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Canadian Megatrends

Lone-parent families: The new face of an old phenomenon



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- . not available for any reference period
- .. not available for a specific reference period
- ... not applicable
- 0 true zero or a value rounded to zero
- 0^s value rounded to 0 (zero) where there is a meaningful distinction between true zero and the value that was rounded
- ^P preliminary
- ^r revised
- X suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the *Statistics Act*
- ^E use with caution
- F too unreliable to be published
- * significantly different from reference category ($p < 0.05$)

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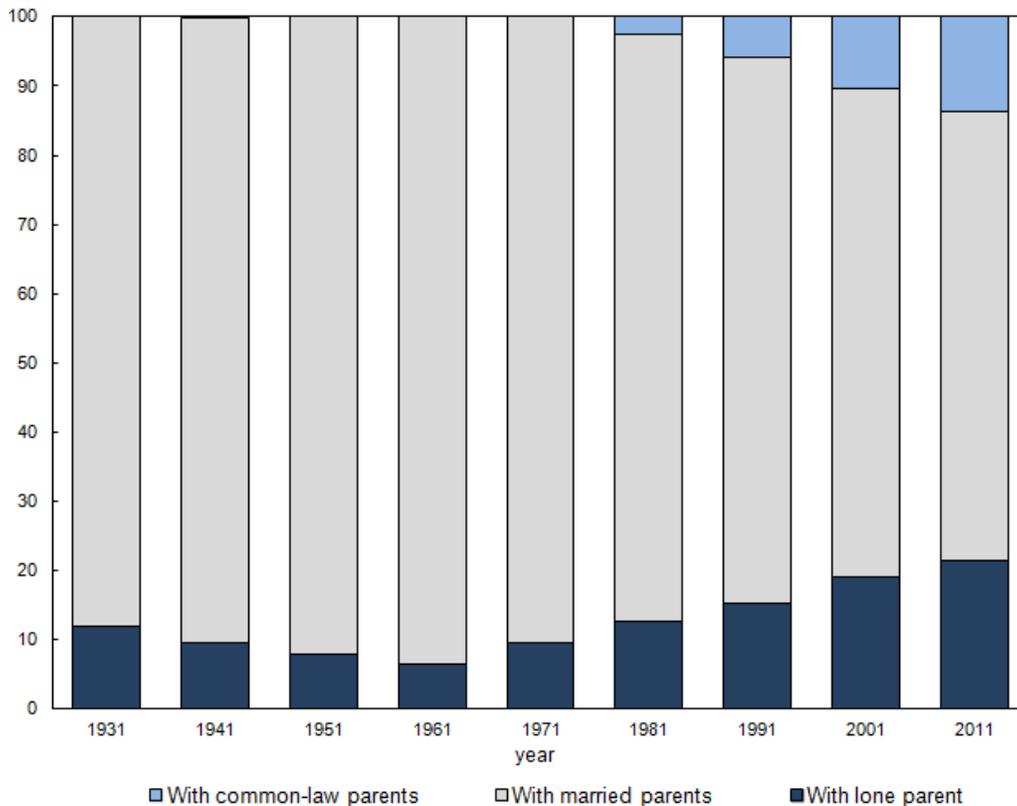
CANADIAN MEGATRENDS

One would think that the lone-parent families of today would more readily resemble those of the Swinging '60s than the Dirty '30s, or even the prim Victorian Age. After all, weren't the '60s the birth of the modern era? In fact, the '60s was an age when the predominance of the two-parent married family reached its peak. It was also a time when societal changes led to the increasing prevalence of the lone-parent families of today.

In the early decades of the 20th century, lone-parent families were relatively prevalent. The proportion of children who lived with a lone parent was nearly as high in 1931 (11.9%) as it was in 1981 (12.7%), though the circumstances of these families were often very different.

Chart 1
Living arrangements of children, aged 24 and under, in census families, Canada, 1931 to 2011

percentage



Note: Data on common-law couple families are not available prior to 1981. Historical comparisons for children living in census families, particularly in lone-parent families, must be interpreted with caution due to conceptual changes over time. For more information, see the Appendix of "Enduring diversity: Living arrangements of children in Canada over 100 years of the Census," Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 91F0015M-11.

Source: Statistics Canada, censuses of population, 1931 to 2011.

The cultural shifts associated with the baby boom (www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/91f0015m/2014011/03-eng.htm) (1946 to 1965), including higher marriage rates and younger ages at marriage (www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-630-x/11-630-x2014002-eng.htm), along with continued improvements in adult mortality, contributed to a lower proportion of children living in lone-parent families during these years. In 1961, the vast majority of children in census families (93.6%) were living with married parents—the highest proportion observed over the past century. In turn, the proportion of children living with a lone parent reached a low of 6.4% in 1961, just over one-half the share in 1931 (11.9%).

While the 1960s were the apex of the married family, the number of divorces increased significantly following the 1968 *Divorce Act*. Other shifts that affected family life in the 1960's and 70's included the growing participation of women in higher education and in the paid labour force, increasing secularization, and the legalization of the birth-control pill. Reflecting some of these societal changes, the share of children living with a lone parent more than doubled from 6.4% in 1961 to 15.2% in 1991.

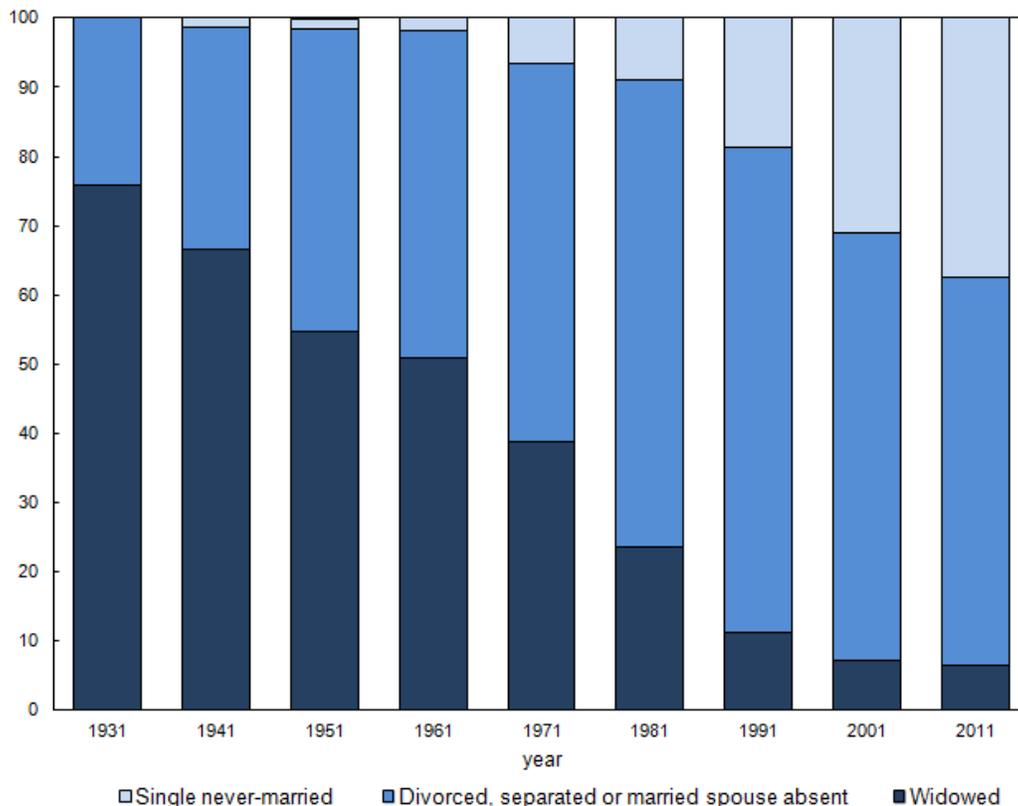
The proportion of children living with a lone parent continued to increase in the new millennium. Despite the growth of common-law couple families—which outnumbered lone-parent families for the first time in 2011—there were still proportionally more children living with a lone parent (21.5%) than with common-law parents (13.7%) in 2011. Indeed, the share of children living with a lone parent was the highest on record in 2011, and more than triple that observed at the height of the baby boom (6.4% in 1961).

Growing share of children living with divorced, separated or never-married lone parents

Along with changes in the prevalence of lone-parent families, the legal marital status of lone parents has changed considerably. In 1931, most children in lone-parent families (75.9%) lived with a widowed lone parent (Chart 2). By 1991, widowed lone parents were the exception, representing about 1 in 10 (11.2%) children in lone-parent families. Instead, most children in lone-parent families (70.0%) lived with a parent who was divorced or separated. By 2011, while the majority of children in lone-parent families lived with a divorced or separated lone parent (56.2%), over one-third (37.4%) lived with a lone parent who had never married—approximately double the share in 1991 (18.8%).

Chart 2
Living arrangements of children, aged 24 and under, in lone-parent families by marital status of the parent, Canada, 1931 to 2011

percentage



Note: Data for single never-married status of lone parents was not published in 1931. Historical comparisons for children living in census families, particularly in lone-parent families, must be interpreted with caution due to conceptual changes over time. For more information, see the Appendix of "Enduring diversity: Living arrangements of children in Canada over 100 years of the Census," Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 91F0015M-11.

Source: Statistics Canada, censuses of population, 1931 to 2011.

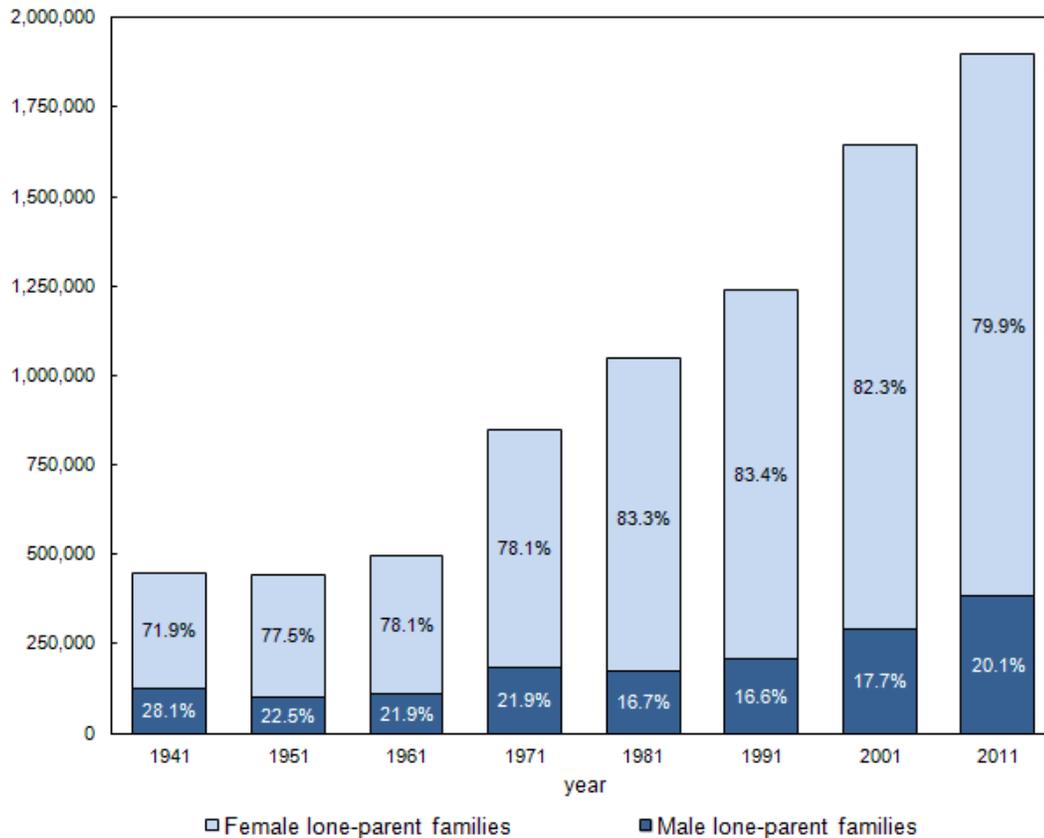
Proportionally more children in the 1940s lived with a male lone parent than today

In addition to changes in the marital status of lone parents, the predominance of female lone parents has varied considerably over time. While lone parents have always been more likely to be female, in the early decades of the 20th century, relatively high maternal mortality contributed to proportionally more male lone parents, compared with later in the century. By 1996, the proportion of children living with a male lone parent reached a record low of 15.5%, compared with 28.1% in 1941, and an estimated 40% in 1901.

Children living in lone-parent families in a census year may have more complex living arrangements and custodial circumstances. Trends toward more joint custody following divorce have increased the chance of a father having custody of a child on Census Day. Reflecting this trend, the proportion of children in lone-parent families living with a male lone parent has recently risen, from 15.5% in 1996 to 20.1% in 2011.

Chart 3
Number of children, aged 24 and under, living in lone-parent families, and distribution of these children by sex of the parent, Canada, 1941 to 2011

Number of children



Note: Historical comparisons for children living in census families, particularly in lone-parent families, must be interpreted with caution due to conceptual changes over time. For more information, see the Appendix of "Enduring diversity: Living arrangements of children in Canada over 100 years of the Census," Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 91F0015M-11.

Source: 1941 to 1971: Wargon, S.T. 1979. Children in Canadian families. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-810, Table 17. 1981 to 2011: Statistics Canada, censuses of population.

Definition

Census family: A census family is composed of a married or common-law couple, with or without children, or of a lone parent living with at least one child in the same dwelling. Couples can be of the opposite sex or of the same sex.

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