
2006 Census Fast Facts

Marriage and Common-Law Partnerships

Introduction

Social values and norms change over time, and some of these changes can be seen by looking at statistics on marriage and common-law partnerships. This article uses data from the 1991 to 2006 Censuses to explore the validity of many popular beliefs about marriage, divorce, and common-law partnerships among British Columbians.

Is Marriage Becoming More Uncommon?

Overall, the proportion of the population that has never been legally married rose steadily between 1991 and 2006. In 1991, 32.5% of men had never been married, but this number had risen by 3.0 percentage points by 2006. Similarly, the proportion of women who had never been married increased from 25.0% in 1991 to 28.9% in 2006.

Marriage has become more uncommon among almost every age group. In the past 15 years, only seniors (aged 65+) and very young men (aged 15 to 19) saw the proportion of their population never legally married decline (-0.6% and -0.1%, respectively), while among the other age groups the increase was most pronounced for those aged 25 to 29.

The increase in the proportion of the population never legally married may be due to a number of factors including: delaying marriage until

later in life and living common-law instead of getting married. Each of these possibilities is discussed further in this article along with a profile of those who are divorced or separated and widowed.

Are Young Men and Women Waiting Longer Before Marrying?

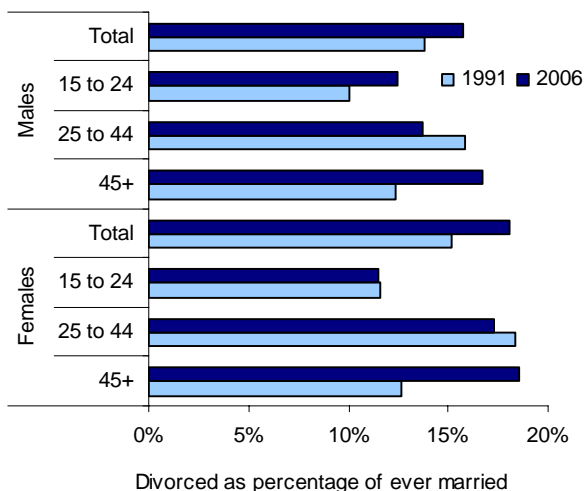
While it is not possible to conduct a proper cohort analysis using such a short time span, these data do suggest that young men and women are waiting longer to get married than in the past.

For example, in 1991, 41.3% of females aged 25 to 29 and 22.4% of females aged 30 to 34 had never been married. In 2006, these figures were substantially higher at 61.5% and 34.9%, respectively. However, the gap between the two age groups (18.9% in 1991 and 26.6% in 2006) was also greater. This suggests that there might be a “catch-up” effect, as young women may not be avoiding marriage entirely, but simply delaying marriage until their thirties.

Is Divorce Becoming More Common?

Although the proportion of the ever married population in BC that was divorced¹ increased from 14.5% in 1991 to 17.0% in 2006, looking at the overall numbers can lead to misleading conclusions. The change in the overall prevalence of divorce is related to the changing size of particular age groups relative to the rest of the population, as a result of population ageing, and young people delaying marriage until later in life.

Changes in the divorce rate between 1991 and 2006 vary considerably by age



Source: Statistics Canada, 1991 and 2006 Census

In 2006, persons aged 45 years and over accounted for 68.8% of the population who had ever been married, an increase from 54.5% in 1991. In comparison, those aged 25 to 44 made up just 30.2% of this population in 2006, down from 43.5% in 1991. Consequently, although there was a 1.5 percentage point decline in the

¹ Measured as divorced and not remarried, or separated divided by the population who had ever been married.

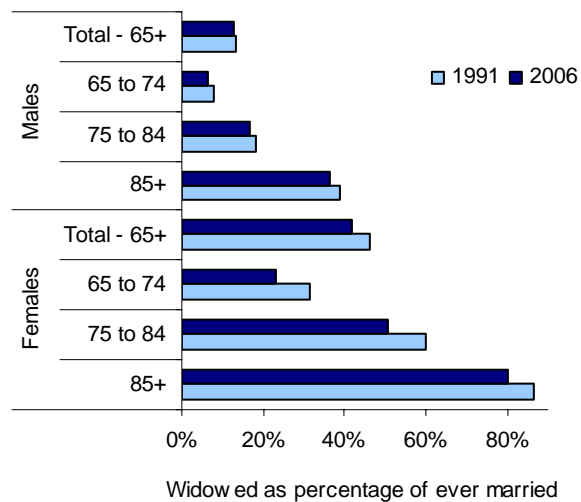
proportion of people aged 25 to 44 reporting they were divorced over this period, a 5.1 percentage point increase among those aged 45 and over generated a net rise of 2.5 percentage points.

As the Population Ages, Are Widows Becoming More Common?

In all but the youngest age groups the proportion of widowed persons has fallen for each of the censuses between 1991 and 2006. In 2006, widowed persons aged 65 and over comprised 80.0% (up from 77.7% in 1991) of all widowers due to population ageing, yet the proportion of widowers in this age group has declined from 32.1% to 27.0%.

The shift in the rate of widowhood among women aged 65 and over has been much more dramatic (declining from 46.4% in 1991 to 41.6% in 2006) than among men (13.1% and 12.6%, respectively), especially for those between the ages of 75 and 84.

Widowhood among seniors declined between 1991 and 2006



Source: Statistics Canada, 1991 and 2006 Census

Are Common-Law Partnerships Becoming the Norm?

In recent years, common-law unions have become more socially acceptable, and as mentioned earlier the proportion of the population who have never been married has risen. It is not surprising then that common-law relationships have increased from 6.5% in 1991 to 8.2% in 2006.

How Widespread Are Common-Law Unions Among Legal States of Marriage?

Divorced persons were the most likely to be living common-law, with just over one-quarter (25.6%) indicating they lived in a common-law relationship, followed by those who had never legally married (16.4%), had separated but were still legally married (16.0%), or were widowed (4.0%).

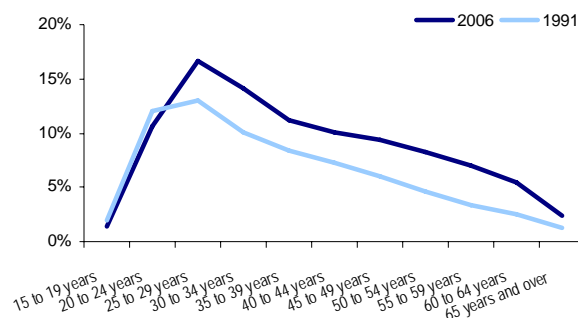
Are Young People Living Common-Law?

Among young persons aged 15 to 24¹, women were more often common-law than men in each census year, indicating that women become common-law at a younger age. Yet between 1991 and 2001 there was a general downward trend in the prevalence of common-law unions among young persons, followed by a slight resurgence in 2006 (ending at 4.4% for men and 7.6% for women).

¹ Caution should be applied to this age group for the 2006 Census as there was some overestimation of persons aged 15, 16 and 17 who were counted as married, common-law, separated, divorced or widowed, rather than never married (single). For further details, please visit: <http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census06/reference/reportsandguides/families-guide.cfm>

Meanwhile, the proportion of those aged 25 and over living in a common-law relationship increased between 1991 and 2006 for every 5-year age group (peaking at 9.2% for men and 8.0% for women overall). Common-law unions were most often occurring among those aged 25 to 29, with a steady decline associated with age for both men and women.

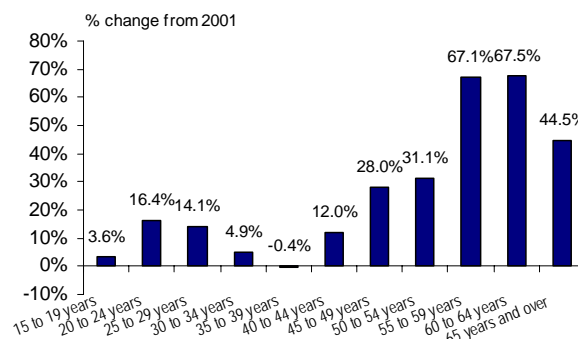
Common-law relationships increased between 1991 and 2006 for each age group 25 years and over



Source: Statistics Canada, 1991 and 2006 Census

However, the majority of the growth in the number of common-law relationships in the last five years has occurred among the older age groups, especially those between the ages of 55 and 64.

Older age groups experienced the most growth in common-law relationships compared to 2001



Source: Statistics Canada, 2001 and 2006 Census

Growth was slower among younger age groups, which is attributable to declines in the

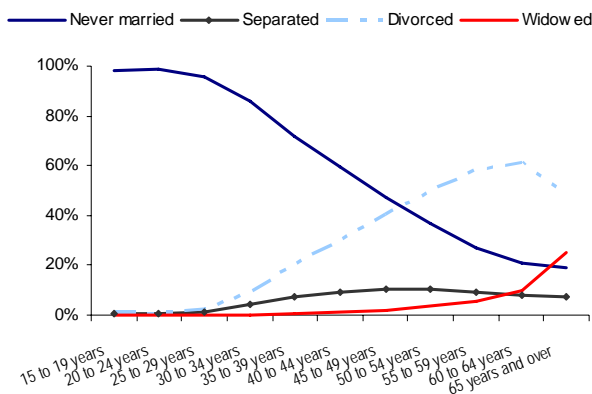
population for these groups, while there was a decline for persons aged 35 to 39.

What is the Legal Marital Status of Persons in a Common-Law Relationship?

The next piece to the puzzle is the legal marital status of the nearly 1 in 10 persons of marriageable age who were in common-law partnerships. Nearly two-thirds (64.7%) of persons at least 15 years of age living in common-law partnerships in 2006 had never been legally married, followed by 26.1% who were divorced, 6.3% who were separated but still legally married, and 2.9% who were widowed.

The legal marital status of those in common-law unions varied significantly with age. The incidence of never being married decreased with age, while the likelihood of being divorced increased, such that more common-law partners were divorced than never married by the time they were 50 years of age.

More common-law partners aged 50 and over were divorced than never married



Source: Statistics Canada, 2006 Census

As well, there is a sharp increase at age 65 in the proportion of common-law partners who were widowed.

**Table 1: British Columbia, 2006
Legal Marital Status by Gender and 5 Year Age Groups**

British Columbia Male Population Age 15+

	2006					
	Total	Never legally married (single) ¹	Legally married (and not separated) ²	Separated, but still legally married	Divorced	Widowed
All Ages	1,665,245	591,490	863,210	48,715	120,820	41,015
15 - 19	140,335	139,405	660	100	150	20
20 - 24	134,085	127,445	5,900	385	305	50
25 - 29	120,260	89,170	28,220	1,455	1,335	80
30 - 34	122,840	57,375	58,505	3,135	3,725	100
35 - 39	140,555	45,085	82,325	4,855	8,020	270
40 - 44	162,675	41,335	100,340	7,140	13,365	495
45 - 49	167,040	32,555	107,125	7,920	18,530	905
50 - 54	156,595	22,700	104,850	7,355	20,205	1,485
55 - 59	142,575	14,825	100,090	5,710	19,645	2,300
60 - 64	106,810	7,950	78,335	3,715	14,035	2,780
65+	271,470	13,650	196,870	6,945	21,495	32,525

British Columbia Female Population Age 15+

	2006					
	Total	Never legally married (single) ¹	Legally married (and not separated) ²	Separated, but still legally married	Divorced	Widowed
All Ages	1,768,640	510,900	867,275	61,865	165,045	163,550
15 - 19	133,225	131,970	945	110	170	35
20 - 24	131,820	118,250	12,070	885	535	85
25 - 29	125,015	76,880	42,775	2,815	2,290	250
30 - 34	131,740	45,975	73,770	5,315	6,330	350
35 - 39	150,085	34,570	94,165	8,190	12,275	885
40 - 44	172,160	30,905	109,100	10,495	19,790	1,870
45 - 49	177,100	25,120	113,010	10,590	25,020	3,365
50 - 54	163,520	17,180	106,385	8,280	26,220	5,455
55 - 59	146,850	11,225	95,735	5,820	25,395	8,675
60 - 64	108,780	5,880	70,505	3,400	17,590	11,405
65+	328,345	12,950	148,815	5,965	29,445	131,170

¹Includes persons never legally married but living in common-law unions.

²Same-sex couples were first included in this category in 2006.

Source: Statistics Canada, 2006 Census, Table 97-552-XCB2006007.ivt
Prepared by: BC Stats, October 2008

**Table 2: British Columbia, 2006
Legal Marital Status (% Distribution) by Gender and 5 Year Age Groups**

British Columbia Male Population Age 15+

	2006					
	Total	Never legally married (single) ¹	Legally married (and not separated) ²	Separated, but still legally married	Divorced	Widowed
All Ages	100.0%	35.5%	51.8%	2.9%	7.3%	2.5%
15 - 19	100.0%	99.3%	0.5%	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%
20 - 24	100.0%	95.0%	4.4%	0.3%	0.2%	0.0%
25 - 29	100.0%	74.1%	23.5%	1.2%	1.1%	0.1%
30 - 34	100.0%	46.7%	47.6%	2.6%	3.0%	0.1%
35 - 39	100.0%	32.1%	58.6%	3.5%	5.7%	0.2%
40 - 44	100.0%	25.4%	61.7%	4.4%	8.2%	0.3%
45 - 49	100.0%	19.5%	64.1%	4.7%	11.1%	0.5%
50 - 54	100.0%	14.5%	67.0%	4.7%	12.9%	0.9%
55 - 59	100.0%	10.4%	70.2%	4.0%	13.8%	1.6%
60 - 64	100.0%	7.4%	73.3%	3.5%	13.1%	2.6%
65+	100.0%	5.0%	72.5%	2.6%	7.9%	12.0%

British Columbia Female Population Age 15+

	2006					
	Total	Never legally married (single) ¹	Legally married (and not separated) ²	Separated, but still legally married	Divorced	Widowed
All Ages	100.0%	28.9%	49.0%	3.5%	9.3%	9.2%
15 - 19	100.0%	99.1%	0.7%	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%
20 - 24	100.0%	89.7%	9.2%	0.7%	0.4%	0.1%
25 - 29	100.0%	61.5%	34.2%	2.3%	1.8%	0.2%
30 - 34	100.0%	34.9%	56.0%	4.0%	4.8%	0.3%
35 - 39	100.0%	23.0%	62.7%	5.5%	8.2%	0.6%
40 - 44	100.0%	18.0%	63.4%	6.1%	11.5%	1.1%
45 - 49	100.0%	14.2%	63.8%	6.0%	14.1%	1.9%
50 - 54	100.0%	10.5%	65.1%	5.1%	16.0%	3.3%
55 - 59	100.0%	7.6%	65.2%	4.0%	17.3%	5.9%
60 - 64	100.0%	5.4%	64.8%	3.1%	16.2%	10.5%
65+	100.0%	3.9%	45.3%	1.8%	9.0%	39.9%

¹Includes persons never legally married but living in common-law unions.

²Same-sex couples were first included in this category in 2006.

Source: Statistics Canada, 2006 Census, Table 97-552-XCB2006007.iiv
Prepared by: BC Stats, October 2008

**Table 3: British Columbia, 2006
Common-Law Status by Gender and 5 Year Age Groups**

British Columbia Male Population Age 15+

	2006			
	Total	Not in a common-law relationship	In a common-law relationship*	Percentage in a common-law relationship
All Ages	1,665,245	1,524,985	140,260	8.4%
15 - 19	140,335	139,360	970	0.7%
20 - 24	134,085	122,940	11,145	8.3%
25 - 29	120,260	100,760	19,500	16.2%
30 - 34	122,840	104,305	18,530	15.1%
35 - 39	140,555	123,620	16,935	12.0%
40 - 44	162,675	145,700	16,980	10.4%
45 - 49	167,040	151,275	15,770	9.4%
50 - 54	156,595	143,005	13,590	8.7%
55 - 59	142,575	131,460	11,115	7.8%
60 - 64	106,810	100,105	6,705	6.3%
65+	271,470	262,450	9,025	3.3%

British Columbia Female Population Age 15+

	2006			
	Total	Not in a common-law relationship	In a common-law relationship*	Percentage in a common-law relationship
All Ages	1,768,640	1,629,020	139,615	7.9%
15 - 19	133,225	130,450	2,775	2.1%
20 - 24	131,820	114,550	17,270	13.1%
25 - 29	125,015	103,720	21,300	17.0%
30 - 34	131,740	114,485	17,250	13.1%
35 - 39	150,085	134,330	15,755	10.5%
40 - 44	172,160	155,315	16,845	9.8%
45 - 49	177,100	160,810	16,290	9.2%
50 - 54	163,520	150,645	12,870	7.9%
55 - 59	146,850	137,730	9,120	6.2%
60 - 64	108,780	103,825	4,950	4.6%
65+	328,345	323,155	5,185	1.6%

*Same-sex couples were first included in this category in 2001.

Source: Statistics Canada, 2006 Census, Table 97-552-XCB2006007.ivt

Prepared by: BC Stats, October 2008

Table 4: British Columbia, 1991-2006
Percentage of Population Never Legally Married* by Gender and 5 Year Age Groups

British Columbia Population Age 15+

	Males				Females			
	1991	1996	2001	2006	1991	1996	2001	2006
All Ages	32.5%	34.3%	35.2%	35.5%	25.0%	26.9%	28.2%	28.9%
15 - 19	99.4%	99.6%	99.5%	99.3%	98.3%	98.9%	99.1%	99.1%
20 - 24	90.1%	92.4%	94.4%	95.0%	77.1%	82.7%	87.6%	89.7%
25 - 29	59.6%	66.6%	70.4%	74.1%	41.3%	49.8%	56.0%	61.5%
30 - 34	34.1%	41.2%	44.8%	46.7%	22.4%	27.9%	32.1%	34.9%
35 - 39	20.5%	26.2%	31.1%	32.1%	13.3%	17.6%	21.4%	23.0%
40 - 44	12.9%	17.3%	22.0%	25.4%	8.7%	11.7%	15.5%	18.0%
45 - 49	8.8%	11.4%	15.6%	19.5%	5.9%	8.0%	11.1%	14.2%
50 - 54	6.9%	8.0%	11.0%	14.5%	4.4%	5.5%	8.0%	10.5%
55 - 59	6.1%	6.4%	7.9%	10.4%	3.6%	4.1%	5.5%	7.6%
60 - 64	6.5%	5.5%	6.2%	7.4%	3.8%	3.5%	4.2%	5.4%
65+	5.5%	5.1%	5.1%	5.0%	4.7%	4.2%	4.0%	3.9%

*Includes persons never legally married but living in common-law unions.

Source: Statistics Canada, 1991-2006 Censuses, Tables 93F0022XDB96004, 97F0004XCB01001, & 97-552-XCB2006007.ivt
 Prepared by: BC Stats, October 2008

Table 5: British Columbia, 1991-2006
Percentage of Ever Married who are Divorced or Separated by Gender and 5 Year Age Groups

British Columbia Population Age 15+

	Males				Females			
	1991	1996	2001	2006	1991	1996	2001	2006
All Ages	13.8%	15.5%	15.9%	15.8%	15.1%	17.0%	17.8%	18.0%
15 - 19	15.0%	34.9%	36.2%	26.9%	11.5%	17.9%	23.9%	22.2%
20 - 24	9.7%	10.6%	13.0%	10.4%	11.6%	12.2%	12.5%	10.5%
25 - 29	11.3%	11.9%	10.2%	9.0%	14.3%	15.1%	12.9%	10.6%
30 - 34	14.3%	14.7%	12.9%	10.5%	17.1%	18.2%	16.5%	13.6%
35 - 39	16.7%	17.7%	15.8%	13.5%	19.5%	20.5%	20.0%	17.7%
40 - 44	18.3%	19.4%	19.0%	16.9%	21.2%	22.2%	22.2%	21.4%
45 - 49	18.0%	20.0%	20.1%	19.7%	20.8%	22.9%	23.3%	23.4%
50 - 54	16.2%	19.2%	20.2%	20.6%	17.9%	21.5%	23.3%	23.6%
55 - 59	13.7%	16.5%	18.9%	19.8%	14.7%	17.8%	21.5%	23.0%
60 - 64	11.7%	13.6%	16.0%	18.0%	12.5%	14.6%	17.2%	20.4%
65+	7.4%	8.7%	9.8%	11.0%	7.2%	8.4%	9.7%	11.2%

Source: Statistics Canada, 1991-2006 Censuses, Tables 93F0022XDB96004, 97F0004XCB01001, & 97-552-XCB2006007.ivt
 Prepared by: BC Stats, October 2008

**Table 6: British Columbia, 1991-2006
Percentage Widowed* by Gender and 5 Year Age Groups**

British Columbia Population Age 15+

	Males				Females			
	1991	1996	2001	2006	1991	1996	2001	2006
All Ages	3.4%	3.5%	3.7%	3.8%	13.6%	13.2%	13.3%	13.0%
15 - 19	5.5%	1.8%	1.5%	2.2%	2.9%	1.6%	2.2%	2.8%
20 - 24	0.3%	0.3%	0.4%	0.8%	0.4%	0.5%	0.5%	0.6%
25 - 29	0.1%	0.2%	0.2%	0.3%	0.4%	0.5%	0.4%	0.5%
30 - 34	0.2%	0.2%	0.2%	0.2%	0.6%	0.6%	0.5%	0.4%
35 - 39	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	1.0%	1.0%	0.9%	0.8%
40 - 44	0.5%	0.5%	0.5%	0.4%	1.8%	1.6%	1.5%	1.3%
45 - 49	0.8%	0.8%	0.8%	0.7%	3.2%	2.7%	2.4%	2.2%
50 - 54	1.3%	1.2%	1.2%	1.1%	5.5%	4.8%	4.2%	3.7%
55 - 59	2.3%	2.0%	1.9%	1.8%	9.5%	8.6%	7.4%	6.4%
60 - 64	4.0%	3.5%	3.1%	2.8%	16.2%	14.6%	12.8%	11.1%
65 - 69	6.4%	6.1%	5.3%	4.8%	25.9%	23.9%	20.9%	18.1%
70 - 74	9.9%	9.6%	9.1%	7.8%	38.4%	36.2%	32.8%	28.8%
75 - 79	15.2%	14.8%	14.5%	13.5%	54.2%	50.9%	47.6%	43.1%
80 - 84	23.4%	22.8%	21.9%	21.2%	69.4%	67.4%	63.4%	59.6%
85 - 89	34.7%	33.9%	33.4%	31.5%	83.5%	80.6%	78.5%	75.3%
90+	50.0%	49.8%	48.2%	48.0%	92.1%	92.0%	89.9%	88.2%

*Widow(er)s as a percentage of ever married.

Source: Statistics Canada, 1991-2006 Censuses, Tables 93F0022XDB96004, 97F0004XCB01001, & 97-552-XCB2006007.ivt
Prepared by: BC Stats, October 2008

**Table 7: British Columbia, 1991-2006
Percentage in a Common-Law Relationship* by Gender and 5 Year Age Groups**

British Columbia Population Age 15+

	Males				Females			
	1991	1996	2001	2006	1991	1996	2001	2006
All Ages	6.7%	7.0%	7.6%	8.4%	6.4%	6.7%	7.1%	7.9%
15 - 19	0.8%	0.7%	0.6%	0.7%	3.2%	2.5%	2.1%	2.1%
20 - 24	9.5%	8.4%	7.8%	8.3%	14.5%	12.9%	12.2%	13.1%
25 - 29	12.9%	13.6%	14.7%	16.2%	13.0%	14.0%	14.8%	17.0%
30 - 34	10.4%	11.3%	13.0%	15.1%	9.8%	10.7%	11.7%	13.1%
35 - 39	8.6%	9.5%	10.7%	12.0%	8.1%	8.8%	9.8%	10.5%
40 - 44	7.6%	8.1%	9.3%	10.4%	6.8%	7.7%	8.7%	9.8%
45 - 49	6.6%	7.3%	8.2%	9.4%	5.5%	6.6%	7.7%	9.2%
50 - 54	5.3%	6.5%	7.5%	8.7%	3.9%	5.2%	6.6%	7.9%
55 - 59	4.1%	5.1%	6.5%	7.8%	2.5%	3.5%	5.1%	6.2%
60 - 64	3.1%	3.8%	4.9%	6.3%	1.9%	2.2%	3.3%	4.6%
65+	1.7%	2.0%	2.7%	3.3%	0.9%	0.9%	1.2%	1.6%

*Same-sex couples were first included in this category in 2001.

Source: Statistics Canada, 1991-2006 Censuses, Tables 93F0022XDB96006, 93F0022XDB96004, & 97-552-XCB2006007.ivt
Prepared by: BC Stats, October 2008