

More Canadians living alone, with parents or without children: census ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

OTTAWA -- Couples without kids are outpacing their procreating counterparts, same-sex relationships are blossoming, multiple generations are living under the same roof and more people than ever are living alone, Statistics Canada revealed Wednesday as the 2016 census showcased more seismic changes in the way Canadians are living their lives.

This segment of the census -- focused on families, households, marital status and language -- often elicits references to old-school sitcoms like "Leave it to Beaver" and "The Brady Bunch" to illustrate the dramatic shifts in the Canadian family unit.

These days, even the fractured family dynamics of "Full House" feel dated. Instead, Canada is skewing older, with fewer children and less affinity for marriage -- forcing legislators to adjust and adapt their policies and programs to fit a rapidly evolving reality.

"These dynamics are really important to understand because of the implications for our social and economic development are significant," said Nora Spinks, CEO of the Vanier Institute of the Family.

"The family, in all of its complexity and all of its diversity, is the most adaptive, adaptable and adapting institution in our society. It takes public policy some lag time to catch up."

Canada's 35.15 million people are getting older; there are now more seniors than children under the age of 14. Immigration contributed two-thirds of the country's population growth between 2011 and 2016, and that diversity has also added complexity to the Canadian family portrait.

"Those are really fundamental trends going on in the Canadian population right now, which has impacts on everything, and I would suspect that in the forthcoming (census) releases you'll still hear about and you'll still be able to make links to those two key demographic trends," said Laurent Martel, director of the demography division at Statistics Canada.

Of the 14.1 million households in Canada in 2016, 28.2 per cent comprised only a single person -- the highest proportion of single-person households ever recorded and the most common living arrangement captured in the 2016 count, a first for the country.

Outside of the United States and the United Kingdom, the percentage of one-person homes in Canada is not especially high, but it does illustrate the legacy of an aging population, the members of which are living longer than ever and are more likely to be widowed.

Higher rates of separation and divorce also mean more people living alone or as lone parents, as does an increasing number of women in the workforce, which fosters a greater sense of economic independence.

Childless couples grew in number at a faster rate over the last five years than couples with at least one child, leaving the latter group at 51.1 per cent of the population, the lowest level ever recorded.

The baby boomers who fuelled such population growth in the 20th century are empty nesters in the 21st. The census found younger Canadians who do have kids are living in places like Alberta, long a magnet for job-seeking families, or Nunavut, where fertility rates are high.

"The big shift has been a shift away from families with children to empty nest couples or younger people deciding not to have children," said Doug Norris, chief demographer at Environics Analytics.

"They're not living in the traditional 'Leave it to Beaver' family."

More signs of changing times: single-parent families grew by 5.6 per cent between 2011 and 2016, with the growth of single dads outpacing their female counterparts seven per cent to five. And one in three Canadians aged 20-34 was living with at least one parent in 2016, an increase of five percentage points between 2001 and 2016.

During that same period, the number of young people living with families of their own dwindled to 41.9 per cent, down from 49.1 per cent. And multigenerational households -- three generations or more under one roof -- grew the quickest over the five-year census window, representing some 2.2 million Canadians.

Sometimes, it's out of necessity, said Spinks. Other times, it's choice.

"They're saying, 'Hey, this is working really well, we've worked out the kinks, we've got the space, we've got the two-car garage, we've got the satellite dish, we've got it all sorted out, so why mess with it?'" she said.

"Others are circumstantial -- can't afford to move out, Grandma is providing child care or the teenager is providing grandparent care, or, 'Our finances are so intertwined that it's hard to disentangle, so let's just keep the status quo.'"

And a decade after census-takers first collected numbers on same-sex marriage, such couples now make up one per cent of all households, with their overall numbers having increased by 60.7 per cent since 2006. Opposite-sex couples grew by just 9.6 per cent during the same period.

Today, about 12 per cent of all same-sex couples are living with children, be they biological offspring, adopted or members of a stepfamily. In raw numbers, there were 10,020 children aged 14 and under living with 8,770 same-sex couple parents on census day last year.

"In the old days, if you were coming out, you wouldn't have gay and lesbian parents all over the place showing that, yes, you can start a family, said Mona Greenbaun, executive director of the LGBT Family Coalition in Montreal.

"Nowadays, all the young people...they all know that if they want to, at one point, they can start a family."

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Region: Canada ^[3]

Tags: demographics ^[4]

data ^[5]

diversity ^[6]

family ^[7]

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<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/data> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/diversity> [7] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/family>