



CANADIAN CHILDREN AT HOME

Living Arrangements in the 2021 Census

Peter Jon Mitchell
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A Cardus Research Report

CARDUS



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Executive Summary

Children benefit from stable family environments. While no family is immune from difficulties or the risk of dissolution, married-parent families face a comparatively lower risk of family instability than do other family types. Observing family structure provides an indirect measure of children's family stability.

Using custom tabulations from the 2021 census, this report examines the living arrangements of children aged zero to fourteen in private households in Canada. The report examines the portion of children in lone-parent families, married-parent families, and common-law families. It also examines the portion of children in married and in common-law families who live in intact families and in stepfamilies. The 2021 census findings are compared to previous census cycles spanning twenty-five years.

The results show that while the portion of children living with married parents has declined for decades, the decline has slowed and remained relatively stable since 2016. Similarly, the increase in the portion of children in lone-parent homes remained relatively stable over the previous five years.

The relatively stable portion of children in married-parent families was aided by slight increases in British Columbia, Manitoba, and Yukon.

The results show that children in stepfamilies are more likely to live with common-law parents than with married parents.

The 2021 census was enumerated during the COVID-19 global pandemic that placed families under increased stress with less access to community support. Additional data collected during the pandemic show a significant decline in marriage rates, divorce rates, and fertility during the health crisis. Further census data will provide better understanding of the medium- and long-term consequences of the pandemic on children's family structure, with the 2021 census serving as an important waypoint for further study.



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Introduction

This report examines data from the 2021 census on the living arrangement of children, with a particular focus on the parental marital status and family structure, given that family form has been correlated with other indicators such as educational attainment and behavioural outcomes. The data show that the majority (60 percent) of children aged zero to fourteen live in married-parent families. Although the portion of children living with married parents has been declining, the decline has slowed, and the portion of children in this family type has remained relatively stable since 2016. This relative stability has been aided by slight increases in the portion of children living with married parents in British Columbia, Manitoba, and Yukon. The census data also reveal that children with cohabiting parents are more likely to be in a stepfamily compared to children in married-parent homes.

Why Examine the Family Structure of Children?

Nearly one in five Canadian children under the age of eighteen has experienced the separation or dissolution of their parents' relationship.¹ Parental marital status and the portion of intact families is an indirect measure of family stability. Measuring instability in the family lives of children is important because instability is correlated with a higher risk of poor outcomes among children. In a review of family-stability literature, sociologists Shannon Cavanagh and Paula Fomby state, "A substantial body of research has established robust associations between children's exposure to a co-residential parent's repeated changes in union status and their elevated risks of behavior problems, delinquency, poorer academic achievement, and early family formation."²

Despite the decline in the portion of married-parent families, marriage remains a stable family form. Children in married-parent homes experience fewer transitions in family structure than do their peers. The relative stability of marriage may account in part for the observation that children in married-parent homes have better educational outcomes on average than children from other family structures, including higher graduation rates and higher levels of educational attainment.³ In the same way, children from married-parent families tend to have better emotional and behavioural outcomes.⁴

1 Statistics Canada, "How Many Children in Canada Have Experienced the Separation or Divorce of Their Parents? Results from the 2019 Canadian Health Survey on Children and Youth," Infographic, March 23, 2022, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-627-m/11-627-m2022018-eng.htm>.

2 S.E. Cavanagh and P. Fomby, "Family Instability in the Lives of American Children," *Annual Review of Sociology* 45, no. 1 (2019): 493–513, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-073018-022633>.

3 Z. Wu, et al., "Family Structure and University Enrollment and Completion" (paper presented at the Population Association of America 2012 Annual Meeting, San Francisco, May 3–5, 2012), <http://paa2012.princeton.edu/papers/120858>; Witherspoon Institute, *Marriage and the Public Good: Ten Principles* (Princeton, NJ: Witherspoon Institute, 2008).

4 S.L. Brown, "Family Structure and Child Well-Being: The Significance of Parental Cohabitation," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66, no. 2 (2004): 351–67, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2004.00025.x>.

The Marriage Advantage

Why children in married households do better on a range of outcomes remains a point of debate. Some scholars hypothesize that the marriage advantage is explained by selection effect. People who possess certain advantages that are likely to produce greater well-being may also be more likely to marry and to pass these advantages on to their children. Other scholars hypothesize that marriage moderates behaviours among adults and provides social supports that contribute to increased child well-being. It is likely that both explanations contribute to the marriage advantage to some degree.

Of course, this doesn't mean that children in non-married-parent families are destined for poor outcomes, but family structure should be a consideration when discussing economic inequality. Marriage is declining more rapidly among parents with less education, while more-educated parents are more likely to marry, stay married, and benefit from greater family stability.⁵ Some scholars examining the relationship between family structure and inequality conclude, "The new socioeconomic gradient in family structure appears to be a 'mechanism' in the reproduction of inequality across generations, being both influenced by rising inequality and a potential contributor to future inequality."⁶

Findings

The results are based on custom tabulations from the 2021 census on the family structure for children aged zero to fourteen in private households. The tabulations provide national, provincial, and territorial data.

Statistics Canada first distinguished between intact families and stepfamilies in the 2011 census. This distinction provides greater insight into the prevalence of family transitions. Although the 2016 census reported on whether children were in intact families or in stepfamilies, it did not report whether these families were headed by married or by common-law parents. As we did in 2016, Cardus again requested custom tabulations for children in married and common-law families, including intact families and stepfamilies.

Married and Common-Law Families

The majority of children, or about 60 percent, live with married parents. About 17 percent of children live with common-law parents, and about 19 percent live with a lone parent.

5 W. Wang, "The Link Between a College Education and a Lasting Marriage," Pew Research Center, December 4, 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/12/04/education-and-marriage/>.

6 S. Lundberg, R.A. Pollak, and J. Stearns, "Family Inequality: Diverging Patterns in Marriage, Cohabitation, and Childbearing," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 30, no. 2 (2016): 79–102, <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.30.2.79>.

Terminology

Intact two-parent family: Children in intact two-parent families include only children of both persons in the couple. These families have no children present who are of one parent only.

Stepfamily: Children in a stepfamily include children of the first person only in the couple, children of the second person only in the couple, and children of both parents, where there is at least one child in the family of one parent only.

Without parents: Children living with grandparents, no parents present, foster children, or living with other relatives.

The portion of children living with married parents has been declining for decades, falling from about 73 percent in 1996 to about 60 percent in 2021. The decline in the portion of children in married-parent families stabilized between 2016 and 2021, declining only 0.3 percent. This was aided by slight increases in the portion of children in married-parent families in British Columbia, Manitoba, and Yukon.

The portion of children living in common-law families increased from almost 11 percent in 1996 to about 17 percent in 2021. During the same twenty-five-year period, the portion of children in lone-parent families increased from about 16 percent to 19 percent, holding relatively stable between 2011 and 2021.

What might account for the relative stabilization in the portion of children in married-parent families? It's difficult to know. The divorce rate in Canada has been in decline, but some analysts attribute this decline to fewer people marrying, compared to the past.⁷ The decline in divorce may also be correlated with the fact that couples are marrying at older ages than in the past. Some social scientists theorize that older people are more

selective in whom they marry compared to younger people, resulting in increased marital stability.⁸ Perhaps the decline in divorce rates provides some insight into the reason that the portion of children in married-parent families has stabilized.

Nunavut presents a unique finding. Children in this territory are more likely to be in a common-law family (33.7 percent) or lone-parent family (28.3 percent) than in a married-parent family (26.5 percent). In fact, it has the highest portion of children living in lone-parent families and lowest portion living in married-parent families in Canada (see provincial and territorial results in the appendix).

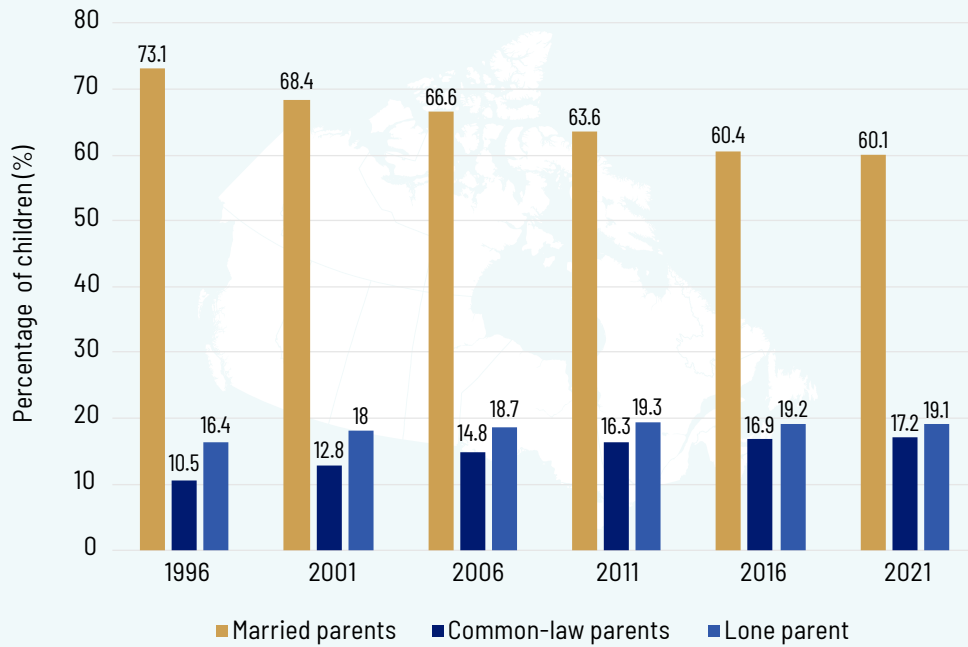
Stepfamilies

The 2021 census data reveal that nearly 30 percent of children living in common-law families are in stepfamilies. This compares to nearly 7 percent of children in married-parent families.

7 See Cardus, "The Canadian Marriage Map: A Compilation of Data on Marriage," June 23, 2020, <https://www.cardus.ca/research/family/reports/the-canadian-marriage-map/>.

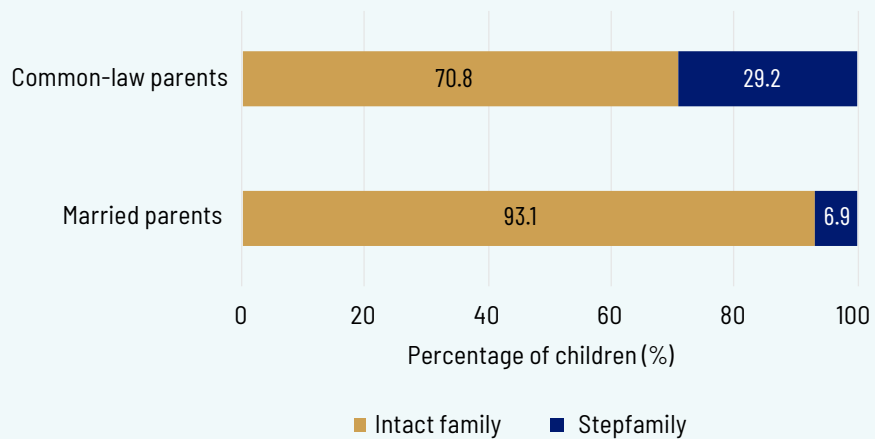
8 S. Kennedy and S. Ruggles, "Breaking Up Is Hard to Count: The Rise of Divorce in the United States, 1980–2010," *Demography* 51, no. 2 (January 8, 2014): 587–98, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13524-013-0270-9>.

Figure 1. Portion of Children Aged 0 to 14 in Type of Family, Canada, 1996–2021



Note: Percentages may not total 100 percent due to rounding and the exclusion of children living outside of married, common-law, and lone-parent families.
 Source: Statistics Canada, "Customized Census Family Structure," 2016 to 2021; Statistics Canada, Censuses of Population, 1996

Figure 2. Portion of Children Aged 0 to 14 in Intact Families and Stepfamilies, by Marital Status, 2021



Source: Statistics Canada, "Customized Census Family Structure," 2021.

Children living in stepfamilies are more likely to live with common-law parents than with married parents. About 55 percent of children in stepfamilies live with common-law parents, even though the portion of all children living with common-law parents is over three times smaller than the portion of children living with married parents.

Census data provide a snapshot in time. Numerating stepfamilies can tell us that at least one family transition has occurred among parents but doesn't detail previous family structures, the number of transitions, or future transitions.

Families in Quebec

Quebec's sizeable population means that the provincial data have a non-trivial impact on the national numbers. Table 1 illustrates this impact. Outside of Quebec, 66.3 percent of children live in married-parent families, while 10.7 percent live in common-law families. About 43 percent of all couples in Quebec are common law, significantly affecting the living arrangements of children. Nearly as many children in Quebec live in common-law families (38.9 percent) as in married-parent families (39.4 percent).

Table 1. Portion of Children Aged 0 to 14 Living in Married, Common-Law, and Lone-Parent Families, by Region, 2021

| Region | Married Parents (%) | Common-Law Parents (%) | Lone Parent (%) |
|--------------------------|---------------------|------------------------|-----------------|
| Canada | 60.1 | 17.2 | 19.1 |
| Canada Outside of Quebec | 66.3 | 10.7 | 18.9 |
| BC | 67.1 | 10.4 | 17.0 |
| AB | 69.9 | 10.0 | 16.9 |
| SK | 61.2 | 12.1 | 19.7 |
| MB | 62.2 | 11.3 | 20.8 |
| ON | 67.7 | 9.7 | 18.6 |
| QC | 39.4 | 38.9 | 19.9 |
| NB | 53.0 | 19.9 | 24.2 |
| NS | 56.1 | 14.9 | 25.9 |
| PE | 63.2 | 13.9 | 20.7 |
| NL | 55.0 | 16.5 | 25.1 |
| YT | 53.1 | 19.3 | 23.1 |
| NT | 44.4 | 25.2 | 25.3 |
| NU | 26.5 | 33.7 | 28.3 |

Note: Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding and the exclusion of children living outside of married, common-law, and lone parent families.

Source: Statistics Canada, "Customized Census Family Structure," 2021.

The high prevalence of common-law relationships in Quebec is an indication of its cultural distinctiveness and unique social presence within Canada. Evidence suggests that common-law relationships in Quebec are more stable compared to the same family form outside of the province, but less stable than marriages both within and outside Quebec.⁹ As the prevalence of common-law relationships has increased, however, marriages in Quebec have become less stable than in the past. Data from the 2019 Canadian Health Survey on Children and Youth found that 23 percent of Quebec children under age eighteen experienced their parents' separation or divorce. This was the second-highest percentage after New Brunswick and higher than the national average of 18 percent.¹⁰

It is difficult to predict whether the Quebec experience holds insights for the future of common-law relationships in the rest of Canada, because of the unique history and culture of the province.

Pandemic Effect

The global pandemic and resulting public-health measures obliged families to do more with less community support. As the 2021 census collected data during the health crisis, it will serve as a waypoint for future research on the impact of the pandemic.

While the long-term impact of the pandemic on family life is unknown, it appears that the health crisis acted as a pause button in terms of marriage, divorce, and fertility. Record-low divorce and marriage rates were recorded during the pandemic, and it appears that some Canadians likely deferred fertility decisions.¹¹ Census 2026 will be an important indicator on the medium-term impact of the pandemic on the living arrangements of children.

9 F.-P. Ménard, "What Makes It Fall Apart? The Determinants of the Dissolution of Marriages and Common-Law Unions in Canada," *McGill Sociological Review* 2 (April 2011): 59–76, <https://www.mcgill.ca/msr/volume2/article4>; D. Pelletier, "The Diffusion of Cohabitation and Children's Risks of Family Dissolution in Canada," *Demographic Research* 35 (November 18, 2016): 1317–42, <https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2016.35.45>; C. Le Bourdais and É. Lapierre-Adamcyk, "Changes in Conjugal Life in Canada: Is Cohabitation Progressively Replacing Marriage?," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66, no. 4 (2004): 929–42, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3600167>.

10 Statistics Canada, "How Many Children in Canada."

11 Statistics Canada, "The Daily—A Fifty-Year Look at Divorces in Canada, 1970 to 2020," March 9, 2022, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/220309/dq220309a-eng.htm>; Statistics Canada, "Fewer Babies Born as Canada's Fertility Rate Hits a Record Low in 2020," May 16, 2022, <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/o1/en/plus/960-fewer-babies-born-canadas-fertility-rate-hits-record-low-2020>; Statistics Canada, "The Daily—'I Don't': Historic Decline in New Marriages during the First Year of the Pandemic," November 14, 2022, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221114/dq221114b-eng.pdf>.

Conclusion

Examining the family structure of children provides an indirect indication of family stability. While no family form is immune from shocks or instability, married families are generally less likely to dissolve than non-married families. Healthy, stable family environments are correlated with better outcomes for children.

Data from the 2021 census reveal that 60 percent of Canadian children aged zero to fourteen live in married-parent families. While the portion of children in this family form has been declining for decades, the data suggest that the portion of children in married-parent families has been relatively stable since the 2016 census.

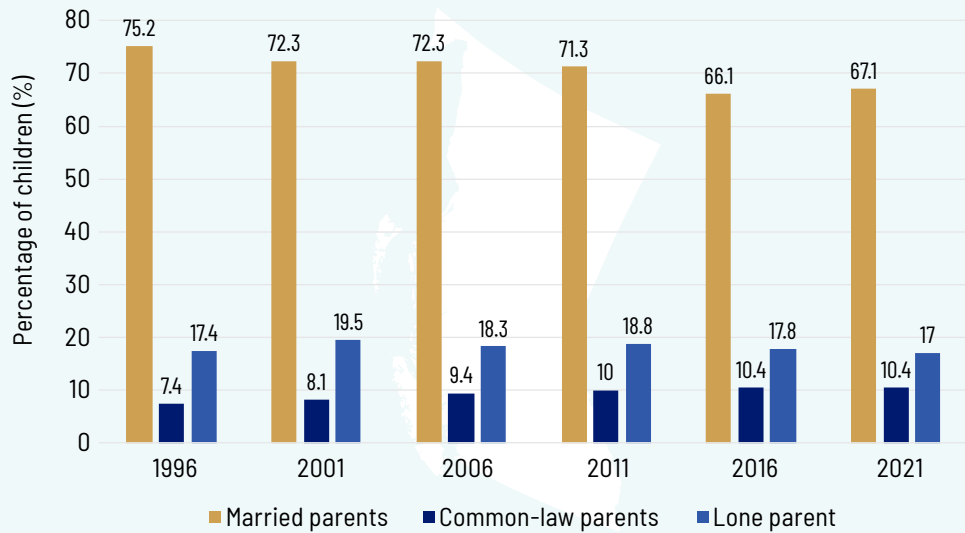
In Quebec, nearly as many children live in common-law families as in married families. Previous research suggests that common-law families in this province experience greater stability than do common-law families outside of the province, but they remain at greater risk of dissolution when compared to married families both within and outside Quebec.

The 2021 census shows that a greater portion of children in common-law families are in stepfamilies than in married-parent families.

The global pandemic had a significant disruptive effect on marriage and divorce rates and on fertility decisions. The long-term impact of the pandemic on these measures and on children's family structure is yet to be determined, but the 2021 census will serve as an important waypoint in assessing the impact of the global health crisis.

Appendix

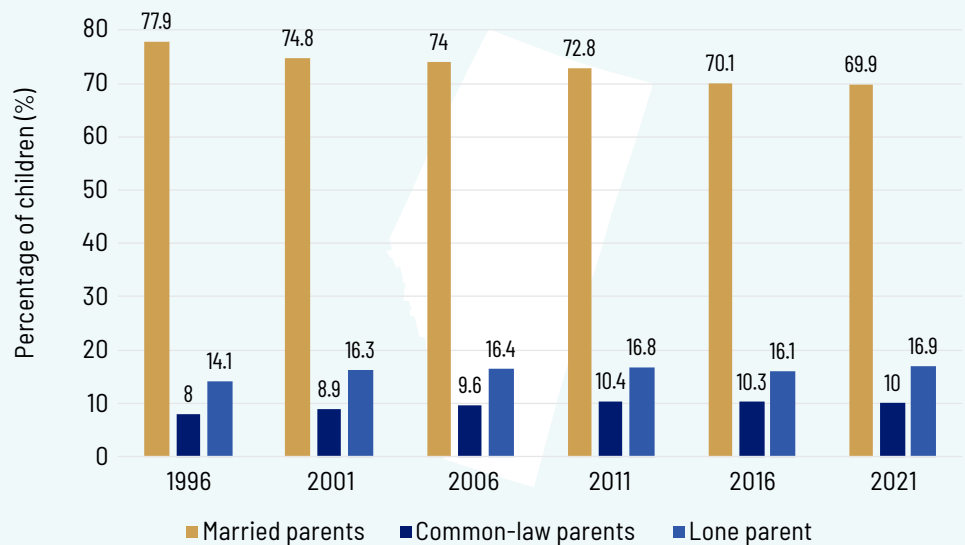
Figure 3. Portion of Children Aged 0 to 14 in Type of Family, British Columbia, 1996–2021



Note: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding and the exclusion of children living outside of married, common-law, and lone-parent families.

Source: Statistics Canada, "Customized Census Family Structure," 2016 to 2021; Statistics Canada, Censuses of Population, 1996 to 2011.

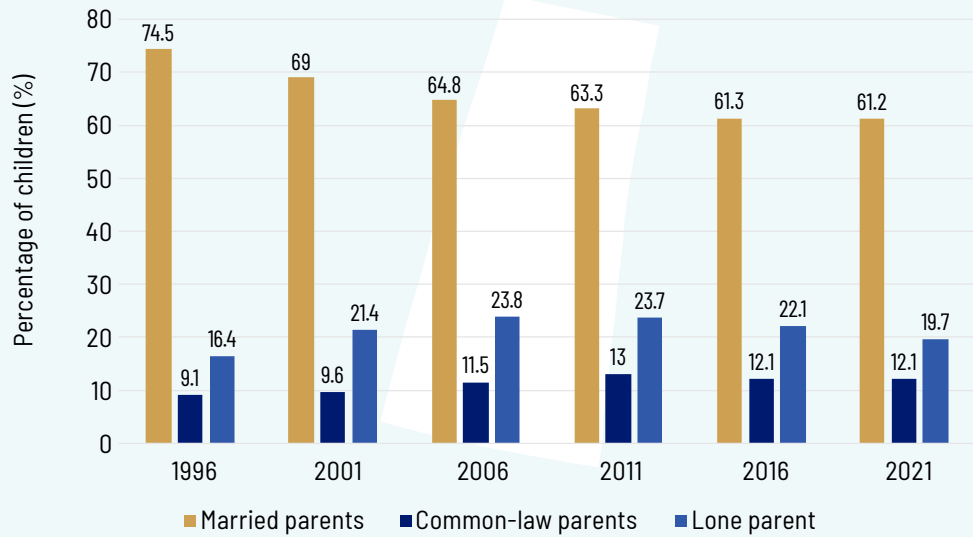
Figure 4. Portion of Children Aged 0 to 14 in Type of Family, Alberta, 1996–2021



Note: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding and the exclusion of children living outside of married, common-law, and lone-parent families.

Source: Statistics Canada, "Customized Census Family Structure," 2016 to 2021; Statistics Canada, Censuses of Population, 1996 to 2011.

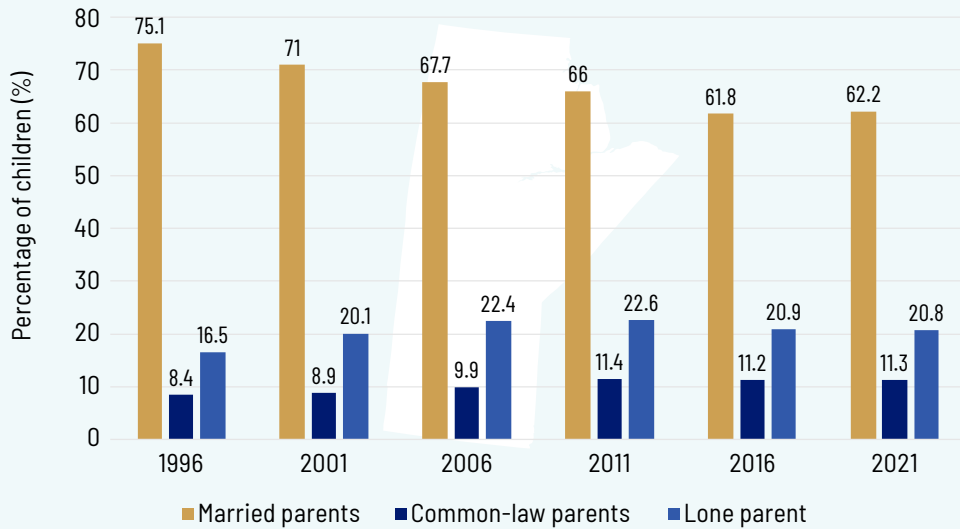
Figure 5. Portion of Children Aged 0 to 14 in Type of Family, Saskatchewan, 1996–2021



Note: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding and the exclusion of children living outside of married, common-law, and lone-parent families.

Source: Statistics Canada, "Customized Census Family Structure," 2016 to 2021; Statistics Canada, Censuses of Population, 1996 to 2011.

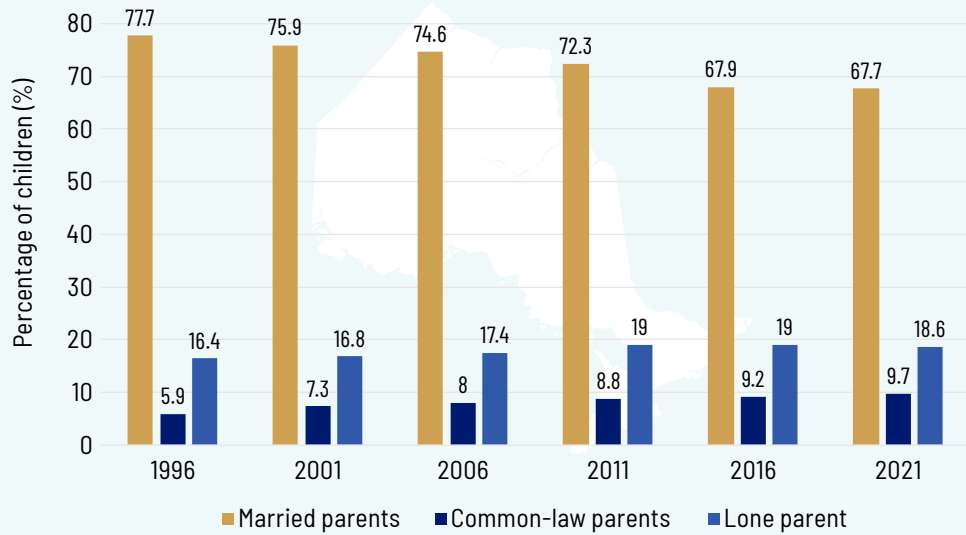
Figure 6. Portion of Children Aged 0 to 14 in Type of Family, Manitoba, 1996–2021



Note: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding and the exclusion of children living outside of married, common-law, and lone-parent families.

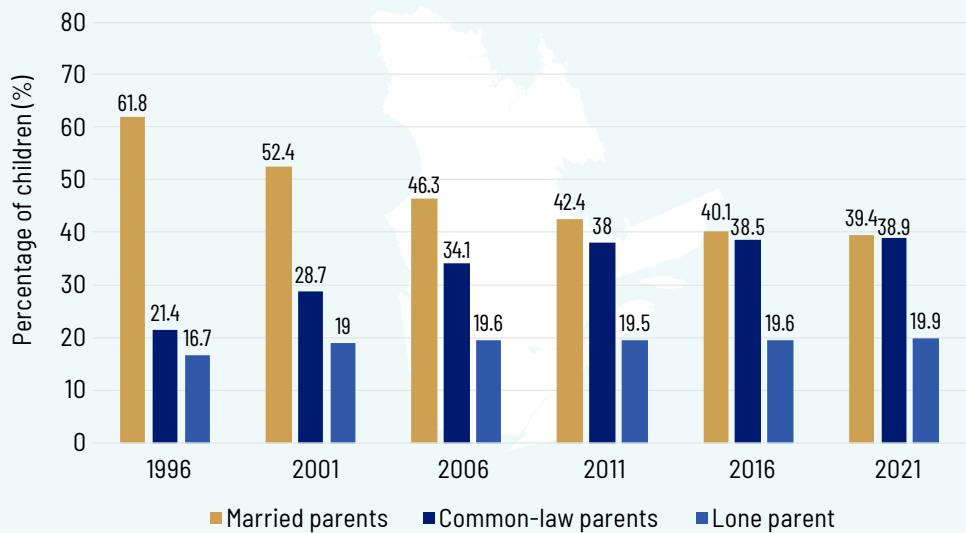
Source: Statistics Canada, "Customized Census Family Structure," 2016 to 2021; Statistics Canada, Censuses of Population, 1996 to 2011.

Figure 7. Portion of Children Aged 0 to 14 in Type of Family, Ontario, 1996–2021



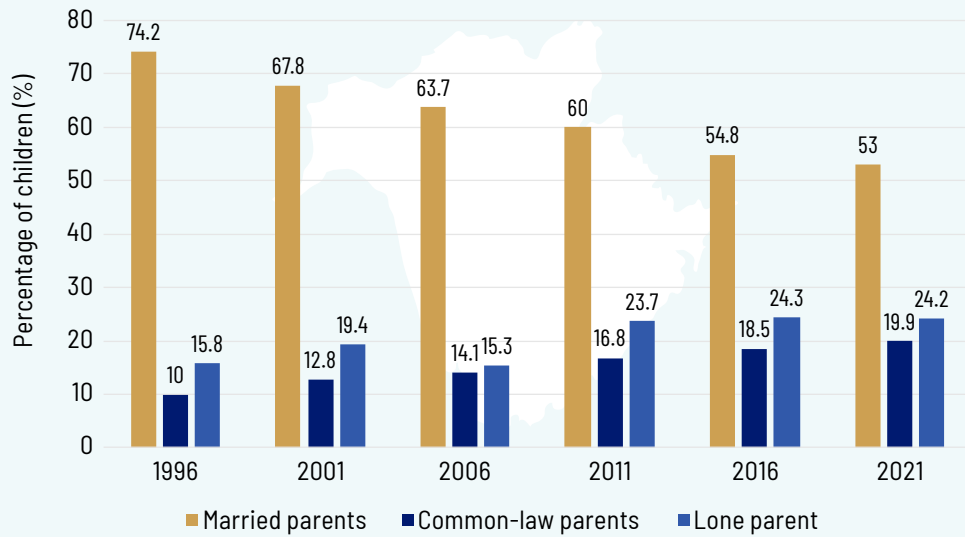
Note: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding and the exclusion of children living outside of married, common-law, and lone-parent families.
 Source: Statistics Canada, "Customized Census Family Structure," 2016 to 2021; Statistics Canada, Censuses of Population, 1996 to 2011.

Figure 8. Portion of Children Aged 0 to 14 in Type of Family, Quebec, 1996–2021



Note: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding and the exclusion of children living outside of married, common-law, and lone-parent families.
 Source: Statistics Canada, "Customized Census Family Structure," 2016 to 2021; Statistics Canada, Censuses of Population, 1996 to 2011.

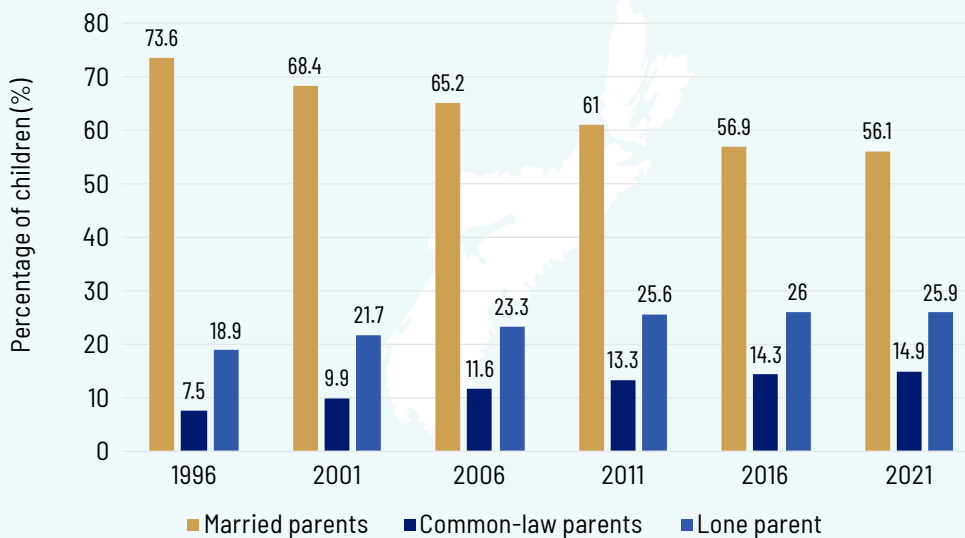
Figure 9. Portion of Children Aged 0 to 14 in Type of Family, New Brunswick, 1996–2021



Note: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding and the exclusion of children living outside of married, common-law, and lone-parent families.

Source: Statistics Canada, "Customized Census Family Structure," 2016 to 2021; Statistics Canada, Censuses of Population, 1996 to 2011.

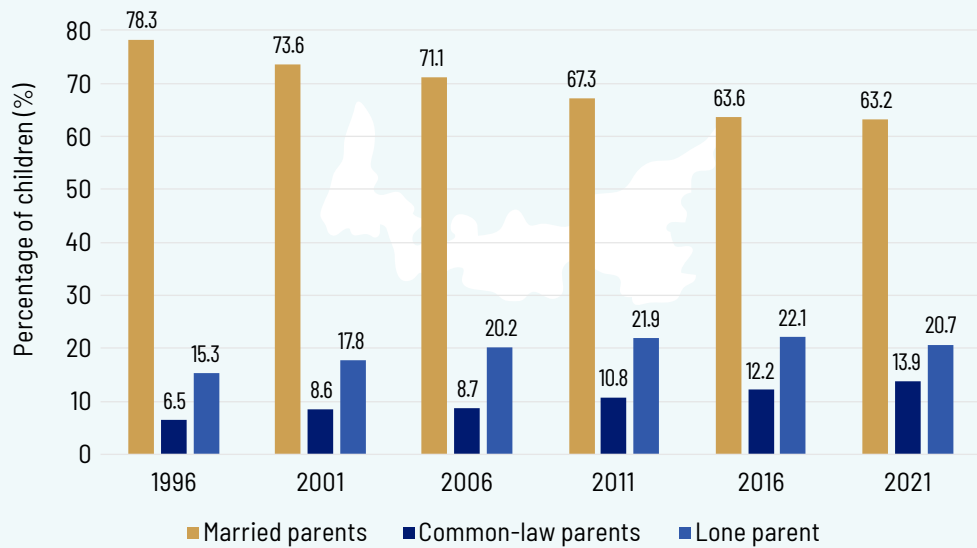
Figure 10. Portion of Children Aged 0 to 14 in Type of Family, Nova Scotia, 1996–2021



Note: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding and the exclusion of children living outside of married, common-law, and lone-parent families.

Source: Statistics Canada, "Customized Census Family Structure," 2016 to 2021; Statistics Canada, Censuses of Population, 1996 to 2011.

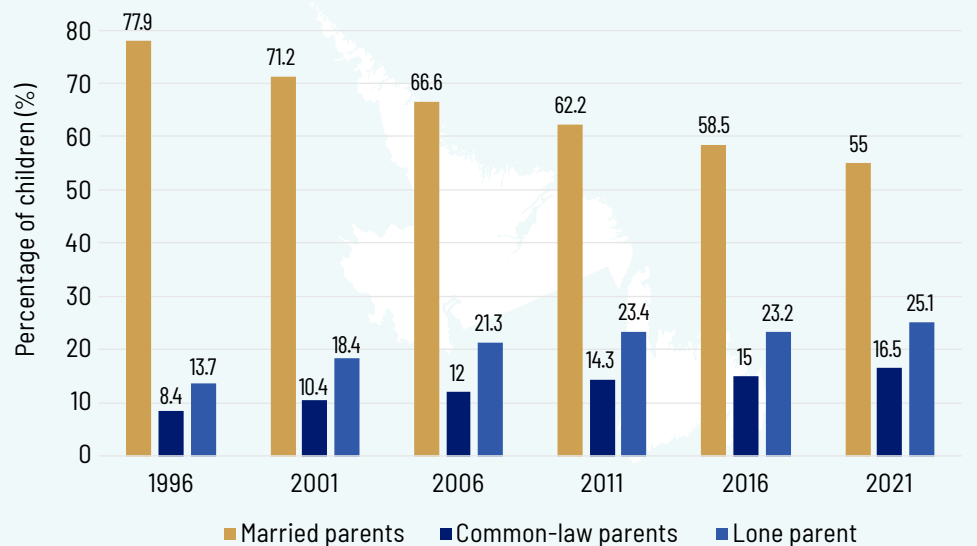
Figure 11. Portion of Children Aged 0 to 14 in Type of Family, Prince Edward Island, 1996–2021



Note: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding and the exclusion of children living outside of married, common-law, and lone-parent families.

Source: Statistics Canada, "Customized Census Family Structure," 2016 to 2021; Statistics Canada, Censuses of Population, 1996 to 2011.

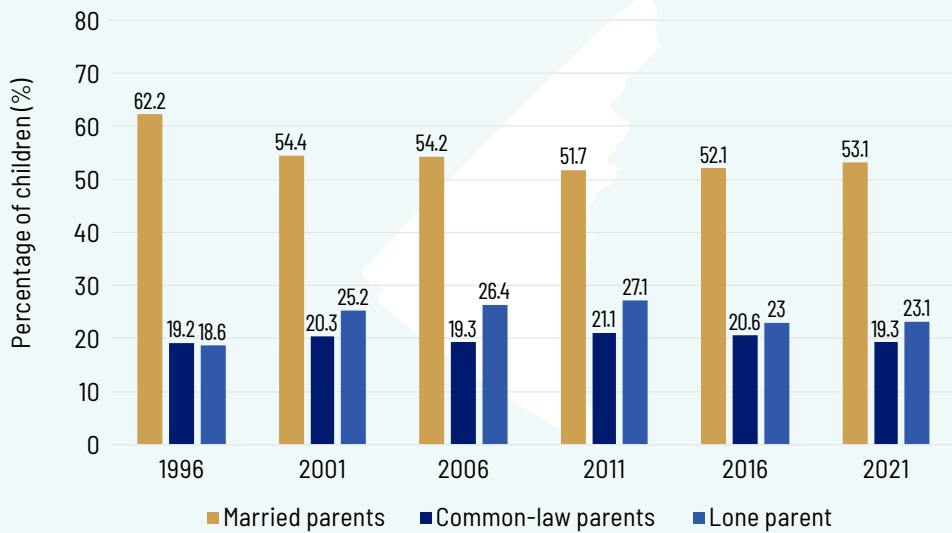
Figure 12. Portion of Children Aged 0 to 14 in Type of Family, Newfoundland and Labrador, 1996–2021



Note: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding and the exclusion of children living outside of married, common-law, and lone-parent families.

Source: Statistics Canada, "Customized Census Family Structure," 2016 to 2021; Statistics Canada, Censuses of Population, 1996 to 2011.

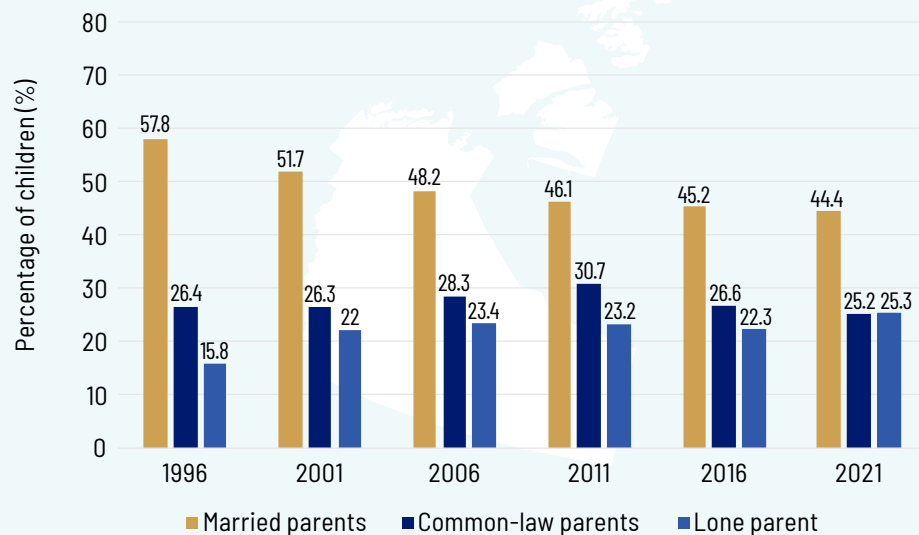
Figure 13. Portion of Children Aged 0 to 14 in Type of Family, Yukon, 1996–2021



Note: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding and the exclusion of children living outside of married, common-law, and lone-parent families.

Source: Statistics Canada, "Customized Census Family Structure," 2016 to 2021; Statistics Canada, Censuses of Population, 1996 to 2011.

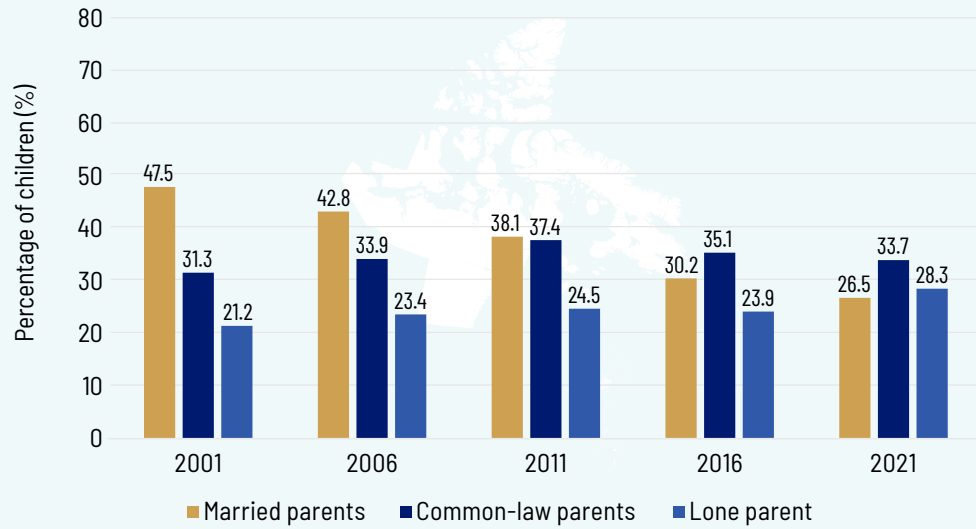
Figure 14. Portion of Children Aged 0 to 14 in Type of Family, Northwest Territories, 1996–2021



Note: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding and the exclusion of children living outside of married, common-law, and lone-parent families.

Source: Statistics Canada, "Customized Census Family Structure," 2016 to 2021; Statistics Canada, Censuses of Population, 1996 to 2011.

Figure 15. Portion of Children Aged 0 to 14 in Type of Family, Nunavut, 1996–2021



Note: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding and the exclusion of children living outside of married, common-law, and lone-parent families. Data not available for 1996 census.

Source: Statistics Canada, "Customized Census Family Structure," 2016 to 2021; Statistics Canada, Censuses of Population, 1996 to 2011.

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