

## **White picket fence and 2.5 kids? Not even close, finds Statistics Canada**

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By Misty Harris

The “white picket fence and 2.5 children” that long signalled the domestic dream isn’t just outdated because our architectural tastes have evolved. According to new figures from Statistics Canada, women on average haven’t had families that large since 1968 — nor do they appear to be headed that way any time soon.

On Tuesday, the agency reported that the total fertility rate in Canada has declined for a third year in a row, falling to just 1.61 children per woman in 2011. And while that represents an increase over a decade prior, when the rate plummeted to a historic low of 1.51, it’s nonetheless consistent with the long-term trend of multiple children becoming a rarer phenomenon.

In fact, Statistics Canada shows we haven’t met the population replacement level of roughly 2.1 children per woman since 1971.

“This isn’t an issue of anyone trying to force people to have kids who don’t want to have them. But it is a long-term concern,” said Derek Miedema, a researcher with the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada. “As the baby boomers retire, we’re not going to have enough people coming into the workforce to pay taxes to support our social safety net.”

The total fertility rate in 2011, the latest year for which data is available, was above replacement level in just one territory (Nunavut, at 2.97). Elsewhere, it ranged from lows of 1.42 and 1.45 in B.C. and Newfoundland and Labrador, respectively, to highs of 1.99 and 1.97 in Saskatchewan and the Northwest Territories, respectively.

Falling in between were Manitoba (1.86), Alberta (1.81), the Yukon (1.73), Quebec (1.69), New Brunswick (1.54), Ontario (1.52) and Nova Scotia (1.47).

To conclude that modern couples don’t value children as much as previous generations, however, would be a mistake.

To wit, the World Values Survey, conducted by a network of social scientists, found Canadians' ideal mean number of kids is actually 2.7. Miedema suggests a number of reasons for the disparity between that fantasy and the current reality, with money unsurprisingly topping the list.

"We're squeezed in a lot of ways," said Miedema, pointing to greater debt, pricier housing, wages not keeping pace, higher education costs and a heftier tax bill. "So when we hear these numbers trumpeted that it's going to cost, say, a million dollars to raise one child from zero to 18, not including postsecondary education, that's going to be a huge factor."

Delayed childbirth is the trend's other bookend, with the decrease in total fertility rate over the past four decades being largely the result of declines in the fertility rates of women under 30.

In 2010, for the first time, the fertility rate was higher for women aged 35 to 39 (51.7 births per 1,000 women) than for those aged 20 to 24 (48 births per 1,000 women). Tuesday's report shows that this gap widened even further in 2011, with the elder cohort climbing to 52.3 and the younger cohort falling to 45.7.

"The later you start, the fewer kids you tend to have," said Miedema, who had his first of two children at age 38. "Not many people want to be chasing an eight-year-old at 50."