

Resource 2.1: Families in changing times

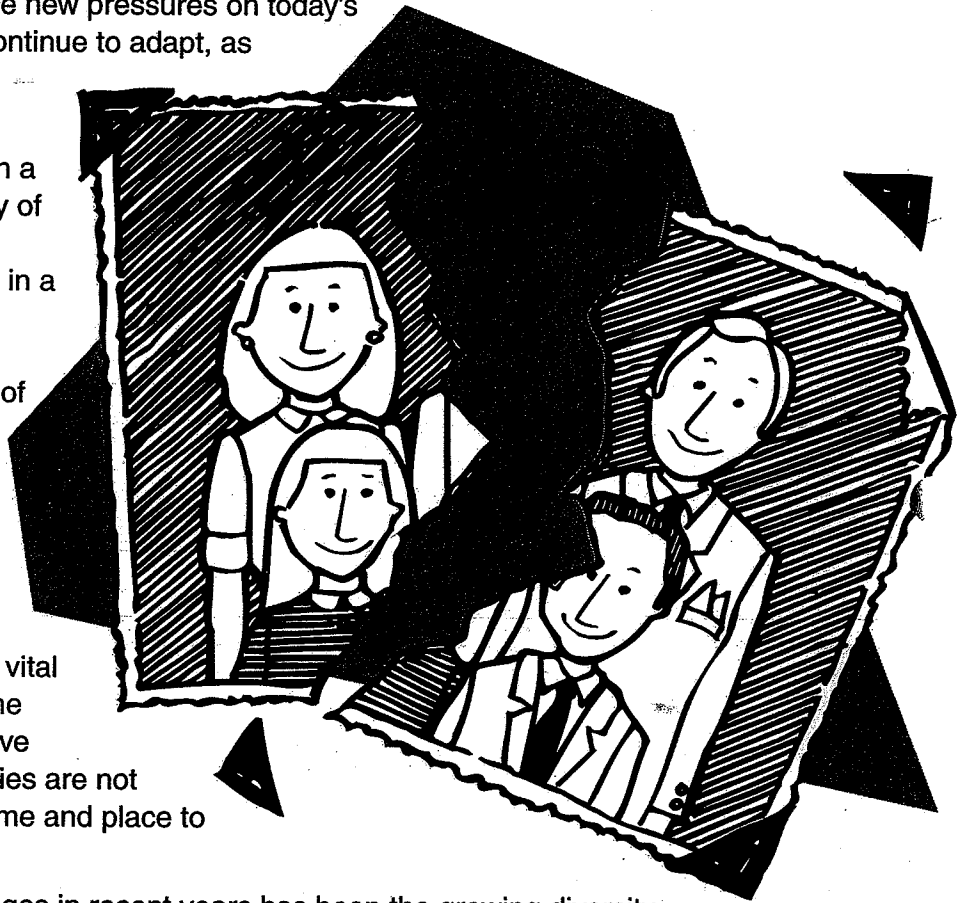
Many Canadians worry about rapid and disturbing changes in society. They observe high rates of separation and divorce, the economic insecurity experienced by so many families and the violence that is a part of too many families. They sense a rise in materialism and individualism. Some predict a future breakdown in Canadian families and society. Some say it is already occurring.

Canadians are aware that their ideas about families — what they are and what they do — have changed from those of their parents and grandparents. Societal and economic changes place new pressures on today's families. Still, families continue to adapt, as always, to changing conditions.

For example, less than a lifetime ago, the majority of Canadian families were composed of two adults in a permanent union that produced three to five children. All other kinds of family were the exception. Today, the exceptions are the rule.

In terms of function, however, families have not changed very much. The core meanings and vital functions of family are the same as they always have been, even though families are not the same from time to time and place to place.

One of the major changes in recent years has been the growing diversity of family types. For many, a family consisted of a husband who worked outside the home, a homemaker wife, and children. This family unit is sometimes called the "traditional" family. Most older adults in Canada grew up in families like this, which may explain why so many opinion leaders, most of whom are older adults, refer to it as traditional.



This family structure, however, was a fairly recent development, and it never was universal. Many Canadian adults did not grow up in such families. Twenty, forty, or sixty years ago, there were many Canadians growing up with two parents that worked, or with only one parent, or with step-parents and step-siblings. Today, two-parent, one-earner families are in the minority. Both parents are employed in seven out of ten families, up from three out of ten just twenty years ago. So when it comes to the traditional family, tradition is a matter of perspective.

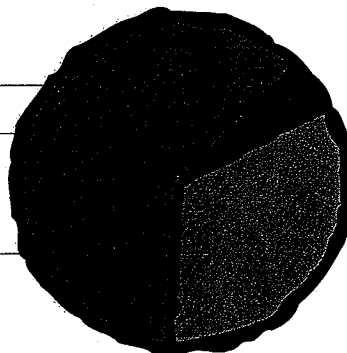
The Transition From Sole to Dual Earner Families

1967

Traditional One Earner 61%

Other 5%

Dual Income 34%

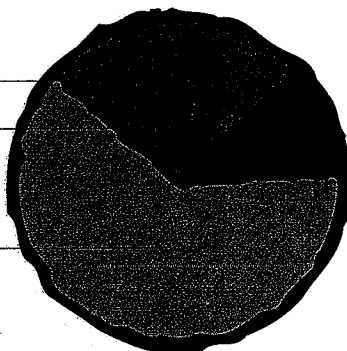


1986

Traditional One Earner 27%

Other 11%

Dual Income 62%



Families are having fewer children as a result of a number of factors. More effective methods of birth control, increased rates of separation and divorce, increased participation in the labour force by women, and the availability of safe, legal abortions have all contributed to smaller family size. In the past 20 years, Canadian family size has decreased greatly, from an average of 3.7 persons in 1971 to 3.1 persons in 1991.

Another change in families has been the increase in common-law marriages. Formerly considered taboo, cohabitation is no longer perceived with intolerance. Marriage itself has evolved, with the transformation of traditional roles making way for a new distribution of domestic responsibilities, for example, or for the possibility of both spouses working outside the home. Marriage has become a double-income union, no longer made up of a stay-at-home wife and a breadwinner husband. Different social programs and numerous laws now apply to this new situation.

—VIF