



NEW CENSUS DATA SHOWS FEWER CHILDREN LIVING WITH MARRIED PARENTS

This decline has ramifications for children, families and public policy.

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CARDUS



Cardus is a think tank dedicated to the renewal of North American social architecture with offices in Hamilton and Ottawa, Ontario. Cardus Family aims to create a larger body of Canadian family research, show the importance of family stability in strengthening civil society and bring experienced and reliable academic, political, civil service and think tank voices together in vibrant discussion.

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“If you want to design good policy, you have to get a good picture,” says Céline LeBourdais, Canada Research Chair in Social Statistics and Family Change and department chair of sociology at McGill.¹ Addressing pressing social issues like social cohesion, inequality, social isolation, and poverty requires reliable data to understand the prevalence and context of issues within Canada and internationally. Naturally, statisticians cannot capture every interesting trend, and the desires of governments and researchers must be balanced with citizen privacy rights. With that in mind, Cardus Family argues that collecting and publishing family-structure data about children’s living arrangements is essential for understanding and addressing the challenges all Canadian families face in the twenty-first century.

The 2016 Census release on the living arrangements of children reported on two-parent families, distinguishing between intact (biological and adoptive parents) and stepparents. For the first time since 1981, the Census 2016 release of family data did not report the distinction between married and common-law parent families with regards to children’s living arrangements.² Cardus Family made a special request and purchased this data, recognizing that this information is collected and analyzed by other countries, such as the United Kingdom and the United States.³

1 “Celine LeBourdais on Studying Step Families,” YouTube, posted by McGill University, July 15, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jcld89xBwis>.

2 Statistics Canada, “2016 Census Topic: Families, Households and Marital Status,” last updated November 15, 2017, <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/rt-td/fam-eng.cfm>.

3 Laurie DeRose et al., *World Family Map 2017: Mapping Family Change and Child Well-Being Outcomes* (New York: Social Trends Institute, 2017), http://sti.pushroom.com/Media/files/000008/0000381_WFM-2017-FullReport.pdf.

Why Distinguish Between Married and Cohabiting Parents?

The important distinction between marriage and cohabitation may not be immediately self-evident to Canadians. While Canadian research demonstrates that family structure is correlated with children's outcomes, the public discussion around this fact is muted, particularly around outcomes for married and cohabiting families. This research has implications for public policy. University of Windsor professor Lydia Miljan, writing on public policy in Canada, puts it this way: "While some experts and advocates argue that family configuration either does not matter or would not matter if the right social and economic policies were in place, the preponderance of the evidence suggests that they are wrong."⁴

We know several aspects of marriage are substantively different from cohabitation. Without a doubt cohabitation is less stable than marriage, even as cohabitation grows in prevalence.⁵ Children born to cohabiting parents who don't go on to marry are roughly three times more likely to experience family breakdown compared to children born to married parents who don't live together before marriage.⁶ A 1998 Canadian study shows declines in perceived educational achievement when contrasting stable cohabiting homes with stable married homes.⁷ Other studies have found distinctions in economic behaviour, for example, in how families budget. A 2014 Canadian study indicates that cohabiting couples are less likely to pool their financial resources when contrasted with married couples, even in Quebec, where cohabitation is more institutionalized.⁸

A sample of international studies including from Canada suggests that the decline of marriage has not occurred equally across all income levels. Higher-educated couples are more likely to marry and stay married than their peers with lower levels of educational attainment.⁹ Recent work by sociologists Sharon Sassler and Amanda Miller suggest that similar divisions persist among cohabiting couples, with higher-educated couples more likely to transition into marriage.¹⁰ Such divisions have implications for economic and social-capital outcomes.

4 Lydia Miljan, *Public Policy in Canada: An Introduction*, 7th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 242.

5 F. Menard, "What Makes It Fall Apart? The Determinants of the Dissolution of Marriages and Common-Law Unions in Canada," *McGill Sociological Review* 2 (2011): 59–60.

6 N. Marcil-Gratton, *Growing Up with Mom and Dad? The Intricate Family Life Course of Canadian Children* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 1998), 16.

7 Zheng Wu et al., "Change and Stability in Cohabitation and Children's Educational Adjustment," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 41, no. 4 (2010): 557–79.

8 Dana Hamplová, Céline Le Bourdais, and Évelyne Lapierre-Adamcyk, "Is the Cohabitation–Marriage Gap in Money Pooling Universal?," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 76, no. 5 (2014): 983–97.

9 W. Bradford Wilcox et al. "When Marriage Disappears: The New Middle America," *The State of Our Unions* (Charlottesville, VA: The National Marriage Project, 2010), <http://stateofourunions.org/2010/SOOU2010.pdf>; Philip Cross and Peter Jon Mitchell, *The Marriage Gap Between Rich and Poor Canadians: How Canadians Are Split into Haves and Have-Nots Along Marriage Lines* (Ottawa: Institute of Marriage and Family Canada, 2014), http://www.imfcanada.org/sites/default/files/Canadian_Marriage_Gap_FINAL_0.pdf; Fraser Nelson, "Revealed: The Marriage Gap between Britain's Rich and Poor," *The Spectator*, November 15, 2014, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2014/11/marriage-is-becoming-a-preserve-of-the-rich/>; Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010* (repr., New York: Crown Forum, 2013).

10 Laurie DeRose, "Social Class Shapes the Experience of Living Together: A Review of *Cohabitation Nation*," Institute for Family Studies, January 9, 2018, <https://ifstudies.org/blog/social-class-shapes-the-experience-of-living-together-a-review-of-cohabitation-nation>.

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—Lydia Miljan

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Given that marriage is the gold standard for raising children, these changing trends associated with family formation are worth identifying and studying.

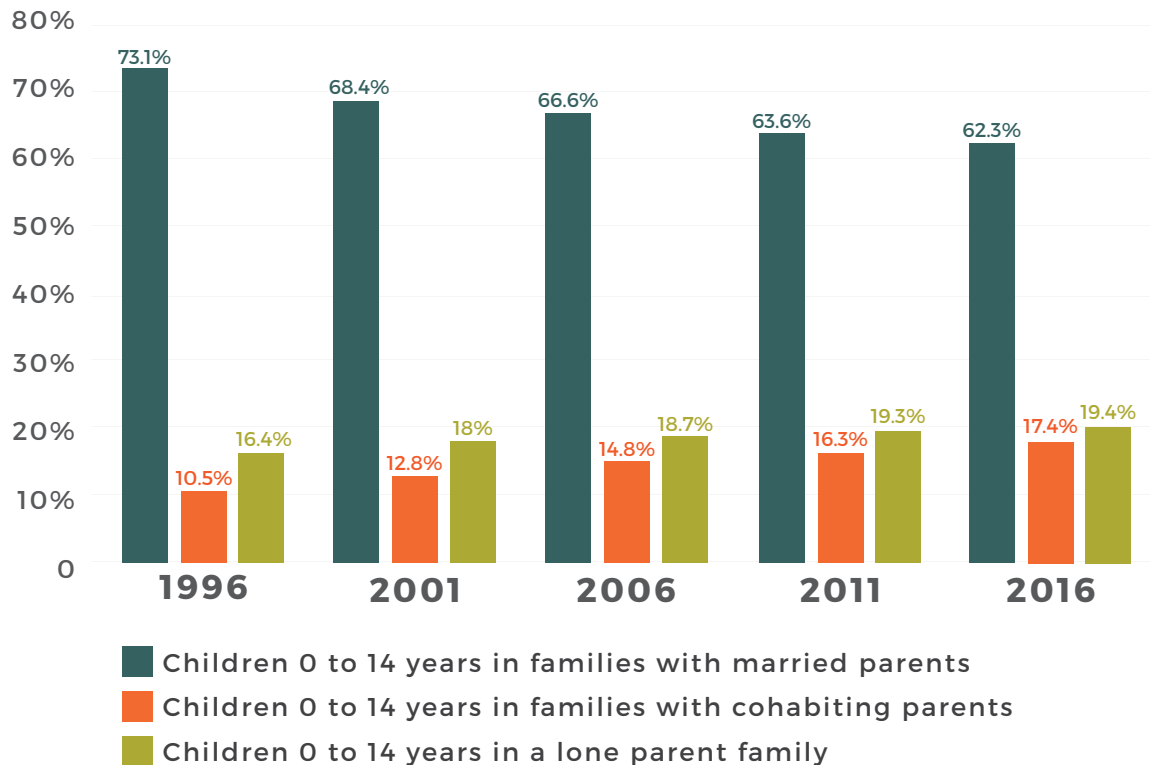
Isabel Sawhill, a scholar and former associate director of the Office of Management and Budget in the Clinton administration, observes in her book *Generation Unbound: Drifting into Sex and Parenthood Without Marriage* that more adults are sliding into relationships and childrearing. She argues that this trend has led to increased family instability and poorer outcomes for children.

Collecting and disseminating data on family structure does not mean favouring particular family forms. Sawhill, for example, believes there is too much emphasis on marriage.¹¹ Other academics view the growth in the diversity of family structures as a positive indication of gender equality, autonomy, and choice. For both perspectives, good data informs public discussion on these important questions.

¹¹ Isabel V. Sawhill, *Generation Unbound: Drifting into Sex and Parenthood without Marriage* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2014).

New Data: Children’s Living Arrangements

What do we learn from the 2016 Census data on cohabiting and married families?*



*Percentages may not total 100% because children aged 0 to 14 not living in census families are not shown. Also due to rounding.

The new data show that in 2016, about 62 percent of children age zero to fourteen were living with married parents. This is down from 64 percent in 2011 and 94 percent in 1961.¹² The percent of children age zero to fourteen living in cohabiting households rose from 10.5 percent in 1996 to 17 percent in Census 2016, a 62 percent increase.

¹² “94 percent in 1961” refers to children aged 24 and under in census families. Please also note that the census did not measure common-law status prior to 1981. Statistics Canada, “Living Arrangements of Children in Canada: A Century of Change,” April 29, 2014, <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/75-006-x/2014001/article/11919-eng.pdf>; 2016 calculations by authors based on Statistics Canada, “Customized Census Family Structure for Children Aged 0 to 14 in Private Households of Canada, Provinces and Territories, 2016 Census,” December 21, 2017.

Recommendation

Census 2016 includes an array of interesting family data—but the statistics regarding cohabitation or marriage in children’s living arrangements was absent. As relationships evolve and change, measurement around relationship trends and living arrangements for children remain more important than ever before. Therefore, we are recommending that even as new distinctions in family forms are added, marriage and cohabitation categories be published in the future census releases as well.