

Canada's divorce is data revealing—and still murky

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Sociology professor Rachel Margolis' research around divorce shows that more Canadian couples are staying married – but garnering such important information has become much harder since Statistics Canada stopped collecting vital statistics on divorce in 2008. Credit: Paul Mayne // Western News

Cupid seems to be working overtime in Canada—and, thanks to one

Western researcher, we have the data to prove it for the first time in a decade.

Divorce rates in Canada are on the decline—nearly cut in half this past decade. While the annual rates hovered around 10 divorces for every 1,000 marriages in the early 2000s, that has since fallen to six for every 1,000 as of 2016.

"The trend in divorce over the last decade seems to follow the trend in the United States and some other European countries," Sociology professor Rachel Margolis noted.

While the number of divorces in the United States is higher than Canada, they too dropped this past decade, from 20 for every 1,000 marriages to 16.7 for every 1,000.

"Part of that is due to the fact not as many people are getting married. And when they are they're getting married later. So [marriage](#) is becoming more selective of stronger unions or people with more education and income."

There was also a shifting age distribution among people getting divorced, Margolis added.

In the early 1990s, more than half of divorces in Canada were granted to those in their 20s and 30s. Over the last 20 years, however, it has become more common for divorces to occur later. Only 28 percent of divorces were granted to those in their 20s and 30s, while 57 percent were granted to those in their 40s and 50s, and an additional 15 percent for those 60 and above, referred to as the 'grey divorce revolution.'

"The Baby Boomers have had more tumultuous marriage histories than younger generations. So we've seen some shifting in the age distribution

of the married and divorced population," Margolis said. "A lot has been written in the United States and other countries about big increases in divorce among Boomers over the last 20 years. We see some increase, but not this huge grey revolution."

Her study, "Capturing trends in Canadian divorce in an era without vital statistics," represents the first new data into divorces in some time.

In Canada, marriage and divorce information has not been published since 2008, when vital statistics data stopped being analyzed and reported by Statistics Canada. An annual savings of \$350,000, plus the fact the government felt people weren't using the statistics, were some of the reasons for ceasing the [data collection](#). But such information is key for demographers, governments and anyone interested in planning for the future, Margolis continued.

"Divorce is a very basic measure of how families and unions are changing," Margolis said. "In order to understand many important questions about how our society is changing, especially for vulnerable groups, we have to know how families are changing. This is very basic demographic data. It's like saying, "Why do we even care how many people live in Canada? Why do a census?"

Because of this data gap, Margolis used anonymized administrative tax data to provide insights into recent trends in divorce in Canada. While other countries have also ceased publications of marriage and divorce vital statistics, they continue to collect data through other means, such as the American Community Survey in the United States. Canada has nothing similar.

"It's a data-quality issue. This is at the core of what demographers do. It's really frustrating because we want to have good estimates of this measures," she said. "How can we measure these basic things on how our

society is changing? What is the quality of the data?"

In the past, divorces have been undercounted in tax data when compared to Statistics Canada. This is potentially problematic, Margolis added, leading to research increasingly underestimating divorce over time. It could become unclear how much of a decline in divorce in recent years is due to a decline in data quality.

To this end, Margolis has brought forward recommendations to Statistics Canada. In addition to tax data, perhaps adding a question to the monthly Labour Force Survey could serve as an efficient and reliable vehicle for collecting this important data. This survey already uses data collected to make decisions regarding job creation, education and training, retirement pensions and income support—so why not marriage and divorce, she wondered.

"Since changes in marriage are so related to changes in employment, household structure and poverty, I think there is interest," said Margolis, who continues to work towards strengthening our understanding of demographic changes in Canada. "We rely on indicators of marriage and [divorce](#) in understanding so many things about society."

More information: Rachel Margolis et al. Capturing trends in Canadian divorce in an era without vital statistics, *Demographic Research* (2019). [DOI: 10.4054/DemRes.2019.41.52](https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2019.41.52)

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