

LN FEATURE: MARRIAGE VS. COMMON LAW - WHAT THE CENSUS OVERLOOKED



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Late last month, Statistics Canada [released a new batch of “family data”](#) from the 2016 Census. The new information talks about rates of marriage, divorce, cohabitation, and many other indicators. Cardus Family has done an [in-depth analysis](#) of the numbers, and the guest on the feature this week is Cardus Family Director and policy analyst Andrea Mrozek.

LN: Andrea, off the top, I’d like to take a 10-thousand foot view of the numbers. More people are living alone; more than 28 percent of families are single-person units. That’s the highest rate ever. Also, fewer people are getting married and more are opting to just live together rather than get married. We’ll get into those specifics, but first, let’s look at the overall trends. What are they telling us about demographics and society in general?

AM: Right, so demographics is the word that I was going to bring up. We have changing demographics, which is certainly one aspect of these statistics. We have an aging society. We know that in Canada today we have more people over the age of 65 than under the age of 15. As people age they’re more likely to be living alone. But then you partner that with the decline in marriage rates, and you basically have sort of an increased social isolation where people are living alone both at the start of life and at the end of life. Some claims in the data were that there’s a higher divorce rate also – and certainly that would be a negative feature leading to living alone – but I’m not convinced there is a higher divorce rate, simply because we’re not getting married

anymore. The reality of the data is we don't know what the divorce rate is because Statistics Canada doesn't measure it anymore. So from 10-thousand feet I would say that the biggest concern I have around the data is an increase in social isolation, and that's something for all of us to be aware of.

LN: Cardus has written a 20-page report analyzing all this. The focus is on the decline in the marriage rates and the increase in cohabitation; some of the effects that those factors have on societal stability. We'll talk about that in a minute, but I'd also like your take on the single-person-family thing. Twenty-eight percent is the highest proportion ever of people choosing to live alone. Combine that with another stat I saw that's not really addressed in your report, that more and more young people are continuing to live at home much longer than they used to. You know, there's this stereotype of the 28-year old still living in their parents' basement. It seems to be taking hold.

AM: Right, well you used the word "choose". "Choose to live alone." I'm not convinced that this is people's first choice in any event. Most of the statistics we have from surveys and polling suggest that young people do want to get married, and I don't think any of us aspire to live alone. With the young people living alone, or the phenomenon of remaining in your parents' basement, we certainly have increased likelihood of that, and I think there's a cost factor there. But I also think that we have lost what sociologists might call a "life script." And that script used to be quite clear. That you would finish high school, you'd get married, you'd have children. People knew how to get from youthful adolescence into what was considered adult life; your own life. And today, we no longer have that life script, in part due to the decline of the marriage culture. So people don't know how to get where they're desiring to go. There's also the finances involved for sure. Real estate prices are high across the country – in urban areas in particular – so (there's) a number of different factors there.

LN: Now to the core of the report. The analysis of marriage versus common law relationships. In the first place, there's a problem with actually ferreting out some of that data. Stats-Can has changed the goal-posts on this. Explain that one for me.

AM: Yeah, and I think that's a bigger story than people realize. So basically in the past, Statistics Canada would have isolated cohabitation from marriage. We would have known precisely what percent of families are married versus living together versus lone-parent families. For this census, they changed that. They obscured the cohabiting data. So what we get in this census is on that they call "intact families". So biological or adopting parents who remain together. But it doesn't matter to StatCan whether you are married or not. They only look at whether you're an intact family, and then you can get the lone-parenting statistics. But we are going to be making a special request for the cohabitating data, which is very important for reasons I'm sure we'll get into.

LN: In spite of those statistical difficulties, the data does show a trend toward lower marriage rates – you did manage to sort of ferret that out – along with an increase in common law relationships. It may seem self-evident, but explain again why this distinction is important, and why it's a bad thing for society in general.

AM: The distinction is very important. It's because marriage and common law are not the same thing. And everybody engaging in the different relationship forms knows they're not the same thing. Common law relationships are less stable. We know we have a divorce rate associated with marriage. In spite of that divorce rate, common law relationships are still less stable; more likely to fall apart. A child raised by common law parents – parents who are simply living together – is more likely to see the dissolution of her or her parents' relationship. And that is a problem because it results in different social statistics for that child. For example, an increased likelihood of not staying in school, dropping out of school, doing drugs, earlier sexual initiation. Some of the social problems we see are related, correlated – not caused by, but correlated – with family breakdown. So from our perspective, it's important to measure those things and keep

them separate. Incidentally, in an ironic moment in the Statistics Canada release of the Census 2016 data, they do refer to a higher likelihood in Quebec of children seeing their parents' dissolution of relationship. And they actually go so far as to say that may be because Quebec has such high rates of co-habitation. So they allude to it in the report; they just don't give us the hard data. But it's important for Canadians to know those two types of relationships are; they're not the same thing.

LN: Your report makes four recommendations. Can you briefly outline them for us, and also how you hope to have the government address them? Are you going to a Cabinet Minister with this, or what's the plan?

AM: So, on the recommendations, we basically are asking for a revival of marriage as a social and cultural institution. We really want Canadians to be able to embrace stable married life, and understand that this is the best way to raise children. When it comes to how we aim to achieve this, I think a very early starting point for Cardus Family will be to ask for clearer statistics to be presented to Canadians. I mentioned earlier in the interview that we have stopped collecting the divorce rate at the federal level. The same is true of collecting just the crude marriage rate at the federal level. We no longer have access to those statistics. We stopped collecting them in 2011, which is why the last data-point for crude marriage rates in the report is 2008. That's almost 10 years ago and it is a real loss for so many reasons. For researchers, for cultural indicators, it's a loss to not have that data. So I think we have to – as researchers – start by asking for the correct data to be able to assess it. And then from there, we can provide good information; continue to provide information about the cultural and social ramifications of marriage. It's not just a private institution, it extends into our economy and our culture, and it's most important for raising of children. Something that Canadians need to be made more aware of. So as a research institution, that's what we aim to do. Certainly, we would start by asking for the correct data-points to be presented.