

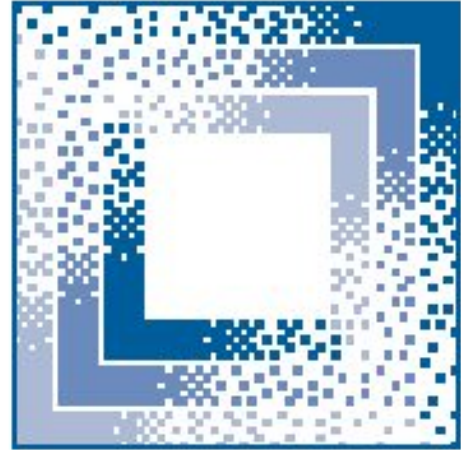


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General Social Survey - Cycle 15

Changing Conjugal Life in Canada

July 2002



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The following standard symbols are used in this Statistics Canada publication:

- . not available for any reference period
- .. not available for a specific reference period
- ... not applicable
- ^P preliminary
- ^r revised
- x suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the Statistics Act
- E use with caution
- F too unreliable to be published

Changing Conjugal Life in Canada

In Canada, as in many industrialized countries, conjugal relationships have undergone significant change. For most of the past 30 years, divorce has been on the rise, common-law unions have been increasingly frequent and marriage seems to be gradually losing ground. Despite these changes, almost all Canadian women enter into a first union at some point in their lives. Whether they were born shortly before the Second World War or in the 1970s, 94% of women between the ages of 30 and 69 will live as part of a couple, should the behaviours of the women surveyed in 2001 continue. This probability was slightly lower (84%) among women ranging in age from 20 to 29, which should hardly be surprising since these women are just entering adulthood. The proportion of these women who will become involved in a first relationship will no doubt increase as they grow older.

Starting conjugal life through a common-law relationship: An increasingly popular choice, especially in Quebec

For women, although the probability to enter into a union has not changed a great deal, the nature of their first union has. In 2001, the vast majority of Canadian women ranging in age from 50 to 69 had started their conjugal life through marriage. Thus, it is estimated that the probability to marry directly reached 93% among women in their 60s and 87% among women in their 50s, which is hardly surprising since a high proportion of them married before common-law relationships became accepted as an alternative way of having a stable relationship.

Recent generations have seen a change: more than 40% of women ranging in age from 30 to 39 are expected to choose a common-law union as their first union, while this percentage is estimated to reach 53% among 20- to 29-year-olds. For the latter, common-law unions now seem to represent the preferred entry into conjugal life (Chart 1).

Data Source and Definitions

The data presented in this article come from the General Social Survey. Between February and December 2001, 24,310 individuals aged 15 years or over and living in private households in one of the 10 Canadian provinces were interviewed. The response rate was 79.3%. The survey collected data on various aspects of respondents' families: family structure while growing up, marriages, common-law relationships, children, brothers and sisters, and a wide range of basic characteristics, including the respondent's domestic situation at the time of the survey.

Definitions used in this article

Family: refers to a married or common-law couple, with or without children of one or both spouses, or a lone parent, regardless of that parent's marital status, having at least one child living under the same roof.

Intact family: refers to a family in which all children in the household are the biological and/or adopted offspring of both members of the couple.

Step family: refers to a family in which at least one of the children in the household is from a previous relationship of one of the parents.

In a "simple" step family, the child(ren) of one of the spouses lives in the household.

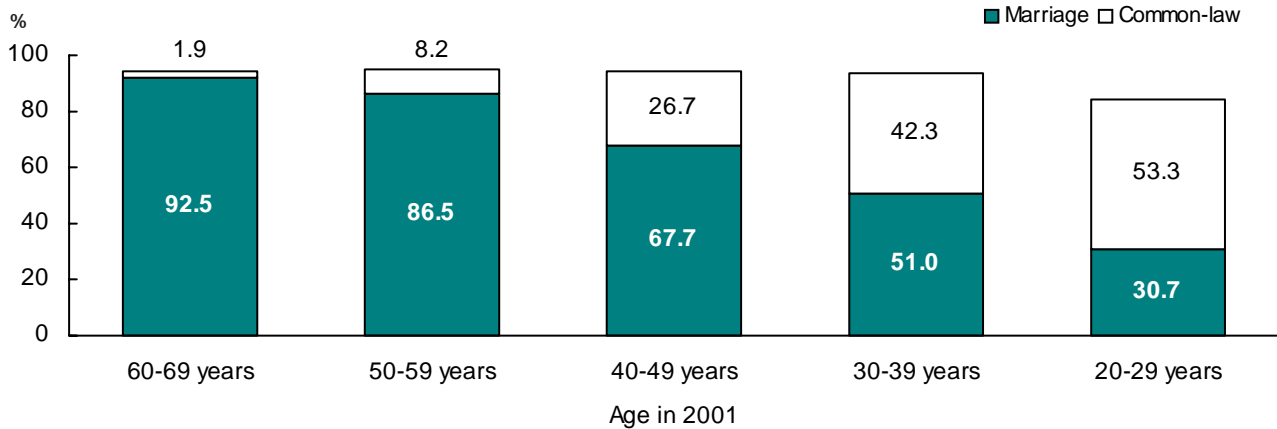
A "blended" family contains children of both spouses from one or more previous unions or one or more children from the current union and one or more children from previous unions.

Separation: in this article the word separation has no legal standing. It is used simply to define the end of a relationship resulting from causes other than death.

Common-law union: all common-law relationships are self-reported and could refer to unions of any duration.

Chart 1

Probability for Women of Experiencing a Marriage or a Common-Law Union as a First Union, Canada, 2001



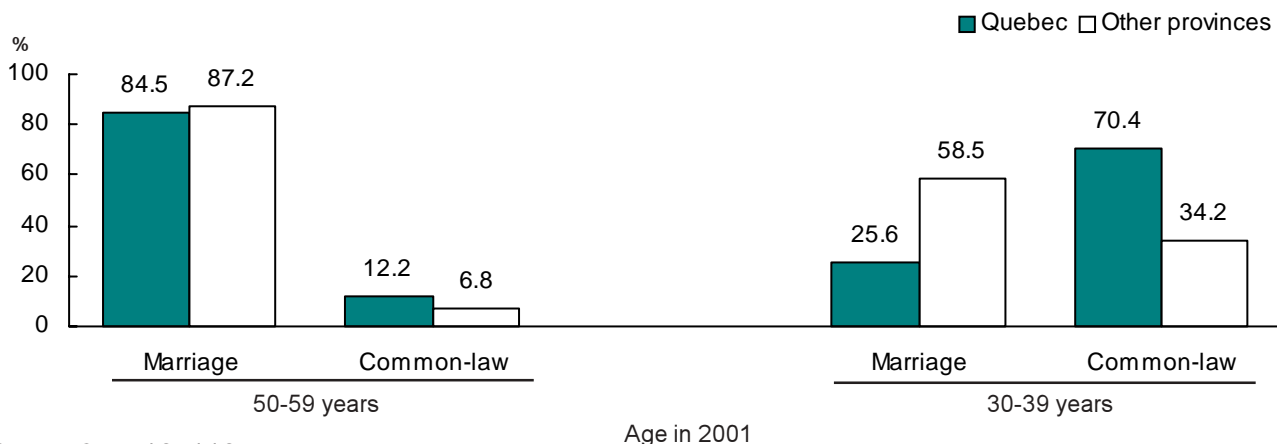
Source: General Social Survey.

The first conjugal experience is quite different in Quebec than in the rest of Canada (Chart 2). The appeal of marriage as a way of forming a first union seems to have declined most markedly in this province. Among those ranging in age from 30 to 39, barely 26% of Quebec women are expected to choose marriage as a way to start their conjugal lives, compared with 59% of women in the other provinces. Conversely, among women in the same age group, it is estimated that 70% of Quebec women will start their conjugal life through a common-law relationship, compared with 34% elsewhere in Canada. This reflects the fact that common-law unions were accepted and adopted in Quebec somewhat sooner than in the other Canadian provinces. In contrast, the vast majority of women in their 50s, both in Quebec and the rest of the country, had first chosen marriage (more than 80% in both cases).

In Quebec, first common-law unions are less likely to lead to marriage. Among women ranging in age from 30 to 39 who started their conjugal lives through common-law union, one third of women in Quebec had married their common-law partner at the time of the survey, compared with 59% of women in the other Canadian provinces.

Chart 2

Probability for Women of Experiencing a Marriage or a Common-Law Union as a First Union, Quebec and the Other Provinces, 2001



Source: General Social Survey.

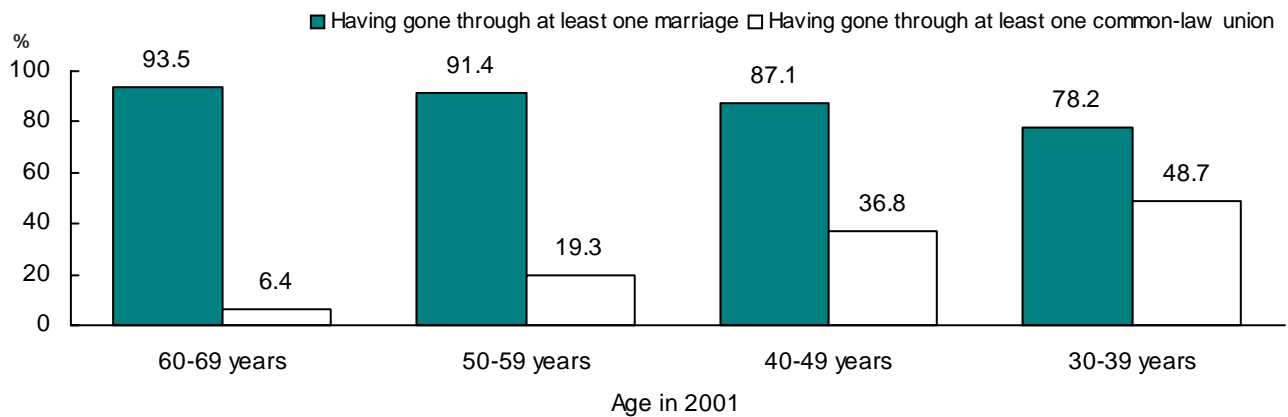
The vast majority of Canadian women will get married

While younger Canadian women are more likely to start their conjugal life through a common-law relationship, most of them will eventually marry. While 42% of women ranging in age from 30 to 39 in 2001 are expected to first enter a common-law relationship (Chart 1), close to 80% are estimated to get married later in their conjugal lives (Chart 3). Moreover, approximately 90% of Canadian women ranging in age from 40 to 69 had also formed at least one union through marriage, but this union was far more often the first one.

The common-law experience touches all generations of women but at different times in their conjugal lives. Common-law relationships are widespread not only among young people in their early years in conjugal relationships but also among women who enter a second union. Thus, while it is estimated that barely 8% of women ranging in age from 50 to 59 in 2001 have chosen a common-law relationship as their first union (Chart 1), approximately 20% of them will eventually be involved in a common-law relationship (Chart 3).

Chart 3

Probability for Women of Experiencing at Least One Marriage or Common-Law Union, by Type of Union, Canada, 2001



Source: General Social Survey.

Since the common-law relationship is now more often than not the first conjugal experience, it will occur sooner in the lives of the younger generations than in the lives of older women, among whom it generally comes after a marriage. Common-law relationships hold different meanings to the different generations: among the young, it is a prelude or substitute to a first marriage, whereas among older women common-law unions are generally a prelude or substitute to remarriage.

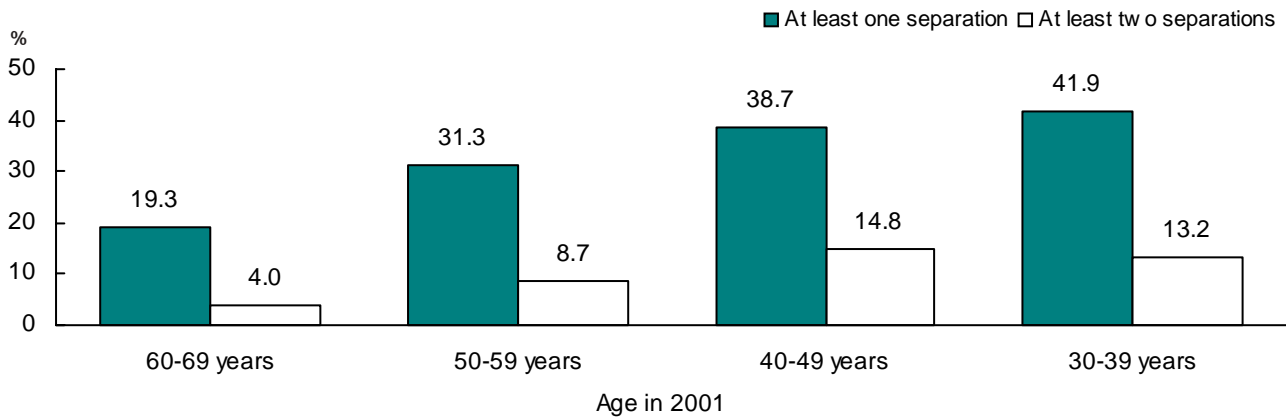
Greater instability in unions

The data from the 2001 General Social Survey (GSS) show quite clearly the growing instability in the unions of today's Canadian women. The probability of seeing their first unions dissolve is increasing: women ranging in age from 30 to 39 are expected to be twice as likely to see their unions end in separation or divorce as women ranging in age from 60 to 69 (Chart 4).

The same trends have been observed among men

Although this article deals mostly with the formation and break-up of unions from the women's point of view, the situation is comparable for men. The trends observed for women apply equally to men.

Chart 4
Probability for Women to Separate, Canada, 2001

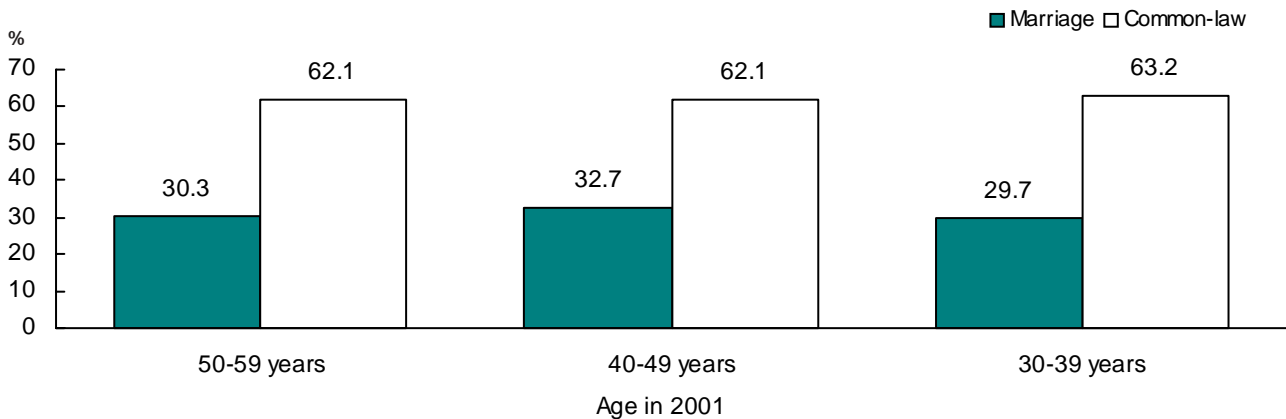


Source: General Social Survey.

The first common-law relationship: Twice as likely to end in separation as the first marriage

The probability of a relationship breaking up is not unrelated to the form of relationship chosen to start conjugal life: common-law unions are generally less stable than marriages. Should the trends continue, more than 30% of Canadian women ranging in age from 40 to 59 who started their conjugal relationships through marriage are expected to separate, whereas the probability more than doubles among their counterparts who started their conjugal relationships through common-law. Women in their 30s are likely to go through a separation in similar proportions to older women even though their conjugal lives started more recently: 30% of those who married directly and 63% of those who first experienced a common-law union are expected to separate (Chart 5).

Chart 5
Probability for Women to Separate, by Type of First Union, Canada, 2001



Source: General Social Survey.

First common-law relationships are now more stable in Quebec, where they are more widespread, than elsewhere in Canada. The trend among young Quebec women to separate following a first common-law relationship is weaker than among young women in the other provinces. An estimated 55% of Quebec women ranging in age from 30 to 39 who first opted for a common-law union had gone through a separation by 2001, a probability that increased to 66% among women in the other provinces (Table 1).

Table 1

Probability for Women to Separate, by Type of First Union, Quebec and Other Provinces, 2001

	Quebec		Other provinces	
	50-59 years	30-39 years	50-59 years	30-39 years
Probability for women to go through at least one separation	33.8	45.8	30.5	40.6
According to whether the first union was ...				
Marriage	30.6	26.8	30.2	30.7
Common-law	64.8	55.3	60.4	66.3

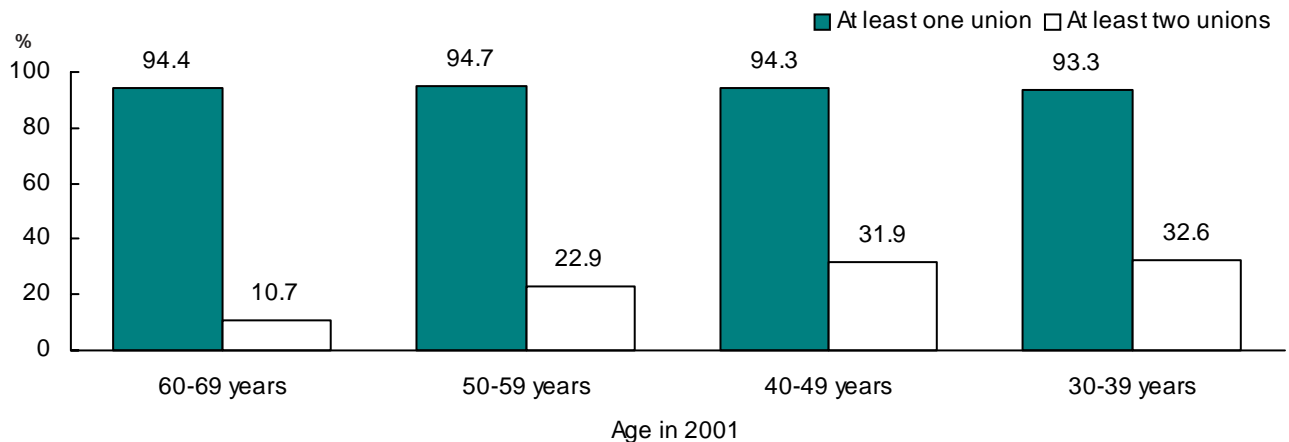
Source: General Social Survey.

The probability to experience at least two unions increases

The increasing number of break-ups is leading to an increase in the number of women who are likely to enter a possible second union. The probability for women to experience a second union is increasing: should the behaviours observed in 2001 continue, it is estimated that three times as many women ranging in age from 30 to 39 will experience a second union compared with women in their 60s. The higher expected probability for women in their 30s to go through a second union (33%) compared with that of women in their 50s (23%) indicates that the formation of second unions is occurring at an increasingly younger age (Chart 6).

Chart 6

Probability for Women of Experiencing at Least One or Two Unions, Canada, 2001



Source: General Social Survey.

An increase in the probability for women to go through a second break-up is also evident. The percentage of Canadian women who will go through a second separation is expected to rise from 4% among women in their 60s to 13% among those ranging in age from 30 to 39 (Chart 4).

The nature of the second union largely depends on the experience with the first one. Nonetheless, more women in recent generations will opt for common-law unions rather than marriage for their second union following a first break-up, even when the first union was a marriage (Table 2).

Women ranging in age from 30 to 39 who first married are expected to be twice as likely to choose common-law union over marriage for their second union, whereas women who first went through a common-law union are

Table 2

Probability for Women Who Had Separated to Experience a Second Union by Type of First and Second Unions, Canada, 2001

	Age in 2001		
	50-59 years	40-49 years	30-39 years
First union was a ...			
Marriage			
2 nd union was a common-law union	38.1	45.8	42.4
2 nd union was a marriage	38.0	35.4	24.2
Common-law union			
2 nd union was a common-law union	59.8	73.3	80.5
2 nd union was a marriage	12.5	12.5	5.6

Source: General Social Survey.

expected to be 14 times as likely to follow this same path. There is less of a contrast among women in their 50s: those who had first married should be equally likely to start a new union through marriage or common-law whereas those who had previously been in a common-law union are estimated to be four times as likely to prefer a common-law relationship to marriage for their second union.

Methods of Analysis

The analysis above uses a sample of 10,907 female respondents ranging in age from 20 to 69 years. Life tables were used to analyze the probability of formation and break-up of unions. All women were assumed to be single at age 15; after that, they were assumed to be exposed to the possibility of entering a union, either marital or common-law. Each transition (first marriage, first common-law arrangement, first separation, second marriage, etc.) was analyzed according to the past conjugal history of each woman. For example, the likelihood of experiencing a first separation was measured separately for women who married directly and for those who started their conjugal life through common-law. This method acknowledged that a woman's propensity to part from her partner may be affected by her previous conjugal experience. The established probabilities estimate the overall proportion of women who will follow a given conjugal path if the behaviours observed at the time of the survey continued.

In this article, a first common-law union transformed into a marriage is considered one union.

Step families: A product of the complexity of conjugal histories

At the beginning to the 21st century, it is evident that the increasing complexity of the conjugal history of Canadians has led to a diversification in family situations. Adults and children are equally affected by the instability of unions. Whereas families with two parents who have been married since they started living as a couple are losing ground, step families are now starting to emerge. The increasing number of break-ups and subsequent unions have led to an increase in the number of such families. Consequently, an increasing number of children have to adapt to the presence of a step-parent in their household and they are also occasionally required to form domestic bonds with half-brothers or sisters. Step families are often formed after a period of lone parenthood.

Slightly more than one couple with children out of 10 forms a step family

Canada had 503,100 step families in 2001, compared with 430,500 in 1995. This represents an increase of 17% in the number of step families. They accounted for 11.8% of all Canadian couples with children in 2001, compared with 10.3% in 1995 (Table 3).

Table 3

Proportion of Intact and Step Families, Canada, 1995 and 2001

	1995	2001
Intact families	89.7	88.2
Step families	10.3	11.8
Total	100.0	100.0

Source: General Social Survey.

Four out of 10 step families are “blended”

Generally, when a step family is formed, it contains the children of one of the spouses. In 2001, 5 out of 10 step families contained only the female spouse’s children, 1 out of 10 contained only the male spouse’s children. The other step families, approximately 40% of them, are “blended”: in most cases (81%), they were formed after the birth of a child to the couple, in addition to the children born from a previous union of at least one of the two spouses. The other blended families (19%) contain children born from previous unions by both spouses (Chart 7).

Chart 7

Step Families by Type, Canada, 2001



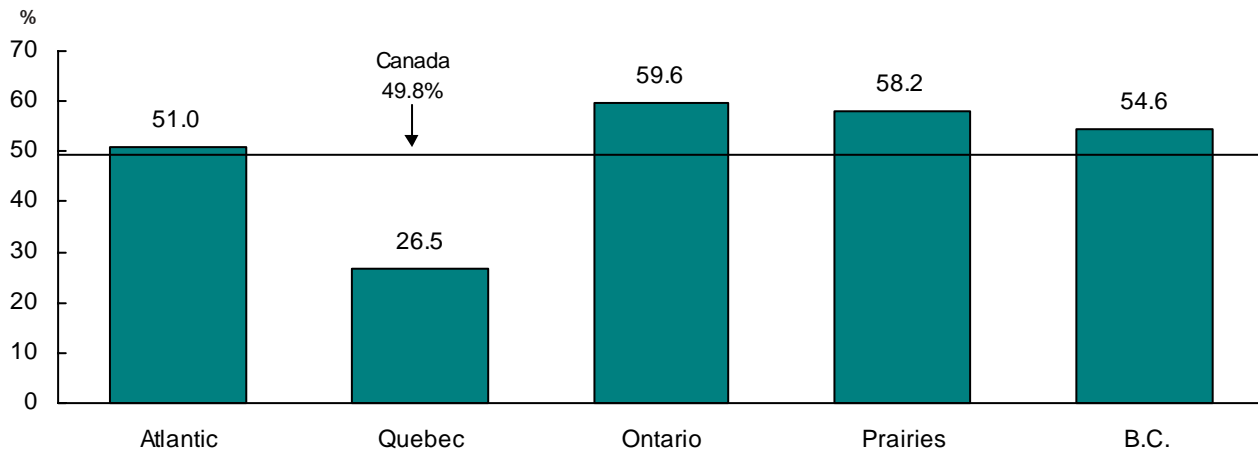
Source: General Social Survey.

Step families: The same number of common-law and married couples

The total number of step families is equally split between married and common-law couples, just over 250,000 each at the national level. This distribution varies from one region to the next across Canada. The high proportion of common-law unions in Quebec is reflected in the composition of step families, where slightly more than one quarter of the couples are married. More than 55% of couples in step families living in Ontario, the Prairies and British Columbia are married (Chart 8).

Chart 8

Proportion of Step Families Composed of a Married Couple, Regions of Canada, 2001



Source: General Social Survey.