

LIVING LA VIDA LONELY

*Marriage and Partnership
Among Canadian Young Adults*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PETER JON MITCHELL is a senior researcher at Cardus. He has spent over a decade researching Canadian families. His work at Cardus includes the reports *Canadian Millennials* and *the Value of Marriage; Supporting Natural Caregivers: Innovative Ideas from Around the Globe*; and others. His articles have appeared in the *National Post*, *Toronto Sun* and *Law Now* magazine among other publications. Peter Jon has been active in radio, television and print media.

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INTRODUCTION

HAS THE PROLIFERATION of online dating services and apps made finding a suitable partner easier? Consult a myriad of online gurus and you are unlikely to find a consensus. Some argue that online services make it easy to meet people by broadening the pool of potential partners, while others counter with studies suggesting that those who meet online are more likely to break up.¹

The evidence suggests that fewer Canadian young adults are in marriages and cohabiting partnerships than in the past. In short, there has been a steady decline in partnerships occurring over decades. Young people today are more likely to be on their own.

This report examines the twenty-year period between 1996 and 2016 based on Census data on 20- to 34-year-olds—traditionally the prime age for forming partnerships and families. According to the data, the portion of Canadian young adults who are married is declining. The portion of young adults who are in cohabiting relationships has been increasing, but not as quickly as the married portion has been declining. There is a slow but persistent growth in the portion of young adults ages 20 to 34 who are neither married nor living in cohabiting relationships. This portion accounts for a majority of Canadians in this age group.

Forming partnerships and starting families are among other traditional markers of adulthood that Canadian young adults are arriving at later than previous generations, such as establishing an independent household and achieving financial independence.

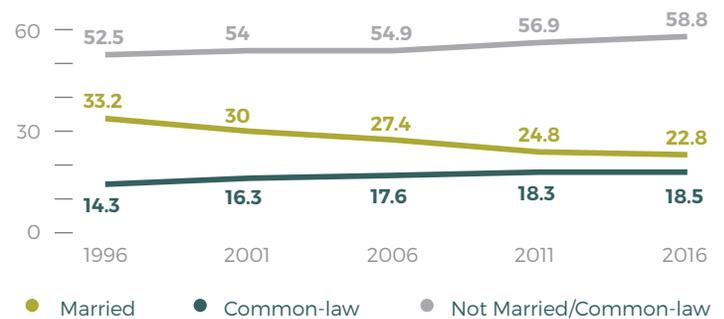
While the personal journey of finding a partner and starting a family is accompanied by its own anxieties, joys, and frustrations, broader trends in family formation have public implications for fertility rates, aging population, and national economic well-being that concern all levels of government.

Families are also a core social institution connected to a web of institutions that form the invisible social architecture Canadians rely on as they go about their everyday lives. In short, how we form families has implications beyond our own personal experience.

SUB-COHORTS BY AGE

THE 20- TO 34-YEAR-OLD age range spans a decade and a half of significant changes in the life history of young adults. We utilize Statistics Canada's age divisions to examine three age ranges: ages 20 to 24, ages 25 to 29, and ages 30 to 34 (IMAGE 1).

IMAGE 1: Percentage of Canadians, ages 20-34 who are married, common-law, or not married/common-law, 1996-2016



Source: Based on Statistics Canada Census Data Tables. (Some totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.)

1. For examples see Shana Lebowitz, "Relationship Experts Agree That Dating Apps Can Be Useful—but Not Necessarily for Finding Love," *Business Insider*, July 28, 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.com/dating-apps-not-helping-you-find-relationship-2018-7>; Ryan Anderson, "The Ugly Truth About Online Dating," *Psychology Today* (blog), September 6, 2016, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-mating-game/201609/the-ugly-truth-about-online-dating>.

AGES 20 TO 24: FEWER PARTNERSHIPS

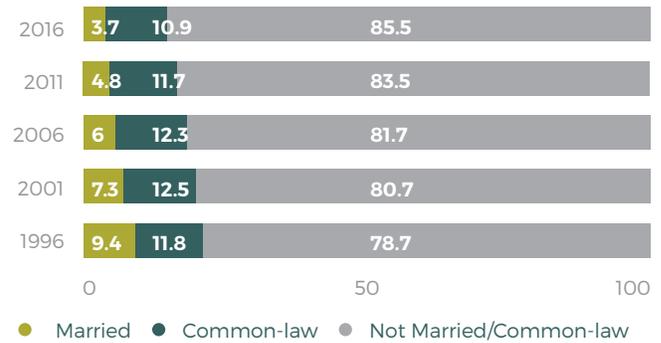
ENTERING MARRIAGE BY age 24 was the norm in Canada for decades. Today, marriage has all but disappeared among Canadians ages 20 to 24, with only 3.7 percent reporting being married in the 2016 Census. This portion has fallen from 9.4 percent in 1996, nearly a 61 percent decrease. While the decline in marriage is well known, less common knowledge is that fewer Canadians in this age cohort are living in cohabiting relationships compared to twenty years earlier. In 1996, about 11.8 percent of 20- to 24-year-olds were cohabiting but after a slight increase, that portion edged down to 10.9 percent by 2016, about an 8 percent decrease (IMAGE 2).²

The decline in partnerships means that the portion of those 20- to 24-year-olds not married or cohabiting has increased from 78.7 percent in 1996 to 85.5 percent into 2016.³ The growing portion of non-married, non-cohabiting young adults coincides with another trend. Young adults are increasingly living at home longer or returning to the parental home. Statistics Canada reports that 62.6 percent of 20- to 24-year-olds live with at least one parent in 2016, up from 58.3 percent in 2001.⁴

TRANSITIONING INTO ADULTHOOD: MORE YOUNG ADULTS LIVING AT HOME

MANY CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC factors have contributed to young adults living with their parents, including increased participation in post-secondary education, longer pathways into stable full-time employment, and the high economic cost of establishing

IMAGE 2: Percentage of Canadians, ages 20–24 who are married, common-law, or not married/common-law, 1996–2016



Source: Based on Statistics Canada Census Data Tables. (Some totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.)

an independent household. Young adults may also be fulfilling cultural expectations or caregiving commitments.

The lengthening transition into adulthood among North American young people has been well documented. The research of Richard Settersten and Barbara Ray suggests that while young adults are less likely to view marriage and having children as markers of adulthood compared to previous generations, young adults do view achieving financial stability and an independent household as part of identifying as an adult. Establishing these markers is often viewed as a prerequisite for entering marriage and parenthood for many young adults.⁵ While cultural and economic factors contribute to delayed achievement of the markers of adulthood, the challenge may have its roots in the adolescent experience.

San Diego State University psychologist Jean Twenge argues that the long trajectory into adulthood is part of a slow life strategy common in contemporary

2. Calculations by author based on Statistics Canada, "Marital Status (13), Age (16) and Sex (3) for the Population 15 Years and Over of Canada, Provinces and Territories and Census Metropolitan Areas, 1996 to 2016 Censuses—100% Data," August 2, 2017. <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/dt-td/Rp-eng.cfm?LANG=E&APATH=3&DETAIL=0&DIM=0&FL=A&FREE=0&GC=0&GID=0&GK=0&GRP=1&PID=109650&PRID=10&PTYPE=109445&S=0&SHOWALL=0&SUB=0&Temporal=2016&THEME=117&VID=0&VNAMEE=&VNAMEF=>

3. Calculations by author based on Government of Canada, "Marital Status (13), Age (16) and Sex (3)."

4. Statistics Canada, "Census in Brief: Young Adults Living with Their Parents in Canada in 2016," August 2, 2017, <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/98-200-x/2016008/98-200-x2016008-eng.cfm>.

5. Richard A. Settersten and Barbara Ray, "What's Going On with Young People Today? The Long and Twisting Path to Adulthood," *The Future of Children* 20, no. 1 (2010): 19–41.

adolescence. She argues from national survey data that fewer teens engage in adult activities than in the past, such as consuming alcohol, sexual activity, driving, working part-time jobs, and spending time with friends away from parents. Some of these behaviours are risky, and restraint may serve young people well. Additionally, middle-, and upper-income parents invest significant emotional, social, and financial capital into a slow life strategy. Yet Twenge suggests a down side. A slow life strategy reduces risk-taking and delays teens in assuming responsibilities that are inherent in developing the independence necessary for embracing adulthood.⁶

Delaying partnerships in the early twenties in order to pursue post-secondary education or other beneficial activities can be an advantageous strategy, but it doesn't mean young adults are prepared to partner and begin family life in the immediate years that follow.



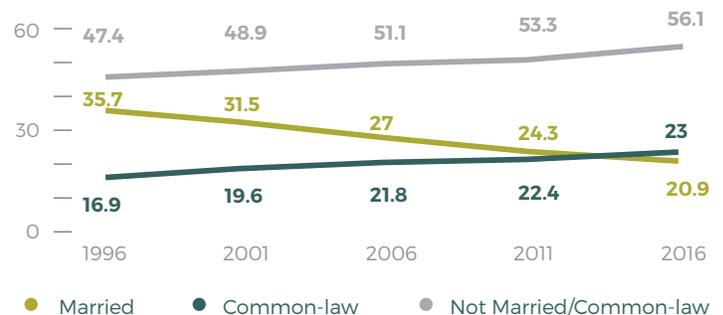
AGES 25 TO 29: COHABITATION ECLIPSES MARRIAGE

THE LAST YEAR FOR which Canada collected data on the average age at first marriage was in 2008. At that time, the average age of first marriage was 29.6 years old for women and 31 years old for men.⁷ Considering the decades-long increase in average age of first marriage, it's not unreasonable

to estimate the average age of first marriage might now be over 30 for both men and women. For this reason, Canadians ages 25 to 29 are an important cohort to observe in order to understand family formation in Canada.

Young adults between ages 25 and 29 were in the prime age range for marriage in 1996 when nearly 36 percent of the cohort were married. By 2016 the portion of married 25- to 29-year-olds fell to about 21 percent. Young adults in this age group are now more likely to cohabit than be married, a change that occurred between 2011 and 2016. A full 23 percent of 25- to 29-year-olds were in cohabiting relationships in 2016 compared to about 17 percent in 1996. (IMAGE 3)⁸

IMAGE 3: Percentage of Canadians, ages 25–29 who are married, common-law, or not married/common-law, 1996–2016



Source: Based on Statistics Canada Census Data Tables. (Some totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.)

MARRIAGE AND COHABITATION: DIFFERENT FUNCTIONS

WHILE A PORTION of cohabiting relationships transition to marriage, many others do not. Cohabiting relationships are quite diverse. That cohabitation has eclipsed marriage in this age cohort is notable because these forms of relationships tend to function differently.

6. Jean M. Twenge and Heejung Park, "The Decline in Adult Activities Among U.S. Adolescents, 1976–2016," *Child Development*, September 18, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12930>.

7. Statistics Canada, "Marital Status: Overview, 2011," July 9, 2013, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/91-209-x/2013001/article/11788-eng.htm>.

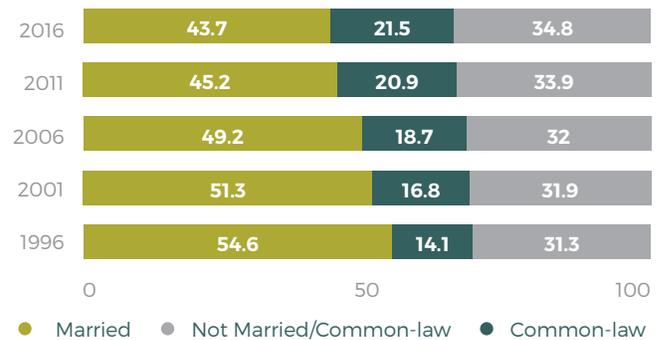
8. Calculations by author based on Government of Canada, "Marital Status (13), Age (16) and Sex (3)."

Despite the decline of marriage, it remains more stable and less likely to dissolve compared to cohabiting relationships. Couples may choose to cohabit because of the greater ease in dissolving the relationships. Recent research suggests that partners in cohabiting relationship may not always be equally committed to the relationship. Researcher Scott Stanley and his co-authors suspect that the social structures that defined the nature of a relationship are less present than past decades, meaning there are fewer structures that signal the level of a commitment to a relationship.⁹

Another reason to note the distinction between marriage and cohabitation is that these forms of partnership tend to display differing economic behaviours. Couples who are still determining the future of their relationship may be less likely to pool their incomes or make long-term investments together. A 2018 study found that married couples are more likely to have higher net worth, and be oriented toward long-term saving, compared to cohabiting couples, who tend to focus on non-financial assets, particularly if individuals have been in previous cohabiting relationships.¹⁰

The majority of young adults in this age group are neither married nor living as part of a cohabiting couple. Over half (56.1 percent) of 25- to 29-year-olds are neither married nor cohabiting in 2016, up from 47.4 percent in 2006.¹¹ About a quarter of young adults in this age group live with at least one parent in 2016.¹² According to General Social Survey data, about 27 percent of 25- to 29-year-olds living in the parental home have never moved out.¹³

IMAGE 4: Percentage of Canadians, ages 30-34 who are married, common-law, or not married/common-law, 1996-2016



Source: Based on Statistics Canada Census Data Tables. (Some totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.)

Fewer young adults are living with their own families, meaning fewer are living with a partner or with children. The percentage of all live births in Canada to women ages 25 to 29 was 28.6 percent in 2016, down from 31.9 percent in 1996.¹⁴ This is in part because women are having children later. Another way of looking at it is the average age of mothers at first birth. In 1996, the average age was 26.5, which rose steadily to 28.5 by 2011.¹⁵

30 TO 34 YEAR-OLDS: MARRIAGE DOWN, BIRTHS UP

DESPITE CANADIANS delaying marriage into their 30s, the portion of married 30- to 34-year-olds has declined 20 percent over a twenty-year period, falling

9. Scott M. Stanley et al., "Unequally into 'Us': Characteristics of Individuals in Asymmetrically Committed Relationships," *Family Process*, October 7, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12397>; "Scott Stanley, 'Unequally Into Us' 2018 Family Process Video Abstract," uploaded by FamilyProcess1, September 25, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F9C-DJHZGTY&feature=youtu.be>.

10. Sonya Britt-Lutter, Cassandra Dorius, and Derek Lawson, "The Financial Implications of Cohabitation Among Young Adults," *Journal of Financial Planning* 31, no. 4 (2018): 38-45.

11. Calculations by author based on Government of Canada, "Marital Status (13), Age (16) and Sex (3)."

12. Statistics Canada, "Census in Brief: Young Adults Living with Their Parents in Canada in 2016," August 2, 2017, <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/98-200-x/2016008/98-200-x2016008-eng.cfm>.

13. Statistics Canada Government of Canada, "Census in Brief: Young Adults Living with Their Parents in Canada in 2016," August 2, 2017, <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/98-200-x/2016008/98-200-x2016008-eng.cfm>.

14. Statistics Canada, "Live Births, by Age of Mother," April 9, 2018, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1310041601>.

15. Statistics Canada, "Fertility: Fewer Children, Older Moms," November 13, 2014, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-630-x/11-630-x2014002-eng.htm>.

from 54.6 percent of Canadians in this age group to 43.7 percent. During the same period, the portion of 30- to 34-year-olds who cohabit increased from 14.1 percent to 21.5 percent. The majority of young adults in this age group are partnered (65.2 percent), but the portion of non-married, non-cohabiting people in this age cohort has gradually increased from 31.3 percent in 1996 to 34.8 percent in 2016 (IMAGE 4).

HAVING CHILDREN: PORTION OF BIRTHS TO WOMEN 30 TO 34 INCREASING

MORE CANADIAN WOMEN are giving birth at later ages. In fact, in 2010 for the first time, more births occurred to Canadian woman in their late 30s than women in their early 20s.¹⁶ Examining births to women in their early 30s, the data reveal that the portion of births to mothers ages 30 to 34 was 30.3 percent in 1996, increasing to 35.7 percent by 2016.¹⁷

SUMMARY

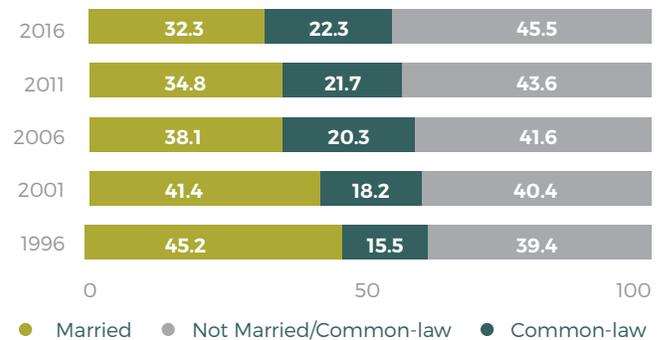
THE OVERALL STORY for Canadian young adults ages 20 to 34 is that they are increasingly living un-partnered. Marriage continues its long decline, and a greater portion of young adults are living together

either before marriage or as an alternative, although the decline in marriage has outpaced the increase in cohabitation. Even when we remove the bottom age cohort of 20- to 24-year-olds, these shifts in marital status remain for 25- to 34-year-olds. By 2006, the portion of 25- to 34-year-olds who were neither married nor cohabiting eclipsed the portion who were married (IMAGE 5).

Additionally, more young adults are either returning to the parental home or are remaining there. Economic, social, and cultural factors continue to play an influential role in this trend as young people are reaching the traditional markers of adulthood at later ages.

Many young adults may be choosing to delay partnerships or forgo them altogether, while others feel inhibited from entering domestic partnerships because of social or economic constraints. A portion of un-partnered young adults have been formerly married or living in common-law relationships. Whatever the case, Canadian young adults are entering partnerships at later ages and having children at later ages compared to the past.

IMAGE 5: Percentage of Canadians, ages 25-34 who are married, common-law, or not married/common-law, 1996-2016



Source: Based on Statistics Canada Census Data Tables. (Some totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.)



16. D’Vera Cohn, “In Canada, Most Babies Now Born to Women 30 and Older,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), July 10, 2013, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/07/10/in-canada-most-babies-now-born-to-women-30-and-older/>.

17. Statistics Canada, “Live Births, by Age of Mother.”

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