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# LIVING ALONE

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1981 Census of Canada

# LIVING ALONE

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# INTRODUCTION

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She is 67, a widow who never graduated from high school. She does not have a job. Her major source of income is government pensions, and in 1980 she got by on \$5,500.

He is 27, single and a university graduate. He works nine to five and earns most of his income from that job. In 1980, he made \$17,800.

What do they have in common? They are both members of a growing minority - people who live alone. Living alone has changed from a rare arrangement to the life-style of 1 in every 11 Canadian adults.

In fact, the one-person household ranks just behind the two-person in popularity. It was the fastest growing household size in the seventies.

Several factors contribute to the rising numbers. The Canadian population is increasingly made up of young adults and the elderly, two groups who tend to live alone. Higher incomes have enabled larger segments of both groups to "purchase" the privacy of an independent household. By delaying marriage, the baby-boom generation has produced a singles boom. A soaring divorce rate has split many households in two. The fact that women generally live longer than men creates many widows.

From 1981 Census data, the following facts about living alone have emerged:

- By 1981, 1.6 million Canadians were living alone - double the number who had done so 10 years earlier.
- Nine adults in every 100 live alone.

- This life-style is most common among young single adults and the elderly, particularly older widows.
- More women than men live alone.
- Among the over 65 age group, women living alone outnumber men by better than three to one.
- One-half of all elderly widows live alone.
- The majority of people living alone are city dwellers who rent apartments. They may have chosen this arrangement because they have the means to maintain an independent household.
- Young people who live alone are better educated, more likely to have white-collar jobs and higher incomes than the average Canadian.
- Living alone is less common in Quebec and the Atlantic provinces than in the rest of the country.

This report answers several questions about people who live alone. It describes who they are, and looks at their numbers and why they are increasing. It discusses their income and what factors affect it. Finally, it tells where they live and in what type of housing.



# HOW MANY CANADIANS LIVE ALONE?

## Growing Numbers of Adults Live Alone

By the time of the 1981 Census, people living alone numbered more than 1.6 million, equivalent to the combined populations of New Brunswick, Saskatchewan, the Yukon and Northwest Territories. In 1981, 9 adults in every 100 lived alone.

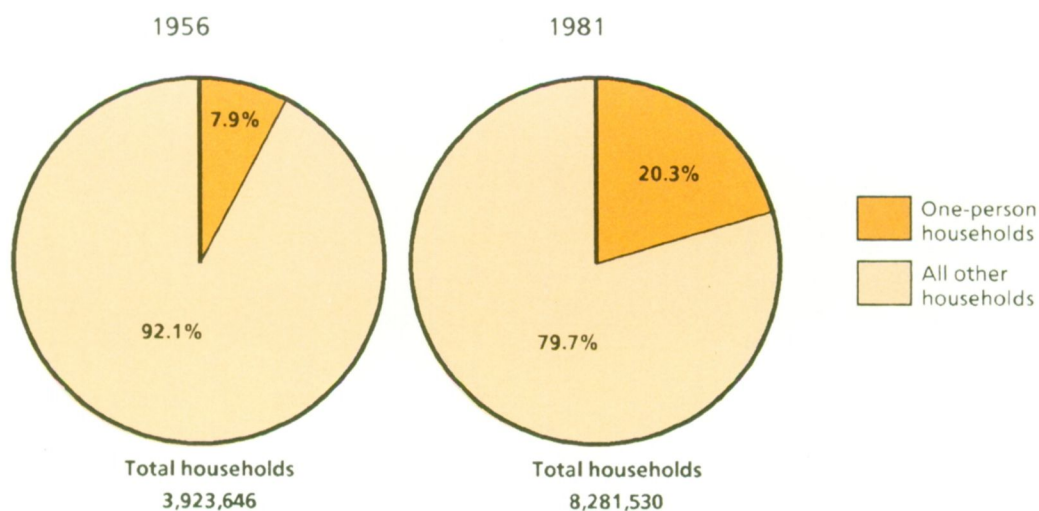
## They Account for a Rising Percentage of Households

There has been a sharp rise in the number of one-person households over the past 25 years. In 1956, they made up fewer than 8% of all households; by 1981 they represented more than 20%.

The one-person household is growing faster than any other household size. Now only the two-person type is more numerous, accounting for 29% of the total.

Chart 1

One-person Households as a Percentage of All Households,  
Canada, 1956 and 1981



Source : Various Census of Canada bulletins (1956 - 1981)

## And Contribute to the Rising Number of Households

While household size declined from 3.9 to 2.9 persons between 1956 and 1981, the number of households doubled.

The sharp rise in one-person households is a major factor in this growth. The number of households has grown by more than 2 million in the past 10 years, and the one-person type has accounted for over a third of the increase.

Table 1

### Persons Living Alone as a Percentage of the Population 15 Years and Over and as a Percentage of All Households, Canada, 1956-1981

	1956	1961	1966	1971	1976	1981
Persons living alone ('000)	309	425	590	812	1,205	1,681
Persons living alone as a percentage of the population 15 years and over	2.8	3.5	4.4	5.3	7.0	8.9
One-person households* as a percentage of all households	7.9	9.3	11.4	13.4	16.8	20.3

\* The number of one-person households is equivalent to the number of persons living alone.

Source: Various Census of Canada bulletins, 1956-1981.



# WHO LIVES ALONE?

## Young Adults and the Elderly Predominate

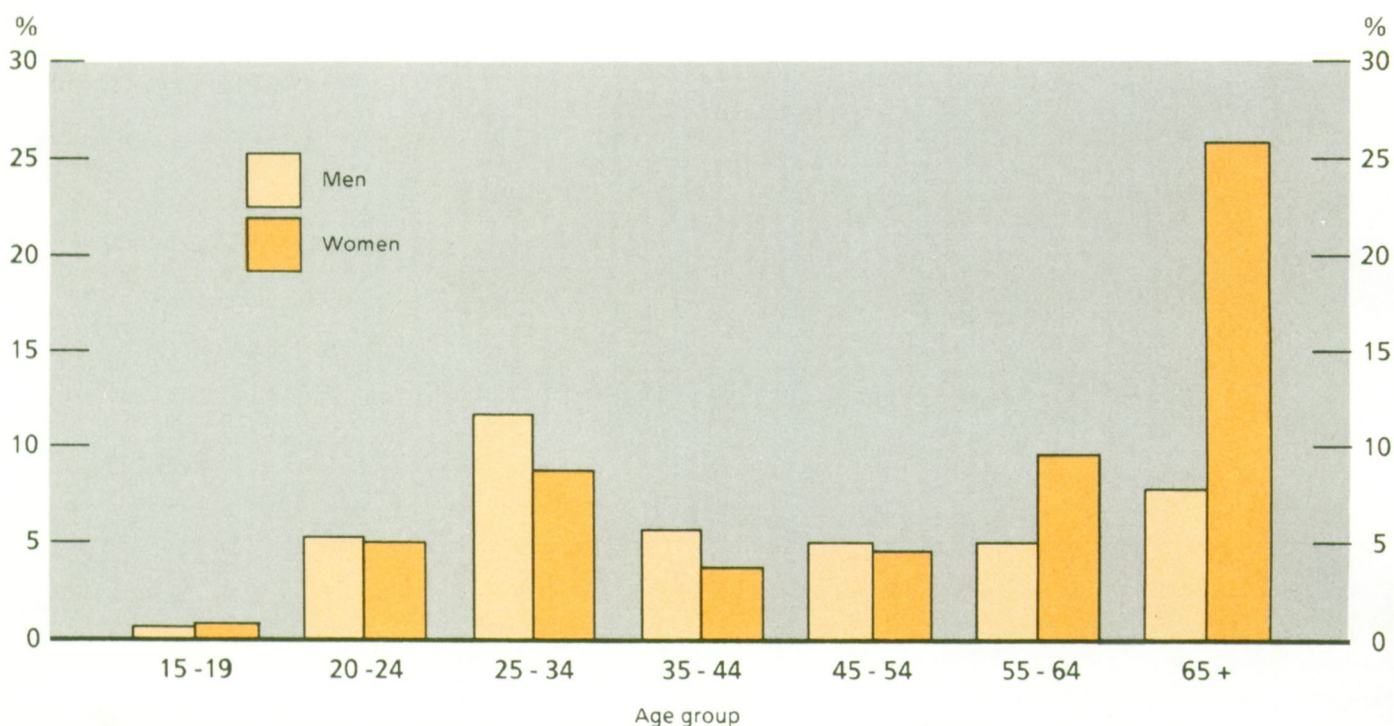
Living alone is most common during young adulthood and old age. Nearly a third of the people who live alone are between 20 and 34. Another third are 65 years and over.

## More Women Than Men Live Alone

Six of 10 persons living alone are women. But the female majority does not prevail for all ages. In the younger age groups, single men and women live alone in almost equal numbers. It is after 55 that women predominate, reflecting their tendency to outlive their husbands. At ages 65 years and over women living alone outnumber men by better than three to one.

Chart 2

Percentage Distribution by Age and Sex of Persons Living Alone, Canada, 1981



Note : Excludes population aged less than 15.

Source : 1981 Census of Canada.

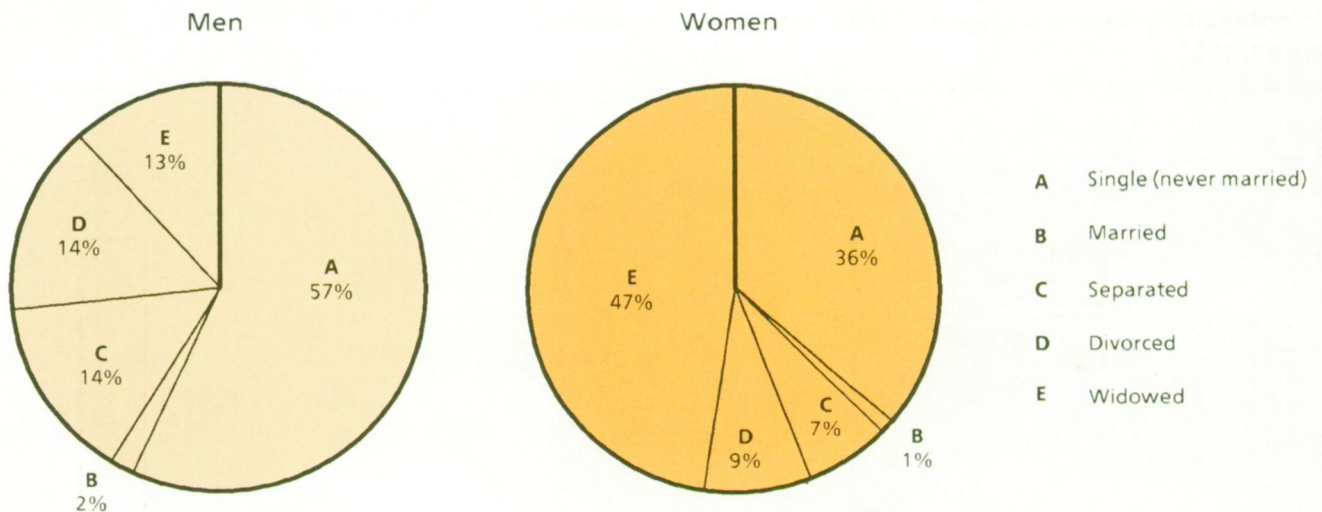
## Widows and Single Men Make Up the Majority Living Alone

Marital status is, of course, a prime determinant of living arrangements. Most occupants of one-person households either have never been married or are widowed. More than half the men living alone are single. Close to half the women living alone are widows.

Separated and divorced men are more apt to live alone than women in the same circumstances. After a marriage break-up, the woman usually gains custody of the children. About half of divorced women head lone-parent families compared with just a ninth of divorced men.

Chart 3

### Percentage Distribution by Marital Status of Men and Women Living Alone, Canada, 1981



Note : Excludes population aged less than 15.

Source : 1981 Census of Canada

# *WHY HAVE THE NUMBERS GROWN?*

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## **Living Alone Took Off in the Seventies**

Living alone has increased in the past 25 years, but particularly in the last decade. Changes in the age and marital status of Canadians as they move through the life cycle have a major impact on living arrangements.

Between 1971 and 1981, people living alone more than doubled as the proportion of adults in the population grew.

The number of young adults and elderly rose considerably. In the past 10 years, 20-34-year olds increased by 1.8 million, while the population 65 and over grew by 617,000.

## **The Baby Boom Contributes to a Singles Boom**

Most of the baby-boom generation reached their twenties during the seventies, and many remained single. Between 1971 and 1981, the number of singles aged 20 to 29 increased by 633,000.

## **The Number of Widows Has Risen**

The widowed population grew at the same pace as singles, with women accounting for almost all of the 214,000 added to this category.

Women's longer life expectancy at 77.5 years, as opposed to 70.2 years for men, makes them apt to outlive their husbands. In addition, men most often marry women younger than themselves. Widows have fewer chances to remarry than widowers because they greatly outnumber eligible men.

## **The Seventies Also Saw a Rapid Increase in Separations and Divorces**

The rise in divorce, which usually creates two households out of one, began with the passage of a more liberal divorce act in 1968. The number of divorced persons nearly tripled between 1971 and 1981.

### However, the Increase in One-person Households Was Not Only Caused by Rising Numbers of Single, Divorced and Widowed Persons

While population changes accounted for part of the increase in one-person households, the incidence of living alone also rose. The rate nearly doubled for singles; for the widowed and divorced, it went up by more than 10 percentage points. In other words, more and more people are choosing to live alone.

### Higher Incomes May Encourage Living Alone

This life-style may have been facilitated by increases in real income. People living alone make up the majority of a larger group - unattached individuals - which also includes people in households where they are not related to other household members. The average income, in constant dollars, of unattached individuals rose by more than a third during the seventies.

Table 2

**Persons Living Alone as a Percentage of the Population 15 Years and Over by Sex and Selected Marital Status, Canada, 1971 and 1981**

	Total		Men		Women	
	1971	1981	1971	1981	1971	1981
	%					
Single (never married)	7.8	14.2	7.6	13.6	8.2	14.9
Widowed	35.1	48.0	31.5	43.8	36.0	48.9
Divorced	25.7	36.9	30.5	46.1	22.2	30.7

Source: 1971 Census of Canada bulletins.  
1981 Census of Canada.



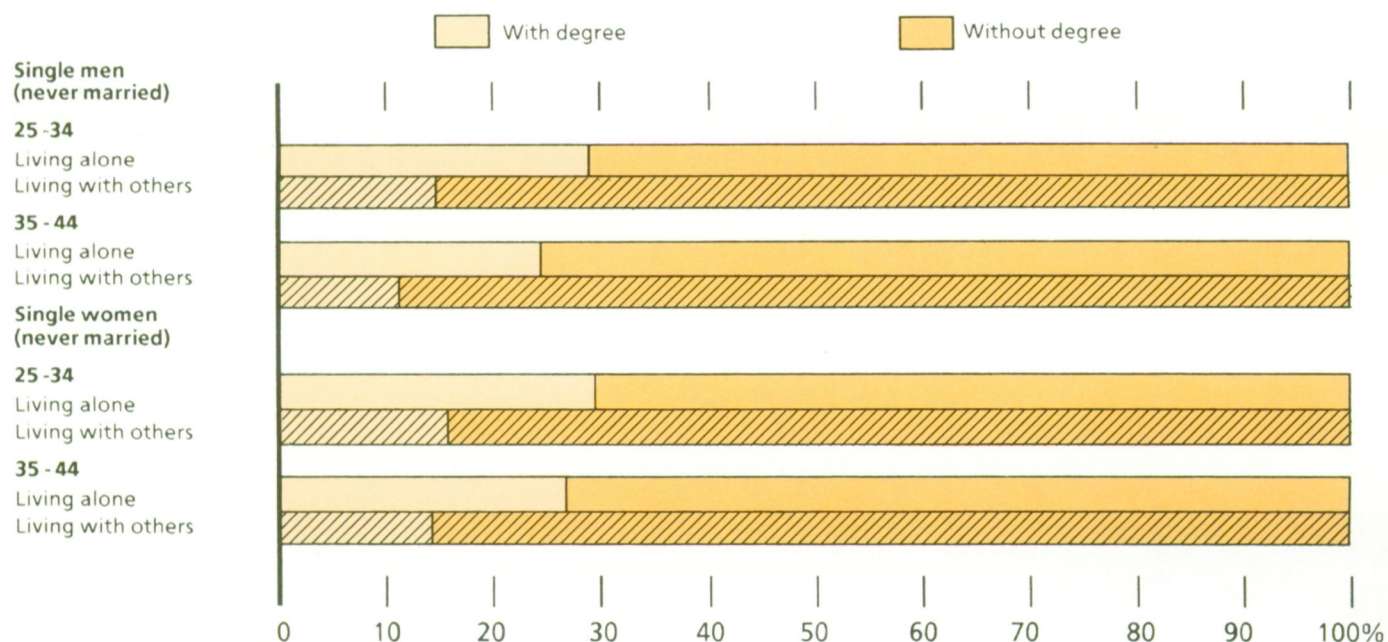
# WHAT ABOUT EDUCATION, LABOUR FORCE ACTIVITY AND INCOME?

## People Who Live Alone Tend to Have a Higher Level of Education

Overall, 12 of every 100 people living alone have university degrees, compared with 8 of every 100 in the rest of the population. As with the general population, degrees are most prevalent among 25-34-year olds, and educational attainment drops with age.

Chart 4

Percentage of Degree-holders Among Single (Never Married) Persons Living Alone  
and Persons Living With Others, by Sex and Selected Age Groups, Canada, 1981



Source : 1981 Census of Canada.



### Of Those Living Alone, the Never-married Are More Likely to Have Degrees

Since most unmarried people who live alone tend to be young, it is not surprising that they are more likely to have degrees. However, in every age group, single women living alone are more apt to hold degrees than single men.

### Below Retirement Age, People Who Live Alone Are More Likely to Be in the Labour Force

People living alone are more likely to be in the labour force than the rest of the population younger than 55. At older ages, especially after 65, their labour force participation is lower.

### Age, Sex and Marital Status Affect Labour Force Activity

Women younger than 65 who live alone have higher labour force participation than other women under 65. Among men living alone, only those younger than 25 are more likely to be in the labour force than other men.

Compared with others of the same marital status, young adults who live alone are more apt to be in the labour force. Much lower participation rates for separated, divorced and widowed women who do not live alone suggest that they may have custody of children.

Table 3

#### Labour Force Participation Rates by Age and Sex, Persons Living Alone and Persons Living with Others, Canada, 1981

	Age group							Total
	15-19	20-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65 +	
	%							
Men								
Living alone	88.4	94.7	95.3	92.8	85.2	65.9	13.5	74.6
Living with others	48.3	90.5	95.3	95.4	92.8	78.5	17.9	78.5
Women								
Living alone	88.0	94.6	95.2	89.6	76.4	48.8	5.2	46.0
Living with others	43.9	75.8	63.5	63.1	54.5	33.4	6.5	52.5
Total								
Living alone	88.2	94.6	95.3	91.5	80.9	54.6	7.1	57.7
Living with others	46.2	83.2	79.1	79.2	73.7	55.7	12.3	65.5

Source: 1981 Census of Canada.

Table 4

**Labour Force Participation Rates of Young (20-34 years) Men and Women Living Alone and Living With Others by Selected Marital Status, Canada, 1981**

	Marital status				
	Single (never married)	Separated	Divorced	Widowed	Total
	%				
Men (20-34 years)					
Living alone	94.9	96.6	96.0	89.3	95.1
Living with others	88.5	93.1	92.4	86.9	93.6
Women (20-34 years)					
Living alone	95.3	93.6	94.1	81.5	95.0
Living with others	82.7	68.0	70.1	57.0	67.9

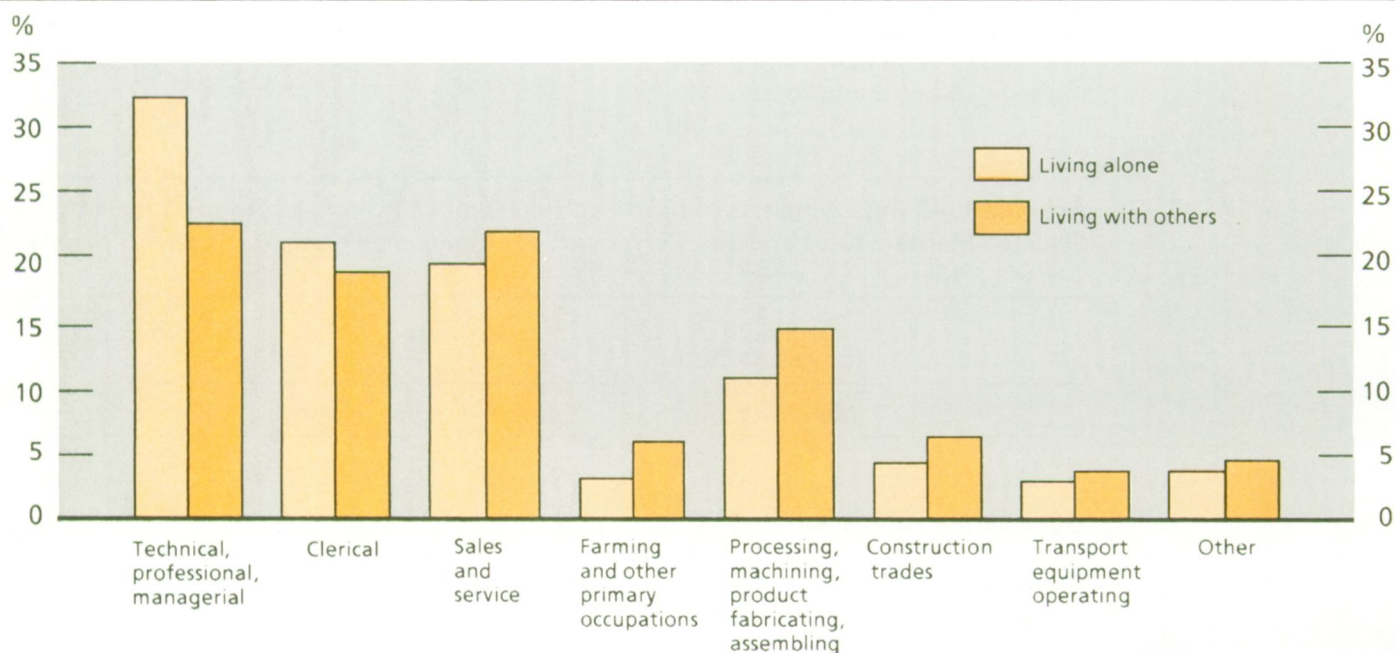
Source: 1981 Census of Canada.

**People Who Live Alone Are Less Likely to be Unemployed than Other Adults**

When the census was taken in June 1981, the unemployment rate among people living alone was 5.6% compared with

7.5% for the rest of the population. Women living alone tend to have lower unemployment than their male peers. The reverse is true for the rest of the labour force.

Chart 5

**Percentage Distribution by Occupation of the Population Who Worked Since January 1, 1980, Persons Living Alone and Persons Living With Others, Canada, 1981**


Note: Excludes population aged less than 15.

Source: 1981 Census of Canada.

### The Majority of People Living Alone are "White-collar" Workers, Many of Whom Are Professionals

A third of the people living alone, compared with less than a quarter of other adults, have occupations in the groups containing highly qualified jobs. Women are more likely to have such jobs than men.

Nearly as many women who live alone have technical, professional or managerial jobs as are in the traditionally female-dominated clerical category. Large percentages of women living alone are in teaching and health.

The "professional" trend is particularly strong among single people who live alone. More than a third of them have managerial or professional jobs compared with one-seventh of singles in other living arrangements. Single women living alone are most likely of all to have such occupations. Next in line are divorced women who live alone.

### Those Living Alone Have Higher Earnings

With more education and a greater likelihood of holding a professional job, people who live alone also earn more than the rest of the population. When the 1980 employment incomes of single, separated and divorced full-time, full-year workers aged 15-64 are compared, men and women living alone have higher incomes than others.

### If Resources Permit, Elderly Widows May Choose to Live Alone

For elderly widows, personal income may be the deciding factor in living arrangements. In 1980, those who lived alone averaged \$8,200 compared with \$6,500 for their counterparts in larger households.

While \$8,200 may provide necessities, it does not allow many extras. A considerable number of elderly widows who live alone may be poor. In fact, about 6 in 10 of them had 1980 incomes of less than \$8,000.

The share of total household income available to the widows who lived with others may have exceeded that of widows living alone. But living with others means giving up some privacy and independence. The difference in personal income between the two groups of widows suggests that those who can manage it may choose to live alone.

Table 5

**Average 1980 Employment Income of Full-time, Full-year Workers Aged 15 to 64 by Selected Marital Status and Sex, Persons Living Alone and Persons Living with Others, Canada, 1981**

	Single (never married)		Separated		Divorced	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
	\$	\$	\$	\$	\$	\$
Living alone	18,900	16,000	22,700	14,800	22,700	15,800
Living with others	14,200	12,300	20,600	13,600	20,700	14,800

Source: 1981 Census of Canada.

# WHERE DO THEY LIVE?

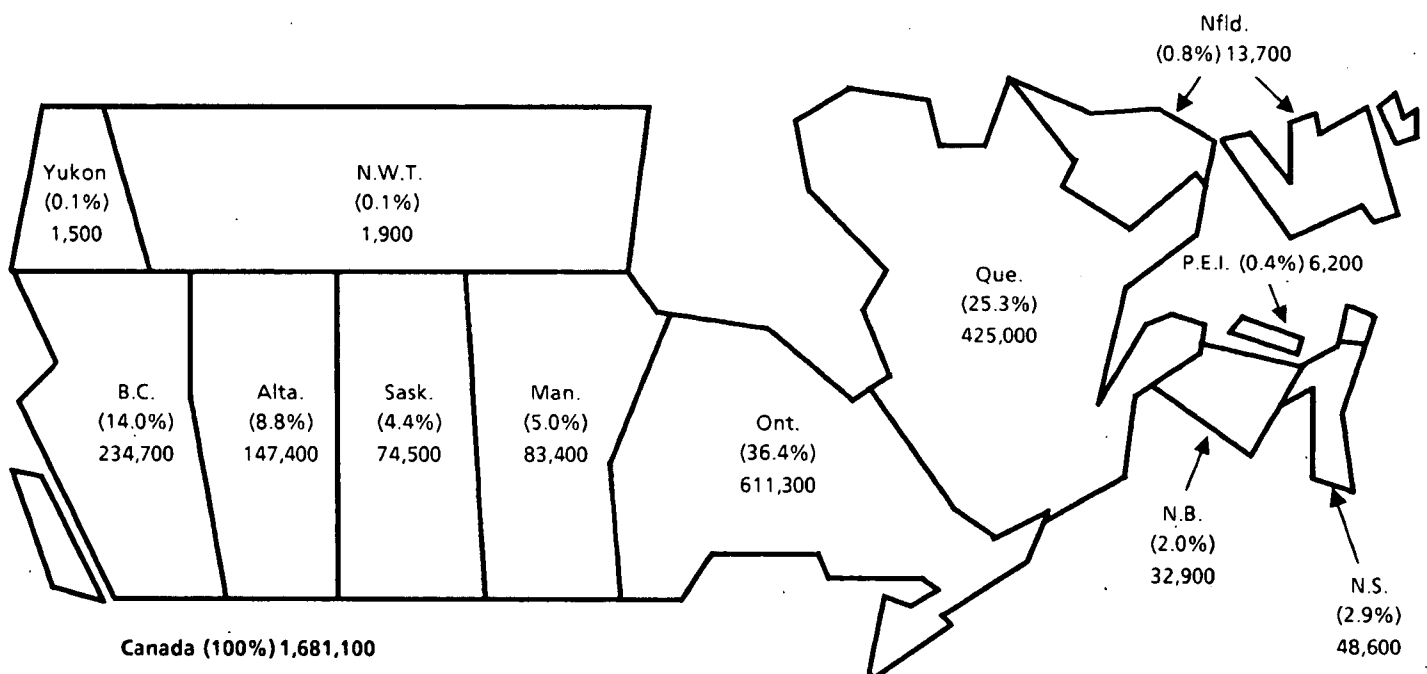
## The Distribution of People Living Alone Parallels But Does Not Match the General Population

Compared with the distribution of the general population, those who live alone are somewhat overrepresented in British Columbia, Manitoba and Saskatchewan and underrepresented in the Atlantic provinces.

Between 1971 and 1981, one-person households grew fastest in Quebec, Alberta and Newfoundland. However, Ontario had the largest numerical increase.

Chart 6

### Number and Percentage Distribution by Province and Territory of Persons Living Alone, Canada, 1981



Note : Excludes population aged less than 15.

Source : 1981 Census of Canada.

## This Life-style is More Prevalent in the West

East of the Ontario-Quebec border, the proportion living alone in each province is less than the national average. By contrast, west of this dividing line, only Alberta, the Yukon and Northwest Territories fall below Canada's average. The province with the highest percentage of adults living alone is British Columbia, with better than 10 in 100. Living alone is least common in Newfoundland where the proportion is only 3 of every 100.

## Most People Who Live Alone Live in Cities

Nine out of 10 one-person households are in urban areas. This is true of just 8 out of 10 family households. In urban centres, 1 adult in 10 lives alone. In rural areas, living alone is much less common - only about 1 in 20.

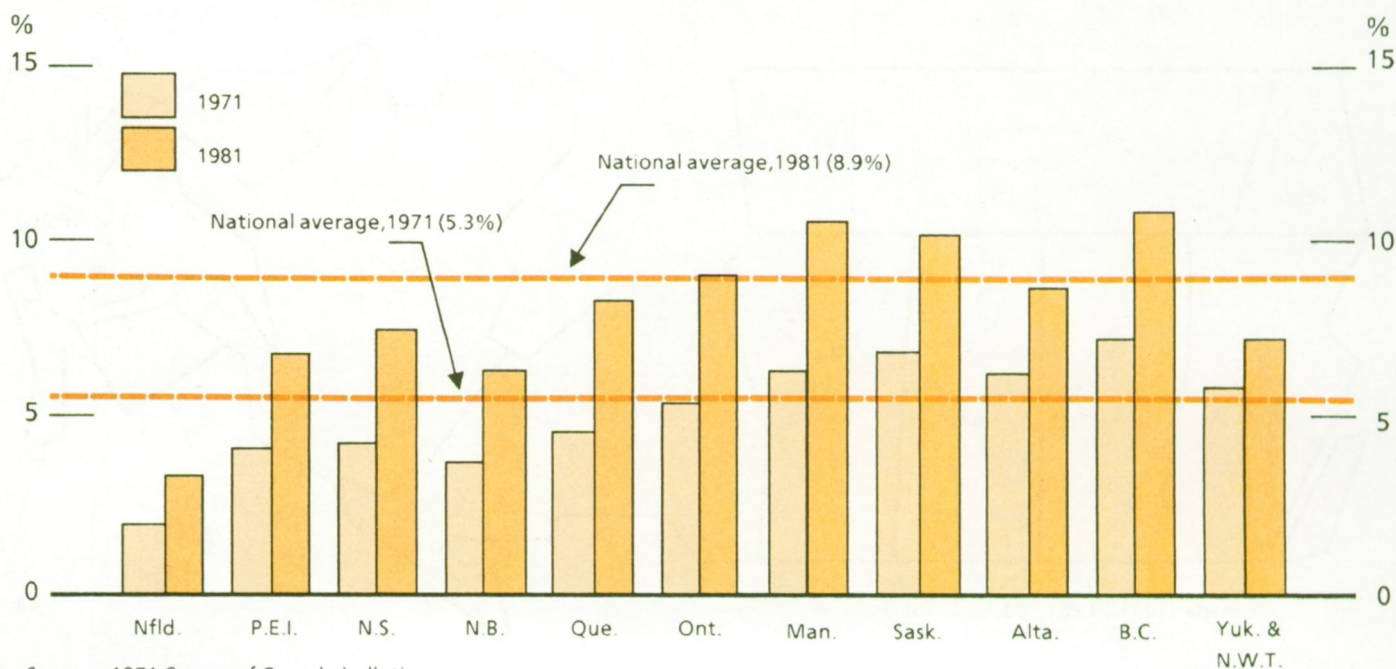
## Victoria is the "Living Alone Capital" of Canada

In Victoria, 14 of every 100 adults are in one-person households. The next highest rates of living alone are in Vancouver, Saskatoon and Winnipeg.

Overall, in nine large metropolitan areas at least 10 of every 100 adults live alone. In addition to those already named, the others are: London, Montréal, Ottawa-Hull, Regina and Windsor. In only two of the nation's major metropolitan areas do fewer than 5 of every 100 adults live alone - Chicoutimi-Jonquière and St. John's, Newfoundland.

Chart 7

**Persons Living Alone as a Percentage of the Population 15 Years and Over, Canada, Provinces and Territories, 1971 and 1981**





## People Who Live Alone Are Apt to be Renters

Among people who live alone, renters outnumber owners by better than two to one. For the remainder of the population, the general tendency is ownership.

More than a fifth of people living alone are in apartment buildings taller than 5 storeys. This is true of just one-twentieth of other adults.

## Ownership and Dwelling Type Are Related to Age, Sex and Marital Status

As with the rest of the population, ownership rates rise with age. The tendency to live in a single-detached home is more prevalent among older age groups, but again, much less characteristic of people living alone.

In general, men living alone are more likely to be home-owners and to live in single-detached dwellings than women. Highest rates of ownership are among widowers and widows. The widowed have the largest proportions in single-detached houses, suggesting that they continue to occupy the family home.

Ownership rates are lowest among people who have never married, but even in this group, more men than women are home-owners.

Table 6

### Percentage Distribution by Type of Occupied Private Dwelling, Persons Living Alone and Persons Living With Others, Canada, 1981

	Single detached	Apartment buildings (5 storeys or more)	Movable	Other multiples*	Total	Number
	%					
Living alone	30.5	22.3	2.2	45.1	100.0	1,681,190
Living with others	67.0	4.8	2.4	25.8	100.0	16,662,175

\* Includes attached houses and apartments in buildings of less than 5 storeys.

Note: Excludes population aged less than 15.

Source: 1981 Census of Canada.



# *WHAT ABOUT THE FUTURE?*

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## **Demographic Trends Favour Living Alone**

Results of the 1981 Census seem to indicate a growing inclination for the young and old to live alone. Since both groups are expected to increase in size, one-person households will likely multiply as well.

The young adult population will continue to grow during the eighties as the last of the baby-boom generation matures. In the short run, this should mean a further increase in living alone. Thereafter, with smaller numbers entering young adulthood, living alone could decline. Such a trend might be accelerated if people who have been postponing marriage eventually wed.

Continued large numbers of divorces could produce more one-person households. But for this group, living alone may just be an intermediate stage between marriages.

Because the population aged 65 and over is expected to grow, living alone may increase among the elderly. With fewer children than their predecessors, future elderly will have limited options for living with kin.

Canada has taken a census of population every ten years from 1851 and every five years from 1956. The last census was taken on June 3, 1981. The census data constitute the most important single source of information on the population of Canada by many geographic areas from the national and provincial levels down to smaller groups such as cities, towns and municipalities. These data include: information on the number of people who live in Canada; their characteristics such as age, sex, marital status, language, educational level and occupation; number and types of families; and types of dwellings. Census information is used for a variety of purposes by private individuals, governments at all levels, educational institutions, business people and other organizations.

As part of a program to supplement 1981 Census statistical reports, a special series of popular studies has been undertaken on selected topics of public interest. Each study is a description of major trends and patterns. The data used are from the 1981 Census and other relevant sources. This series is designed for use at the high school and community college levels. However, it could also be of interest to the general public.

LIVING ALONE is one of the reports in this series. It brings together under one cover highlights of information about persons living alone. Other studies in the series are being published at about the same time or within the next few months.

The manuscript for this study was prepared in the Social Statistics Field by M.S. Devereaux.

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