

Would you live common-law?

by Anne Milan

Common-law unions have increased dramatically over the past 20 years, and have become an integral part of conjugal living in Canada. According to census data, common-law unions have more than doubled, from 6% of all families in 1981 to 14% in 2001. While some couples decide to live common-law in a second or subsequent relationship, many are choosing this type of arrangement as their first conjugal union.¹

Despite the growth in common-law unions, and the increased social acceptance of this type of relationship, living together without being married is not for everyone. In fact, it has been suggested that instead of asking “who lives common-law?” it might be more appropriate to ask “who does not live common-law?”² This article uses data from the 2001 General Social Survey (GSS) to examine the extent to which never-married and previously married people³ who have never lived common-law in the past would be willing to do so in the future.

Men more willing than women to live common-law

The unmarried population who has never lived common-law is fairly evenly divided between those who would and those who would not be willing to live in this type of union.

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What you should know about this study

Data in this article come from the 2001 General Social Survey. The survey interviewed a representative sample of over 24,000 Canadians aged 15 years and older living in private households in the 10 provinces. In this article the question, “Do you think you could ever live in a common-law relationship?” was asked only of the individuals who have never been married or were previously married, were not currently in an intimate relationship, and had never lived common-law. About 7,100 people with these characteristics responded to the question, representing nearly 6 million Canadians.

Just less than half (48%) of never-married or previously married people felt they could live common-law at some future time, while just over half (52%) felt they could not.

The proportion of men who would consider living in a common-law relationship is substantially higher than the proportion of women: 62% of unmarried men reported being agreeable to such a union compared with 36% of women. Results of a logistic regression model show that when all other factors were held constant, the odds of women agreeing to live common-law were only about 60% the odds of men.

Willingness to live common-law declines as people get older, and is lower for women than for men at each age group. For example, 74% of

men and 64% of women aged 15 to 29 would agree to such an arrangement, compared with only 13% of men and 5% of women aged 60 and over. The fact that women are less willing to live

1. Statistics Canada. 2002. *Profile of Canadian Families and Households: Diversification Continues* (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 96F0030XIE2001 003); Statistics Canada. 2002. *Changing Conjugal Life in Canada* (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 89-576-XIE).
2. Smock, P.J. 2000. “Cohabitation in the United States: An appraisal of research themes, findings, and implications.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 26:1-20.
3. This analysis excludes persons who, at the time of the survey, were in an intimate relationship with someone from a separate household.

common-law may suggest that they are more likely than men to think of marriage as the preferred social union. Perhaps because they tend to be older, only 6% of widowed people would consider a common-law union, compared with 39% of divorced or separated persons, and 64% of never-married individuals. Regression results showed that the odds of widowed individuals agreeing to live common-law were 30% lower than the odds of never-married people.

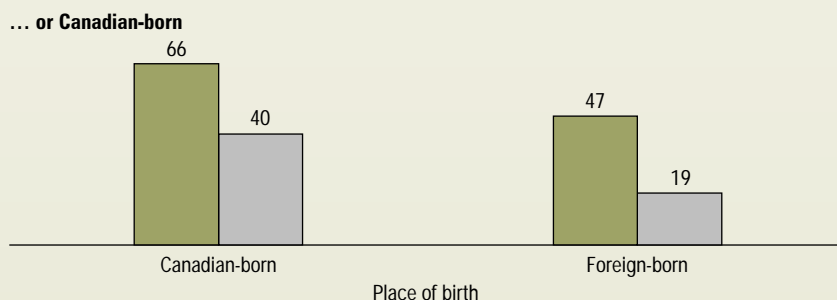
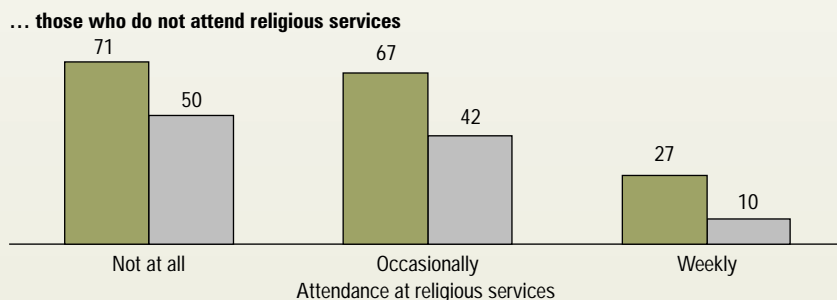
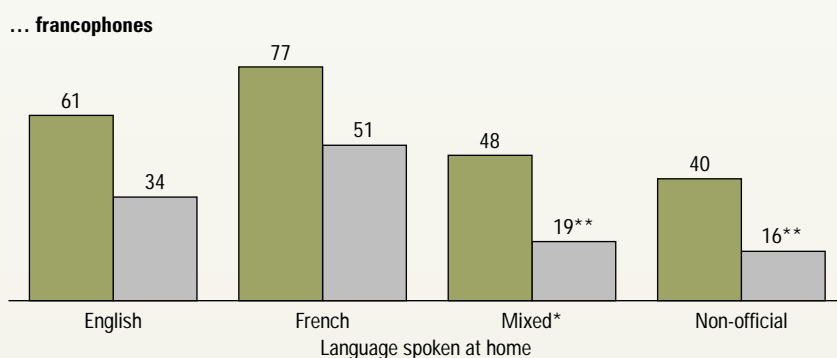
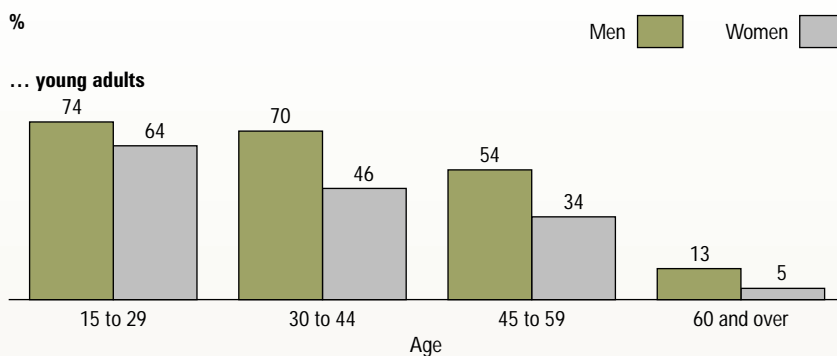
Education and labour force status make a difference

Higher levels of education are often associated with more liberal attitudes. Findings from the 2001 GSS show that individuals with at least some postsecondary education (54%) were more willing to live common-law than those with less than high school (41%). After accounting for other factors, the odds of agreeing to a common-law union were 30% lower for people whose highest level of education was high school than for those with at least some postsecondary education. An earlier study also found that individuals with some university education were more likely to live common-law than to marry in their first union.⁴

While higher education is associated with a more positive attitude toward common-law relationships, young adults aged 15 to 29 who were students were less inclined to want to live in a common-law union (66%) than those in the labour force (76%). Perhaps, to some individuals, a certain degree of financial security is important before entering a union. Overall, after controlling for other factors, the

4. Turcotte, P. and F. Goldscheider. 1998. "Evolution of factors influencing first union formation in Canada." *Canadian Studies in Population* 25, 2: 145-173.

CST Canadians most willing to live common-law are...



* Mixed refers to any combination of English/French and/or non-official language.
 ** High sampling variability.
 Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2001.

odds of agreeing to live in a common-law union were 40% less for students than for those in the labour force. This is consistent with results from a previous study, which found some evidence that individuals attending school had a lower likelihood than their employed counterparts of feeling that common-law unions were acceptable.⁵

People in Quebec most willing to live common-law

The willingness to live common-law varies substantially across the country. This type of arrangement is considerably more widespread in Quebec than elsewhere in Canada,⁶ and people are most positive toward common-law unions in this province. Over three-fifths (61%) of unmarried people in Quebec who had never lived common-law would consider this type of relationship, compared with about two-fifths (39%) of those in Ontario and in the Prairies (41%). In both the Atlantic provinces and British Columbia, just over half (51%) of the unmarried population would co-reside without legal marriage. After accounting for all other factors, residents of Ontario, the Prairies and British Columbia had significantly lower odds than Quebec residents of agreeing to live together without tying the knot.

The language people generally speak at home also appears to make a difference. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of individuals whose home language was French were willing to live common-law compared with 46% of those who spoke English at home. The proportion of persons willing to live common-law dropped to 26% among those who spoke a non-official language at home.⁷ Regression results indicate that, compared with their French-speaking counterparts, the odds of expressing an interest in living common-law were 30% less for Canadians whose home language was English and 70% less for those with a non-official home language.

CST A snapshot of unmarried Canadians

The unmarried Canadians analyzed in this study are a diverse group. Their average age was 41, but more than 4 in 10 (44%) were 15 to 29 years old and nearly 3 in 10 (26%) were 60 or over. The number of women surpassed that of men among unmarried Canadians: 54% compared with 46%. Most unmarried individuals had never married (62%), an additional 19% were divorced or separated, and the remaining 19% were widowed. The majority of unmarried Canadians (56%) had personal incomes of less than \$20,000, while 18% earned \$40,000 or more. Over 4 in 10 unmarried persons worked in the labour force, just over one-quarter were students, and nearly one-third listed homemaking, retirement or illness as their main activity. Over half of the unmarried population (55%) had high school or less while 45% had at least some postsecondary education.

Among young adults aged 15 to 29, an overwhelming 95% of those who spoke French at home were willing to live common-law. The proportion of young adults open to the possibility of a future common-law arrangement dropped to 67% for those who spoke English at home and then to 42% for those who spoke a non-official language at home.

Cultural background matters

Living common-law is more accepted in some cultures than in others. In many Western countries, where increasing individualism and lower formal religious commitment are the norm, there is likely to be greater

approval of common-law unions.⁸ In contrast, these arrangements are less likely to be accepted in many of the more traditional Asian or southern European societies, which place a high importance on religion or family values. An earlier study of selected ethnocultural groups found that young Canadian adults with British ethnic origins display more liberal attitudes towards living common-law than those with southern European, Chinese, or Indo-Canadian origins.⁹

Canada is home to many cultures, and a notable proportion of the population was born outside the country. When asked about their willingness to live common-law, Canadian-born

5. Mitchell, B.A. 2001. "Ethnocultural reproduction and attitudes towards cohabiting relationships." *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 38, 4: 391-413.

6. According to the Census, about 30% of all Quebec couples lived common-law in 2001 compared with 12% in the rest of the country.

7. In Quebec, over half (53%) of unmarried persons who spoke English at home would live common-law, compared with 64% of those who spoke only French. Only 44% (high sampling variability) of Quebec residents who spoke a non-official language at home were willing to live common-law.

8. See, for example, Thornton, A. and L. Young-DeMarco. 2001. "Four decades of trends in attitudes toward family issues in the United States: The 1960s throughout the 1990s." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 63, 4: 1009-1037.

9. Mitchell. 2001.

	Odds ratio		Odds ratio
Sex		Place of birth	
Female	0.6*	Canadian-born	1.4*
Male	1.0	Foreign-born	1.0
Marital status		Region of residence	
Widowed	0.7*	Atlantic	0.8
Divorced/separated	0.9	Ontario	0.4*
Never married	1.0	Quebec	1.0
		Prairies	0.3*
Age ¹	0.9*	British Columbia	0.6*
Education		Parents lived together until respondent aged 15	
Less than high school	0.9	Yes	1.0
High school graduate	0.7*	No	1.3*
At least some postsecondary	1.0		
Main activity		Importance of marriage for a happy life	
Labour force	1.0	Very important	0.3*
Student	0.6*	Important	0.5*
Other ²	0.4*	Not very important	0.9
		Not at all important	1.0
Religious attendance		Importance of a lasting relationship for a happy life	
Not at all	5.7*	Very important	7.7*
Occasionally	4.6*	Important	5.9*
Weekly	1.0	Not very important	3.1*
		Not at all important	1.0
Language spoken at home			
English	0.7*		
French	1.0		
Mixed	0.4*		
Non-official	0.3*		

* Statistically significant from benchmark group (p<0.05).

1. For each additional year, the odds of agreeing to live common-law decline by 10%.

2. "Other" includes main activities such as homemaking, retirement, volunteer work, or illness.

Note: This table presents the odds that a respondent would be willing to live in a common-law relationship in the future, relative to the odds of a benchmark group when all other variables in the analysis are held constant.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2001.

men and women were far more receptive to this option than were foreign-born individuals. About 52% of Canadian-born persons were willing to live common-law compared

with 30% of those who were foreign-born. When accounting for all other factors, the odds of being open to a common-law union were 1.4 times higher for Canadian-born individuals

than for those who were born outside the country.

Frequent attendance at religious services seems to go hand-in-hand with support for marriage.¹⁰ Only 15% of individuals who were very religious, as measured by weekly attendance at a place of worship, were willing to live in a common-law union compared with 61% of those who never attended religious services. The differences were equally striking among young adults aged 15 to 29. Some 27% of those who attended religious services weekly were willing to live common-law compared with 81% of those who did not attend. When all other factors were accounted for, the odds of being receptive to a common-law arrangement were 5.7 times higher for non-attenders than for those who attended services weekly.

Family disruptions influence attitudes toward relationships

Children's family-related views and behaviours, including attitudes toward common-law unions, may be shaped by the marital histories of their parents. According to recent research, young adults who experienced parental divorce or separation were more likely to choose a common-law relationship as their first conjugal union than were those who did not experience family disruption.¹¹

Men and women who, at least up to the age of 15, lived with both their parents were less willing to live common-law than those whose parents had divorced, separated, or become widowed: 58% versus 45%. When keeping all other factors constant, the

10. Clark, W. Autumn 1998. "Religious observance: Marriage and family." *Canadian Social Trends*: 2-7.

11. Turcotte, P. and A. Bélanger. 1997. *The Dynamics of Formation and Dissolution of First Common-Law Unions in Canada*. Statistics Canada working paper.

odds of being willing to live together without formal marriage were 1.3 times higher for Canadians whose parents had separated or divorced than for those who lived in an intact family at least until age 15.

Attitudes toward common-law living related to other family values

People with conservative family attitudes tend to opt for marriage, while those with liberal views are more likely to choose a common-law union.¹² Willingness to live common-law is also linked to other family-related values and attitudes. Some 43% of Canadians who perceived marriage to be very important or important for a happy life indicated that they could live in a common-law union compared with 57% of those who felt that marriage was not very or not at all important. After all other factors were accounted for, those who rated marriage as very important for a happy life had 70% lower odds of considering a common-law union than did those who felt that marriage was not at all important. It seems that marriage may hold less importance for prospective partners in a common-law union, yet many individuals who do choose a common-law union as their first conjugal relationship do eventually marry their partner.¹³

Among individuals who perceived a lasting relationship as very important or important for a happy life, 53% indicated they could live common-law compared with 36% for whom a lasting relationship was not very or not at all important. The odds of agreeing to live common-law were

7.7 times higher for Canadians who rated a lasting relationship as very important for a happy life than for people who felt that a lasting relationship was not at all important, when accounting for all other factors.

Summary

Although common-law unions have become much more socially acceptable than they were in previous decades, there are many people who, for a variety of reasons, feel they could not live in such a relationship. In the past, people who lived common-law — generally those who were more likely to question social norms — risked social disapproval. This is much less the case today. If attitudes affect future behaviour, then those who are willing to live common-law are more likely to eventually engage in this type of union. Overall it appears that, among other factors, willingness to live common-law is associated with being male, having been born in Canada, being a resident of Quebec and attending religious services less frequently.



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12. Clarkberg, M., R.M. Stolzenberg and L.J. Waite. 1995. "Attitudes, values and entrance into cohabitational versus marital unions." *Social Forces* 74, 2: 609-634.

13. Statistics Canada. 2002. *Changing Conjugal Life in Canada*.

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