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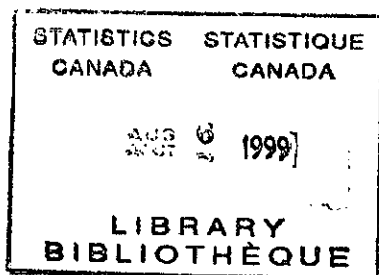
FOCUS ON CANADA

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**FAMILIES  
IN CANADA**

Canada





**1986 Census of Canada**

## **FAMILIES IN CANADA**



**by Thomas K. Burch**

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## PREFACE

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**T**he 1986 Census of Canada provided, as did all the previous censuses, a rich source of information on individual, family and household characteristics of Canadians. The census data allow individual researchers as well as academic, business, cultural, social and governmental organizations to undertake in-depth enquiries and analyses on those social issues which interest and concern them.

This study is part of the 1986 Focus on Canada Series. The series is a modest effort by Statistics Canada to provide overviews of a wide variety of subjects on which the 1986 Census collected information. The studies have been written by experts, both inside and outside Statistics Canada, in non-technical language supported by simple tables and attractive charts. The topics include demographic characteristics (population, families, farmers, youth, seniors, the disabled), socio-cultural characteristics (ethnicity, language, education), and economic characteristics (women in the labour force, affordability of housing, occupational trends, employment income, family income).

The present study on "Families in Canada" was contracted out to the Institute for Research on Public Policy and was authored by Professor Thomas K. Burch of the University of Western Ontario for the Institute.

I would like to express my appreciation to the authors, to the reviewers and to the staff of the Bureau involved in managing and producing this series.

We hope that the studies in the Focus on Canada Series will not only provide Canadians with very useful information on various facets of Canadian society, but will also be an inducement for them to undertake further research on the topics.

Ivan P. Fellegi  
Chief Statistician of Canada



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## HIGHLIGHTS

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- The century-long downward trend in household size continued between 1981 and 1986, although at a somewhat slower pace. By 1986, over one-half of all Canadian households comprised only one or two persons; of these, slightly over one-fifth were one-person households. Somewhat larger households were present in Atlantic Canada.
- The number of census families increased by 6.5% between 1981 and 1986 versus a 4.5% increase of the total population. Approximately three-quarters of all households contain a census family, that is a couple with or without children, or a lone parent with children at home.
- Almost 90% of Canadian families consist of a couple (with or without unmarried children). The remainder are lone-parent families — 2% headed by a man, and 10% headed by a woman.
- In general, almost 90% of female lone-parent families across Canada contain two or fewer children. An exception is Newfoundland, where approximately one-fifth contain three or more children.
- In 1986, the percentage of persons in common-law unions reached 11% for females aged 20-24 and for males aged 25-29. The already low proportion cohabiting among females aged 15-19 declined slightly between 1981 and 1986. Though rates of cohabitation are high by historical standards, this practice occurs only in a minority of the population.
- The 1986 Census revealed a sharp change in the combined percentages of young adults who were married or cohabiting. The proportion of persons married has declined in all age groups between 15 and 34. The proportion cohabiting has declined for women aged 15 to 20, and shows only small increases in other age groups, not enough to offset the decline in proportions married.
- The percentage of persons cohabiting is lowest among rural farm populations and the least educated. Among the provinces, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland have the fewest people cohabiting, Quebec the highest.
- Rates of cohabitation are lowest among persons of Italian and Chinese ethnic background, and highest among those of French ethnic background. The rates are relatively low among members of Eastern Orthodox, Jewish and Eastern religions, and relatively high among those reporting no religion.

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- Although persons living alone and lone parents report themselves somewhat less happy or satisfied than persons living with a spouse, their absolute levels of happiness or satisfaction are high — generally, 85% or more report themselves happy or satisfied.
  - Given recent changes in the family, the image of the typical Canadian as a parent needs some adjustment. Today only about half of persons aged 20-39, and less than one-third of those aged 40-59, live with one or more children under age 15. Of all Canadians over age 20, about two-fifths live with children.

## INTRODUCTION

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**T**he history and geography of Canada, the origins of its people, and even recent government policies of multiculturalism, all combine to create diversity in families — from region to region and from one subgroup to another.

George Woodcock described the situation in *"A Social History of Canada"*: "And so Canadian society has taken on a double diversity: a historical one, from the variety of origins of its peoples, and a geographical one, from the differing environmental influences that conditioned their ways of life."

This diversity of family origins has been examined in another recent work, *"The Explanation of Ideology: Family Structure and Social Systems"*, by the French demographer Emmanuel Todd. Todd uses extensive anthropological evidence to demonstrate the existence of at least eight distinct traditional family systems around the world, rather than the three or four typically identified by sociologists. These family systems differ markedly in their underlying attitudes toward authority and equality, residence rules for newlyweds, inheritance practices, and attitudes toward marriage to close relatives. Even within Europe, according to Todd, traditional family systems differed widely; for example, the English or Dutch family on the one hand, and the German or Irish family on the other. Even within nations such as France or Italy, different forms of family life characterized different subregions.

Some of these traditional differences persist today among Canadians of European background, although they have been modified by immigration, exposure to a common Canadian culture, and the mere passage of time. If we include Canada's "new immigrants" from Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America, the differences in our family origins are all the greater and the strength of family traditions all the stronger.

A central theme of this report, thus, is the diversity of family forms in Canada. Another theme is that of change in family patterns. All things considered, the last quarter century seems to have been a period of unusual change in family patterns, not just in Canada but throughout much of the developed world. To illustrate this, one can point to: (a) a sharp rise in the proportion of one-person households; (b) the decline of fertility to all-time low levels, below those needed for long-term population replacement through natural increase; (c) the emergence of cohabitation as a partial alternative to legal marriage; and (d) the emergence of divorce as commonplace, affecting as many as one-third of recent Canadian marriages.

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This report emphasizes change in family patterns between the 1981 and 1986 Censuses, with a longer-term perspective introduced when necessary.

Most people would probably agree that the importance of family change lies mainly in the possible implications for human welfare. A commonly held view is that some current family changes may be harmful to Canadian society and to individual Canadians. The rise in the number of people living alone, for example, is often interpreted as a sign of growing individual isolation. Lone-parent families are usually associated with economic deprivation. Divorce and changing sex-roles (notably the high percentage of employed mothers with young children) are sometimes viewed as interfering with the rearing of future generations. Others see these trends and their consequences as reflections of the growing freedom of Canadians, especially women, to pursue their individual goals and happiness.

A factual report such as this cannot address questions of social philosophy and policy. Rather it aims to provide an accurate statistical view of recent family trends, and to help put these views into comparative and historical perspective.

A discussion of Canadian "family patterns" involves great scope. There are several groups to be noted: households, families, couples, and kinship networks. And there are several factors influencing their behaviour: marriage, cohabitation, divorce, childbearing, death, migration, home-leaving, and household fusion (as when an elderly parent moves in with a son or daughter). There are also links between these groups and life cycle events. For example, marriage usually results in the creation of a new household. A household increases in size with the birth of a child. It splits into two households when a divorce occurs, or reverts to a couple-only household when the children have left. Finally, a household disappears with the death of both spouses. Similar relationships affect the existence, size and structure of family and kinship groups.

This report first looks at some dimensions of households and families by comparing data from the 1981 and 1986 Censuses. The focus is on the kinds of households and families that have become increasingly prevalent in Canada — that is, small (one- or two-person) households, non-family households (consisting only of unrelated persons) and lone-parent families — and on their diversity across provinces.

It then examines one of the most volatile aspects of the Canadian family recently, that of union formation and dissolution, or more concretely, marriage, divorce, and cohabitation. Wide diversity in cohabitation is illustrated across the provinces and the ethnic and religious subgroups.

Finally, this report takes a close look at patterns sometimes deemed to be problems, especially for children (e.g., those in lone-parent families, with working mothers) and for the elderly (e.g., those living alone).

Although the study relies most heavily on data from the 1981 and 1986 Censuses, it also uses some data from the 1985 General Social Survey (GSS). This annual nationwide sample survey was initiated by Statistics Canada to supplement information from censuses and routine vital statistics registration.

**HOUSEHOLD SIZE AND STRUCTURE**



## HOUSEHOLD SIZE AND STRUCTURE

**T**he 1986 Census counted approximately nine million private households in Canada. The term **private household** refers to a person or group of persons who occupy a private dwelling — typically, a house or apartment — and who do not have a usual place of residence elsewhere in Canada. Only 0.2% of households enumerated in the 1986 Census were **non-private** or **institutional** households (for example, prisons or asylums). The average size of private households in 1986 was small — 2.8 persons — down only slightly from 1981, when the average was 2.9. In contrast, as recently as 1971, the average Canadian household contained 3.5 members.

About half of all households comprise two or fewer members. Chart 1 shows the distribution of private households by the number of members for 1986 and 1981. Also shown for comparison is the distribution for 1966 (not too long after the post-World War II “baby boom”). The differences between 1981 and 1986 are small, with slight increases in the percentage of one- and two-person households, and slight decreases in the percentage of households with four or more persons.

The differences in the distribution of private household size between 1981 and 1966 or 1986 and 1966 are much larger, illustrating the strong historical trend toward smaller households. There is no simple explanation for this trend, but several important factors can be mentioned: the near disappearance of multi-generation families and extended households, live-in servants or farm workers, boarders and lodgers; rising real income; lower birth rates; population aging and changing residential preferences; and the growing supply of apartments and condominiums in our housing stock.

Chart 2 shows the long-term trend of average household size, and emphasizes that the downward trend for over a century continued between 1981 and 1986, although at a slightly slower pace. It may be that the current average of 2.8 persons per household is rapidly approaching its lower limit.

In interpreting these data, it should be understood that the size of the average household should not be confused with the size of household in which the average Canadian lives. By definition more people live in larger households — eight Canadians live in an eight-person

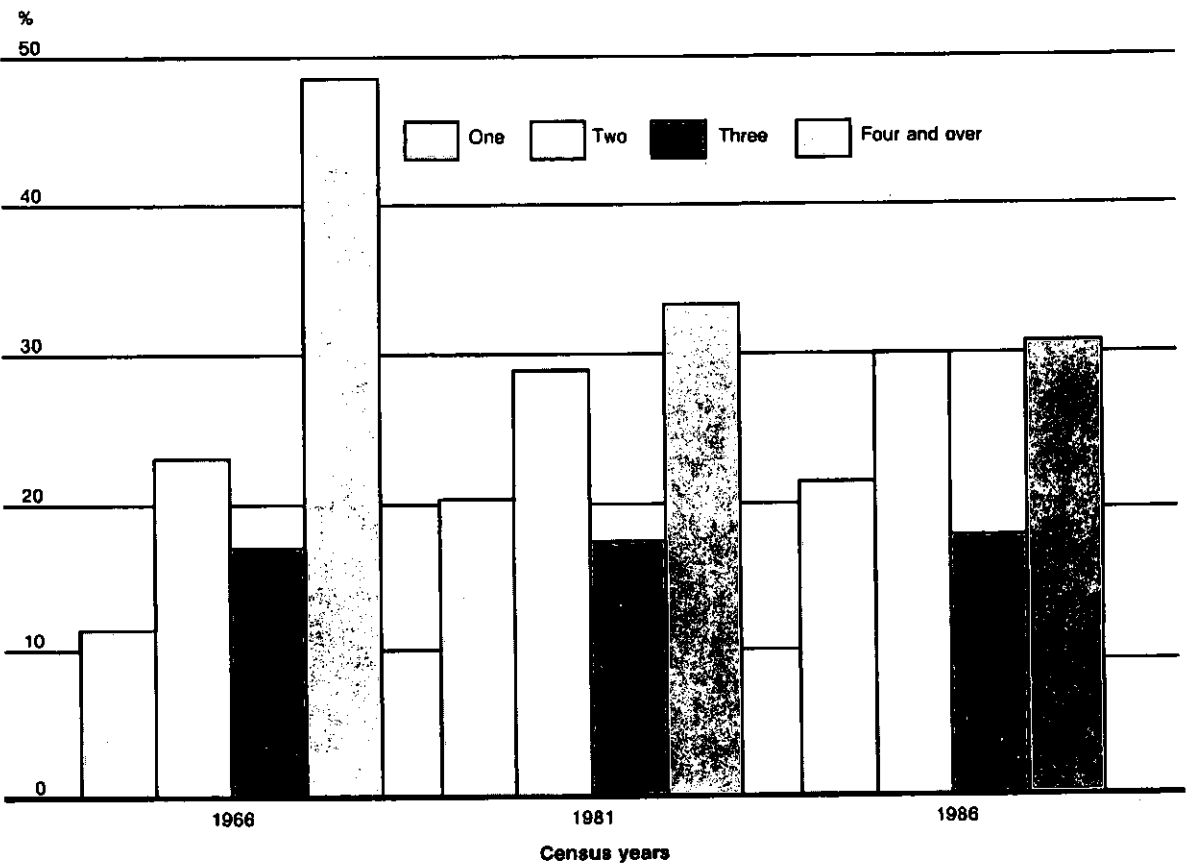
household, only one in a one-person household, and so forth. Thus, whereas the average household in 1986 contained 2.8 Canadians, the size of the household in which the average Canadian lived had 3.5 persons. A more concrete way of illustrating this point is to note that there are more two-person households in Canada than any other size, but more people live in four-person households.

There is considerable diversity in household size and structure across Canada. Chart 3 depicts the percentage of households comprising one person for each province or territory. The proportion is 21% for Canada as a whole, with slightly higher percentages than the national average in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and British Columbia, and slightly lower in New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and the Northwest Territories. At 10% the percentage of one-person households in Newfoundland is roughly half the national average. The stories behind these figures are complex: they involve, among other things, economic and social structure (e.g., the income levels and non-metropolitan character of Newfoundland), fertility levels (with Newfoundland having relatively high levels by Canadian standards), and migration and age structure (e.g., the migration of retired persons to British Columbia).

The ranking of provinces is similar in terms of average household size and percentage of non-family households (households that do not contain a census family, that is, a couple or lone parent plus unmarried children). Both of these variables reflect the same underlying trend toward smaller and simpler households.

The number and proportion of non-family households increased slightly over the 1981-1986 period, from 24.8% to 26.2%. It is important to remember, however, that the vast majority of these are one-person households. More specifically, persons who do not live with a spouse, child or parent are more apt to live alone than with more distant relatives or unrelated persons, whether room-mates, servants, nurses, or lodgers. Many one-person households contain older persons, widows or widowers with children no longer at home, indicating that some of the increase is related to the progressive aging of the Canadian population.

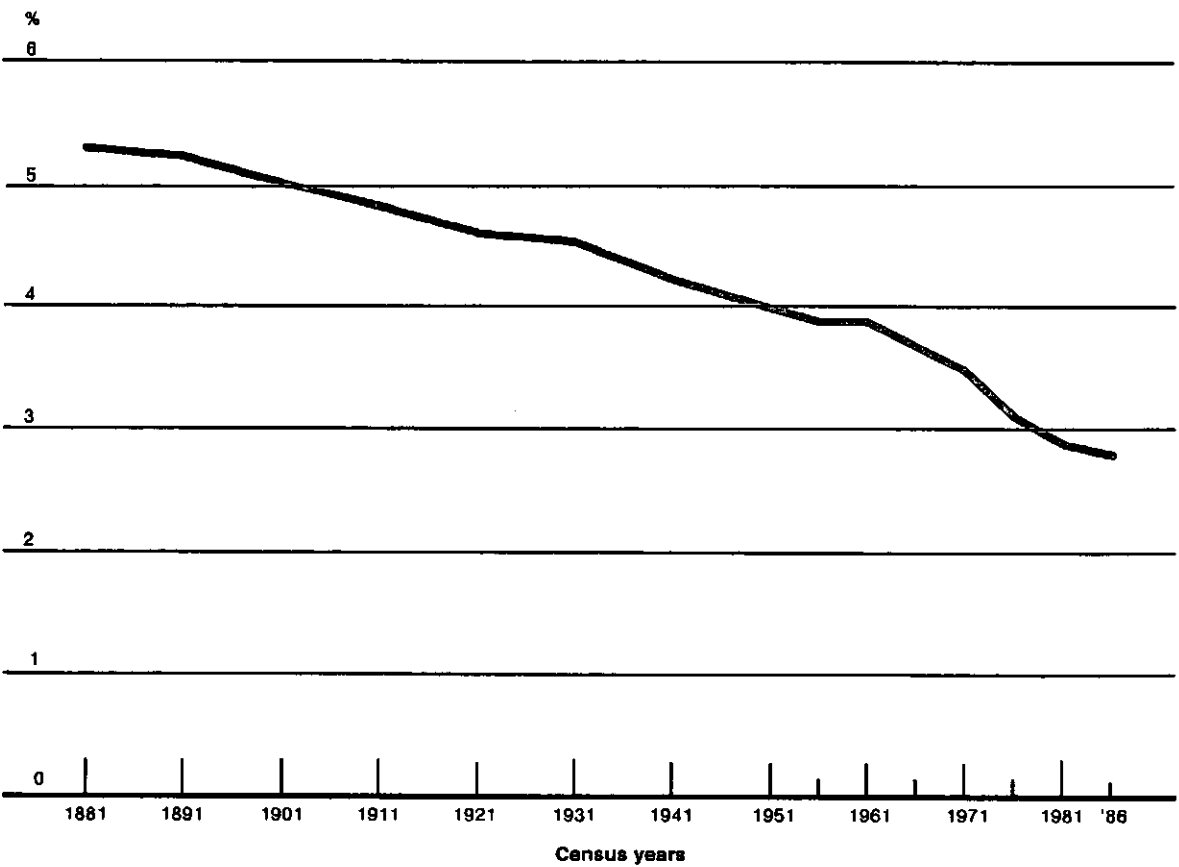
**Chart 1.                    Percentage Distribution of Private Households by Size, Canada, 1966, 1981 and 1986**



**Source:**  
Statistics Canada, Census of Canada, various years.

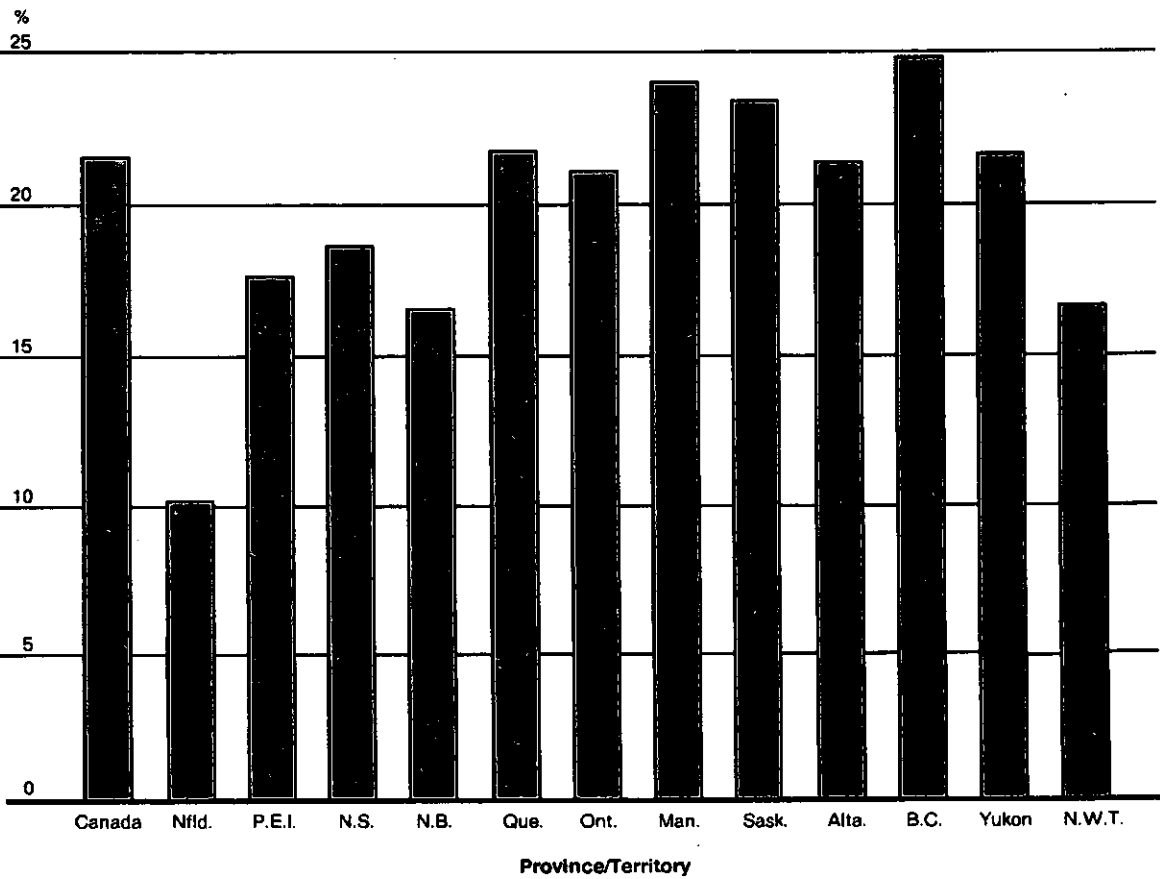


Chart 2. Average Household Size, 1881-1986



Source:  
Statistics Canada, Census of Canada, various years.

**Chart 3.            Percentage of One-person Households, Canada, Provinces and Territories, 1986**



**Source:**  
1986 Census, special tabulations.

## FAMILY STRUCTURE

In the 1986 Census, a **census family** is defined as a husband and wife or a common-law couple (with or without children who have never married, regardless of their age), or a lone parent of any marital status, with one or more children who have never married, regardless of age, living in the same dwelling. The number of Canadian families so defined increased by 6.5% between 1981 and 1986, growing more slowly than the number of households (8.6%), but somewhat more rapidly than the total population (4.2%).

Census families are divided into those that comprise a couple and those that are headed by a lone parent. This distinction is important because lone-parent families usually contain only one wage earner, and have appreciably lower incomes on average than husband-wife families. The 1986 Census counted some 6.7 million families, 87.3% of which were husband and wife families, 2.3% were male lone-parent

families, and 10.4% were female lone-parent families (see Table 1). The proportion of all lone-parent families (both male and female) increased, from 11.3% in 1981 to 12.7% in 1986. This reflects the continuation of a trend that began in the mid 1960s, and shows no apparent slowing of pace.

The 1981-1986 period saw an even faster rise in the number of couples living common-law. The overall increase for this category was 36.5%, with a 50.7% increase in the number of common-law families with children in the home. In general, the early 1980s saw the largest increases in numbers of "non-traditional" family forms (especially common-law couples and lone parents), with percentage increases ranging from 19% to 50.7%. Husband-wife families increased much more slowly (4.9%), while the most "traditional" family of all (husband, wife and children) increased in numbers by only about 2.3% (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Census Families by Family Structure, Canada, 1981 and 1986**

	1981	1986	% change
	%	%	
<b>Total families</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>6</b>
Husband-wife families	88.7	87.3	4.9
With children	56.9	54.6	2.3
Without children	31.8	32.7	9.4
Now-married couples	83.1	80.1	2.7
With children	55.0	51.9	0.6
Without children	28.1	28.2	6.8
Common-law families	5.6	7.2	36.5
With children	1.9	2.7	50.7
Without children	3.7	4.5	29.2
Lone-parent families	11.3	12.7	19.6
Males	2.0	2.3	22.2
Females	9.3	10.4	19.0

Source:

Statistics Canada, 1986 Census, Families, Part 1, Catalogue No. 93-106, Table 3.

Despite these very large percentage increases, however, the new family forms still represent a minority of Canadian families. Taken together, common-law and lone-parent families accounted for 20% of all Canadian families in 1986. Approximately 52% of all families were husband-wife families with children; 80% comprised a husband and a wife.

It is worth noting that the 1986 figure for lone-parent families still has not reached that of the 1931 Census (13.6%) although the factors behind the statistics for the two years differ sharply. In 1931, widowhood was the main cause of lone parenthood, today divorce (and, to a lesser extent, motherhood of never-married women) is the main reason.

Lone-parent families headed by men make up a small proportion of all families nationally (2.3%) and their prevalence varies little among the provinces (between 2.0% and 2.5%), with the exception of the Yukon and Northwest Territories (3.9% and 4.6% respectively).

Lone-parent families headed by women are much more common; their ratio to male lone-parent families is about five to one. Nationally, one in ten families is a female lone-parent family. For men, there is relatively little variation in this figure across provinces (Chart 4). The low figure (8.9%) is found in Newfoundland and the high figure (11.9%) in Quebec. The somewhat higher incidence of male lone-parent families in the Yukon and Northwest Territories is not mirrored in the data for women.

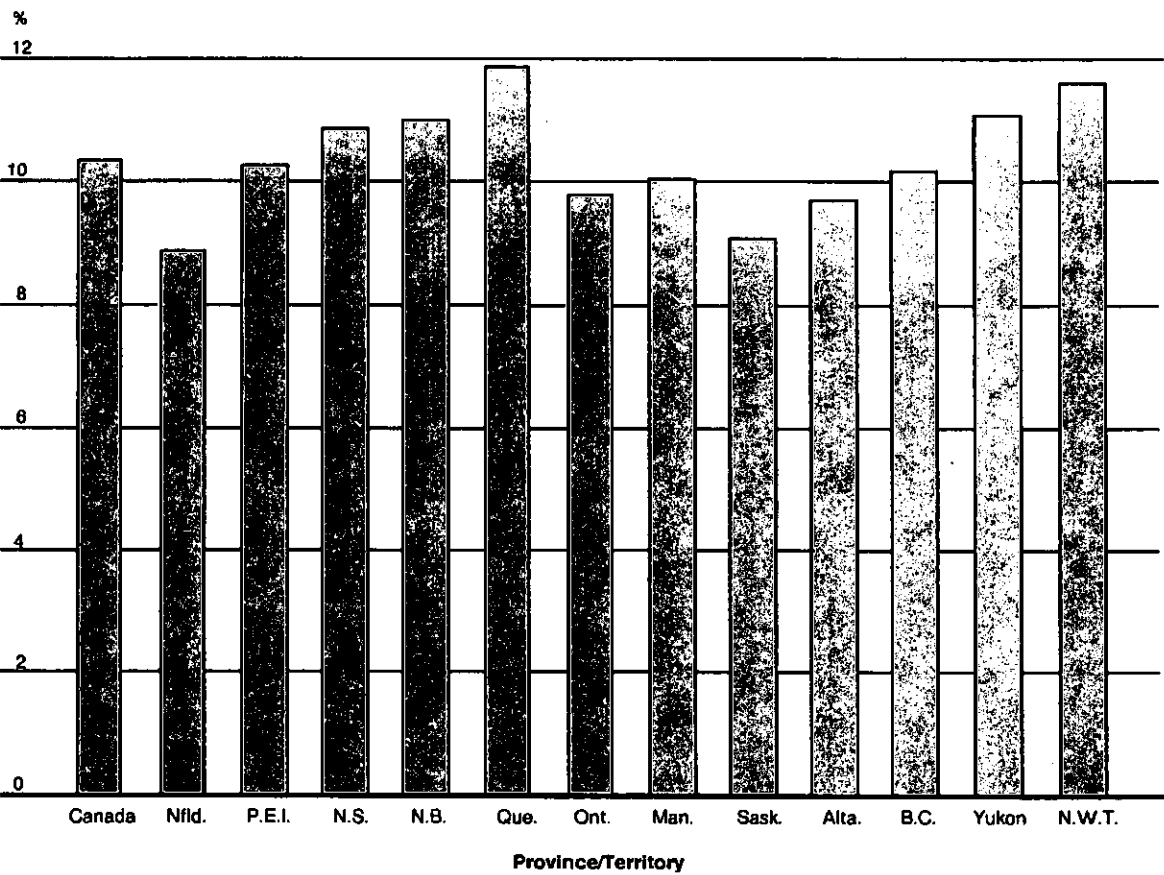
Although, the overall proportions of lone-parent families show only slight variation across the provinces, there are substantial differences in the marital status of lone parents and the size of their families. As seen in Chart 5, in Canada as a whole, 54% of

female lone-parent families are headed by a separated or divorced woman. In Alberta and British Columbia, the figure exceeds 60%. It drops below 40% in Newfoundland, and down to 34% for the Northwest Territories. Similarly, the overall proportion of female lone-parent families headed by single (i.e. never-married) women is 14.9% for Canada. This figure drops to 10.4% for Newfoundland, and increases to 21.2% for Saskatchewan. It is nearly double the national average in the Yukon (26.4%) and the Northwest Territories (27.1%).

The low figures for Newfoundland apparently reflect age structure, mortality conditions, and remarriage patterns, since in that province 46% of female lone-parent families are headed by widows (Prince Edward Island is a close second with 40.8%), compared to the national average of 27.7%. In short, the prevalence of lone-parent families does not vary much across the provinces, but there are substantial differences in the marital status "routes" to lone parenthood.

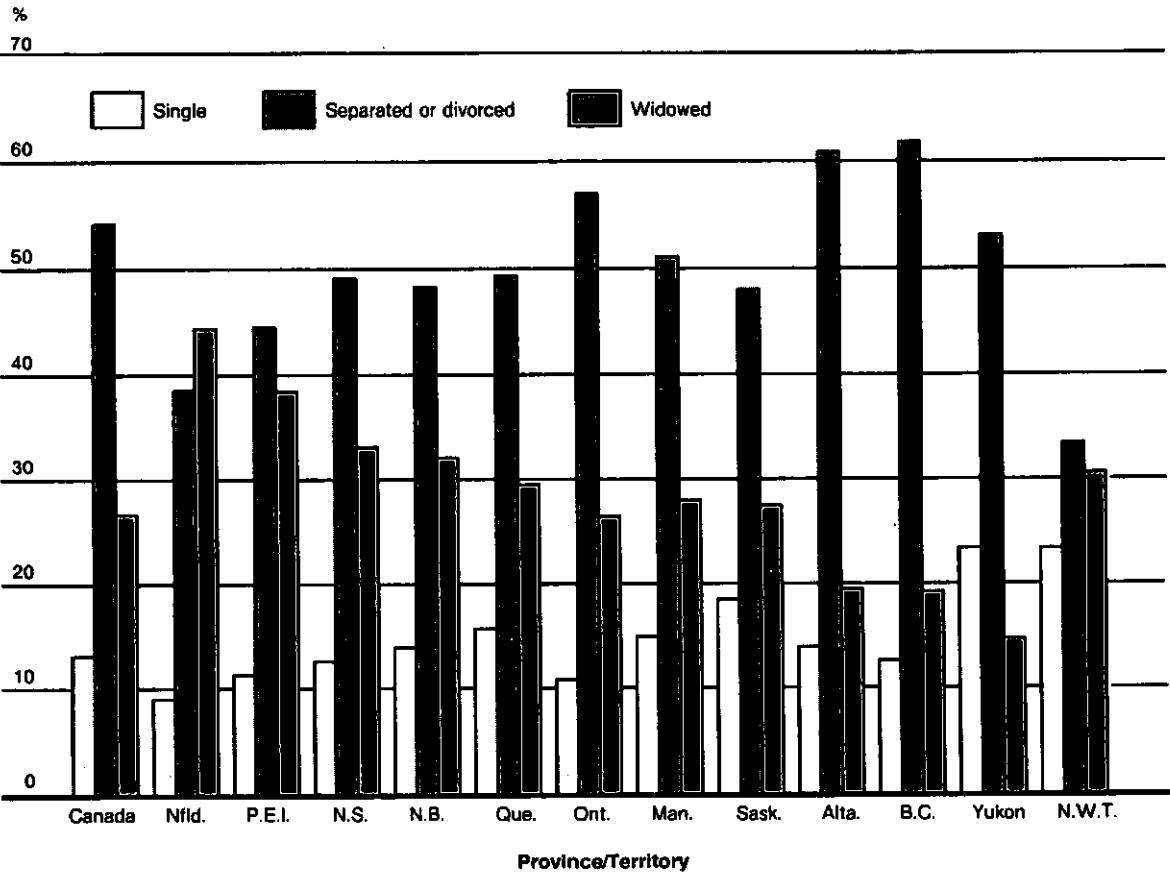
The provinces and territories also differ in the size of their lone-parent families. The majority of female lone-parent families are small. Nationally, 56.7% comprise only one child, and another 30.5%, two children. Only 12.8% comprise three or more children, but that figure varies across Canada, as can be seen in Chart 6. In Newfoundland, more than one-fifth of female lone-parent families have three or more children present, but a relatively high proportion of these women are widows. In the Northwest Territories, the figure reaches 28.2%, more than double the national average. Quebec has the lowest proportion of these larger female lone-parent families (11.4%), although this figure is not much below the national average.

**Chart 4.      Percentage of Lone-parent Families Headed by Females, Canada, Provinces and Territories, 1986**



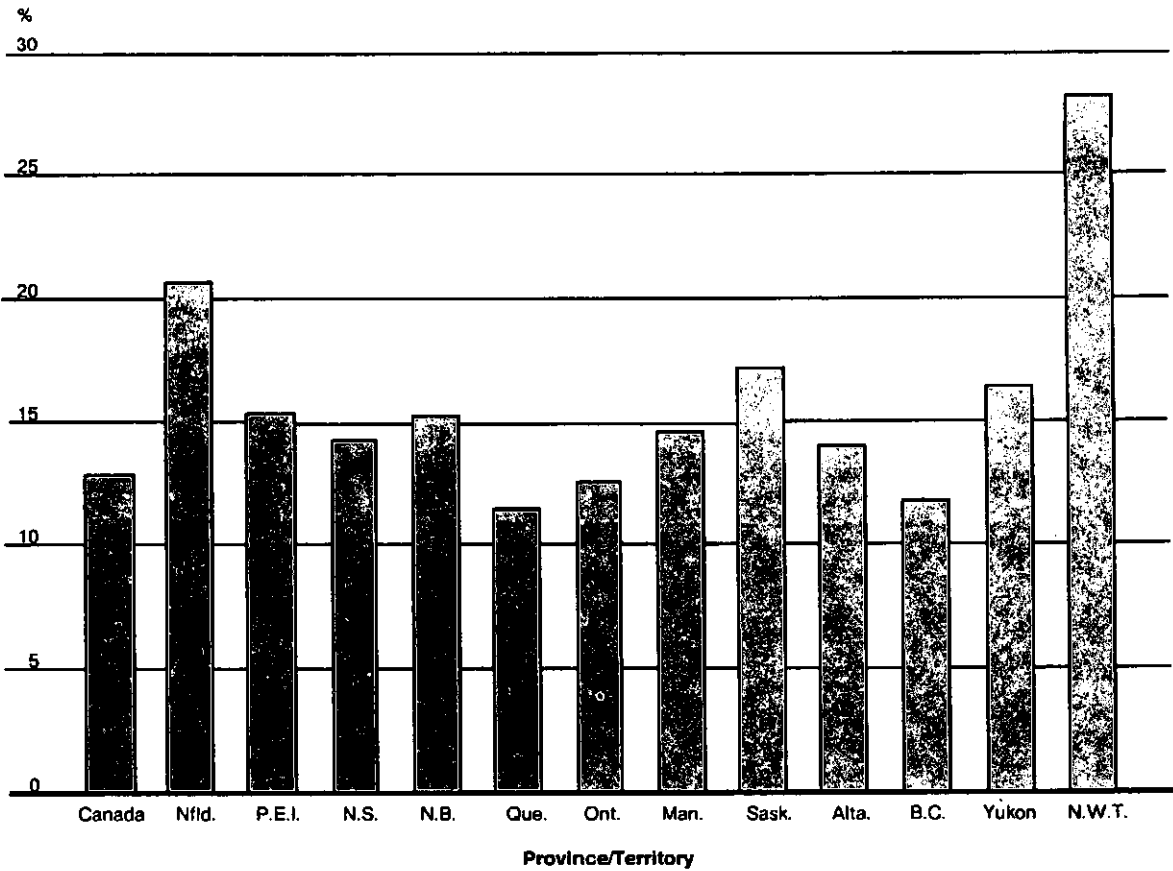
Source:  
1986 Census, special tabulations.

**Chart 5. Percentage of Lone-parent Families by Marital Status, Canada, Provinces and Territories, 1986**



Source:  
1986 Census, special tabulations.

**Chart 6. Percentage of Female Lone-parent Families With Three or More Children, Canada, Provinces and Territories, 1986**



**Source:**  
1986 Census, special tabulations.





## MARRIAGE, COHABITATION AND DIVORCE

**A**s noted earlier, the number, size and shape of households and families are greatly affected by the formation and dissolution of marriages and other forms of unions, such as common-law relationships. In no realm of family/household behaviour do we find greater change and greater diversity than in that of union formation and dissolution.

Prior to 1970, living together by a man and woman not legally married to each other was socially unacceptable and statistically rare. Data from the 1985 Family History Survey show that approximately 90% of all common-law unions had begun in 1970 or later. In the 1986 Census, approximately one in nine women aged 20-24 and men aged 25-29 were reported as living in such a relationship at the time of the census.

Viewing cohabitation from the individual perspective rather than that of families (as in Table 1 shown earlier), Charts 7 and 8 give some details on Canadian family situations, by age, based on 1986 Census data. These indicate that cohabitation is most common among young adults; specifically, women in their twenties, men in their late twenties and early thirties. Many of the common-law unions at these ages are first unions, and are preludes to legal marriage with the same partner. The somewhat smaller proportions cohabiting among middle-aged Canadians (for example, 4.3% of women and 5.3% of men aged 40-44) often reflect unions formed after separation or divorce. The percentages cohabiting among older persons (aged 65 and over) are low. This is partly because of their generally lower tendency to form new unions of any kind, following widowhood or divorce, and partly because of their greater adherence to traditional norms surrounding marriage.

A comparison of census data for 1981 and 1986 (see Chart 9) shows that patterns of union formation continue to be volatile, and suggests differences across birth cohorts (persons born in the same calendar year or years). For the four age groups between 15 and 34, these data show changes in the percentage of persons living as couples (those cohabiting, those married and these two groups taken together) and those persons who never married.

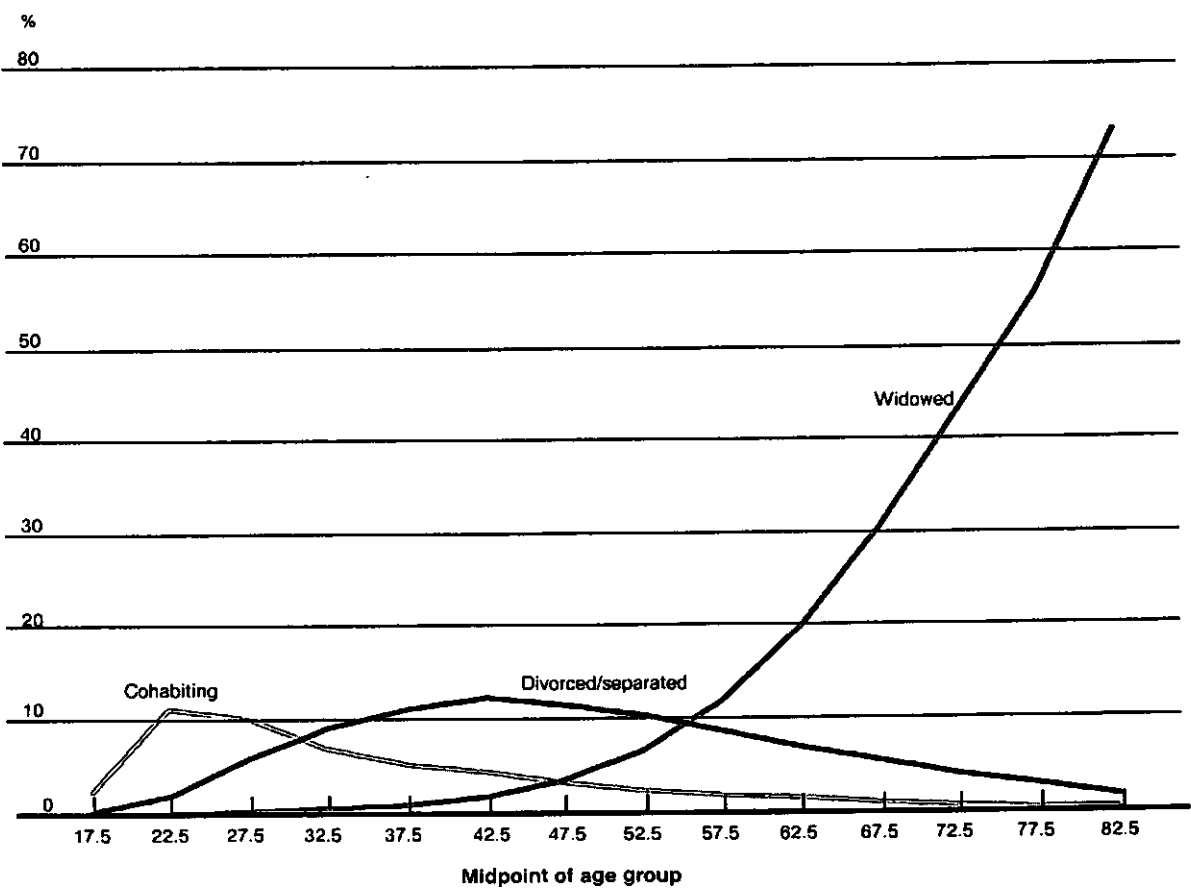
The comparisons show a rise in the proportion of single (never-married) persons in all four age groups. For women aged 20-24, the rise is a substantial 10 percentage points, from approximately 50% to 60%. Similarly, across all age groups, there has been a substantial decline in the percentage of legally married persons. But this has not been matched by a rise in the percentage of people cohabiting. In fact, among women aged 15-19, the percentage cohabiting has declined — a small decline in absolute terms, but a proportionate decline of 21%. Among women aged 20 to 34, the percentage currently cohabiting has increased, but not enough to offset the decline in the percentage married. The combined percentage of married and cohabiting persons has declined appreciably for all women under age 35.

Although the percentages of persons cohabiting have risen by only a few points (except for women aged 15-19, whose percentage decreased), the actual numbers cohabiting have increased markedly for some age-sex categories. For women aged 40-44, for example, the number cohabiting rose by 81%, from 18,715 in 1981 to 33,945 in 1986. This resulted from an increase in the proportion cohabiting by 49% and an overall 21% increase in the number of women in the age group. The latter increase reflects the fact that some of the women aged 40-44 in 1986 are members of the large post-World War II birth cohorts, the so-called "baby boomers". A similar sharp increase in numbers between 1981 and 1986 is seen for the 35-39 age group, that is, persons born in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

The number of women aged 20-24 who were cohabiting increased only slightly between 1981 and 1986. By 1986, there were fewer women in this age group but a slightly higher proportion of them was cohabiting. For women aged 15-19, both the number in the age group and the proportion cohabiting decreased.

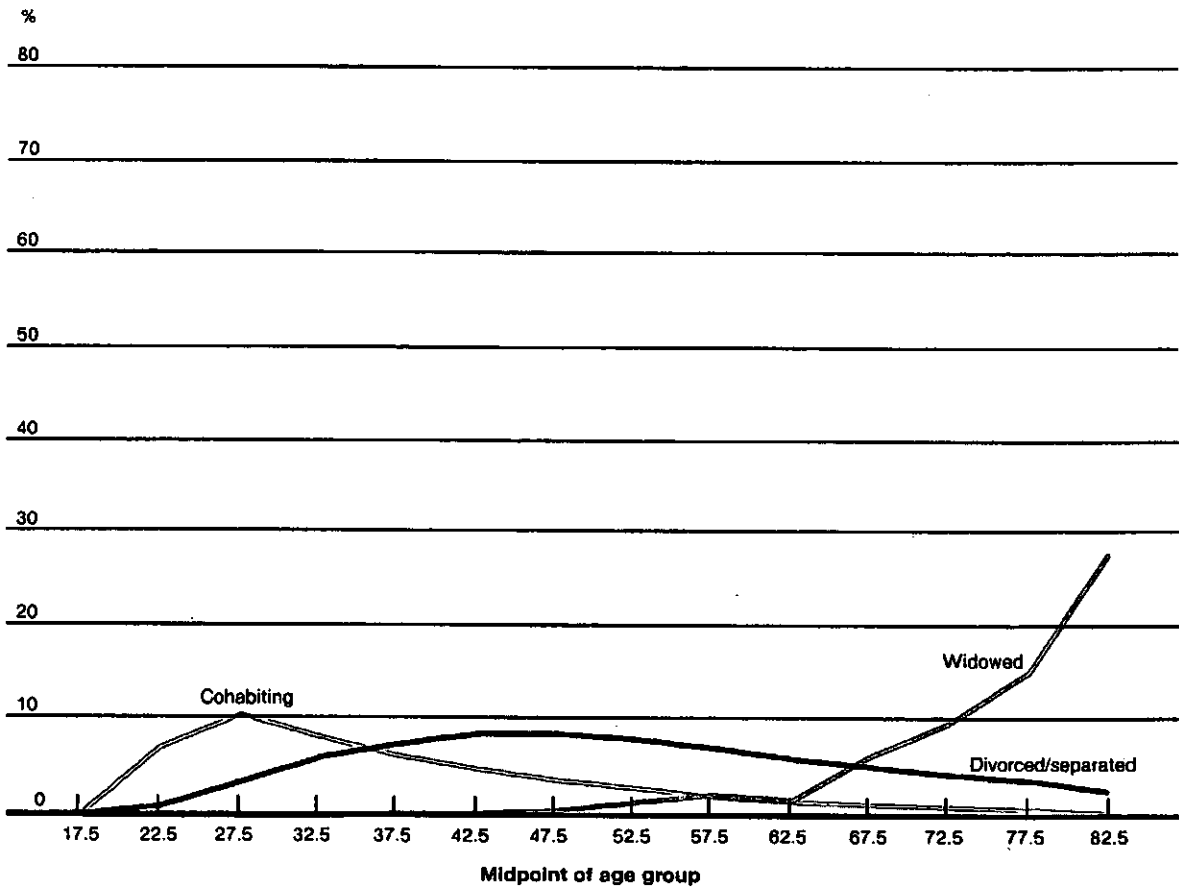
Other things being equal, these continuing declines in the percentage and/or number of young women living with a spouse or common-law partner — in what have traditionally been the prime years for childbearing — militate against any rise in current low fertility levels.

**Chart 7.      Percentage of Women Cohabiting and Previously Married by Age, 1986**



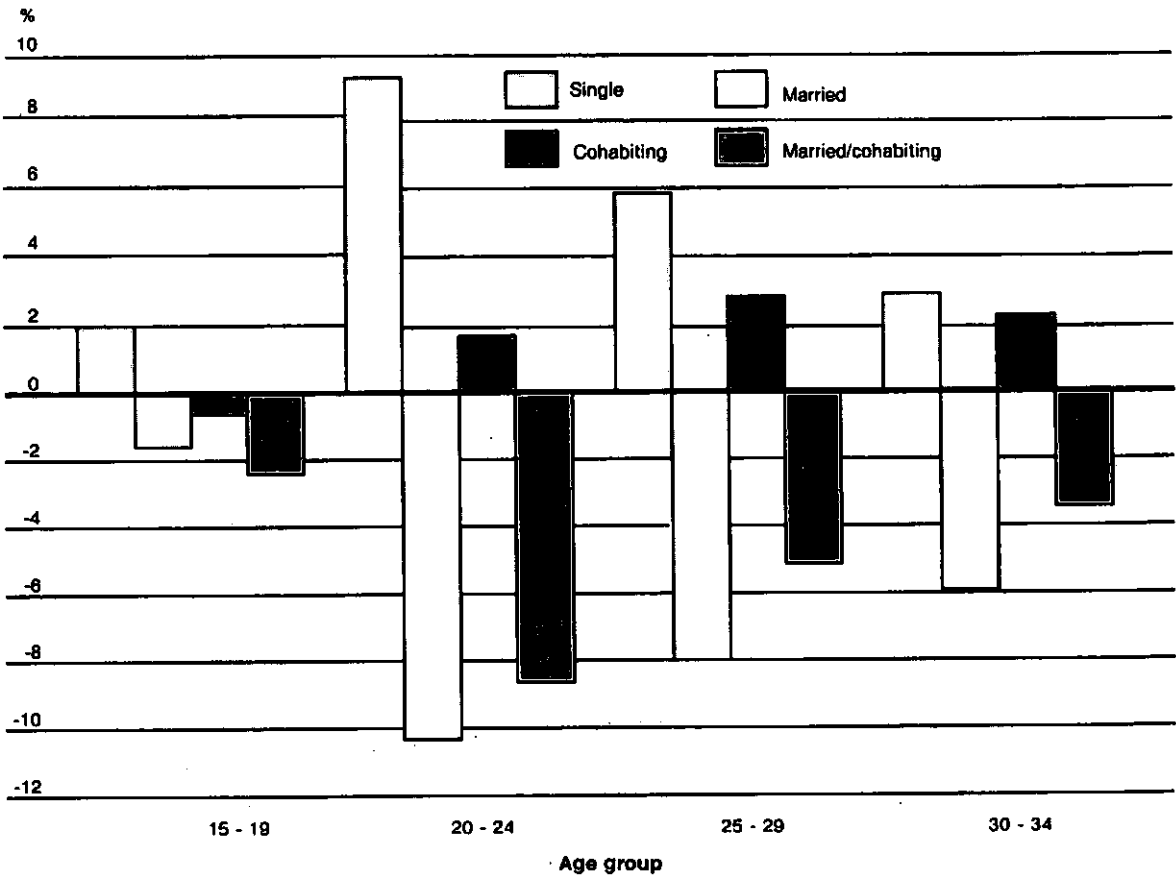
Source:  
1986 Census, special tabulations.

**Chart 8.                    Percentage of Men Cohabiting and Previously Married by Age, 1986**



Source:  
1986 Census, special tabulations.

**Chart 9. Changes in Family Situations of Young Women by Age Groups, 1981-1986**



Source:  
1981 and 1986 Censuses, special tabulations.

For the total adult population (Canadians aged 15 and over), the proportion cohabiting increased slightly between 1981 and 1986, from 3.8% to 4.9% for women, and from 4.0% to 5.1% for men.

Although Charts 7 and 8 also show some differences in family situations between men and women, these differences are shown in greater detail in Chart 10, which gives ratios of female to male proportions by age for individuals in different marital situations (whether currently married, cohabiting, divorced/separated, or widowed). A ratio of one means the sexes have equal proportions in a given group.

At early ages, women are more apt to be married or cohabiting than men, a present-day reflection of the long standing tendency for women to enter unions earlier than men. After age 25 for those cohabiting and age 35 for those married, however, the pattern reverses, and in older age groups men show a higher proportion in one or the other forms of partnership. The proportion of married men over age 70 is roughly twice that of women.

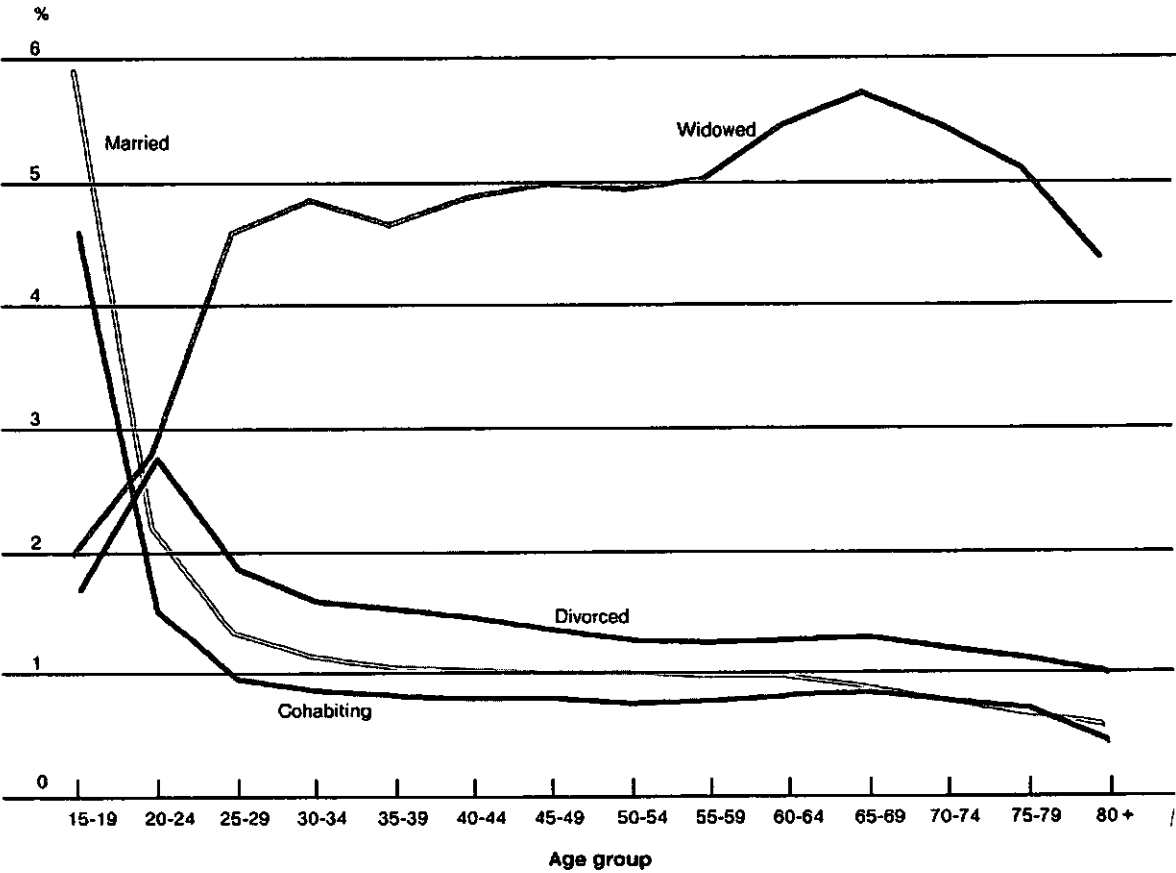
The lower proportion of elderly married women is due in part to the higher incidence of widowhood among women and to their poorer prospects for remarriage. There are proportionately more than four times as many widows as widowers in most age groups (Chart 10). More women are apt to become widows because they have tended to marry men older than themselves, and because men generally have lower life expectancies than women. More older women are apt to remain widows because of the smaller number of males in the corresponding age

groups, and the tendency for men to remarry women younger than themselves.

The proportion of men and women experiencing divorce, of course, is nearly equal, but for most age groups, somewhat more women than men reported themselves as divorced. In the earliest age groups, this reflects the earlier age of marriage of women, and thus their earlier exposure to divorce. In the later age groups, it reflects the poorer remarriage prospects of women already noted. Figures for the oldest age groups, showing a **lower** proportion of divorced women than men, may not be too meaningful due to the small numbers of divorced persons at these ages and thus random fluctuations in the percentages. But these data may also reflect the fact that women are less apt to divorce in later years because they are less apt to be married.

In interpreting the data on male and female family situations, it is important to remember that the age profile does not necessarily reflect the lifetime experience of a particular birth cohort. Indeed, it is precisely the change in the behaviour of successive cohorts that lies behind the recent change in Canadian family patterns. At the time of the 1986 Census, for example, older men and women had experienced very little divorce or common-law union during their lifetimes. This is in contrast to persons in their thirties or forties, a substantial proportion of whom have experienced cohabitation, divorce or both. A full understanding of such a changing cohort experience requires detailed analyses of data from several successive censuses, as well as vital registration data and sample surveys, such as the 1984 Family History Survey.

**Chart 10. Ratio of Women to Men by Percentage Married, Cohabiting, Widowed or Divorced by Age Groups, 1986**



Source:  
1986 Census, special tabulations.

## COHABITATION — DIVERSITY AND FAMILY CHANGE

Nothing better illustrates the diversity and change in Canadian family life than a closer look at subgroup variation in cohabitation. Data from recent censuses paint a picture of the common-law union as a new form of behaviour that has spread to a substantial minority of the population in most segments of Canadian society.

Chart 11 looks at variation among the provinces in the proportion of young men and women cohabiting at the time of the census. Newfoundland and Prince Edward Island have by far the lowest proportions cohabiting (both 3.5%), about half the national average. Among the provinces, Quebec has the highest proportions cohabiting (11.2%). The figure for Ontario is 5.1%, less than half that for Quebec and somewhat below the national average. The proportion cohabiting in the Northwest Territories is about the same as Quebec, 11%. In the Yukon, 14.7% of the population aged 15-29 is cohabiting, fully twice the national average. Although plausible in social, economic and cultural terms, the relatively high proportions cohabiting in the Territories must be viewed with some statistical caution, since the absolute numbers on which they are based are relatively small (roughly 1,000 and 3,000 cases respectively).

These provincial differences in the prevalence of cohabitation reflect, in part, the differing urban-rural composition of the various provincial populations. In particular, the rural farm population of Canada shows atypically low rates of cohabitation — slightly over 1% compared with 7% or more for all other residence categories. Quite apart from possible explanations in terms of ideology or values, this result illustrates how available housing stock (in this case, the absence of apartments or other rental accommodation) interacts with family formation: young couples wishing to cohabit in farm areas are hard pressed to find housing. In this connection, it is worth noting that cohabiting couples are even less likely to live in the parental household than married couples.

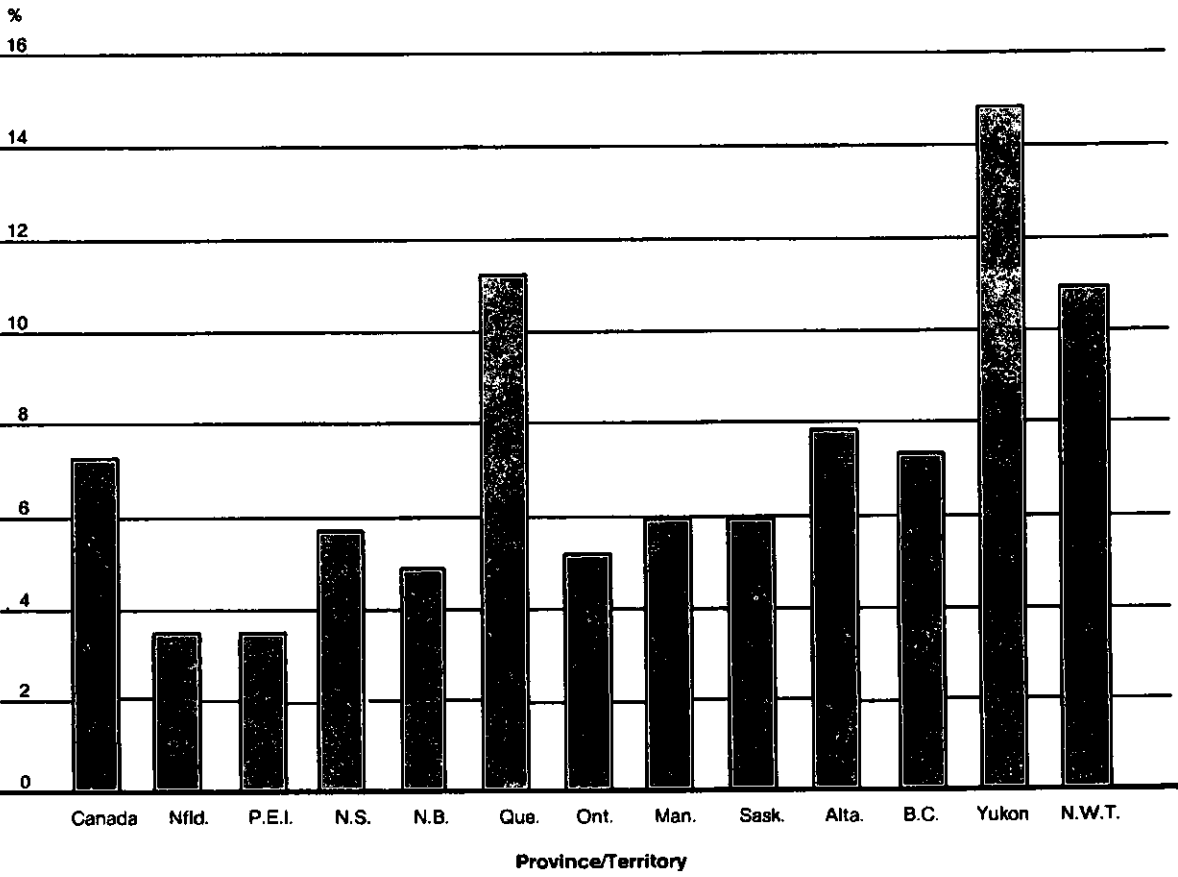
Chart 12 shows the proportion of cohabiting persons aged 15-29, according to the most numerous

single ethnic backgrounds reported in the 1986 Census. Cohabitation appears to be relatively rare among persons of Chinese and of Italian origins, both around 1.5%, compared to 7.3% of this age group overall. By far the highest proportion is for persons of French origin (11.6%). The other ethnic groups show intermediate figures close to the overall average (Irish and Scots slightly higher; English, Germans, Ukrainians and especially Dutch, slightly lower).

Chart 13 illustrates sharp differentials by religion. Roman Catholics and the largest Protestant denominations (Anglican and United) are all close to the national average, with approximately 5% to 6% cohabiting. This is not surprising, since these groups play a large role in determining the national average. "Other Protestants", including presumably many fundamentalist denominations, have slightly lower proportions (4.3%). Persons of Jewish or Eastern Orthodox religions have appreciably lower proportions cohabiting, 2.9% and 2.7% respectively. By far the lowest proportion is found among persons reporting Eastern religions, for example, Hinduism, Islam — only 1.4% were cohabiting, roughly one-quarter the national average. At the opposite extreme were persons identified in the census as having "no religious preference" — 9.4% or twice the national average were cohabiting. This is a forceful illustration of the connection between family behaviour and ideology.

In the past, many societies, including Canada, perceived living together without being formally married as behaviour associated with the lower socio-economic strata of society. "Respectable" people were properly married. In Canada today, the situation seems to have reversed. Those with the least education (less than Grade 5) have markedly smaller proportions cohabiting, reflecting either an obvious difference in attitudes toward cohabitation, or perhaps a general difficulty in finding or keeping a partner, whether in cohabitation or marriage. Apart from those with less than Grade 5 schooling, there are only minor differences in the proportions of persons cohabiting by educational level.

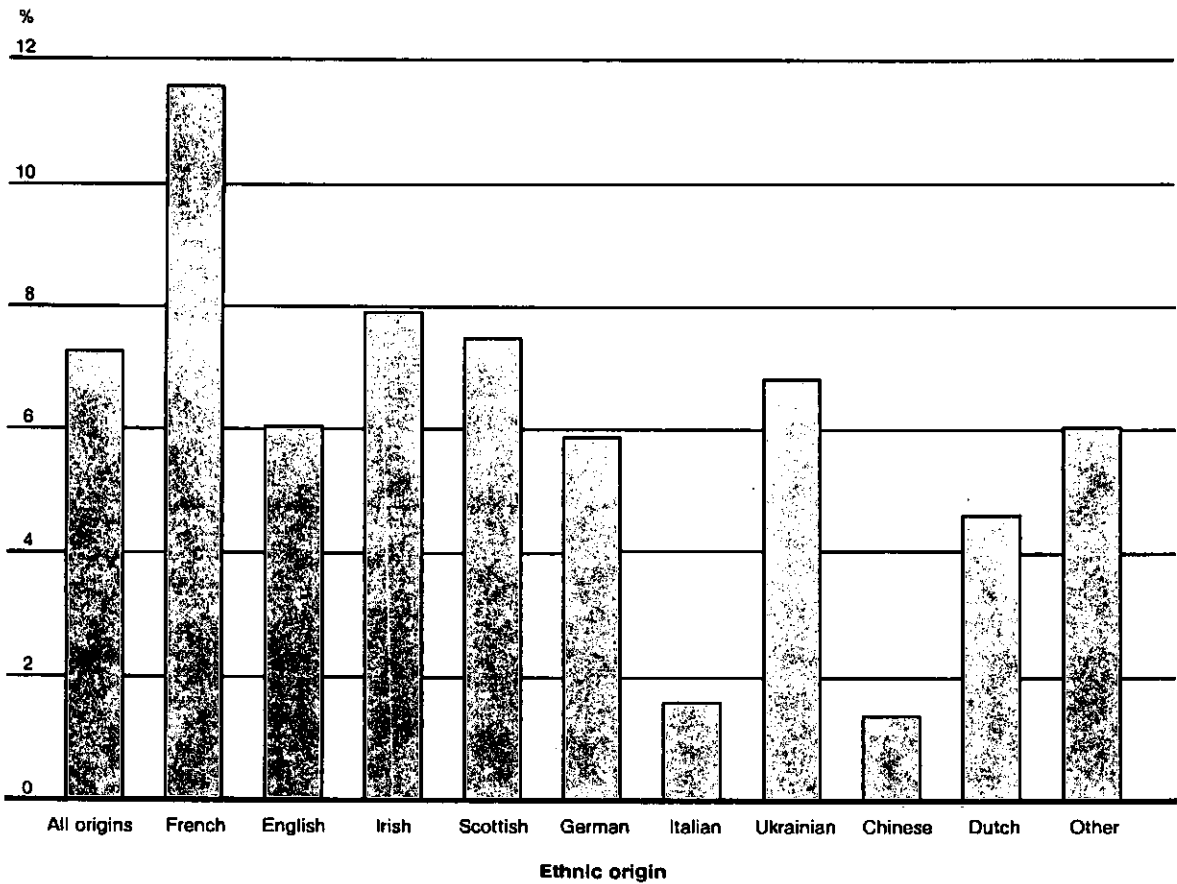
**Chart 11. Cohabitation by Province or Territory, Both Sexes, Ages 15-29, 1986**



**Source:**  
1986 Census, special tabulations.

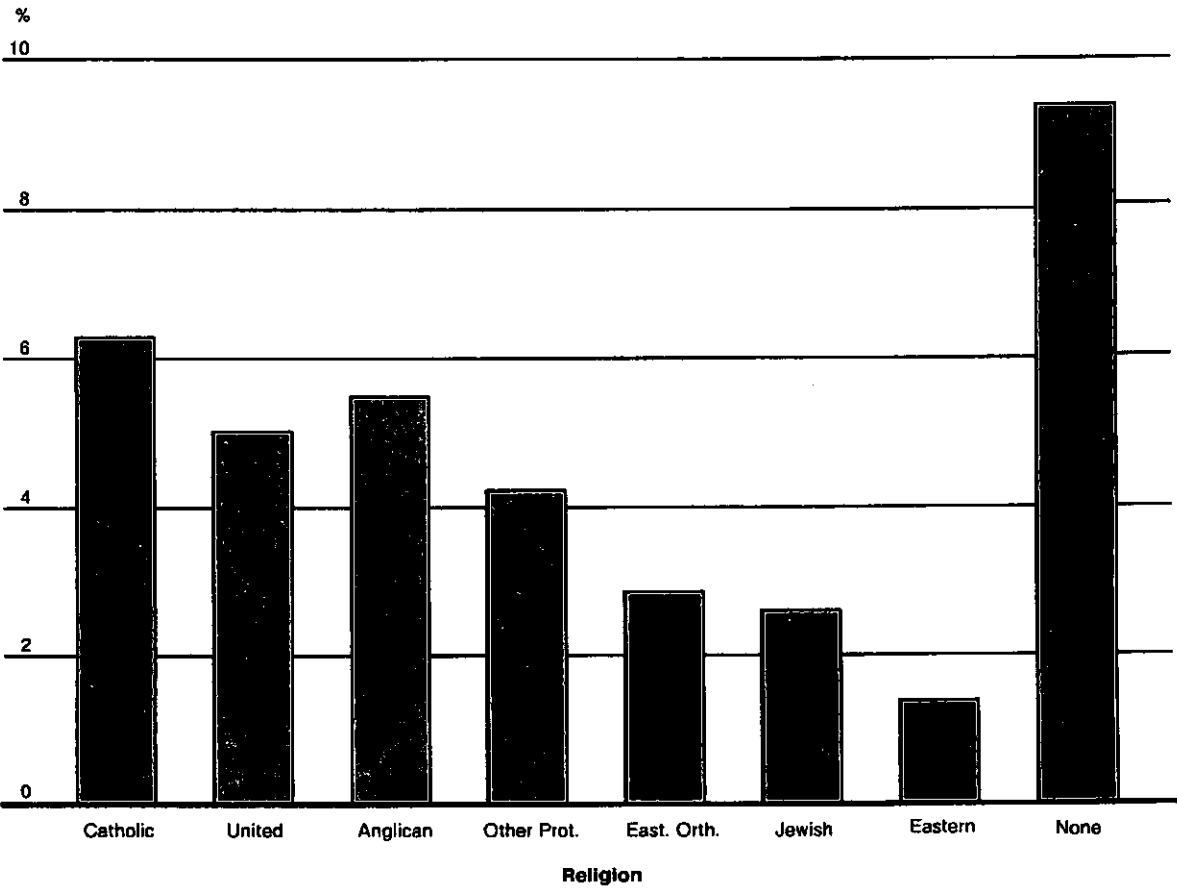


**Chart 12. Cohabitation by Ethnic Origin, Both Sexes, Ages 15-29, 1986**



**Source:**  
1986 Census, special tabulations.

**Chart 13. Cohabitation by Religious Preference, Both Sexes, Ages 15-29, 1981**



Source:  
1986 Census, special tabulations.

## FAMILY CHANGE AND PERSONAL WELL-BEING

**L**iving alone. Certain aspects of present-day family change are often viewed negatively. Sometimes this negative view is based largely on values — be they traditional, religious, or sentimental — which do not coincide with new forms of behaviour, such as cohabitation, divorce, or a decision not to have children. At other times, there is concern that under the new patterns, certain needs (whether of society or the individual) are not being served as well as under the old patterns. Statistical data, of course, cannot readily answer value questions. But analysis of the data can lead to a more realistic posing of such questions and can put them in a better perspective.

One frequent concern has been that the general trend toward smaller families and households and the rise in the proportion of Canadians living alone or with non-relatives will lead to increasing social isolation. This concern is voiced most often with regard to older persons. Widows and widowers, especially the former, are today less likely than before to live with

a married son or daughter in a multi-generational family, and are more apt to live alone. To some people this represents a loss in sociability and social support. To others it represents a gain in privacy and autonomy.

Two questions seem particularly crucial to a discussion of these issues:

- (1) Other than the fact that they live by themselves in a separate house or apartment, in what sense are these individuals alone? What is their contact with relatives, friends, and neighbours?
- (2) How do these people feel about their living situations? Are they more or less satisfied than people in other living arrangements?

To shed light on these matters, the 1986 Census can be supplemented with data from the 1985 General Social Survey. The number of relatives and close friends, as well as a summary measure of contact with them, for persons living alone and those living in all other household statuses, are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2. Relatives, Friends and Social Contacts: Persons Living Alone versus All Others, 1985**

Indicator	Persons living alone	All others
	%	
Have six or more close relatives <sup>1</sup>	36	53
See at least one close relative weekly <sup>2</sup>	44	46
Have seen five or more other relatives recently	31	54
See other relatives weekly	12	22
Have five or more close friends	37	38
See close friends weekly	69	68
<b>Number of cases</b>	<b>1,174</b>	<b>10,026</b>

<sup>1</sup> Refers to nuclear relatives, that is, parents, children or siblings, regardless of residence.

<sup>2</sup> Refers to nuclear family **other** than those in same household as the respondent.

**Source:**

Tabulations from the 1985 General Social Survey.

Persons living alone have fewer close relatives (children, parents, or siblings) — indeed this fact may partly explain why they live alone. On the other hand, the proportion of persons living alone who see a close relative at least once a week is about the same as for other persons.

Persons living alone saw fewer relatives in the three months preceding the GSS, and were less apt to report seeing these other relatives at least weekly. Persons living alone are not married (except in rare instances, such as someone with no children at home whose spouse is institutionalized). Thus, they would be expected to have fewer "other relatives", and to maintain less contact with those that they do have (for example, in-laws or stepchildren from a former marriage).

Regarding close friends, persons living alone suffer no disadvantage compared with those who do not live alone. Virtually the same percentage of these two groups report having five or more close friends and seeing close friends at least once a week.

These general relationships change little across the various age groups, although occasionally persons living alone have a more favourable situation than others, especially in the area of friendship. Persons aged 40 and over who live alone, for example, report slightly more close friends and slightly more frequent contact with their close friends than those not living alone. Many of the latter, of course, are married and living with their spouse, and thus have less need for friends to provide day-to-day companionship.

The 1985 General Social Survey asked a series of questions on satisfaction with various realms of life, and a general question regarding the respondent's

self-rating in terms of happiness. Chart 14 compares the level of satisfaction or happiness reported by persons living alone with those reported by other persons.

All Canadians, including those living alone, reported high levels of satisfaction with life, with 90% or more reporting they are "very satisfied" or "somewhat satisfied" or "very happy" or "somewhat happy". On the other hand, those not living alone consistently show slightly higher percentages of positive responses, and are somewhat more likely to put themselves in the more positive category, "very" rather than "somewhat".

These relationships differ by age group, with older persons who live alone showing approximately the same levels of satisfaction as those living in other circumstances. To put it differently, the dissatisfaction found among persons living alone is concentrated among persons in the early adult and middle years of life; it also tends to focus on specific areas (e.g., family, finances, housing) rather than on "life as a whole".

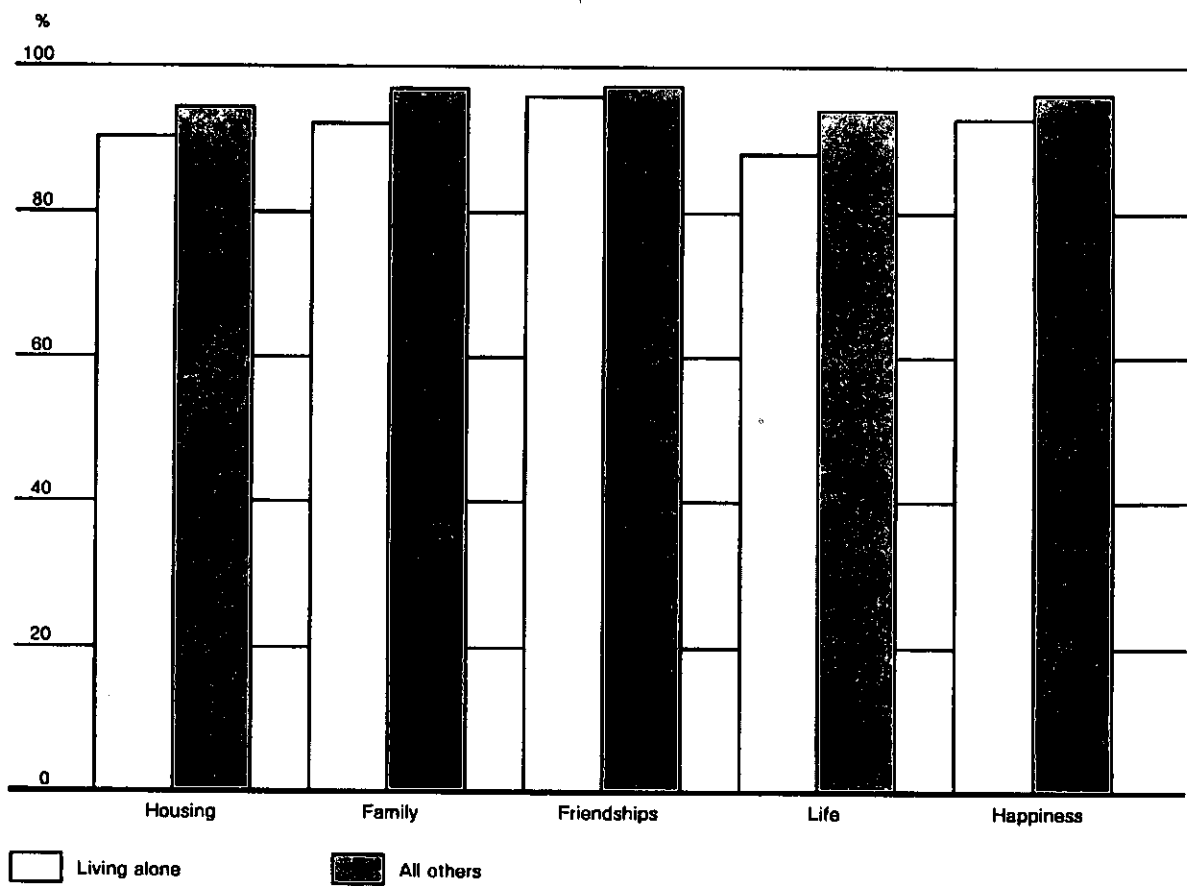
**Lone parents.** The situation of lone parents, especially lone mothers, seems to be more negative than that of persons living alone. The person living alone can arrange day-to-day life according to his or her own needs and preferences. The lone mother must also pay attention to the needs of one or more children — without the close help and emotional support of another involved adult. As Table 3 indicates, female lone parents face the additional prospect of a relatively low family income — low relative to that of men, and especially low relative to that of husband-wife families, many of whom have two wage-earners.

**Table 3. Per Capita Income by Family Type, Canada, 1986**

Family type	Per capita income
	\$
Husband-wife	13,673
With children	11,462
Without children	18,873
Female lone parent	7,615
<b>All families</b>	<b>12,975</b>

Source:  
1986 Census, special tabulations.

**Chart 14.      Satisfaction or Happiness of Persons Living Alone versus All Others, 1985**



**Source:**  
1985 GSS-1, special tabulations.

Like persons living alone, however, lone parents are not isolated from social contact. Table 4 summarizes some indicators pertaining to family and friends. Lone parents actually have more close relatives than other persons, but this includes their child or children. More relevant is that lone parents are slightly more likely to see at least one other close relative (i.e. one not living in the same household) at least once a week. They report slightly fewer other relatives (including in-laws, since, typically they have no spouse), but are only slightly less likely to see these other relatives at least once a week. Lone parents also report somewhat fewer close friends, but again tend to see them as often as persons living in other household arrangements.

Chart 15 summarizes GSS data on the reported satisfaction or happiness of lone parents, compared

with persons living in all other household statuses. The data pertain only to lone parents aged 15 to 39, where children are young and the problems associated with lone parenthood are typically the most acute. Overall, lone parents are somewhat less satisfied or happy than other persons, although the absolute levels of reported satisfaction are still fairly high — over 80%.

The largest differences in Chart 15 occur in housing and general items. About 14% fewer lone parents report they are satisfied with life as a whole, or that they are "very happy" or "somewhat happy". A comparison of lone parents with persons living alone (Table 5) suggests somewhat more dissatisfaction or unhappiness among the former, while the most satisfied Canadians tend to be living with a spouse or other adult partner.

**Table 4. Relatives, Friends and Social Contacts: Lone Parents versus All Others, 1985**

Indicator	Lone parents	All others
	%	
Have six or more close relatives <sup>1</sup>	72	51
See at least one close relative weekly <sup>2</sup>	62	54
Have seen five or more other relatives recently	40	52
See other relatives weekly	17	21
Have five or more close friends	29	38
See close friends weekly	64	68
<b>Number of cases</b>	<b>394</b>	<b>10,807</b>

<sup>1</sup> Refers to nuclear relatives, that is, parents, children or siblings, regardless of residence.

<sup>2</sup> Refers to nuclear family other than those in the same household as respondent.

Source:

Tabulations from the 1985 General Social Survey.

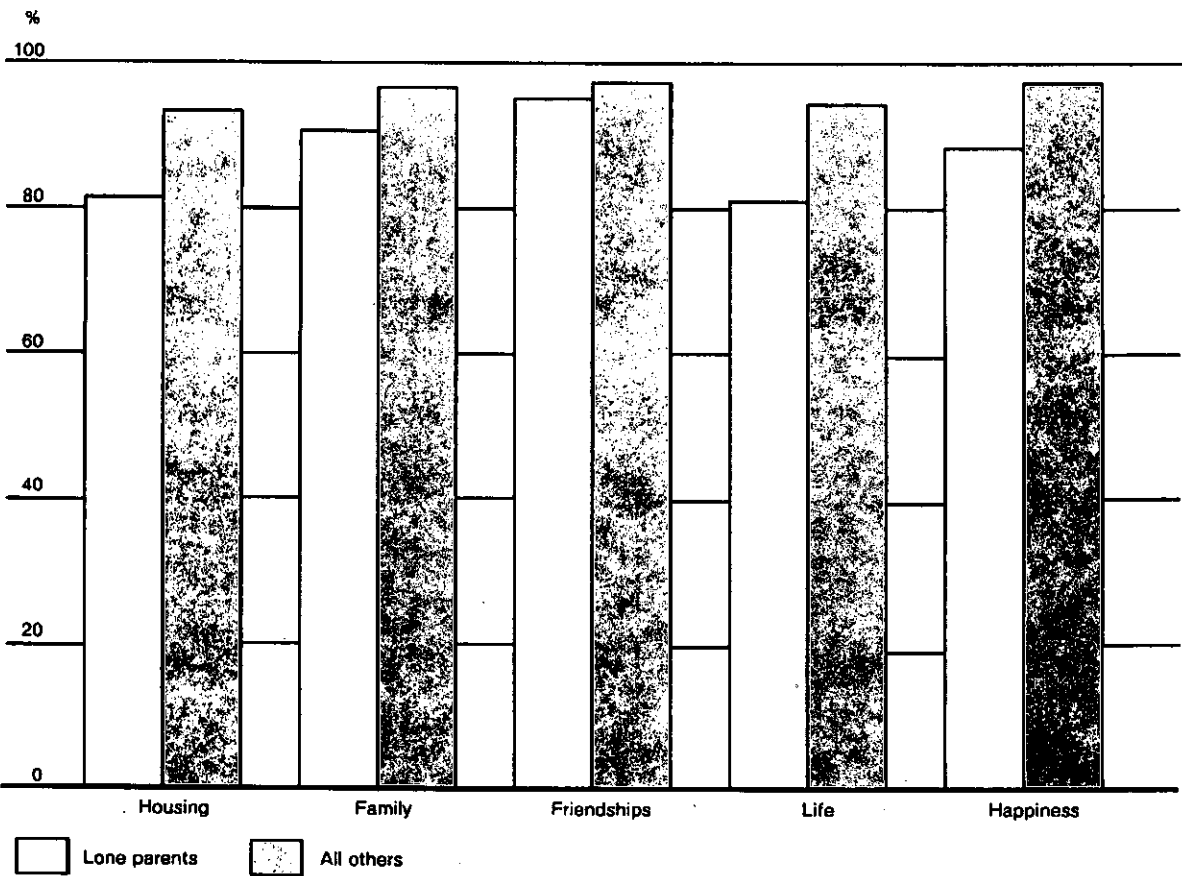
**Table 5. Reported Dissatisfaction or Unhappiness by Household Status, 1985**

	Lone parent	Alone	Other
	%		
Dissatisfied with:			
Housing	12	10	5
Family	8	8	3
Friendships	5	4	3
Life as a whole	16	12	5
Somewhat or very unhappy	13	7	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>393</b>	<b>1,172</b>	<b>9,564</b>

Source:

Tabulations from the 1985 General Social Survey.

**Chart 15. Satisfaction or Happiness of Lone Parents versus All Others, Ages 15-39, 1985**



**Source:**  
1985 GSS-I, special tabulations.

**The child.** Only a child is absolutely dependent on its family for survival and well-being. Adults can typically support themselves, and can seek to meet their social and emotional needs in many ways. They do not have to be married or to have children. But children, especially infants and young children, have to live in a family or family substitute. Moreover, in most of the family changes discussed in this report, some elements of individual choice are involved — people choose to divorce, to live alone, to have a child, always, of course, in the face of constraints, including the choices of others. But the young child has no choice. He or she must simply live with what society and his or her parents offer.

As is clear from Table 1, a growing minority of Canadian children must accept living in a lone-parent family. While it would be wrong to conclude that these children are not well-cared for, there would seem to be some inherent disadvantages, including the low family/household incomes noted in Table 3. These often translate into poorer housing, health care, recreation and education.

For most Canadian children, contemporary life involves both parents working outside the home. Table 6 shows the proportion of mothers employed among mothers with young children, as reported in the 1981 and 1986 Censuses (virtually all fathers of young children also work, or are otherwise occupied, e.g., in university or professional school). Today, a majority of mothers with young children work and the number continues to rise.

Again, the mere fact that both parents work outside the home does not imply poor parenting or deprivation for the children. But it does have implications for the time children spend with parents, whether mother, father or both. And it does mean that

childrearing duties formerly performed in the home are now performed elsewhere. The result is current quest for adequate day care (whether private or public) as Canadian society seeks to find an effective alternative to an older family system based on a sharp division of household labour between the sexes.

Not only do children not choose their living arrangements, they also have no direct say in economic and political decisions affecting their welfare. And, increasingly, they do not have even an indirect impact on these decisions, in the sense that fewer Canadians live with children or confront their needs directly on a day-to-day basis. Persons in these situations are less apt to vote for or otherwise support child welfare measures. As the noted American demographer Samuel Preston has pointed out, in an aging society, children and their parents are a dwindling political constituency.

The image of the typical adult as a parent persists, but the reality is somewhat different. As can be seen in Table 7, only about two out of every five Canadians over age 20 live with one or more children. Even at the ages most associated with parenthood (ages 20-39) the proportion just reaches one-half. For persons in middle age (ages 40-59) it drops below one-third. Among older persons, only about 1 in 25 now lives in the same residence with a young child. Table 7 shows data for both sexes combined, but the story is essentially the same for men and women considered separately.

A comparison of data from the 1981 and 1986 Censuses shows a downward shift in the proportion of Canadians living with children, with small absolute declines in the percentages (4.1% for ages 40-59), but somewhat more substantial relative declines (from 7% to 21%).



**Table 6. Labour Force Participation of Wives With Children Aged 5 or Under by Wives' Age Groups, 1981 and 1986**

Age group	Percentage in labour force	
	1981	1986
18-24 years	47	60
25-34 years	42	51

**Source:**  
1981 and 1986 Censuses, special tabulations.

**Table 7. Adults Living With One or More Children<sup>1</sup> by Age Groups, 1981 and 1986**

Age group	1981	1986
	%	
20-39 years	54	51
40-59 years	33	29
60 years and over	5	4

<sup>1</sup> Refers to children aged 15 or under.

**Source:**  
1981 and 1986 Censuses, special tabulations.



## CONCLUSION

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**T**he family changes described above are not unique to Canada. They are found in virtually every developed country in the Western world. These societies all exhibit increasing proportions of adults living alone, delayed marriage, increases in cohabitation, rising divorce rates, below-replacement fertility, and an increase in lone parents. Although there are differences in the level and timing of the changes, the overwhelming impression in comparative data is one of similarity. This near-universality in trends suggests causal factors intimately related to central aspects of Western culture and to the social and economic structure of our society.

Fundamental demographic changes such as longer life expectancy, delayed marriage and lower fertility have made marriage and family a smaller part of many people's lives, in the sense that these occupy a smaller portion of one's total lifetime. The decline of family businesses has gradually eroded the strong economic basis for family unity that shaped the behaviour of our ancestors. Increased physical mobility has weakened the influence that family and home community have over one's behaviour. The entry of a majority of married women into the labour force has given women greater economic independence.

Many of the above changes are deeply rooted in Canadian society. Many are permanent, although there are signs of slowing trends or even reversal — for example, the decline in cohabitation among young adult women. Some family patterns will be modified in the future by the “new immigration”, bringing as it does new ethnic backgrounds and cultural traditions regarding family matters — specifically from South and South-east Asia, the Middle East, the Caribbean. New diversity and new changes will emerge in the last censuses of this century and the first census of the new millennium, in 2001.



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