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## Canadian Families: Diversity and Change

**D**iversity and change are the salient features of Canadian families in the nineties. If the incidence of divorce, remarriage and common-law partnership continues to remain high, more volatility in family forms can be expected. The transformation from one family form to another (i.e., step, common-law, lone-parent) is greatly influenced by the available pool of partners for change: the divorced, the remarried, the common-law, and the presence of children.

*Through remarrying, a divorced lone parent will join the ranks of parents in step families. Through entry into a common-law relationship, this parent will join the ranks of common-law partners. Conversely, a step family or a common-law couple family can be transformed to one or two lone-parent families if their relationship ends.*

### Changes in family structure

The forms and characteristics of Canadian families are changing. These changes are the result of increases in divorce, separation, remarriage and cohabitation on the one hand, and decreases in mortality, fertility and marriage on the other.

With the trend of fewer marriages and the tendency to have children later in life, the once dominant family form – married couples with children – has become less common, dropping to 44.5% in 1995, from 55.0% of all families<sup>1</sup> in 1981. (Chart 1)

The decline in this form of family is balanced by the relative growth of other family forms. Between 1981 and 1995, common-law couples doubled to 11.9% from 5.6% of all families. In the same period, lone-parent families rose to 13.8% from 11.3%, while the proportion of married couples without children rose to 29.8% in 1995 from 28.1% in 1981.

Even among families comprised of couples and their children, considerable variation exists in family structure. Different

<sup>1</sup> **Family** - The term family in this fact sheet refers to a now-married or common-law couple with or without children of either or both spouses, or a lone parent of any marital status with at least one child living in the same dwelling.

Included as family members in this definition are ever-married children who are neither a spouse nor a parent to another household member. This inclusion makes the definition used here slightly different from the census family definition. However, the number of families with parent(s) living solely with ever-married children is small, representing only 0.7% of all families in the 1995 General Social Survey.

In this fact sheet, biological parent(s) includes adoptive parent(s) and biological child(ren) includes adopted child(ren).

parent-child relationships give rise to intact,<sup>2</sup> step<sup>3</sup> and blended family structures. With more alternate family forms, the newest portrait of the Canadian family is no longer a single representation, but one of increasing diversity.

### Intact families, a strong majority among couples with children

Intact families are those in which all children live with their biological or adoptive parents. Despite changing lifestyles in the nineties, intact families continue to be the majority (89.7%) of all families consisting of couples with children.

Among intact families, 94.0% were headed by married couples. The remainder (6.0%) consisted of common-law couples with children.

### Step family, a new look for the nineties

In the past, step families were generally the outcome of remarriage after the death of a spouse. Today, step families are also formed as a result of parents with children marrying or living common law for the first time (i.e., previously single parents), or remarrying or living common law after the breakup of a previous union. Many such relationships now consist of common-law couples with step children, and often, the other biological parent is still living.

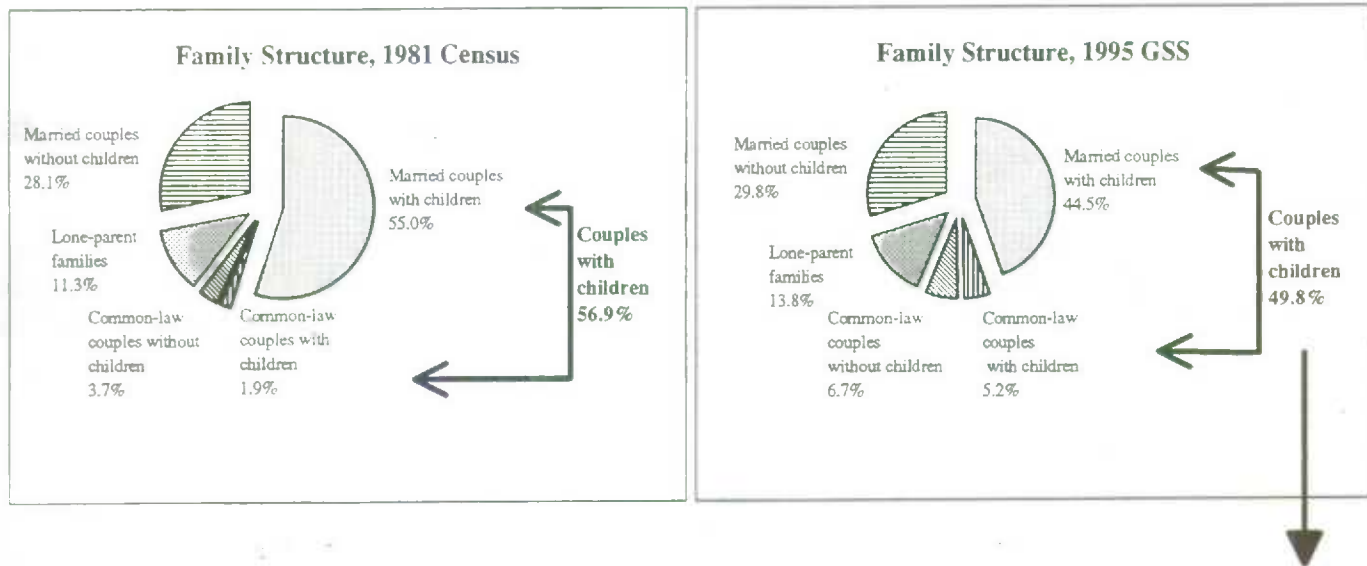
<sup>2</sup> **Intact family** - research literature defines an intact family as a family in which all children in the household are the biological and/or adopted offspring of both members of the couple.

<sup>3</sup> **Step family** - refers to a family in which at least one of the children in the household is from a previous relationship of one of the parents.



## General Social Survey

Chart 1. Family Structure, 1981 Census and 1995 General Social Survey



Couples with Children (100.0%)	
Intact Families	89.7%
Step Families	10.3%
With only the father's child(ren) from previous union(s)	1.3%
With only the mother's child(ren) from previous union(s)	5.2%
With children both parents brought from previous union(s) or children from previous union(s) and the current one	3.9%

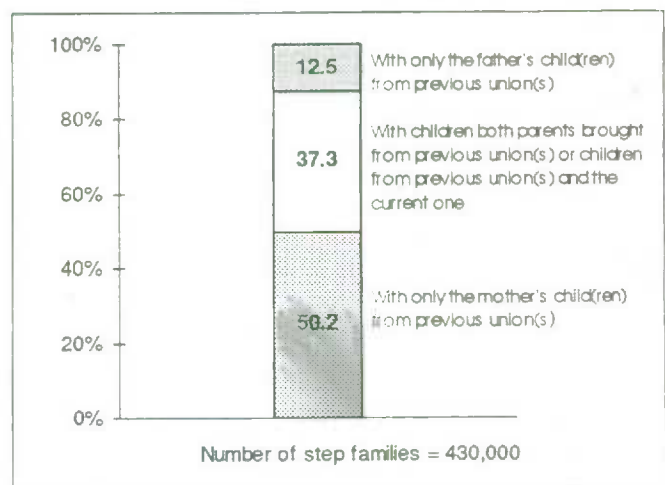
In 1995, there were an estimated 430,000 step families in Canada. Of these, 50.4% consisted of now-married couples, while 49.6% were common-law couples. For whatever reasons, social or economic, many of these parents have decided not to get married.

Step families are a growing phenomenon in Canada. They represented 10.3% of couple families with children in 1995. As long as re-entering into relationships in the form of common-law unions or remarriage continues to rise, the number of step families will continue to grow.

### Over one-third of step families show blending of children

Inherent to step families are a mix of biological and step relationships between parents and children. In 1995, 50.2% of step families consisted only of children who lived with the biological mother and a step father. Step families with only children living with the biological father and a step mother were less common, only 12.5%. This reflects the fact that mothers are much more likely than fathers to retain custody of their children. (Chart 2)

Chart 2. Step Families, by Type, 1995 GSS



Over one-third (37.3%) of step families are blended families, i.e., families with a mix of children both parents brought from previous union(s) or families with a mix of children from previous union(s) and the current one. According to the

## General Social Survey

General Social Survey, there were 161,000 blended families in 1995.

Children in blended families have to deal with complex social relationships when biological parent, step parent, biological sibling, step sibling and half sibling partially or all come into play. In addition to this wide spectrum of relationships within the household, some children in blended families have to deal with another set of relationships outside the household, i.e., their relationships with their non-custodial biological parent, and often, that parent's new family.

### Common-law couples surge to almost 1 million in 1995

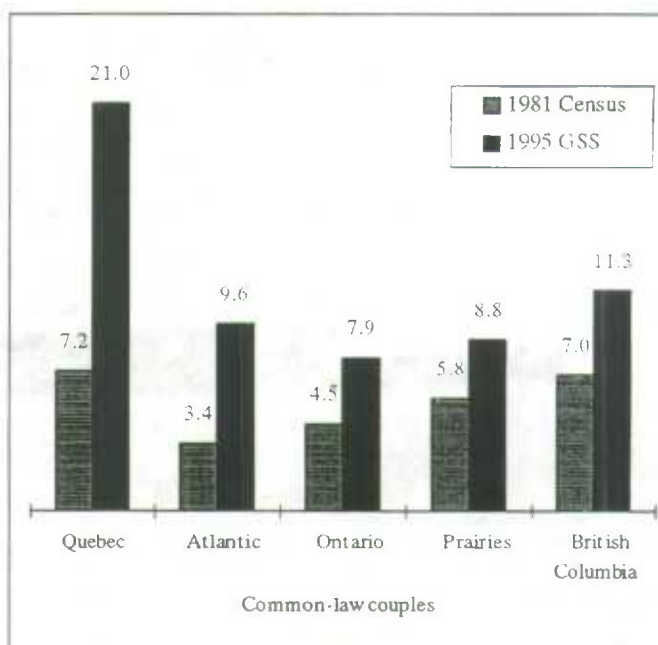
Common-law living is not a new phenomenon; however, its substantial increase within the last fifteen years is striking. Between 1981 and 1995, the number of common-law families almost tripled to 997,000 from 355,000. As a proportion of total families, common-law couples climbed to 11.9% from 5.6%. The prevalence of common-law couples reflects the changing attitudes of Canadians towards marital union. It appears that common-law union is not only a prelude to marriage, but also an alternative to marriage and remarriage.

### Common-law couples in Quebec attain a new high level

In the early eighties, Quebec led the nation in common-law couple families. By 1995, its share reached an even higher level, 44.4% up from 34.1% in 1981. Close to half a million common-law unions (442,000) were reported in Quebec in 1995, representing slightly more than three times that province's level in 1981 (121,000).

Common-law couples accounted for 7.2% of all families in Quebec in 1981. This proportion increased consistently – 10.8% in 1986, 16.3% in 1991 and 21.0% in 1995. No other region had such a striking trend in the number and proportional increase in common-law living. In 1981, the proportion of common-law couples in other provinces was 5.0%, about 2 percentage points lower than that of Quebec. By 1995, this difference increased to 12 percentage points, 21.0% in Quebec versus 8.9% for the rest of the provinces. (Chart 3)

**Chart 3. Common-law Couples as a Proportion of Total Families, by Region, 1981 Census and 1995 GSS**



### Lone-parent families still on the rise

Although the rate of increase of lone-parent families is no match to that of common-law couples, lone-parent families, nonetheless, continue to increase in number and in the proportion of all families.

Between 1981 and 1995, lone-parent families grew more than 60% to over 1.1 million from 712,000. Lone-parent families also increased as a proportion of all families with children: to 21.6% in 1995 from 16.6% in 1981.

### Changing path to lone-parenthood

During the 1950s and 1960s, the death of a spouse was the major cause of lone-parenthood, with more than 60% of all lone parents being widows or widowers. This situation has changed since the 1970s.

In 1981, more than half of lone parents (51.8%) were either separated or divorced. This proportion continued to rise, reaching 55.1% in 1995. In place of widowhood, marital dissolution has emerged as the major cause of lone-parenthood. Widows and widowers make up a smaller share of total lone parents: only 16.2% in 1995, compared with 32.7% in 1981.



## General Social Survey

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### Single lone parents, a fast growing sub-group

Also noteworthy is the increase in single never-married lone parents. In 1981, close to one in ten (9.8%) lone parents were single never-married. By 1995, almost one in four (24.8%) fell into this group.

Single never-married people raising children on their own could be the result of the breakdown of a common-law union in which children are present. One or two lone-parent families would be formed depending on how the children were split up between the parents. (Table 1)

Table 1. Marital Status of Lone Parents, 1981 Census and 1995 GSS

	1981	1995
	%	%
Never-married (single)	9.8	24.8
<b>Separated or divorced</b>	<b>51.8</b>	<b>55.1</b>
Separated	25.5	21.9
Divorced	26.3	33.2
Widowed	32.7	16.2
Other*	5.8	3.9
Total	100.0	100.0

\* Includes people who were married or living common law, but the spouse was absent, or lone parent whose marital status was not stated.

Most of the information presented in this fact sheet comes from the 1995 General Social Survey (GSS) which measures major changes in demographics, social characteristics and family conditions of Canadians. It marks a repeat of the family questions on marital and fertility histories originally asked in the 1990 GSS and in the 1984 Family History Survey.

The target population of the 1995 GSS consisted of all individuals aged 15 and over living in a private household in one of the ten provinces. The data were collected over a 12-month period from January 1995 to December 1995, using a computer-assisted telephone interview system. Responses were obtained from 10,749 respondents for a response rate of 81.1%.

The GSS data released today are mainly based on the demographic variables of age, sex, marital status of each person in the household as well as the relationships of each person to every other person in the household. This matrix of relationships allows a more comprehensive identification of family forms. Also, this survey differentiates parent-child relationships as biological, step, adoptive or foster, permitting the classification of a variety of family forms: intact, step, adoptive and foster families.

This release also makes use of historical data from the Census of Population for comparison.