

NATIONAL POST

The family road less travelled

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The third tranche of data from the 2011 Census is out, and it confirms a number of trends Canadians have already observed for themselves. More children are born outside of marriage than inside it; more kids are living in blended families; and more same-sex couples are choosing to tie the knot and have children.

Paradoxically, the number of couples without kids again exceeds the number who do, and they aren't all empty-nesters. More and more couples are pursuing a so-called "child-free" lifestyle, as are individuals who choose to live alone, with neither spouse nor spawn to crimp their style.

These two contradictory trends are both highly significant, and point to an exacerbation of what I always suspected to be the main dividing line in society: people with kids vs. people without. Children, more than education, career choice, or geography, define one's life path. They impose responsibility and circumscribe choice. No longer can one take a vacation on a whim, spend money on a closet of overpriced shoes, or move across the country to take a job. Children are a bucket of cold water on the head of the hedonist, which explains why, in our narcissitic me-first culture, we are having fewer and fewer of them.

And for those who do reproduce, there emerges another dividing line: marriage. A New York Times article published earlier this summer painted a stark picture of the difference between single and dual-parent families, and concluded that the key to staying out of poverty is not only getting, but staying, married. In a release issued in reaction to the 2011 census data, **Andrea Mrozek, manager of research and communications for the Institute for Marriage and Family Canada confirmed, "All research points to the fact that married parent families offer more stability for children and decreased poverty rates."**

Despite this evidence, parents refuse to act like homo economicus. The census tells us they are increasingly having children on their own, choosing to live common law, or splitting up with children in tow. Post-separation or divorce, they seek to reconstitute new families with other single parents - over 12% of children now live in blended families - despite the fact that the rate of divorce for second marriages is even higher than that for first.

If children are supposed to make us responsible, why act this way? Many point to the same individualist culture that drives the childless revolution: our desire for personal freedom and inability to sacrifice. At the same time, state supports mean that single parents and their children don't starve, making it financially easier to leave a relationship.

But as a single parent myself, I can vouch that we also make choices for reasons other than the material. A father may conclude that it is better for a child not to be raised in an atmosphere of strife or conflict. A single woman may decide to carry an unplanned child to term. A husband or wife may seek to end an abusive relationship. Finances take a back seat to emotions, safety and the desire - though declining - to become a parent in the first place.

There is thus no easy fix for declining birth and marriage rates. Family-friendly tax policies, such as income splitting, would provide a financial incentive to stay together, while reducing benefits to single parents could make it less attractive to become one. But in the end, it comes down to a sense of individual responsibility, and weighing the interests of both parent and child in each case. The paradox of freedom is that it allows us to take the most difficult roads. The question is whether we should take our children down them too.