

Canada's changing family [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The redefinition of family continues apace in Canada, with the latest household figures from the 2006 census showing a significant increase in the number of same-sex couples and a first-ever count of same-sex marriages.

At the same time, there are more common-law families, more childless couples, more people living alone and a greater number of single-parent households in Canada than ever before.

The census counted 45,345 same-sex couples, up 32 per cent from 2001, representing 0.6 per cent of all couples in Canada. Not surprisingly, half of these couples lived in the three largest census metropolitan areas: Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver.

Statistics Canada allowed census respondents for the first time to indicate if they were in a same-sex marriage. A total of 7,465 couples said they were.

For the first time unmarried couples out-number married partners, and couples without children are more common than couples with children. About nine per cent of Canadians in a same-sex relationship had children under 24 years old living in the home.

The census also found:

- There were 6,105,910 married-couple families, an increase of only 3.5 per cent from 2001, accounting for 68.8 per cent of all census families.
- In contrast, the number of common-law-couple families surged 18.9 per cent to 1,376,865, or 15.5 per cent of all census families. Only two decades ago, that proportion stood at 7.2 per cent.
- The number of lone-parent families increased 7.8 per cent to 1,414,060.
- The number of one-person households increased 11.8 per cent, more than twice as fast as the 5.3 per cent increase for the total population in private households.
- The number of households consisting of couples without children aged 24 years and under increased 11.2 per cent from 2001.

"The overall picture certainly is one of an increasing diversification of our families and households," said Doug Norris, senior-vice president and chief demographer at Environics Analytics.

"For the first time ever, we've got more couples without children than with children, we've got over a quarter of our households with one person only," he said.

In what could be described as the 'incredible shrinking family,' the census found just nine per cent of families with five people or more, and more than 25 per cent of households with just one person. Five decades ago, those numbers were reversed.

Rosemary Bender, director-general of social and demographic statistics at Statscan, attributed the change in part to declining fertility rates and increased life expectancy.

"Those who are widowed, for example, are living longer, they're healthier and they're living alone. So you have an increasing number of one-person households, including young people who are delaying marriage or common law unions and are staying single longer," she said.

Although the increase in same-sex couples is significant, it was not unexpected.

Under-reporting is common on first-time census questions: The number of same-sex couples identified by the Australian census doubled from 1996 to 2001; the United States saw an increase of 300 per cent from 1990 to 2000.

Moreover, Canada has seen broad policy changes on same-sex couple rights and entitlements since the last census.

Adoption, pension benefits, child-care tax breaks and a host of other rights were awarded to gay and lesbian couples in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Canada became the fourth country in the world to legalize same-sex marriage in July, 2005, after several provincial courts

ruled that the government's definition of marriage & the union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others & was unconstitutional.

Experts say these policy changes and greater societal tolerance made it easier for same-sex couples to self identify on the 2006 census.

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Meanwhile, the number of traditional nuclear families gave up even more ground to lone-parent families, which make up a record one in four Canadian families with children.

Evidence of the lone-parent phenomenon reaches back to the early 20th century, but the reasons more and more Canadian children are being raised by only one parent are drastically different than they were 75 years ago.

Regardless of the cause, poverty is a common thread.

"The problem is that you have only one breadwinner, when that breadwinner is employed at all," said Anne-Marie Ambert, professor emeritus of sociology at York University in Toronto.

In 2005, the median household income for two-parent families in Canada was \$67,600. For lone-parent families it was \$30,000 & meaning half of all single-parent families were bringing in less than that amount annually.

There were 1.4 million lone-parent families & 26 per cent of all families with children & last year. That's up some eight per cent from five years earlier. While the vast majority of such households (80 per cent) were headed by women, the number of lone-parent families headed by men was up 15 per cent.

More than 2.1 million children are now living in a lone-parent family.

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Region: Canada ^[2]

Tags: statistics ^[3]

demographics ^[4]

diversity ^[5]

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/07/09/canadas-changing-family-ca> [2] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7864> [3]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/statistics> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/demographics> [5]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/diversity>