



Changing Canadian Households, 1971-91

Introduction

Growth in the number of households is the major source of housing demand. Such growth occurs as the population grows and ages and as social and economic forces alter preferences for different living arrangements.

This *Research and Development Highlight* describes changes in the number and composition of households in Canada between 1971 and 1991 and comments on likely changes in the next twenty years. It documents the growing importance of non-traditional living arrangements, particularly lone-parent and one-person households. All data presented come from custom tabulations of census data.

Definitions

A household is a person or group of people who occupy a separate dwelling unit. According to census definitions, a non-family household is any household that does not contain a census family, while a family household contains at least one census family. A census family is a husband and wife (including common-law) with or without never-married children or a lone parent with one or more never-married children. The number of family households is slightly lower than the total number of families since there are a relatively small number of households that contain more than one family.

1971-91: An Overview

Between 1971 and 1991, the number of households in Canada increased by two-thirds—from six to ten million. Households grew over twice as fast as the population, reducing the average household size from 3.6 to 2.7 persons. Growth was especially strong in the first half of the period when households increased on average by 225,000 per year, a figure that dropped to 174,000 in the following ten years.

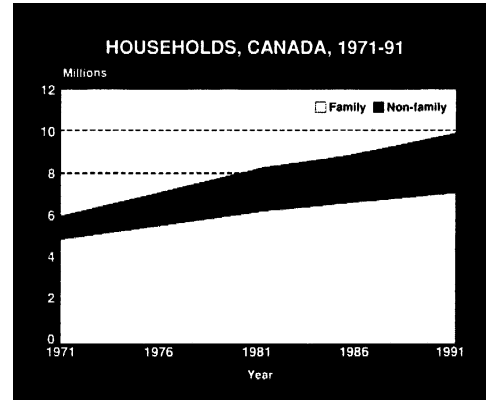
The number of non-family households—people living alone or with other unrelated individuals—increased by 150 percent during the period: in 1971, fewer than one in five households were non-family households, compared to more than one in four in 1991. By contrast, family households grew more slowly, shrinking proportionately from 80 to 72 percent of all households. Over the whole period, family households increased by 2.3 million and non-family households by 1.7 million.

Various interrelated explanations for strong household growth and shrinking household sizes have been given. These include declining fertility and marriage rates, increasing divorce rates, postponement of first marriages, increasing labour force participation by women, a greater demand for privacy, increasing affluence, and entry of the large baby boom generation into the housing market. In 1971, the first of the baby boomers were in their early twenties and just beginning to leave home to form households.

Family Households

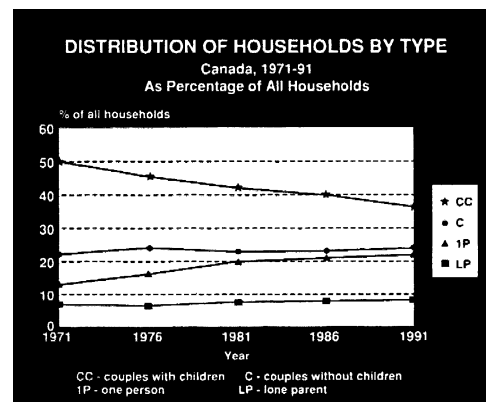
Although family households as a group increased much less rapidly than non-family households, different family types grew at widely variant rates. At one extreme, with divorce rates rising, lone-parent households more than doubled during the period. At the other, couples with children, the dominant household type at the outset of the period, grew by less than a quarter, declining as a proportion of all households from one in two to just over one in three. Couples without children grew slightly faster than the average for all households.

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HOUSEHOLDS BY TYPE, CANADA, 1971-91

Year	Total	Family	Non-Family
(Thousands)			
1971	6,034.5	4,928.1	1,106.4
1976	7,166.1	5,633.9	1,532.2
1981	8,281.5	6,231.5	2,050.0
1986	8,991.7	6,635.0	2,356.7
1991	10,018.3	7,235.2	2,783.0
(Percent of All Households)			
1971	100.0%	81.7%	18.3%
1991	100.0%	72.2%	27.8%
(Growth)			
1971-81	37.2%	26.4%	85.3%
1981-91	21.0%	16.1%	35.8%



Households composed of a husband and wife (with or without children) declined from 73 to 62 percent of all households. These couples were increasingly less likely to be formally married. Between 1981 and 1991, common-law couples accounted for nearly half the growth in husband-wife families.

The number of multi-family households, households containing two or more families, dropped by a quarter in the first half of the period as families that had been living with other families sought separate accommodation. After 1981 and particularly with the arrival of the recession at the end of the decade, multi-family households increased as families evidently were forced once again to share accommodation.

Year	FAMILY HOUSEHOLDS				NON-FAMILY HOUSEHOLDS	
	Couples without children	Couples with children	Lone Parent	Multi-Family	One Person	Other
	(Thousands)					
1971	1,355.0	3,028.3	423.7	121.1	810.4	296.0
1976	1,759.5	3,266.7	516.1	91.7	1,205.3	326.8
1981	1,948.7	3,523.2	668.4	91.2	1,681.1	368.9
1986	2,130.9	3,604.0	802.9	97.1	1,934.7	422.0
1991	2,485.1	3,729.8	903.7	116.6	2,297.1	486.0
	(Percent of All Households)					
1971	22.5%	50.2%	7.0%	2.0%	13.4%	4.9%
1991	24.8%	37.2%	9.0%	1.2%	22.9%	4.9%
	(Growth)					
1971-81	43.8%	16.3%	57.7%	-24.7%	107.4%	24.6%
1981-91	27.5%	5.9%	35.2%	27.9%	36.6%	31.7%

Non-Family Households

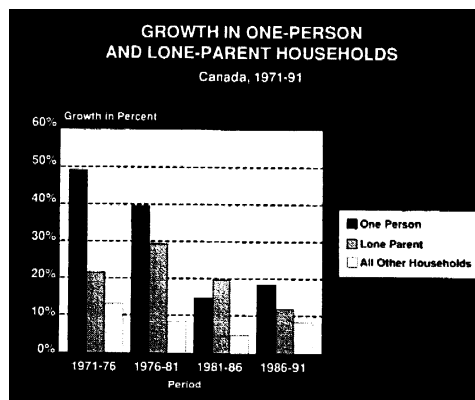
People living alone make up over eighty percent of non-family households. Nearly tripling their numbers, one-person households grew faster than any other household type between 1971 and 1991. In 1971, fewer than one in seven households consisted of a single person, a ratio that had climbed to nearly one in four by 1991. High divorce rates, low marriage rates, and a demand for privacy no doubt contributed to this increase.

Other non-family households, composed of two or more unrelated individuals, grew at virtually the same rate as the total number of households. Growth was stronger than average, however, over the last ten years of the period: it would seem that a weaker economy convinced some individuals, young people in particular, to share accommodation with others.

Conclusion: The Next Twenty Years

In Canada, the 1971-91 period was characterized by relatively strong but moderating household growth and declining household sizes. One-person and lone-parent households grew faster than all other household types, accounting for half of all household growth. Clearly, there is no longer a single dominant, or typical, household type.

Many of the factors underlying the pattern of recent household growth show little sign of abating: for example, marriage rates remain low and divorce rates high. As well, Canada's population continues to age: all but the youngest of the baby boomers are over the age of thirty.



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- With slower population growth expected in the future, household growth will probably continue to moderate.
- Strong growth in the number of people living alone will persist. Aging and the higher life expectancy of women relative to men will mean an increase in the number of widows. As well, many lone parents will likely live alone once their children leave home.
- Aging should also contribute to growth in the number of couples without children. Many of these will be “empty nesters” whose children have moved out.
- Couples with children will continue to shrink as a proportion of all households, a result of aging and low fertility.
- Given an aging population, it seems unlikely that the number of lone-parent households will increase as rapidly as in the past. The children of those who are currently lone parents will eventually move out.

The continued shift away from households composed of couples with children carries implications for housing demand. Other faster growing household types, such as one person households and empty nesters, are likely to demand smaller dwellings than couples with children. As well, the aging of the population points to a requirement for housing that is sensitive to the needs of seniors—housing that allows seniors to maintain their independence.

This issue of *Research and Development Highlights* has been produced as a result of work carried out by the Research Division of Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC). Any questions about the contents of this highlight may be directed to Roger Lewis, Researcher, Housing Requirements, at (613) 748-2797.

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