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Census in Brief

Portrait of children's family life in Canada in 2016

Census of Population, 2016

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- .. not available for a specific reference period
- ... not applicable
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- 0^s value rounded to 0 (zero) where there is a meaningful distinction between true zero and the value that was rounded
- ^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
- * significantly different from reference category ($p < 0.05$)

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Highlights

- In 2016, 7 in 10 children aged 0 to 14 (69.7%) were living with both of their biological or adoptive parents and without stepsiblings or half-siblings.
- In 2016, close to 2 in 10 children aged 0 to 14 (19.2%) were part of a lone-parent family, and 1 in 10 (9.8%) was part of a stepfamily. A small share of children (1.4%) were living without their parents.
- The age of the child matters. In 2016, one in five children younger than 1 year old (20.7%) was living in a lone-parent family, in a stepfamily or without their parents, a share that increased to more than one in three children among those aged 10 to 14 (36.2%).
- The share of children living in a lone-parent family, in a stepfamily or without their parents was higher in the territories, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick.
- The 2016 Census enumerated 28,030 foster children aged 0 to 14.

Introduction

“Stepmom” or “stepdad,” “stepbrother” or “half-sister,” “my mom’s boyfriend” or “my dad’s place”—these are words that many Canadian children use on a daily basis at home or at school.

Lone-parent families and stepfamilies—created following the death of a parent, a separation or a divorce—are not new phenomena. However, these families are more frequent and more diverse than before. For example, an increasing share of children are living in a lone-parent family with their father, a situation that was less common a few decades ago.

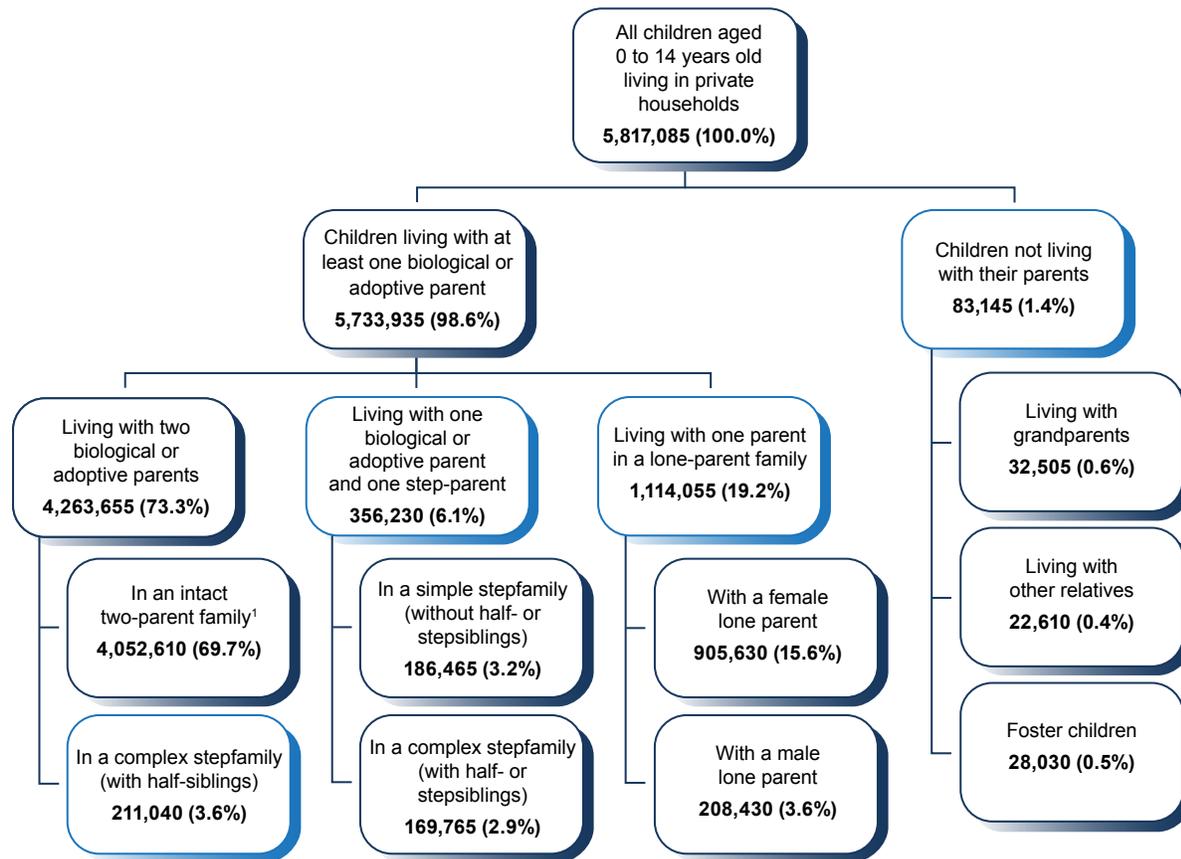
The family life of children may have a direct impact on their health; their economic, social and emotional well-being; and on their life course in the long run.¹ For example, family life during childhood may affect the long-term relationship between children and their parents, particularly when the parents are older and need support themselves. Children living in lone-parent families or stepfamilies may also have a greater need for some services (childcare, for example) and may be more exposed to certain situations, such as living in a low-income family.

This article based on the 2016 Census looks at children aged 0 to 14 in Canada according to the structure of their immediate family—that is, whether they live with their two parents, with only one parent, in a stepfamily, or without their parents but still in a family living arrangement. It also presents some trends by age of children, as well as regional variations.

1. Ginther, D. K. and R. A. Pollak. 2004. “Family Structure and Children’s Educational Outcomes: Blended Families, Stylized Facts and Descriptive Regressions.” *Demography*. Vol. 41, no. 4, p. 671-696.
Sweeney, M. M. 2010. “Remarriage and Stepfamilies: Strategic Sites for Family Scholarship in the 21st Century.” *Journal of Marriage and Family*. Vol. 72, p. 667-684.
Bramlett, M. D. and S. J. Blumberg. 2007. “Family Structure and Children’s Physical and Mental Health.” *Health Affairs*. Vol. 26, no. 2, p. 549-558.

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Figure 1
Overview of children's family situations in private households, Canada, 2016



1. An intact two-parent family refers to a two-parent family that is not a stepfamily.

Note: In this overview of children's family situations, the categories in light blue correspond to family situations other than an intact two-parent family.

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2016.

Three in 10 children are living in a lone-parent family, in a stepfamily or without their parents

In 2016, among the 5.8 million children aged 0 to 14 in Canada living in private households,² 7 in 10 (69.7%) were living with both of their biological or adoptive parents and no stepsiblings or half-siblings (Figure 1).

Three in 10 children (30.3%) were living in different situations: they were living in a lone-parent family; in a stepfamily; or in a family without their parents but with grandparents, with other relatives or as foster children.

2. In 2016, a small number (22,485) of children aged 0 to 14 were living in collective dwellings (either institutions such as hospitals or non-institutional group homes) or were enumerated among people living outside Canada.

Close to 2 in 10 children are living in a lone-parent family

In 2016, over 1 million children (1,114,055), or 19.2% of all children aged 0 to 14, were living in a lone-parent family, with or without grandparents or other relatives living in the home.

For decades, lone-parent families have accounted for a significant and increasing share of families with children.³ From 2001 to 2016, the percentage of children aged 0 to 14 living with one parent rose from 17.8% to 19.2%.

In 2016, 81.3% of children aged 0 to 14 in lone-parent families were living with their mother, and 18.7% were living with their father.

During the 15-year period from 2001 to 2016, the number of children living with a lone father grew much faster (34.5%) than the number of those living with a lone mother (4.8%). This difference partly reflects the increasing acknowledgment of the role of fathers and their parental responsibilities in Canadian society and the legal system: in the event of a breakup, fathers are increasingly being awarded joint custody of their children.⁴

One in 10 children is living in a stepfamily

In 2016, 567,270 children, or 9.8% of all children aged 0 to 14, were living in a stepfamily (Figure 2). This percentage was very similar to the percentage in 2011 (10.0%).

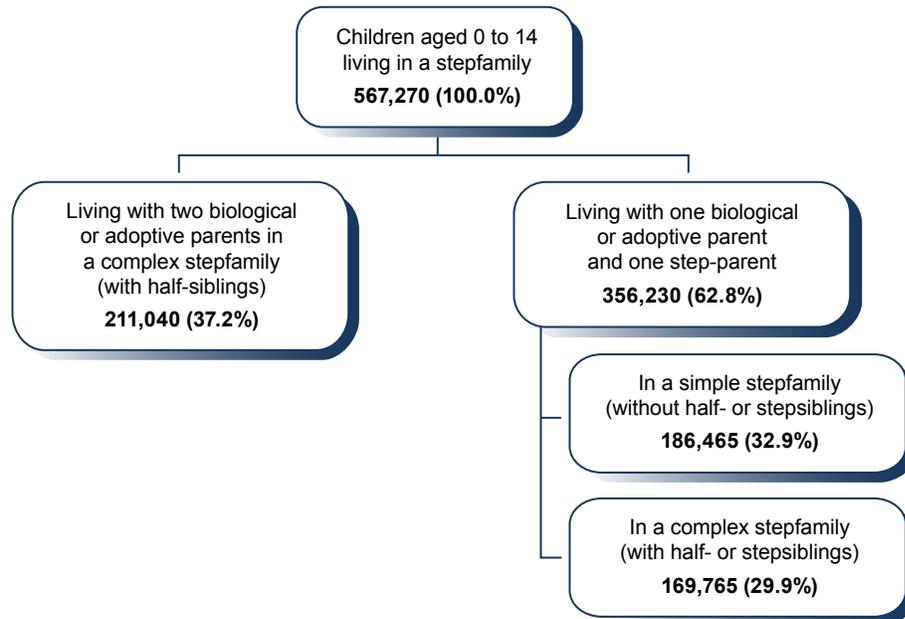
In 2016, 62.8% of children in stepfamilies (6.1% of all children aged 0 to 14) were living with one of their biological or adoptive parents and a step-parent by marriage or common-law union. Slightly more than half of them had no half-siblings or stepsiblings: any brothers and sisters were the children of the same parent (a simple stepfamily). Slightly less than half were living in a more complex situation: they had at least one half-brother, half-sister, stepbrother or stepsister.

The other 37.2% of children in stepfamilies (3.6% of all children aged 0 to 14) had both of their biological or adoptive parents present. Children in this situation had at least one brother or sister with whom they had only one parent in common: a half-sibling.

3. For more information on historical comparisons, see the following:
Statistics Canada. 2015. "[Lone-parent families: The new face of an old phenomenon.](http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-630-x/11-630-x-2015002-eng.htm)" (<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-630-x/11-630-x-2015002-eng.htm>) Canadian Megatrends. February. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 11-630-X.
Bohnert, N., A. Milan and H. Lathe. 2014. *Enduring Diversity: Living Arrangements of Children in Canada over 100 Years of the Census.* (<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/91f0015m/91f0015m2014011-eng.htm>) Demographic Documents. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 91F0015M – No. 11. Ottawa. Statistics Canada.

4. For more information on non-resident fathers, see the following:
Beaupré, P., H. Dryburgh and M. Wendt. 2010. "[Making fathers 'count'.](http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-008-x/2010002/article/11165-eng.htm)" (<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-008-x/2010002/article/11165-eng.htm>) *Canadian Social Trends*. No. 90. Winter. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 11-008-X. p. 25–33.
Strohschein, L. 2017. "Nonresidential fatherhood in Canada." *Canadian Studies in Population*. Vol. 44, no. 1–2. p. 16–27.

Figure 2
Overview of children living in stepfamilies in private households, Canada, 2016



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2016.

About 83,000 children aged 0 to 14 are living without their biological or adoptive parents

A small share of children aged 0 to 14 in private households—83,145 children, or 1.4% of all children—were living without a parent present in the household.

They were living in one of the three following situations. About 4 in 10 of these children (32,505 children, accounting for 0.6% of all children aged 0 to 14 in 2016) were living with one or two grandparents without a parent present, that is, in a skip-generation family. Other relatives besides their grandparents may have been living with them as well. Less than one-third (22,610, or 0.4% of all children) were living with other relatives excluding grandparents, such as an older sibling, an aunt, an uncle or a cousin. One-third (28,030, or 0.5% of all children in that age group) were living as foster children in private homes.

The likelihood of living in a lone-parent family or stepfamily increases during childhood

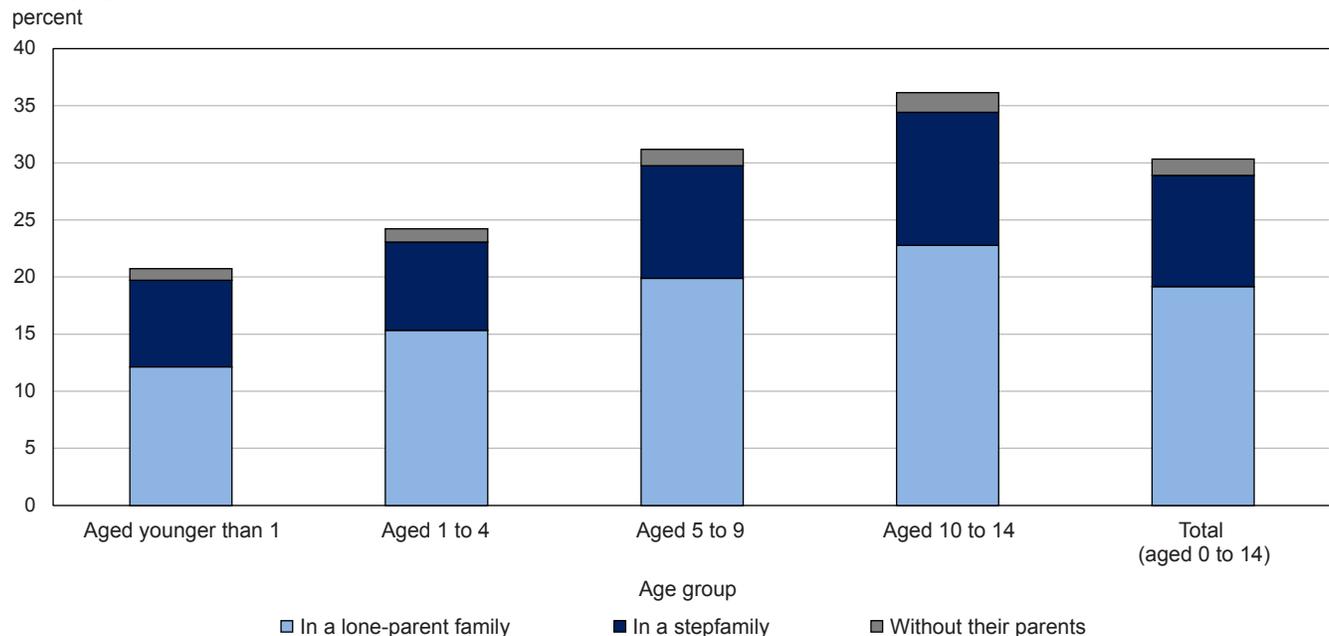
The proportion of children living in a lone-parent family, in a stepfamily or in a family without their parents can be expected to increase with the age of children, although the causes have shifted over time. In the current context, children are less likely to experience the death of a parent than they were in the past, which can be attributed to

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significant increases in life expectancy over many decades. On the other hand, children growing up today are more likely to experience their parents' separation than was the case long ago.⁵

Regardless of the specific causes, it is possible to get a sense of the frequency of these events by looking at children of different ages at the same point in time. Accordingly, in 2016, the percentage of children living in a lone-parent family, in a stepfamily or without their parents varied by the age of the children (Chart 1). Among children younger than 1 year old, 20.7% were living in one of these three family situations. The percentage among older children was higher, even among those between 1 and 4 years old, for whom it was 24.2%. Among children aged 5 to 9, it was 31.2%, and among those aged 10 to 14, it was 36.2%.

Chart 1
Proportion of children aged 0 to 14 living in a lone-parent family, a stepfamily, or without their parents, by age group, Canada, 2016



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2016.

Some children may have been born into a lone-parent family, while others may have experienced their parents' separation (or a parent's death) relatively soon after their birth. When only children in lone-parent families are considered, one in eight children younger than 1 year old (12.1%) were living in a lone-parent family at the time of the census. Of these, 87.1% were living with their mother. The proportion of children living in a lone-parent family increased to almost one in four (22.8%) among children aged 10 to 14. Among this older group of children, 79.4% were living with their mother and 20.6% with their father.

Likewise, in 2016, older children were more likely to live in a stepfamily than younger children: 11.7% of children aged 10 to 14 were living in a stepfamily, compared with 7.6% of children younger than 1 year old.

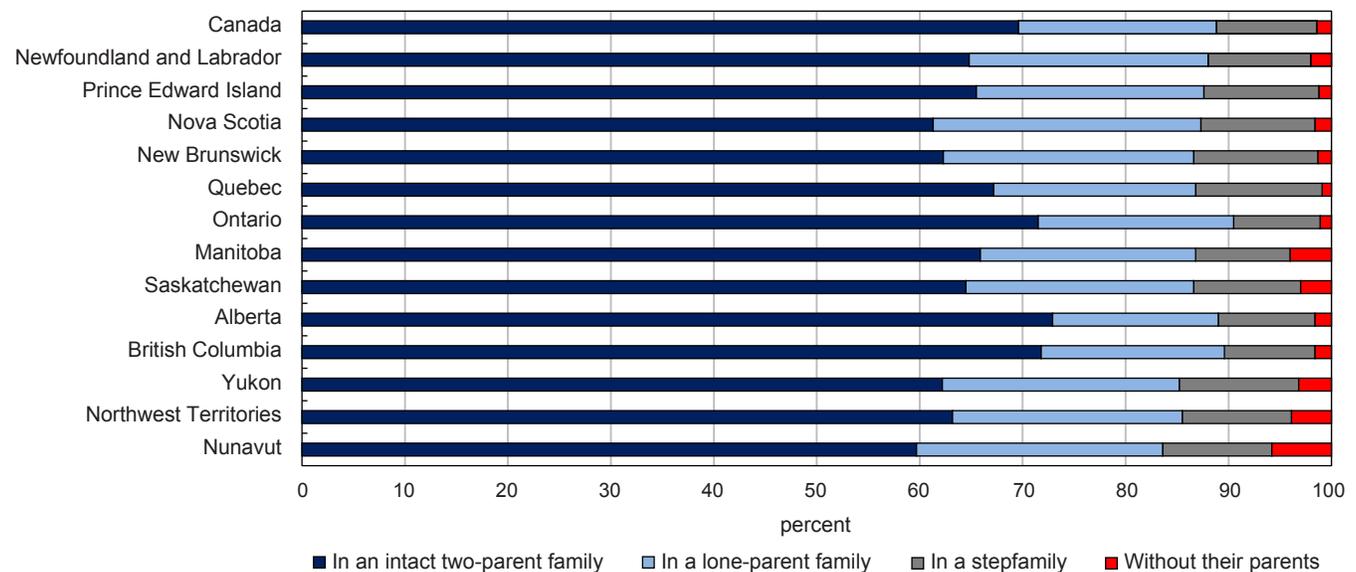
5. Bohnert, N., A. Milan and H. Lathe. 2014. *Enduring Diversity: Living Arrangements of Children in Canada over 100 Years of the Census*. (<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/91f0015m/91f0015m2014011-eng.htm>) Demographic Documents. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 91F0015M – No. 11. Ottawa. Statistics Canada.

The family situations of children vary from one region to another

In 2016, there were significant differences among the provinces and territories in the proportions of children living in a lone-parent family, in a stepfamily or without their parents. Overall, the share of children living in one of these three situations was lowest in Alberta (27.1%), British Columbia (28.2%) and Ontario (28.5%), while it was close to 40% in the territories (38.6%), Nova Scotia (38.7%) and New Brunswick (37.7%) (Chart 2).

The living situations of children in each province and territory can be influenced by many factors, including the various cultural preferences of the population and the economic situation of the region. As one example of the possible role of cultural preferences, studies have shown that, depending on their country of origin, immigrants to Canada are less likely than non-immigrants to have children outside marriage or to get divorced.⁶ The provinces of Alberta, British Columbia and Ontario have attracted more immigrants in the past than other regions of Canada.

Chart 2
Family situations of children aged 0 to 14, Canada, provinces and territories, 2016



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2016.

In Quebec, there is a large increase in the proportion of children living in a lone-parent family or a stepfamily as they get older

In Quebec, 32.9% of children aged 0 to 14 were living in a lone-parent family, in a stepfamily or without their parents—a somewhat higher proportion than for Canada as a whole in 2016 (30.3%). However, the difference observed in the proportions by age was largest in Quebec, compared with all other provinces. In Quebec, the difference between pre-school-aged children and older children was 19.2 percentage points, or the difference between 23.0% among children aged 0 to 4 and 42.2% among children aged 10 to 14. In comparison, the difference for Canada as a whole was 12.7 percentage points, or the difference between 23.5% for children aged 0 to 4 and 36.2% for children aged 10 to 14.

6. Lee, S. and B. Edmonston. 2013. "Canada's immigrant families: Growth, diversity and challenges." *Population Change and Lifecourse Strategic Knowledge Cluster Discussion Paper Series*. Vol. 1, no. 1. Article 4.

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The large difference between younger and older children in Quebec may be related to higher instability among common-law unions, which are more popular in Quebec than elsewhere in Canada (except in Nunavut), rather than the result of more children born to lone parents.⁷

The highest proportion of children living in a lone-parent family is in Nova Scotia

In 2016, Nova Scotia (26.0%) and New Brunswick (24.3%) had the highest percentages of children aged 0 to 14 living with a lone parent. These percentages were higher than the national average of 19.2%. Newfoundland and Labrador had a percentage of about 23%, as did Nunavut and Yukon.

In the past, the Atlantic provinces have had higher proportions of births outside unions than other provinces.⁸ In 2016, in the four Atlantic provinces combined, 19.7% of children younger than 1 year old were living in a lone-parent family, 90.0% of them with their mother. In comparison, 12.1% of all children younger than 1 year old in Canada were living in a lone-parent family, 87.1% with their mother.

The proportion of children living in a lone-parent family with their father was higher in Quebec and the territories: 23.2% in Quebec, 25.1% in Nunavut, 23.1% in Yukon and 21.4% in the Northwest Territories, compared with 18.7% at the national level. These differences, at least for Quebec, can be explained by the fact that sole and joint custody for fathers has been more common in Quebec than in the other provinces.⁹

In 2016, Quebec (12.3%) and New Brunswick (12.1%) had the highest percentages of children aged 0 to 14 living in a stepfamily. When these percentages are broken down by age group, the percentage of children aged 10 to 14 living in a stepfamily in Quebec was particularly high, at 15.3%, compared with 11.7% for Canada.

In the territories, Manitoba and Saskatchewan, proportionally more children are living without their parents

The three family situations in which children live without their parents (but in a private home) were more common in the three territories and in Manitoba and Saskatchewan than in the rest of Canada. In these areas, 3% to 6% of children aged 0 to 14 were living in one of these three situations in 2016: with grandparents, with other relatives or as foster children. In every other province, the percentage was 2% or less.

According to the 2011 National Household Survey (NHS), not only did these two provinces and three territories have the highest shares of children aged 0 to 14 with a reported Aboriginal identity,¹⁰ they also had a significant share of Aboriginal children this age living in family situations without their own parents and with their grandparents or other relatives.¹¹

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7. Le Bourdais, C., É. Lapierre-Adamcyk and A. Roy. 2014. "Instabilité des unions libres : une analyse comparative des facteurs démographiques." *Recherches sociographiques*. Vol. 55, no. 1, p. 53–78.
Le Bourdais, C., M. Girard, L. Swiss and É. Lapierre-Adamcyk. 2013. "Entre famille et vieillissement : impact des transformations familiales aux âges avancés." *Revue internationale d'études canadiennes*. Vol. 47, p. 9–40.
 8. Juby, H., N. Marcil-Gratton and C. Le Bourdais. 2004. *When Parents Separate: Further Findings from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth*. Ottawa. Department of Justice Canada.
 9. Ibid.
 10. In 2011, the proportion of children aged 0 to 14 for whom an Aboriginal identity was reported in the National Household Survey (NHS) was 95.5% for Nunavut, 66.8% for the Northwest Territories, 33.0% for Yukon, 27.6% for Manitoba and 27.4% for Saskatchewan. In comparison, it was 7.0% for all Canadian children of the same age. Data on Aboriginal peoples from the 2016 Census will be available on October 25, 2017.
 11. Turner, A. 2016. "Living arrangements of Aboriginal children aged 14 and under." (<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/75-006-x/2016001/article/14547-eng.htm>) *Insights on Canadian Society*. April. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 75-006-X.
Statistics Canada. 2013. *Aboriginal Peoples in Canada: First Nations People, Métis and Inuit*. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 99-011-X2011001. Ottawa. Statistics Canada.

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Of all provinces and territories, Nunavut had the highest percentages of children aged 0 to 14 living with their grandparents (2.7%) or with other relatives (2.3%) but without their parents. Manitoba had the highest percentage of children aged 0 to 14 living in a foster family, at 2.1% (5,070 children) in 2016.

Readers can consult a national [thematic map](http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/geo/map-carte/ref/thematic-thematiques/fam/map-eng.cfm?type=1) (<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/geo/map-carte/ref/thematic-thematiques/fam/map-eng.cfm?type=1>) showing the proportion of children aged 0 to 14 living in a lone-parent family, in a stepfamily or without their parents, by 2016 census division.

Data sources, methods and definitions

Data sources

The data in this analysis are from the 2016 Census of Population. Further information on the census can be found in the [Guide to the Census of Population, 2016](http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/ref/98-304/index-eng.cfm) (<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/ref/98-304/index-eng.cfm>), Catalogue no. 98-304-X.

The full range of information on detailed family structures, as covered in this analysis for 2016, was first made possible in the 2011 Census, when data on stepfamilies and foster children were first collected.

Children categorized as living with only one biological or adoptive parent may in fact be dividing their time between the separate households of their parents. The census does not capture these situations. Instead, the census questionnaire contains this instruction: "Children in joint custody should be included in the home of the parent where they live most of the time. Children who spend equal time with each parent should be included in the home of the parent with whom they are staying on May 10, 2016."

Additional information on census data quality and comparability for families, households and marital status can be found in the [Families Reference Guide, Census of Population, 2016](http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/ref/guides/002/98-500-x2016002-eng.cfm) (<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/ref/guides/002/98-500-x2016002-eng.cfm>), Catalogue no. 98-500-X2016002.

Methods

Random rounding and percentage distributions: To ensure the confidentiality of responses collected for the 2016 Census, a random rounding process is used to alter the values reported in individual cells. As a result, when these data are summed or grouped, the total value may not match the sum of the individual values, since the total and subtotals are independently rounded. Similarly, percentage distributions, which are calculated on rounded data, may not necessarily add up to 100%.

Due to random rounding, counts and percentages may vary slightly between different census products, such as the analytical documents, highlight tables and data tables.

Definitions

Simple stepfamily: A stepfamily in which all children are the biological or adopted children of one, and only one, married spouse or common-law partner, and whose birth or adoption preceded the current relationship.

Complex stepfamily: There are three types of complex stepfamilies. First, a couple family in which there is at least one child of both parents and at least one child of only one parent. Second, a couple family in which there is at least one child of each parent and no children of both parents. Third, a couple family in which there is at least one child of both parents and at least one child of each parent.

Please refer to the [Dictionary, Census of Population, 2016](http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/ref/dict/index-eng.cfm) (<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/ref/dict/index-eng.cfm>), Catalogue no. 98-301-X, for additional information on the census variables.

Additional information

Additional analysis on families, households and marital status can be found in *The Daily* (<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/170802/dq170802a-eng.htm>) of August 2, 2017, and in the Census in Brief articles entitled *Same-sex couples in Canada in 2016* (<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/98-200-x/2016007/98-200-x2016007-eng.cfm>), Catalogue no. 98-200-X2016007, and *Young adults living with their parents in Canada in 2016* (<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/98-200-x/2016008/98-200-x2016008-eng.cfm>), Catalogue no. 98-200-X2016008.

Additional information on families, households and marital status can be found in the *Highlight tables* (<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/hlt-fst/fam/index-eng.cfm>), Catalogue no. 98-402-X2016004; the *Data tables* (<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/dt-td/Lp-eng.cfm?LANG=E&APATH=3&DETAIL=0&DIM=0&FL=A&FREE=0&GC=0&GID=0&GK=0&GRP=1&PID=0&PRID=10&PTYPE=109445&S=0&SHOWALL=0&SUB=0&Temporal=2016&THEME=117&VID=0&VNAMEE=&VNAMEF=>), Catalogue nos. 98-400-X20160024 to 98-400-X2016041; the *Census Profile* (<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E>), Catalogue no. 98-316-X2016001; and the *Focus on Geography Series* (<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/fogs-spg/Index-eng.cfm>), Catalogue no. 98-404-X2016001.

Thematic maps (<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/geo/map-carte/ref/thematic-thematiques/fam/thematic-thematiques-eng.cfm>) for this topic are also available for various levels of geography.

A video providing an overview of Canadian families in the past and today is available from the *Video centre* (<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/video/index-eng.cfm>).

An infographic entitled *Portrait of households and families in Canada, 2016 Census of Population* (<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-627-m/11-627-m2017024-eng.htm>) also illustrates some key findings on families and households in Canada.

For details on the concepts, definitions and variables used in the 2016 Census of Population, please consult the *Dictionary, Census of Population, 2016* (<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/ref/dict/index-eng.cfm>), Catalogue no. 98-301-X.

In addition to response rates and other data quality information, the *Guide to the Census of Population, 2016* (<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/ref/98-304/index-eng.cfm>), Catalogue no. 98-304-X, provides an overview of the various phases of the census, including content determination, sampling design, collection, data processing, data quality assessment, confidentiality guidelines and dissemination.

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