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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

How do young people make the transition to adulthood?

Through the use of four major markers: starting work, leaving home, having children and getting married, this paper examines the transition to adulthood over the last century in Canada.

Many discussions of this topic look back to the 1970s to show how adolescents today are taking a longer road to adulthood. If we look back to the early 20th century, however, we will see that the current generation is continuing trends from that time, which were effectively interrupted by the baby boom. Or at least it may appear so on the surface. A deeper look shows that what seems the same is in fact different, given the changed social conditions between now and then with respect to work, family life and war and peace.

One transition marker stands out as a unique development. This is the movement from marriage to cohabitation (living together or living common-law). Young people today, especially in the province of Quebec, are choosing cohabitation in droves.

This paper:

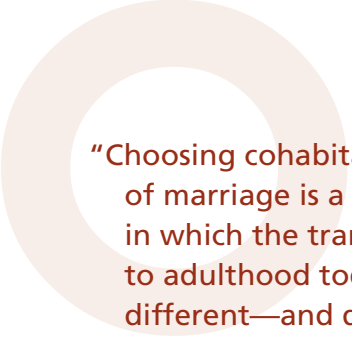
- Explores the overall changes in the transition to adulthood over the last century
- Examines the nature of cohabitation vis-a-vis marriage with respect to stability and relationship breakdown
- Seeks to answer how the shift to cohabitation may contribute to delayed adulthood

Recommendations include broadening awareness around the social science showing cohabitation is not the same as marriage, neither does it contribute to a better marriage in the future. Awareness around the different outcomes should be heightened, particularly since the negative outcomes of cohabitation detract from the relational aspirations of the people involved.

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INTRODUCTION

When discussing adolescence in Canada, much has been written over the last number of years about how today's children are taking longer to cross major markers into adulthood. If we compare with 30 or 40 years ago, this is clearly the case. When we look further back into Canadian history, the statistics from the first half of the 20th century show that in some ways today's adolescents are following a trend. However, given the very different historical circumstances, even these similarities may be differences.



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In at least one way, though, today's adolescents are almost completely unique. They are opting for cohabitation in droves, either before or instead of marriage.

The transition to adulthood includes various steps, such as starting work, leaving home, getting married and having children. These markers serve as points in life by which we can compare the pace of transition between birth cohorts and generations. By comparing the age at which past generations have reached these markers with the timeline of adolescents today, we gain a clearer understanding of how this transition has changed over time. Choosing cohabitation instead of marriage is a major way in which the transition to adulthood today is different—and delayed—when compared with prior generations.

STARTING WORK

The workforce in Canada has changed drastically in the last 50 years. Parts of Canada which exist on the basis of manufacturing jobs have seen new jobs dry up and existing jobs disappear. Even young adults with professional degrees may find the job search more difficult. In the 1990s in particular, new hiring practices made it difficult to enter the work force at ground level. “Instead of hiring new employees,” a Statistics Canada report indicates, “firms contracted their work out to other firms and self-employed individuals. This strategy effectively blocks work opportunities for young people, who are usually too inexperienced to successfully bid for contract work.”¹ These local shifts are evidence of a national shift in the nature of the job market, which can also be seen in the proportion of jobs available as white or blue collar jobs. The ratio of white collar jobs (such as jobs in business, finance or administration, among others) to all jobs rose from 53.4 per cent in 1971 to 68.3 per cent in 1995. Over the same time period, the percentage of blue collar jobs, such as those in trades, transport or equipment operation fell from 46.6 per cent to 31.7 per cent.²

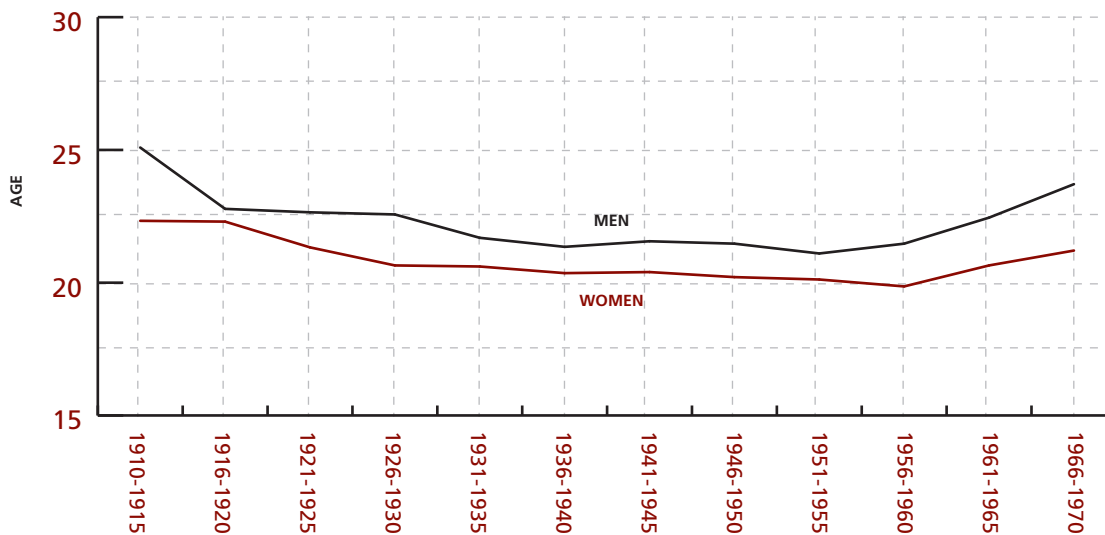
Other than those who enter the trades, a student who today desires a long, productive and financially rewarding career increasingly needs to complete a university degree. As a 2010 American study noted: “The early adult years often involve the pursuit of higher education, as a decent standard of living generally requires a college education, if not a professional degree.”³ Another study echoes this concern. “Young men with no more than a high school degree have lower employment rates, lower real wages, and less access to private pensions and employer-subsidized health insurance than did similar young workers during the mid-1970s.”⁴

The need for higher education is a large factor in the delayed transition to regular work. A study of the life courses of Canadian men found that the median age at which men born between 1971 and 1975 started regular work was 20.4 years.⁵ In 1998 the average age of this transition was 23 years.⁶ If a graduate degree is required for the desired career path, that transition will be delayed even longer.

LEAVING HOME

Looking further back into Canadian history is helpful. As we can see in the graph below, people born between 1966 and 1970, age 40 to 44 today, left home slightly earlier than their counterparts born in 1910 to 1915. The median age of leaving home between 1910 and 1915 was 25 for men and 22 for women, as shown in the graph below.

Median age at home-leaving by cohort, men and women



Source: *A Cohort Analysis of Home-Leaving in Canada, 1910-1975, 1990 General Social Survey*⁷

Today, adolescents are staying at home longer than those born between 1966 and 1970. Between 1981 and 2006, the percentage of young adults aged 20 to 29 living with their parents rose from 27.5 per cent to 43.5 per cent.⁸ “In 2006, over half of all young adults from 20 to 24 years old lived with their parents (65.2 per cent of young men and 55.3 per cent of young women).”⁹ A much lower percentage of young adults between 25 and 29 years of age live with their parents (30.9 per cent of men and 21.3 per cent of women).¹⁰

While we cannot definitively compare age of home-leaving with those in the early 1900s, the difference between then and now is not as stark as between now and 50 years ago.

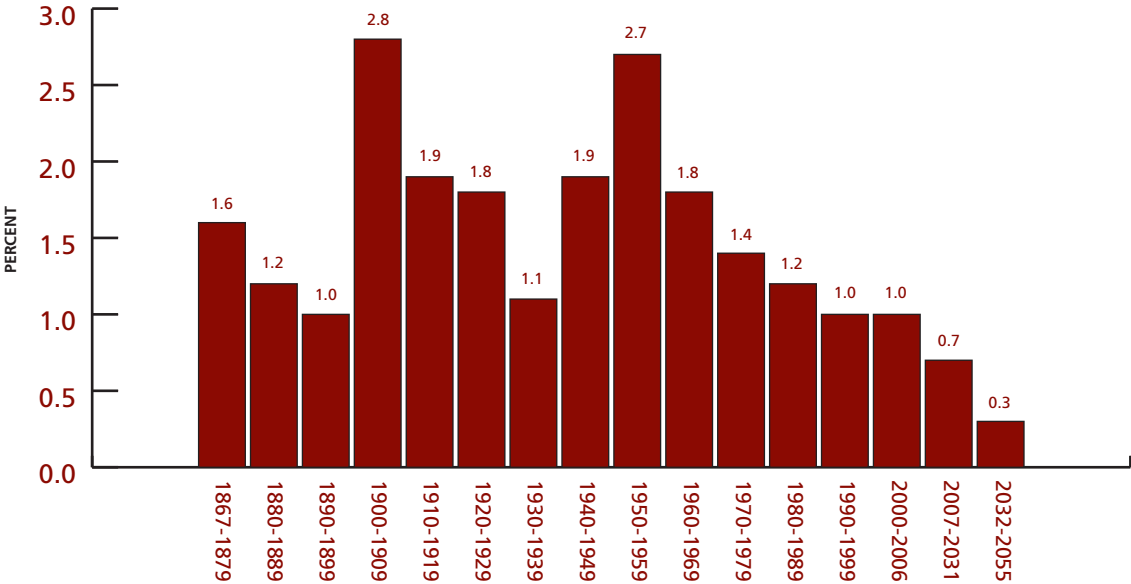
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HAVING CHILDREN

Much that is old is new again in terms of family formation and childbirth. Statistics show that in the 1930s, the birthrate among Canadian women was falling. Things changed with the baby boom, when the birth rate skyrocketed, and then began to fall again in the 1960s. Only in 1990 did population growth reach a growth rate lower than that of 1930 to 1939, matching that of 1890 to 1899 and essentially picking up where those decades left off. The baby boom, as the graph below shows, is the second fertility anomaly of the 20th century. It is the exception to the rule of declining birthrates and declining rates of population growth.

It is true, therefore, that the current Canadian total fertility rate (the total number of births per woman over her reproductive lifetime) of 1.66 is a noticeable increase from just four years ago.¹¹ Will that rate continue to rise, or will it plateau below the replacement rate of 2.1, which is the number required to maintain population levels by births alone?

Average annual population growth rate, historical (1867-2006) and projected (2007-2055)



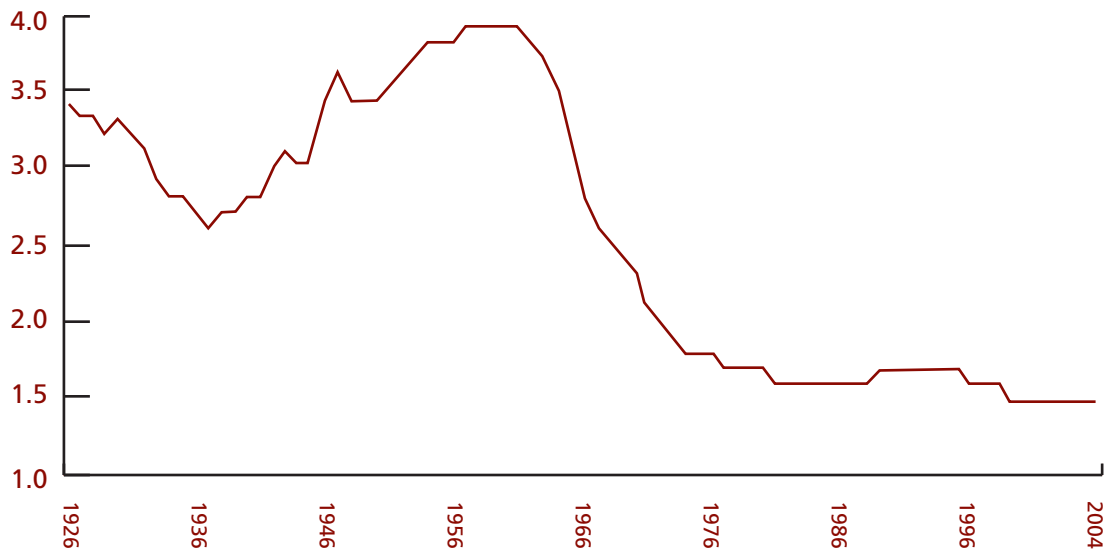
Source: Human Resources and Skills Development Canada¹²

Families today are delaying childbirth as both men and women take longer to complete their education and establish their careers. Men and women are choosing to delay parenthood. Statistics Canada finds that “the decades between 1987 and 2007 saw an overall decline in the fertility rate of Canadian women in their twenties, while that of women in their thirties increased steadily. In 2006, the fertility rate of women aged 30 to 34 surpassed the fertility rate of those aged 25 to 29.”¹³ The median age of women at their first birth, on the other hand, has not surpassed 28 years since the mid 1850s. Parents and grandparents today may wonder why their children and grandchildren are taking so long to settle down, get married and have children. If we cast our eyes back a century, the fertility rate today is the endpoint of a pattern that developed over the course of the last century.

Yet this repetitive nature should not mask differing realities. We know that the earlier decreases happened in the context of World War I, where a large number of young men died on the battlefields. This meant there were fewer eligible bachelors with whom to marry and start a family. Similarly, the further decreases experienced through the 1930s can be understood in the context of the Great Depression. When families could hardly afford to feed themselves, it is understandable that they might be reluctant to expand.

This marks a sharp contrast with Canada today. Economic growth has slowed of late, but even given the recent economic downturn, we enjoy a level of prosperity unseen in previous generations. Unemployment rates are not at historical highs. We are fighting a war in Afghanistan, but this is a different context from World War I or II.

Fertility rate, Canada 1926-2004 (average number of children a woman aged 15-49 will have in her lifetime)



Source: Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (2010)¹⁴

In an era of relative peace and affluence, why are men and women deciding to have fewer children? Certainly, the availability of the birth control pill and abortion are two points to consider, among others. Another is delayed marriage.

GETTING MARRIED OR LIVING COMMON-LAW

The last four decades have seen a decidedly new phenomenon in the area of marriage relationships. Unlike any generation previously, since the 1970s in Canada and especially in Quebec, there has been a clear shift away from marriage to cohabitation (also known as living common-law) as the form of first relationship.

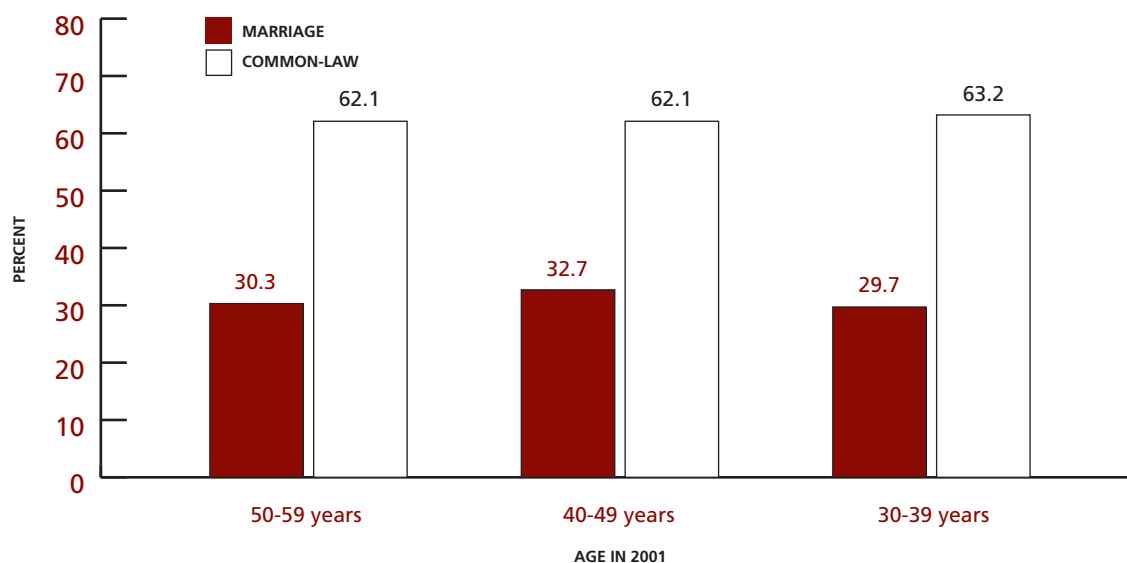
In Canada outside of Quebec in the early 1970s, 85 per cent of women’s first unions were marriage and only 15 per cent were cohabiting relationships.¹⁵ By the early 1990s the percentages were 50/50

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for marriage and cohabitation.¹⁶ In Quebec in the early 1970s, 80 percent of women's first unions were marriage and 20 per cent were cohabitation.¹⁷ By the early 1990s the ratio in Quebec was 20 per cent marriage and 80 per cent cohabitation.¹⁸

A growing body of literature indicates that cohabitation is less stable than marriage, this even in spite of the growing instability of marriage after the amendments to the Divorce Act in 1969 in Canada.¹⁹

Probability for women to separate, by type of first union, Canada, 2001



Source: Statistics Canada. (2002). *Changing Conjugal Life in Canada*.²⁰

Statistics Canada researchers put it this way:

Starting conjugal life in a common-law relationship, as opposed to a marriage, sharply increases the probability of this first union ending in separation. And whether the common-law partners eventually marry or not makes little difference: the risk of separation is just as high.²¹

Other researchers describe cohabiting relationship even more bleakly: "The majority of cohabitational relationships terminate within three years. Although many of these relationships end because of marriage, the lack of longevity in cohabitations as such illustrates that these relationships have yet to develop into a normative variant of marriage."²²

Marriage in the past was a marker of adulthood.²³ Today, young people leave the parental home to go to work or school and increasing percentages choose to live together rather than marry. Marriages that end in divorce often place the participants in the position of another divorce should they marry again. "Over 20 per cent of all divorces in Canada are a repeat divorce for at least one of the spouses," write the authors of a report for the Vanier Institute of the Family, an Ottawa-based research group.²⁴ And Statistics Canada found that "over one in five of Canadians who remarried had left their second spouse within an average of 7.6 years."²⁵ These relationship breakdowns may lead those involved to believe that no relationship can ever be permanent. Writes Zheng Wu, a sociologist at the University of Victoria: "The ephemeral nature of cohabitations observed in everyday life may undermine the notion that intimate relationships are lasting and permanent."²⁶

“The journey from adolescence to adulthood, so clear at midcentury, is now a long slog filled with choices. Even in midlife, choice continues: Am I satisfied with my marriage? Should I consider ending it? If I am divorced, should I marry again? The stakes are high because we place so much emphasis on having a successful personal life, even as the meaning of success becomes less evident”

-ANDREW CHERLIN, SOCIOLOGIST

disagreements? How will we manage our finances? Kay Hymowitz is an American social researcher and author of the book *Marriage and Caste in America*. She writes “to marry and to earn a steady living are to try to master life and shape it into a coherent narrative.”²⁸

Marriage and parenthood may not make a person an adult in and of themselves, but the changes and growth that are the result of marriage and children force individuals to change in ways that remaining single or cohabiting does not.

How do the realities of cohabitation effect the transition to adulthood? In contrast to past generations, cohabitation draws out the breaking and starting of relationships into later life. Andrew Cherlin is a sociologist and the author of a 2009 book called *The Marriage-Go-Round*. He writes, “[t]he journey from adolescence to adulthood, so clear at midcentury, is now a long slog filled with choices. Even in midlife, choice continues: *Am I satisfied with my marriage? Should I consider ending it? If I am divorced, should I marry again?* The stakes are high because we place so much emphasis on having a successful personal life, even as the meaning of success becomes less evident.”²⁷ Because cohabitation, as noted above, effects how men and women view the possibility of long-term solid relationships, it may also contribute to a delay in the age at which men and women enter into marriage.

Men and women who become husband and wife choose to establish a relationship which is at least intended to be life-long. This involves certain tradeoffs for both spouses. How will we share a living space? How will we work through our

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CONCLUSION

Adolescents today are charting their own path from adolescence to adulthood. In some ways, the statistics look as though they are picking up where earlier generations left off. The need for schooling means that young people start work and leave home later than adolescents did 50 years ago, but they are more in line with the statistics of 100 years ago. Even the rate of childbirth is in a sense a continuation of a pattern established before World War II. However, given our different socio-economic status and the lack of war, this is also new territory.

Adolescents today are making their most marked change from generations past in terms of cohabitation versus marriage.

This change represents a shift to relationships which are less stable, shorter in duration, and more likely to result in multiple relationships than marriage. The effect of multiple cohabiting relationships when young may delay adulthood through subsequent difficulty in establishing long-lasting relationships, either common-law or in marriage.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Grow awareness for the idea that cohabitation is not marriage. Pointing out the differences is not a moral judgment but a statement of a body of social science research. Marriage offers a better chance at a lifelong stable relationship and this is something of which few today are aware.

- Sex education classes in secondary school could use social science research to compare cohabitation with marriage in terms of stability, length, and the negative consequences of having multiple life-partners.
- Premarital counseling could make couples aware of the challenges in their relationship due to cohabitation before marriage. ■

Endnotes

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