

Canadian Catholic News

Canada 'family portrait' reveals troubling trends

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OTTAWA, Canada (CCN) – The latest Statistics Canada’s “Census 2006: Family Portrait shows troubling trends that spell bad news for the future well-being of society say pro-family groups.

That data, released Sept. 12, show more single-parents are raising children alone, common law relationships have jumped by 18.9 percent, and the number of married couples continues to decline.

For the first time, unmarried Canadians over age 15 outnumbered married Canadians and couples without children (42.7 percent) outnumbered couples with children (41.4 percent). More Canadians than ever before are living alone (13 percent).

“This very worrisome data is the result of 40 years of increased pressure on marriage and the family from the state, from the modern economy and from the culture,” said Michele Boulva, the director of the Catholic Organization for Life and Family (COLF).

Catholic Civil Rights League President Phil Horgan sees a direct relationship to the decline of marriage to recent court decisions that put common law relationships on the same footing as marriage and legalized same-sex marriage.

“This trend is in keeping with what the League predicted in light of laws and court rulings that consistently devalue our traditional understanding of marriage and family,” Horgan said. “One of the points that’s come clear in the census data is the educative function of the law. When you change these institutional understandings, people make different decisions.”

“If you are not going to preserve marriage as the natural linkage between men and women for the formation of families, then all other types of combinations become more prevalent,” he said.

Though married couples still constitute the largest family group (68.6), this group is “steadily decreasing,” according to Statistics Canada, while the number of common law relationships continues to grow and now constitutes 15.5 percent of couples. In Quebec, that number soars to 34.6 percent.

Boulva said the rise of common law families is “bad news for Canadians” because those relationships are far less stable than marriages. She pointed to the 2006 General Social Survey which showed that more than 60 percent of these unions break up, compared with about a 30 percent break up rate for marriages.

“This data is a wake-up call for the state and for the church,” she said. “Our country needs to develop a culture of life and a culture of marriage.”

“The breakdown in marriage and family life has severe economic impact, particularly on women and children who experience inequality and poverty following family breakdown,” she said, noting their needs then put pressure on social services.

David Quist, executive director of the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada, agreed married couples do better. “They stay together longer; by their own self-judgment they lead happier lives; they tend to have higher family incomes and they tend to live healthier lives as well.”

With the increase of divorce rates, and the increase of common law relationships, it has become easy to get out of a relationship, he said, noting the trend is a reflection of the “me” generation.

“Instead of saying ‘what can I contribute to this relationship?’ it is ‘what can I get out of it?’ I think that’s a sad reflection,” he said.

Alan Mirabelli, executive associate at the Vanier Institute of the Family, pointed out, however, the “vast majority of Canadians still prefer marriage.”

“The value or the aspiration hasn’t changed very much,” he said.

Mirabelli noted Baby Boomers chose to have fewer children. Their children are now delaying marriage in order to finish school, pay of their debts and get established in their careers. When people marry at age 30, they are automatically going to have fewer children than their parents who married in their early twenties, he said.

“We say that with a sense of panic,” he said, but he pointed out nothing in the data should take anyone by surprise. The trends have been predictable since the 1960s, he said.

Mirabelli also said other factors rather than selfishness could explain the rise of common law unions. “A great number of those living common law are people who have been widowed, people who chose to live common law rather than remarry,” he said, noting the tax system may play a role in penalizing people who remarry.

Demographic changes raise concerns about Canada’s future ability to pay for future social programs, as aging Baby Boomers retire and put more pressure on health care and social insurance.

“Where are the children coming from?” Horgan asked, noting that common-law relationships seldom produce large families and the Census data shows more childless couples than ever before.

“I’m not convinced immigration is going to pick up the slack,” Quist said, noting that the Chinese and Indian economies are starting to grow. People from those countries might prefer to stay home as opportunities grow there, rather than move to Canada, he said.

Boulva said research shows the family diversity model – one that sees marriage as only one option among various equally valid family types – has failed. Mirabelli said one of the difficulties for public policy is determining what constitutes a family.

“Healthy, married-parent families are the optimal environment for promoting the well-being of children,” Boulva said. “Children raised by both biological parents are less likely than children raised in single or step-parent families to be poor, to drop out of school, to have difficulty finding a job, to become teen parents, or to experience emotional and behavioral problems.”

Boulva said the state needs to recognize and promote traditional marriage as a social institution, best equipped for the procreation and raising of children. Meanwhile, all member of the church need to launch an educational effort on “the beauty and greatness of God’s plan on human conjugal love” and the positive impact of the sacrament of marriage, she said.

“We must bring young couples to understand that the sacrament of marriage is a plus in their lives; a plus for their love, because God himself becomes part of their union and guarantees them with never-ending forces of love and fidelity,” she said.

The family portrait counted 45,345 same-sex couples among their Census families, about 0.06 percent of the all couples in Canada. Of that figure, 16.5 percent were chose to marry after the 2005 legalization of same-sex marriage.

Quist notes the same-sex marriage numbers are “incredibly small” considering the amount of space they have taken up in the public debate.

He also noted that in the first six months of this year, the City of Toronto issued 320 same-sex marriage licenses, but only one was for a Canadian couple. The rest were for people from other countries.