



Marriage in decline: Canadian census reveals new trends

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Traditional family life in Canada is declining, according to data recently published from the 2011 census.

Census data show that married couples declined as a proportion of all census families between 2006 and 2011. Nevertheless, they still formed the predominant family structure in Canada, accounting for two-thirds of all families, Statistics Canada reported Sept. 19.

The proportion of cohabitating couples and lone-parent families both increased. For the first time, cohabitating couples outnumbered lone-parent families in 2011.

The number of same-sex married couples nearly tripled between 2006 and 2011, to 43,560, according to Statistics Canada. They noted this reflected the first full five-year period for which same-sex marriage has been legal across the country. Same-sex marriage was legalized in July 2005.

The 2011 Census of Population counted stepfamilies for the first time. They represented about one in eight couple families with children.

There were 9,389,700 families in 2011, up 5.5% from 2006. Of these, nearly 6,294,000 consisted of married couples, a 3.1% increase.

The number of families with a cohabitating couple increased 13.9% to 1,567,900 in 2011. The number of lone-parent families rose 8.0% to just over 1,527,800.

Married-couple families accounted for 67.0% of all census families in 2011, down from 70.5% in 2001. The proportion of common-law families increased from 13.8% to 16.7%, while the share of lone-parent families rose from 15.7% to 16.3%.

The percentage of children living with unmarried parents rose from 12.8% to 16.3% in the five-year period to 2011.

Gen-X and Gen-Y

The decline in marriage was examined in a report published shortly after the release of the census data, by the **Institute of Marriage and Family Canada**.

In the publication, "The trouble with Gen-X and Gen-Y families: Why starting a family today is harder than it was for the Baby Boomers," author Derek Miedema looked at a number of factors, ranging from longer periods in school, the declining value of higher education, higher home prices and a changing economy.

Young adults, the report explained, finish their tertiary education with student loans to repay and face high housing prices and increased taxes.

Between 1976 and 2011 average house prices in Canada, adjusted for inflation, rose 185%. The report also cited a study showing that tuition fees are higher in real terms than at any other time since 1950.

Once in the workforce young adults experience less job security compared to their parents. Starting in the 1990s there has been a significant increase in contract employees that are not only less secure but have less health and pension benefits.

The average tax bill for families is also a burden. Recent data shows that the average tax bill for families' accounts for 44.2% of income and the average family spends more on tax than it does for food, shelter and clothing. In 1961 taxes only accounted for 33.5% of family income.

Economic factors are not the only influence, Miedema asserted, saying that family breakdown and the lack of what he termed a "life script" play a major role. The postponement of marriage to a later age and the significant increase in cohabitation, plus continuing high rates of divorce reflect very different attitudes about marriage compared to a few decades ago.

"A life script focuses individuals on how to get to the future they desire," he explained.

Getting married and having children mark a transition into adulthood and an increasing number are not achieving this Miedema observed.

High costs

This leads to serious personal costs, he added. The trend to cohabitation, which is much less stable than marriage, exposes people to deep emotional costs when the relationship breaks up. Cohabitation also increases the risks of single parenthood, with all the disadvantages that this entails.

The changes in family structures go beyond effects on the individuals involved Miedema commented. There is compelling evidence, he affirmed, showing that strong families make for a stronger economy.

The other side of the coin is that family breakdown results in significant costs for society. Miedema cited a study that put at \$C7 billion that annual cost of family breakdown.

He was not optimistic about the future. Baby Boomers will be retiring and need to save for this, reducing the possibilities to economically help their children. Canada's workforce is also getting older, meaning that in the future the tax burden to support retirees will increase for those the working age population.

"What can be done?" Miedema asked. Among his suggestions were a greater attention to family breakdown, allowing family income splitting for parents with children, and lowering taxes for families with children.

He also called for communities, families and schools to help restore a life script which places a higher value on love, marriage and children as the best way for life-long family stability. Not an easy task but one essential for the welfare of all.