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**Major Research Paper:**

**Demographic trends  
in marital status / divorce rates  
across generations**

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## Abstract

In this paper, I used survey and census data to estimate Canadian divorce trends and patterns, since recent vital statistics are not available. I also studied the factors that influence divorce rates across generations. My research seeks to provide a better understanding of changes in patterns of family formation and dissolution, specifically on divorce trends in Canada. I investigated several demographic and socioeconomic factors related to divorce such as marital history, economic resources, and demographic characteristics. The demographic characteristic of age allows determining which generation drives the current trends in divorce rates. I compared my findings with other demographic studies about divorce trends in Canada.

Contents

Abstract ..... 2

1. Introduction ..... 4

2. Literature Review ..... 6

    2.1 Marriage and divorce ..... 6

    2.2 The late-life divorce ..... 10

    2.3 The declining divorce for the young generation ..... 11

    2.4 Correlates of divorce: demographic characteristics, economic resources, and marital biographies ..... 12

3. Theoretical Framework ..... 14

4. Methodology ..... 16

    4.1 Data ..... 16

    4.2 Methods ..... 18

    4.3 Limitations ..... 25

5. Results and Discussion ..... 27

    5.1 Divorce trends ..... 27

    5.2 Marital biography factors ..... 35

    5.3 Socioeconomic factors ..... 36

    5.4 Demographic characteristics ..... 38

6. Conclusion and Future Work ..... 40

    6.1. Conclusion ..... 40

    6.2 Future work ..... 41

Bibliography ..... 42

## 1. Introduction

Marriage and family are key social institutions in most societies. These two institutions have historically been inseparable in the past in the Canadian culture (Little and McGiver, 2014), while now they can be separated. Measures of marriage and divorce are key indicators of formal unions, which are also important for understanding the family context where most fertility takes place, wealth is accumulated, and important consumption habits are established. Union dissolution has socioeconomic consequences, especially for women and children (Van Winkle and Leopold, 2019). Government policies could be adapted to mitigate these consequences.

Married couples remain the predominant family structure in Canada (67% in the 2011 census), despite the declining number of marriages. Over time, the share of married-couple families has decreased. In 1961, married couples accounted for 91.6% of the census families. By 2011, this proportion had declined to 67.0%. This decrease was mostly a result of the increase in the number of common-law couples (Statistics Canada, 2012a). Common-law partnerships have become an alternative to marriage, and this occurred to an even higher extent (and earlier) in Quebec than elsewhere in Canada (Le Bourdais et al., 2005). Lardoux and Pelletier (2014) also noted the increasing rate of common-law unions in Quebec and studied the effect this has on the children born of these unions. They found that having unmarried parents has no negative effect on educational outcomes for boys, and a positive outcome for girls.

In Canada, marriage and divorce information has not been published since 2008, when vital statistics data stopped being analyzed and reported by Statistics Canada, leaving a knowledge gap<sup>1</sup> in these important demographic indicators. An annual savings of \$350,000, plus

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<sup>1</sup> Census data is not sufficient because a census does not contain information about marital history, only about marital status. For example, somebody could divorce and marry again in the 5 year period between two censuses,

the fact the government felt that people were not using the statistics. Statistics about marriage and divorce were not being downloaded as much as other topics. These were some of the reasons for ceasing the data collection (Margolis et al., 2019). As a consequence of this decision, the data on marriage and divorce in Canada in the last decade does not allow a calculation of precise trends. The only study about this is a recent paper that uses administrative tax data to estimate Canadian divorce trends and patterns (Margolis et al., 2019). The tax data is shown to not be ideal for this purpose, because of the self-reported nature of the marital status and lack of marital history information.

In this paper, I use survey and census data to address the same problem, while also studying the factors that influence divorce rates across generations. My research seeks to provide a better understanding of changes in patterns of family formation and dissolution, specifically on divorce trends in Canada. I present descriptive statistics on trends in family structure and living arrangements, from 1996 to 2017. Then, I investigate several sociodemographic and economic factors related to divorce such as marital history, economic resources, and demographic characteristics. The demographic characteristic of age is used to determine which generation drives the current trends in divorce rates. I compare my findings with other demographic studies about divorce trends in Canada (Margolis et al., 2019).

The research questions that I am addressing are: What are the trends in divorce rates in Canada? What are the factors related to divorce, including demographic characteristics, economic resources, and marital biography?

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and this divorce would not be counted by using census data, while by using vital statistics, the number of divorces would be exact.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Marriage and divorce

The concept of family changes with each generation. There has been a growing shift away from tradition when it comes to the institution of marriage. More men and women than ever, though still a small minority, do not marry at all. Cohabitation, both as a precursor of and as an alternative to marriage, has become commonplace (Lundberg and Pollack 2015). Young couples opting for cohabitation rather than marriage are more likely to exhibit attitudes that tend to redefine what conjugal union represents: less emphasis is placed on living as a couple and on children, marriage itself is given less importance as a source of happiness, and less significance is assigned to the stability of the couple, especially in Quebec (Lapierre-Adamcyck et al., 2004). In the same time, divorce became socially acceptable and the departure from a life-long commitment was justified by logic that “a good divorce is better than a bad marriage” (Lesthaeghe, 2010). The reforms in divorce law and declining social stigma has reduced barriers to divorce, and the opening of new economic opportunities for women allowed many to escape bad marriages (Ruggles, 1997).

Legal alternatives to marriage, like registered partnerships and common-law relationships, have become more widespread, and national legislation has evolved to confer more rights on unmarried and same-sex couples. Same-sex marriages are not included in my study because the data sources that I am using do not include information about them. In 2011, only 0.3% of the marriages were same-sex marriages. Same-sex marriage became legal in Ontario in 2003 and was already legalized in eight of ten provinces and one of three territories when, on July 20, 2005, Canada became the first country outside Europe and the third country in the world to legalize same-sex marriage nationwide after the enactment of the Civil Marriage Act

(Statistics Canada, 2012b). Almost all of the literature has focused on heterosexual couples. Recent years have seen a wave of legal recognition of same-sex partnerships, which has consequently raised scholars' interest in their demography. But information concerning the dissolution of same-sex couples remains relatively limited. Research suggests that although same-sex partnerships are in general less stable than heterosexual marriages, the predictors of their instability are in many respects similar (Lau, 2012).

Acknowledging the changing family landscape, in which much cohabitation and family life occurs outside marriage, a growing number of studies have looked into the dissolution of unmarried cohabitations. There is still active debate on whether, when, and in which countries cohabitation is essentially equivalent to marriage, or not. Many cohabiting unions either split up or are transformed into marriages relatively quickly, even in countries in which cohabitation is common. In general, cohabiting unions are less stable than marriages (Andersson, 2002). There are many similarities in the factors that promote or undermine the stability of marriage and cohabitation. However, some important differences can be found which are generally linked to the weaker institutionalization and the continuity of unmarried cohabitation (Brines and Joyner, 1999).

The increases in divorce rates have been among the most visible features of the recent decades of family change. Often, divorce was difficult to obtain and could only be granted on the basis of serious fault (such as adultery, violence, or mental illness) or possibly, by mutual consent of the spouses. Even then, the process was usually expensive and lengthy. Major liberalization of divorce laws began in the sixties and seventies, and in 1970, California was the first state to implement unilateral "no fault" divorce, in which either spouse could exit the marriage without having to provide specific reasons. Sweden followed suit in 1974, and by the

turn of the millennium, most Western countries had liberalized their divorce legislation (Härkönen, 2013).

In Canada, divorce rates started increasing substantially only after 1968, when the divorce laws were liberalized. In 1968, Canada's first unified divorce law was passed. At that time, divorce became easier to obtain, although considerable legal and other difficulties remained. Divorce could be obtained on the basis of a matrimonial offence (previously the only basis on which divorce was available) or on the basis of marriage breakdown.

Before 1986, if marital breakdown was cited as the reason for divorce, a couple had to have lived three years apart before they could obtain a divorce. In 1986 a revised Divorce Act (1985) was proclaimed. The revised act included a “no-fault” divorce and the sole reason for divorce now is marriage breakdown, which is defined as either living apart for at least one year or committing adultery or treating the other spouse with physical or mental cruelty<sup>2</sup>.

Until 1983, the definition of rape in Canada excluded offences committed by a husband against his wife. In that year, reforms to the Criminal Code (Bill C-127) did away with the offence of rape altogether, and implemented a new scheme of sexual offences that were gender neutral and could, explicitly, be committed by one spouse against another<sup>3</sup>.

There has been considerable interest in estimating the trends in marital disruption and finding explanations for them (Balakrishnan et al., 1987). The United States has the highest divorce rate in the world, with roughly 45% of marriages expected to end through divorce (Amato, 2010; Cherlin, 2010). Studies indicate the divorce rate among those aged 50 and older doubled since 1990 (Brown and Lin, 2012). This suggests the risk of divorce declined among

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/divorce-in-canada>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb-bmdi/pub/document/3306\\_D6\\_T9\\_V5-eng.htm](https://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb-bmdi/pub/document/3306_D6_T9_V5-eng.htm)

younger adults. Wu (2017) studied the age variation in the divorce rates in the US in 1990 and in 2015. He concluded that the overall divorce rate declined only a little (from 19 divorced for every 1000 married people in 1990 versus 16 per 1000 in 2015). The risk of divorce declined with age and the gap in the divorce rates across age groups was wider in 1990 than in 2015. The divorce rate for adults under age 35 has decreased since 1990. For adults over the age of 35, the divorce rate has increased, and this growth is the most dramatic for the oldest age groups. Among those aged 55-64, the risk of divorce has more than doubled. For those 65 and older, the divorce rate has tripled (Wu, 2017).

The study of Cohen (2019) showed that divorce rates in the US are lower for the Millennials compared to previous generations. He also analyzed the socio-demographic and economic factors that influence these trends, similarly to (Kurz, 2018) and (Vespa, 2017).

In the European Union, recent demographic studies showed that the number of marriages per 1,000 persons decreased within the EU-28 in recent decades, while the number of divorces increased, according to vital statistics described in Eurostat (2018). An increase in the proportion of children who were born to unmarried couples was also observed.

The normative and institutional bases of traditional union formation and household structure systematically weakened in all societies that adopted egalitarian and democratic systems governed by respect for individual choice (Lesthaeghe, 2010). This means that other forms of union formation expanded in the wake of these developments. Alongside individual autonomy, self-realization became a major goal in its own right, in a process of rising individualism (Santos et al., 2017). This produced a rising demand for higher education, especially among women, stimulated other tastes and life styles, and resulted in sub-replacement fertility. Communication technology and mass media are spreading knowledge about new forms

of behaviour to all corners of the world. Moreover, they are associated by some people with being "more advanced" and "more developed" (Thornton, 2005). These new forms are seen by many as progressive in terms of feminist ideals, but they are also contested by many, and others are rather indifferent. Fundamentalist reactions occurred in response to these global ideational shifts, but so far their success has been limited to stem the overall shift toward post-materialist and expressive value orientation (Lesthaeghe, 2010).

## 2.2 The late-life divorce

Wu and Schimmele (2007) suggested that broad cultural shifts in the meanings of marriage and divorce influence all generations, including older adults. Specifically, the changing norms of marriage as a lifelong institution coupled with a heightened emphasis on individual fulfillment and satisfaction through marriage may contribute to an increase in divorce among older adults, including those in long-term first marriages. Marriages change and evolve over the life course and thus may no longer meet one's needs at later life stages. Qualitative research indicates that many older couples that divorce have simply grown apart (Bair, 2007). Lifelong marriages are increasingly difficult to sustain in an era of individualism and lengthening life expectancies; older adults are more reluctant now to remain in empty shell marriages (Wu and Schimmele, 2007). A marriage that was satisfactory when both spouses worked and shared activities such as child rearing may flounder once the couple retires and the nest is empty. Growing apart over the marital life course is a more common reality (or risk) with lengthening life expectancies (Bair, 2007). On the other side, the attitudes about divorce changed and became more permissive. The rise of divorce has not occurred evenly across age groups. As pointed out by Brown and Lin (2012), there has been a striking increase in divorce among the middle-aged.

### 2.3 The declining divorce for the young generation

The study of Kennedy and Ruggles (2014) for the 1980–2010 period showed that divorce rates in the United States have doubled in these three decades among persons over age 35. The relaxation of legal constraints and declining social stigma has reduced barriers to divorce, and the opening of new economic opportunities for women allowed many to escape bad marriages. Among the youngest couples, however, divorce rates are stable or declining. If current trends continue, overall age-standardized divorce rates could level off or even decline over the next few decades. The decline in divorce rates among women under age 25 probably reflects increasing selectivity of marriage. Fewer young people enter into marriage: over 40 % of the population in 2008 had not married by their 30th birthday, marking a fourfold increase since 1980. With the rise of cohabitation, it is likely that many couples who would have been at the highest risk of divorce in the past—for example, those entering unions as teenagers as a result of an unplanned pregnancy, or with low levels of income and education—are foregoing marriage entirely (Cherlin 2010; Smock et al. 2005). As pressure to marry recedes, people can be more selective about their partners; thus, it seems that marriages become more stable.

As Kennedy and Ruggles (2014) showed, divorce rates have risen for older women while falling for younger women. But if the increase for older women mostly reflects the experience and orientation of the Baby Boomer generation, then we would not expect today's younger women to join their upward trajectory. If people marrying now are showing less proclivity for divorce, then we would expect them to reach longer marital durations, leading to lower divorce rates at older ages in the future (Cohen 2019).

## 2.4 Correlates of divorce: demographic characteristics, economic resources, and marital biographies

There are several key sets of factors related to divorce, including demographic characteristics, economic resources, and marital biographies (Amato, 2010). Some of these indicators are expected to operate uniquely for older adults.

*Demographic characteristics* include cohort, gender, and race. Brown and Lin (2012) studied them for the period 1990-2010 in the US and showed that there are significant cohort differences in the divorce rates for all of the subgroups examined, with middle-aged adults experiencing higher divorce rates than their older counterparts. The divorce rates were quite similar for women (10.3 divorced persons per 1,000 married persons) and men (9.8 divorced persons per 1,000 married persons) aged 50 and older. There was also some racial and ethnic variation in the risk of divorce among those aged 50 and older.

Economic resources encompass education, employment, and income. They tend to reduce the risk of divorce. For example, the study of Martin (2006) showed that the college educated are much less likely to divorce than those with lower levels of education.

Schwartz and Han (2014) showed that education is multifaceted reflecting values, beliefs, and life styles, as well as earnings potential. They found a large shift in the association between spouses' relative education and marital dissolution in their study for the 1950-2004 period in the US. Specifically, marriages in which women have the educational advantage were once more likely to dissolve, but this association has disappeared in more recent marriage cohorts. Another finding was that the relative stability of marriages between educational equals has increased. These results are consistent with a shift away from rigid gender specialization toward more flexible, egalitarian partnerships, and they provide an important counterpoint to claims that

progress toward gender equality in heterosexual relationships has stalled. Changes in the relative educational attainment of men and women were not only linked to changes in patterns of union formation, but also to changes in union dissolution.

Employment and earnings are considered as protective factors against divorce (Amato, 2010), but how these operate for older adults who are typically retired and are relying on fixed incomes is unclear. The availability of economic resources could facilitate divorce during later life, especially for women (Bair, 2007). Financial autonomy could allow older women to consider divorce as a viable alternative to remaining married.

Some scholars considered wives' employment and income as risk factors for divorce. More recent evidence, however, is mixed about the strength and even the direction of this association. Amato (2010) analysed this body of research and reached two conclusions. First, wives' employment has the potential to generate tension between spouses over the household division of labor. Frisco and Williams (2003) found that perceived unfairness in the division of household labor was associated with decreased marital happiness among spouses and an increased likelihood of divorce. Similarly, Amato et al. (2007) found that wives' hours of employment tended to increase spouses' perceptions of marital problems. The authors also found, however, that wives' earned income improved other dimensions of marital quality by alleviating perceived economic hardship. In other words, wives' employment had negative and positive consequences that offset one another, resulting in no net effect on marriage. These offsetting effects may be responsible for many of the inconsistencies in the research literature on this topic. Second, although wives' employment and income do not destabilize marriage, they make it easier for wives as well as husbands to leave unhappy marriages.

*The marital biography*, or marriage order and marital duration, shape the risk of divorce. Higher order marriages are more likely to end through divorce than first marriages as those who divorced in the past presumably are willing to divorce again, whereas some fraction of those in first marriages is unwilling to ever divorce (Sweeney, 2010). The risk of divorce declines as marital duration increases. Dissatisfied couples are weeded out over time, leaving a disproportionate share of the most stable, well-adjusted couples (Amato, 2010). During later life, marriages can be plagued by strained adult stepchildren relationships and conflict over wills, assets, and health care decisions that undermine marital stability. Marital biographies may have differential associations with women's and men's risks of divorce as women are less likely than men to remarry after divorce and women are more likely to marry older men (Brown and Lin, 2012).

### 3. Theoretical Framework

My study fits into the larger line of sociological research about the changing pattern of family formation and union dissolution. Marital instability and the increases in divorce rates have been among the most visible features of the recent decades of family change. Some have seen this as a sign of social and moral disruption with a potential to shatter the family institution and the foundations of society itself. Others have celebrated these trends as signaling increased individual liberty and the loosening of social norms (Gähler, 1998).

Theoretical perspectives on divorce have ranged from macro-sociological theories of the role of divorce in the family system to micro-level perspectives on the processes conducive to marital instability (Kitson and Raschke, 1981). Many scholars begin from an at least implicit account of divorce in which partners remain in their marriages as long as the benefits of doing so exceed the

sum of the costs of dissolving them and the benefits of other options (e.g., Levinger, 1976, Brines and Joyner, 1999). This rational perspective is the most explicit in economic approaches to marriage and divorce (e.g., Becker, 1981). The benefits and costs include emotional rewards, mutual support and commitment, economic and moral considerations, social sanctions and approval, legal issues, children, and new partners. Divorces can be analyzed as events, that is, the decision to leave a partnership and the ending of the marriage (Härkönen, 2013). This underlines the heterogeneity of divorces and the importance of factors that act as barriers to divorce or the possible options beyond it, and of the need for looking beyond marital quality and satisfaction as determinants. Divorce is a multifaceted event that involves the disruption of one of the strongest affectional bonds formed by adults. As one of the most significant life events, divorce can cause major stress and upheaval for many, and a sense of relief and opportunity for personal growth for others. Divorce can often be a shifting point within the context of families. What society considers as family is always subject to change, but what stays the same is the way individuals look for bonds of commonality (Gähler, 1998).

There are some common demographic and societal changes that affect industrialized countries in general. Demographic changes include the decrease in the number of marriages, the increase of the age at the first marriage, the raise in the number of cohabitations, the raise in the number of divorces, and the decline in fertility due to increased age of parenthood. Societal changes include disengagement from civic and community-oriented networks, social capital shifts to expressive and affective types, weakening of social cohesion, rising symmetry in gender roles, women's economic autonomy, and flexible life-course organization (Lesthaeghe, 2010).

An important candidate for change in family and union formation and stability is gender roles. The changes in gender roles were to a large extent driven by changes in women's roles and

activities, whereas men have been much slower or even resisted to taking up previously female tasks. An increase in men's willingness to do their share in the household may thus lead to increased family stability as this would fit better the increasingly prevailing egalitarian ideals of partnerships and marriage as a union of two equals with their individual needs (Esping-Andersen and Billari, 2012). Some researchers have focused on specific relationship characteristics that predict divorce. Longitudinal studies showed that predictors of marital disruption include domestic violence, frequent conflict, infidelity, the number of perceived relationship problems, a weak commitment to marriage, and low levels of love and trust between spouses (Clements et al., 2004) (DeMaris, 2000).

Based on these theoretical considerations and the factors that were identified in the literature review from section 2, I investigate the influence of these factors on the divorce trends in Canada.

## 4. Methodology

This is a quantitative research study using data from Statistics Canada: census data (aggregated data from 5 censuses) and the General Social Survey Cycle #25 Family (GSS, 2011). In my analysis, I also used a few aggregate statistics from the GSS Cycle #31 Family (GSS, 2017) (because the full data is not yet available).

### 4.1 Data

I studied the Canadian population over the age of 15. I included only women, in order to avoid counting each marriage or divorce twice (for the census data in my case). Another reason is that women tend to more accurately report the timing of divorce events than men (Bumpass et

al., 1991) (for the survey data in my case). Restricting the analysis to women is a common methodological choice in the literature (Cohen, 2019) (Kennedy and Ruggles, 2014). The time period for my study is from 1996 to 2017.

Data Source 1: Statistics Canada: Topic-based Tabulations [B2020] Census 2016.

This data presents information about the marital status, age and sex for the population 15 years and over in Canada, for 5 censuses: 1996, 2001, 2006, 2011, 2016. It also includes information about location (per province / territory). The long-form census and Labour Force Survey (which is sampled from the long-form census) measure current marital status, but not recent changes in marital status (it does not include data about marital history).

Data Source2: Statistics Canada: The General Social Survey (GSS 2011 Cycle #25 Family).

This is the only national representative survey in Canada that can be used to estimate marriage and divorce rates. It monitors changes in Canadian families. It collects information on: conjugal and parental history (chronology of marriages, common-law unions and children), family origins, children's home leaving, fertility intentions, as well as work history and other socioeconomic characteristics. It contains a representative sample of the Canadian population: 22,435 persons interviewed in 2011 (1465 variables were recorded for each person).

The reason for choosing the census data is that it is recent (until 2016) and it covers the whole Canadian population over a longer period of time, even though it only records the marital status in the census years (every 5 years), with no information about marital histories. This allows studying the family formation and divorce trends over time. The reason for choosing the GSS is that it contains detailed marital histories, as well as economic and demographic

characteristics. This allows studying the factors that influence the odds of divorce, even though it is only a sample of the Canadian population. The survey captures information on the structure of families through each of its cycles and uses retrospective questions to follow the historic evolution of families. This GSS cycle's ability to monitor the evolution of families from cycle to cycle is in part due to its "life course perspective" approach. This approach, which recognizes the impact of social context on a person's life, is vitally important given the increasing diversity of today's families and the events they go through.

The two data sources provide complementary information. The GSS brings the detailed marital histories, while the census data contains only the marital status in each census year. But the census data is much larger (since it is a census), while the GSS is only a representative sample for the survey year. In general, censuses and surveys provide complementary information because they have different purpose: a census provides complete information, while a survey provides in-depth information (Randall et al., 2015).

## 4.2 Methods

I used quantitative analysis methods. For determining recent trends in divorce rates, I use **tabulations and graphs** on the first data source (5 Canadian censuses). I tabulated and plotted the number of married women per 1000 women. On the same graph, I plotted the number of divorced women per 1000 women. The latter is similar to the crude divorce rate<sup>4</sup>, but it is the number of divorced women, not the number of divorces in that year. It is necessary to normalize

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<sup>4</sup> The crude divorce rate is the number of divorces occurring among the population of a given geographical area during a given year, per 1,000 persons. Some studies calculate per 100,000 persons. The crude divorce rate is not an optimal measure because the denominator includes children and single adults who are not at risk of divorce. It is better to use the refined divorce rate when possible, which is the number of divorces per 1000 persons. Most studies calculate per married women, in order to avoid counting twice each marriage.

the values (to calculate per 1000 women), in order to compare them in the 5 census years, because the Canadian population increased from one census to the next one. I also plotted a graph with the number of divorced women per age groups for the 5 census years.

In order to show which factors have an influence on the divorce rates in Canada, I built a **logistic regression model** on second data source (GSS 2011).

The regression sample is composed of all the women from the survey who were currently married or divorced (7,284 women). Due to missing values for some factors, the sample was reduced to 6,063 for building the logistic regression model. All the descriptive statistics and the analysis based on the GSS 2011 use the provided survey weights.

**As the dependent variable**, I defined a new variable named **divorced** that is zero for women who are currently married and 1 for those who are divorced.

**The independent variables** were: marriage order, income, education, and generation, and the province of residence<sup>5</sup>. Table 1 shows the detailed weighted descriptive statistics of the survey sample: 21.82% of the respondents were divorced, 84.65% of the respondents were at their first marriage, 12.65% at their second marriage, and very few at higher order marriages. Almost 60% of the respondents have higher education. The income levels are relatively uniform. The age group/generation distribution reflects the structure of the Canadian population, with the largest category being the Baby Boomers (46.3%). The distribution per provinces reflects the size of the population for each province.

Note that all the tables and figures in the paper are produced by myself in Stata and Excel, using the data from the sources indicated in the captions of the tables or figures.

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<sup>5</sup>A collinearity test showed the independence of these five variables.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the population studied: married or divorced women. Source: General Social Survey Cycle #25 Family (GSS, 2011).

	<b>Percent</b>
<b>divorced</b>	21.82
<b>marriage_order</b>	
1st	84.68
2nd	12.64
3rd+	2.67
<b>Income</b>	
<20,000	20.82
20,000-39,999	16.1
40,000-59,999	27.29
60,000-79,000	17.48
80,000-99,999	13.57
>=100,000	4.74
<b>education</b>	
< high school	13.01
high school diploma	15.52
some university/college	11.69
university diploma +	59.78
<b>generation</b>	
Silent	16.13
Baby Boomers	46.53
Generation X	12.49
Millennials	24.85
Post-millennials	0
<b>Province</b>	
Newfoundland & Labrador	1.64
Prince Edward Island	0.45
Nova Scotia	3.02
New Brunswick	2.32
Quebec	19.11
Ontario	40.9
Manitoba	3.66
Saskatchewan	3.2
Alberta	11.64
British Columbia	14.05

**Marital history factors:**

The GSS contains detailed information about the marital status of each respondent. In cases where they were married, it includes the age of the respondent at the current marriage, the number of years they cohabited before marriage, information about the spouse, etc. In cases where they were divorced, it includes information about the age at divorce. Multiple marriages were also recorded, if it was the case. I used as the first independent variable in my model the **marriage order**, with 3 values: 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>+. There were in fact 4 levels, but I regrouped the 3<sup>rd</sup> marriage and the 4<sup>th</sup>+ under the label 3<sup>rd</sup>+, because there were very few cases with 4 or more marriages.

The **age at the first marriage** and the number of years of **cohabitation** before it (or at least a variable to show if there was cohabitation or not) were shown to have an influence on the odds of divorce in the study of Cohen (2019) for the US. I looked to tabulations of the age at the first marriage and the number of years of cohabitation from the GSS. But I was not able to use them in the logistic regression model because the relevant questions were not asked for many of the respondents in the survey, and this would have excessively reduced the sample size of logistic regression (to less than 500).

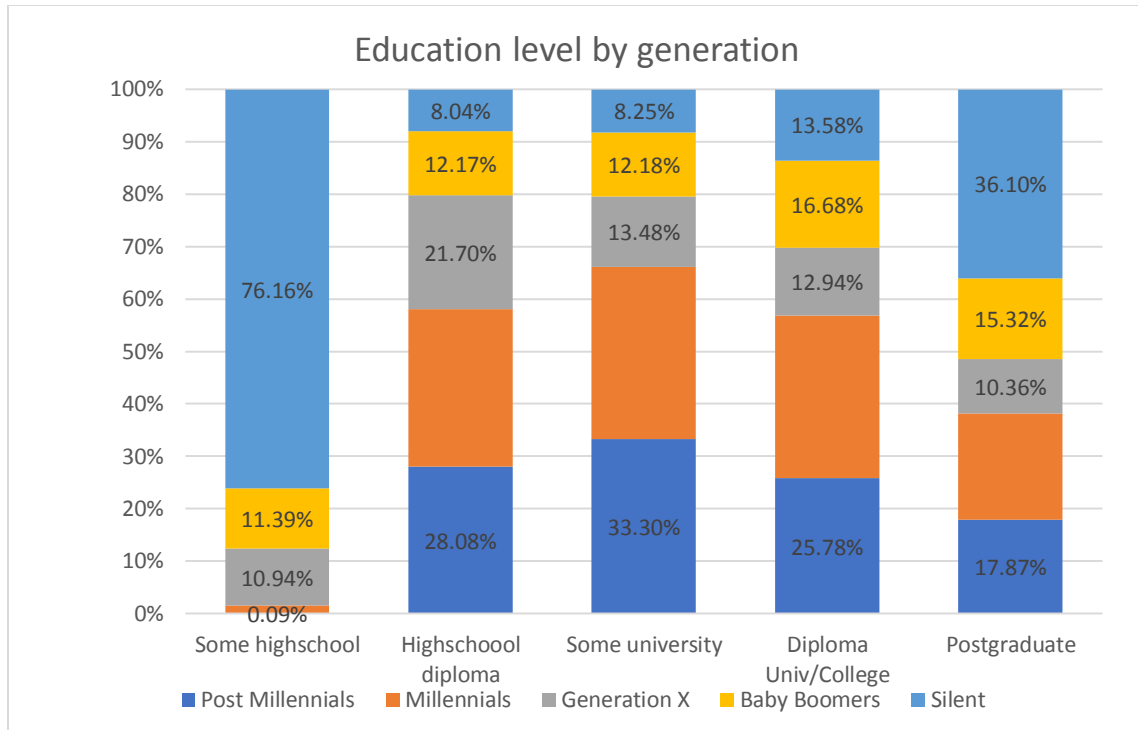
**Economic factors and education:**

I used the **income** of the respondents as the second independent variable. There were 12 levels of income, and I regrouped them into 6 levels (<\$20,000, \$20,000-\$39,999, \$40,000-\$59,999, \$60,000-\$79,999, \$80,000-99,999, >=100,000), in order to make the model easier to understand.

The third independent variable was the education level. Figure 1 shows the relative frequencies of the level of education for each generation<sup>6</sup>. There were 5 levels (less than high school, high school diploma, some university/college, university diploma and postgraduate) and I regrouped them into 4 levels. I merged the last two, university diploma and postgraduate studies, into university diploma+, because the latter had few observations and the model improved after the grouping. From Figure 1, we can see that the Millennials and the Post-Millennials have higher levels of educations than the other generations.

Employment information was not available in the GSS (only information about work history and parental leaves).

Figure 1. Estimated frequencies of education levels by generation. Source: GSS 2011



<sup>6</sup> See the definition of the generations in the next sub-section.

**Demographic characteristics:**

The main characteristic of interest from this group was the **age** of the respondents. I created a new variable based on age groups, to define the **generation** of the respondent (Silent, Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Post-Millennials). Note that Post-Millennials were not included in the regression sample, because they were too young and were not yet married.

I had to decide how to define the generations. In general, a generation is a group of individuals who are about the same age and have experienced, most often as children or young adults, specific historical events, such as an economic crisis, an economic boom, a war, or significant political changes. These events may influence their views of the world. It is difficult to find the separation lines between the generations, because they are a complex lens through which to understand societal change, rather than a label with which to oversimplify differences between groups (Dimock 2018).

The definitions used in US studies (Dimock, 2018) (Kurz et al., 2018) are different from the ones used by Statistics Canada<sup>7</sup>. For example, in the US, the generation of Millennials is defined as the cohort that includes anyone born between 1981 and 1996. The next generation, Post-Millennials, is defined as starting with those born in 1997. According to Statistics Canada, the Millennials include anyone born between 1972 and 1992. In my study, I use the definitions from Statistics Canada because I work with Canadian data and I need to be able to compare to other studies for the Canadian population. This generation is often called Generation Y or 'echo of the baby boom.' Interestingly, the generation of the children of the baby boomers was smaller (9.1 million) than the baby boomer generation (9.6 million) in 2011. Baby boomers had fewer children than their parents. Fertility dropped from 3.1 children per woman at the end of the baby

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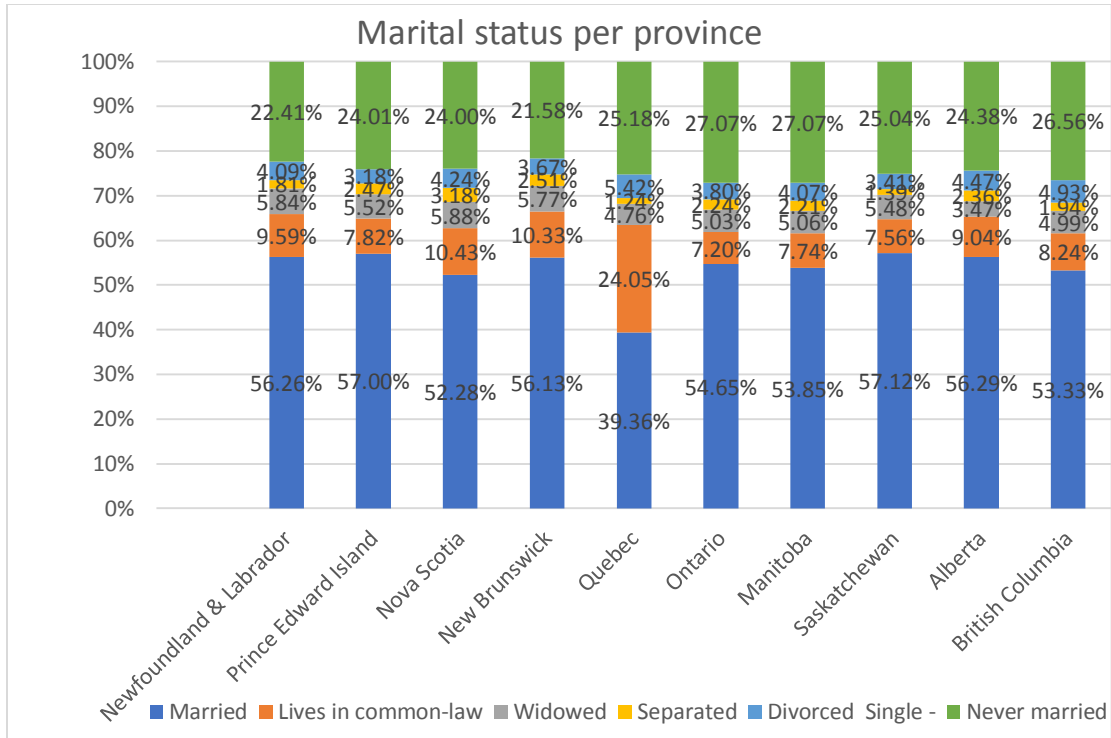
<sup>7</sup> [https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2011/as-sa/98-311-x/98-311-x2011003\\_2-eng.cfm](https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2011/as-sa/98-311-x/98-311-x2011003_2-eng.cfm)

boom (1965) to 1.6 in the mid-1980s. While growing up, many members of the children of baby boomers generation were influenced by changes that affected their parents. These include increases in separation and divorce rates, increases in female labour force participation, increases in institutional day care, and rapid technological change.

Therefore, the way I encoded the generations for the GSS 2011 data is: the Silent generation has ages 66 or more, the Baby Boomers 46 to 65, the Generation X 40 to 45, the Millennials 19 to 39, and the Post-Millennials 18 or less.

The **province of residence** is the last factor that I added to the model. Note that the GSS contains data for the 10 Canadian provinces, but not for the 3 territories (which have a very low population). Figure 2 shows the relative frequencies of the marital status for each province. We can see that Quebec has the highest percentage of people living in a common-law unions (24%) and the lowest percentage of married people (close to 40%), among all the provinces. We will discuss this more in section 5.

Figure 2. Estimated frequencies of marital status by province. Source: GSS 2011



### 4.3 Limitations

There are several limitations in my study, related to characteristics of the available data. One limitation is that the data about decreasing divorce rate does not cover the Millennials for their entire lives since the oldest Millennials are not old enough now. Therefore, we cannot reliably study the long-term trends for their divorce rates.

Another aspect is related to the GSS. Even though it is a representative sample of the Canadian population, it includes data only for the ten provinces, and no data for the three territories.

More limiting for my study is the large amount of missing information about the detailed marital histories. Questions like the age at first marriage and the number of years of cohabitation

before it were not asked from all the respondents of the GSS 2011 for which these questions were relevant (only 1,931 were asked about their age at first marriage and only 1,028 were asked about cohabitation before marriage for the sample of 7,284 women).

Psychological factors are not among the factors I was able to consider. There is a large body of research that investigated the proximate and psychological factors that may lead to divorce (Bradbury et al., 2000). Unsurprisingly, low marital satisfaction is a strong predictor of divorce and infidelity, while incompatibility, and behavioral and relationship problems rank high among the reasons people have given for their divorces (Amato, 2010). Strong reasons for divorce, such as infidelity or violence, have become less often cited, whereas psychological and relational problems, and reasons associated with the division of housework, have increased in importance. These findings are in line with ideas of marital change towards a partnership between equal individuals respecting their personal needs (Cherlin, 2010).

Same-sex marriages and divorces were not included in my study. There were only a small number of same-sex marriages from 2005 when they became legal in Canada: 0.3% same-sex marriages in 2011 according to (Statistics Canada, 2012b). Therefore they were not included in the GSS 2011 sample. A small number of lesbian marriages might have been included in the analysis on the census data, but not gay marriages since I include only the women.

## 5. Results and Discussion

### 5.1 Divorce trends

For studying the change in national marriage and divorce rates, I calculated the number of married women per 1,000 women, and the number of divorced women per 1,000 women, from the 5 Canadian censuses. The results are presented in Figure 3. It shows that there are fewer marriages and more divorces from 1996 to 2016. The number of married women decreased from 1996 to 2016 (from 526 women in 1000 women in 1996 to 468 women in 1000 women in 2016), The number of divorced women increased (from 83 women in 1000 women in 1996 to 101 women in 1000 women in 2016), but the increase is relatively small. The smallest increase is between 2011 and 2016 (from 99 to 101). Figure 3 also shows that the number of women living in common-law unions rose steadily, with a larger increase between 2011 and 2016 (from 115 women in 1000 women in 2011 to 152 women in 1000 women in 2016). The number of women never married and not living in common-law unions increased at a small rate in the 5 census periods (from 252 women in 1000 women in 1996 to 266 women in 1000 women in 2016).

I calculated the number of divorced women per 1,000 women, for four age groups, from the 5 Canadian censuses, and plotted the graph from Figure 4. We can see that the divorce rate for adults under the age of 44 has decreased since 1996 (from 37 women in 1000 women in 1996 to 15 women in 1000 women in 2016). For adults over the age of 45, there is an increasing trend until 2006, then it starts to decline slowly. There is steep and continuous increase for the oldest age group (55+) (from 19 women in 1000 women in 1996 to 58 women in 1000 women in 2016). The figure shows that the divorce rate is declining in Canada for the younger generations, in particular for the generation of the Millennials. However, it is too early to conclude this, because the Millennials are still young and more data will be needed for further studies.

Figure 3. Marriage and divorce trends in the 5 Canadian census years (the number of married women, living in common law, single, and divorced women per 1,000 women). Source: Canadian census 1996, 2001, 2006, 2011, 2016

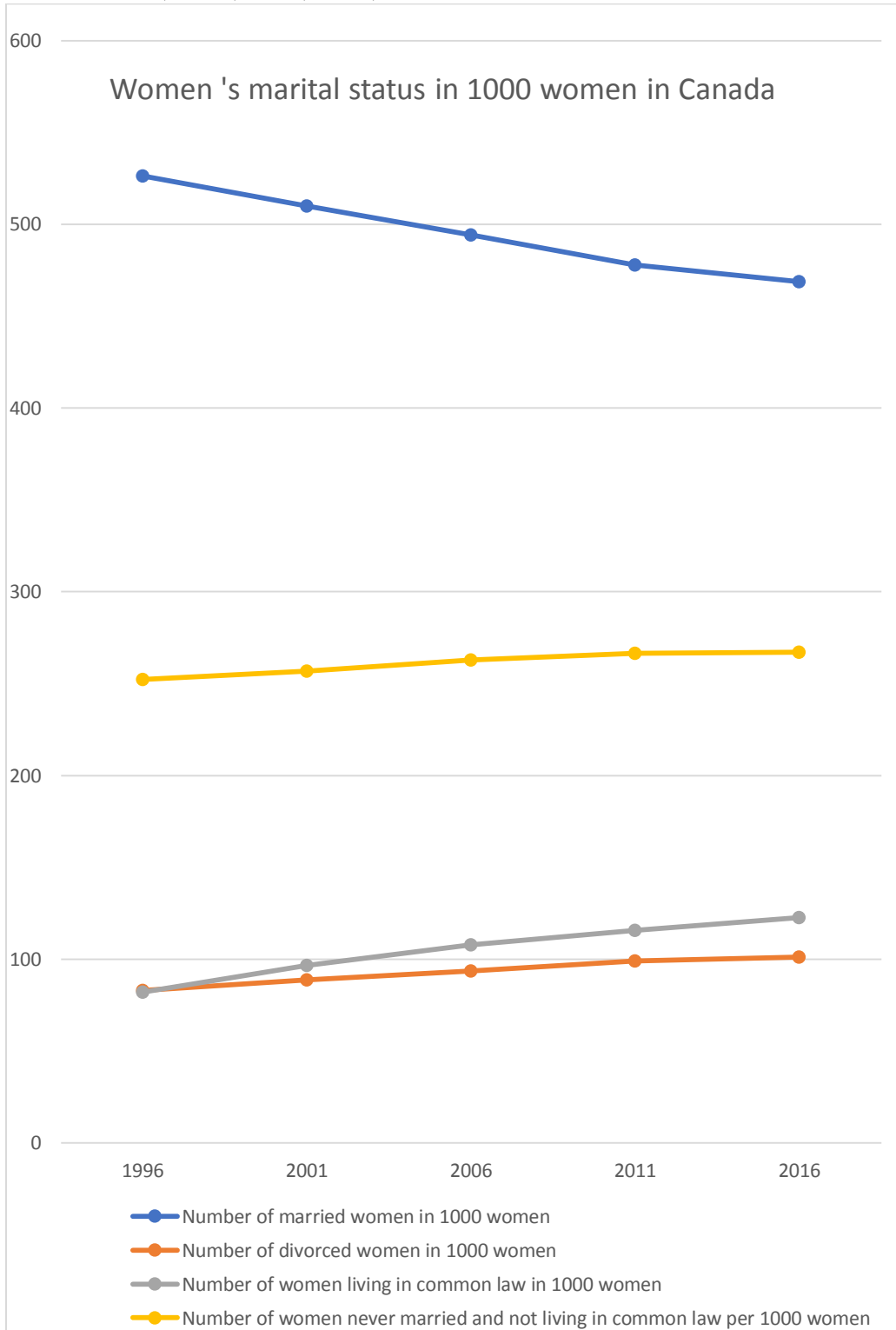
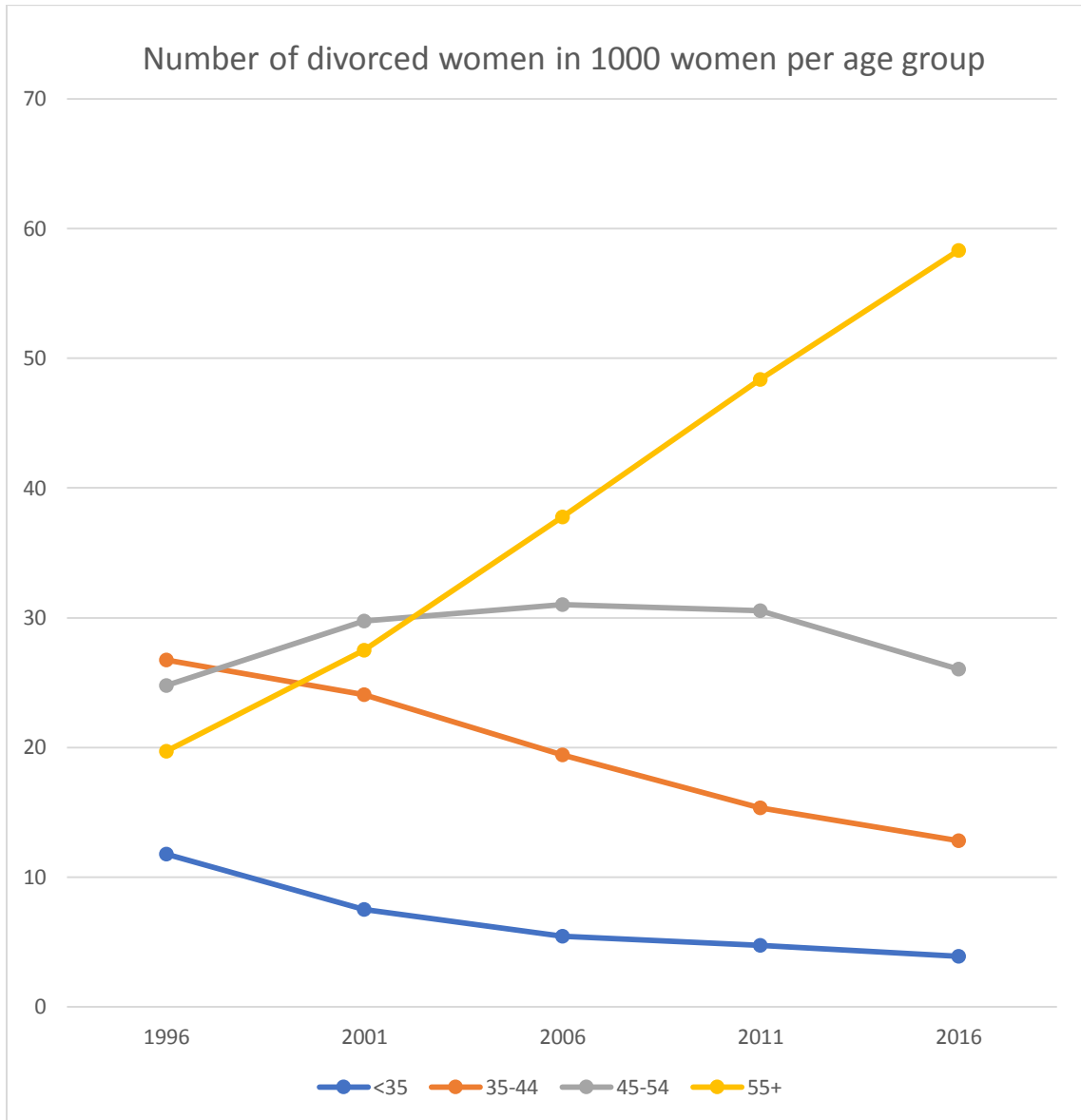


Figure 4. Number of divorced women by age groups. Source: Canadian census 1996, 2001, 2006, 2011, 2016



My results show a decrease in marriage rates, and this is a common trend also in the US (Cohen, 2019) and in the European Union (Eurostat, 2018), (Härkönen, 2013), (Lesthaeghe, 2010). This could be explained by the changing pattern in family formation and living arrangements. In recent decades, the social and legal significance of marriage has decreased. The changes in social norms, such as less stigma associated with non-marital sex and non-marital fertility, increased social acceptance of cohabitation with or without children, which become more normative but less stable, have substantially changed the state of marriage (Lundberg and Pollak, 2015).

The rate of marriage for Millennials is lower than for previous generations (37% for Millennials, 65% for Generation X, and 67% for Baby Boomers, according to my tabulation from the GSS 2011). The Millennials are still starting relationships, but they are trading marriage for cohabitation (Vespa, 2018). There are fewer marriages, but more common-law unions. Common-law couples accounted for 16.7% of all census families, according to the Portrait of Families and Living Arrangements in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2012b). My estimation based on the GSS 2011 was similar, 17% common-law unions. The couples who decide to marry rather than continue living in a common-law relationship might be more stable due to greater selectivity.

Figure 3 shows that the pattern of divorce is slightly increasing when measured on the data from the 5 censuses (1996 to 2016), which confirms the trends for Canada of Margolis et al. (2019). Despite of this slightly rising divorce rate, we observed different trends among the age groups, as shown in Figure 4. The divorce rate for adults under age of 44 has decreased since 1996. For adults over age 45, there is an increasing trend until 2016; then, it starts to decline

slowly. There is a steep and continuous increase for the oldest age group (55+). Similar trends were found in US studies. Brown and Lin (2012) showed that the divorce rate among those aged 50 and older doubled since 1990, suggesting that divorce is declining among younger adults. Cohen (2019) showed that the declining divorce trend in the US is driven by the young adults (the Millennials in particular), despite a dramatic increase for the older generations. Most of the US studies are based on data from the American Community Survey, which is an annual survey. The number of new divorces is easier to estimate because the respondents were asked if they divorced in the past 12 months.

The family unit is a changing concept not only in North America, but also in Europe. Being a member of a family and the expectations people have of family relationships vary with time and space, making it difficult to find a universally agreed and applied definition. Legal alternatives to marriage, like registered partnerships and common-law relationships, have become widespread, and national legislation has changed to confer more rights on unmarried or same-sex couples. Alongside these new legal forms, other forms of non-marital relationships have appeared, making it more difficult for statisticians to collect data that can be compared across countries.

There has been a shift towards common-law living in recent years. This is also visible in my graphs from Figure 3, where the number of common-law unions increased steadily in each of the 5 census years. According to the census data from 2016, over one-fifth of all couples (21.3%) were living in a common-law union.

New data from the GSS 2017 (Statistics Canada, 2019) shows that in 2017, most Canadians aged 25 to 64 are married or live in common-law unions. Of the 19.9 million people aged 25 to 64 in Canada in 2017, the majority were married (56%) or living in a common-law

union (15%). Conversely, 13% had never been married or lived in a common-law union, 6% were separated or divorced from a marriage, 8% were separated from a common-law union and 1% were widowed and not in a new union. Whether in marriages or common-law relationships, women tend to partner at an earlier age than men. According to the 2017 data, women were 28 years old, on average, when they married their current spouse and 31 years old, on average, at the start of their current common-law union. In comparison, men, on average, were aged 30 at the start of their current marriage and 32 years of age when entering their current common-law relationship.

More people now choose to live in a common-law union before marriage. According to (Statistics Canada, 2019), in 2017, 39% of married 25 to 64 year olds lived in a common-law union with their current spouse before tying the knot. This was up from 25% in 2006. Those who had lived in a common-law union with their spouse had done so for an average of 3.6 years prior to marrying, up from 2.5 years in 2006.

The main reasons for which common-law couples decide to get married are shown in Figure 5. 34% of the respondents mentioned cultural, religious or moral reasons, and 33% saw marriage as a way to make the relationship official. Only 8% decided to get married for the reason of having children.

Figure 6 shows the reasons why common-law Canadian couples decide to not get married, as I extracted them from the GSS 2011. 37% of the respondents are happy with their current situation, 23% do not believe in the institution of marriage, 14% are still suffering from past experiences related to separations, and 8% involve wedding costs.

Figure 5. Reasons why common-law couples get married. Source: GSS 2011

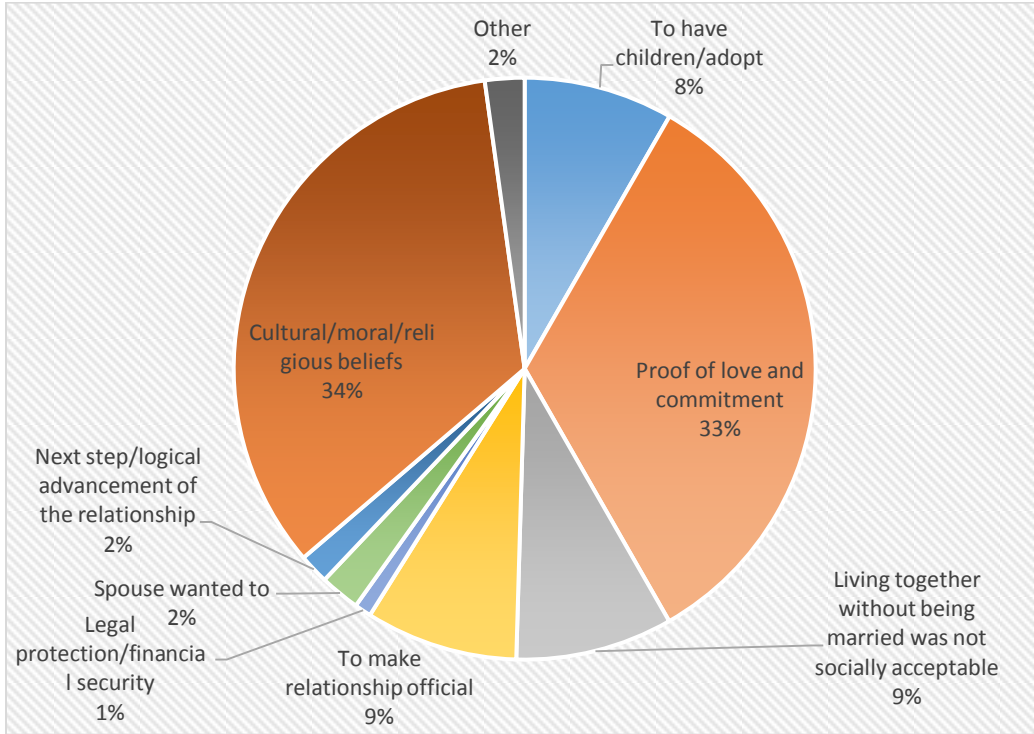


Figure 6. Reasons why common-law couples decide not to get married. Source: GSS 2011

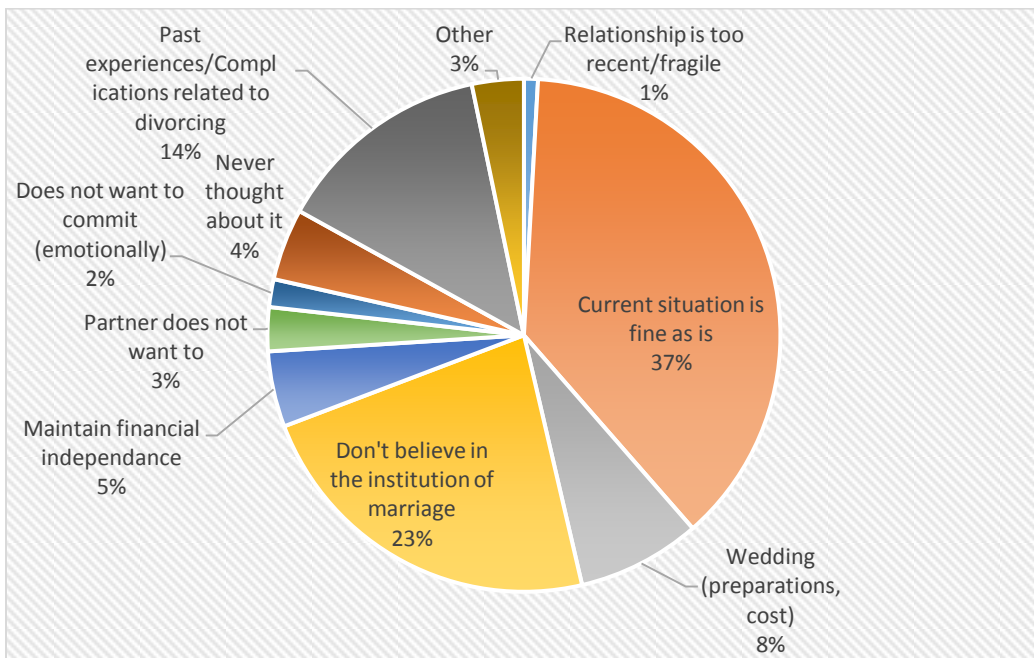


Table 2. Odds Ratios and Standard Errors (SE) from the Logistic Regression Model of the Likelihood of Divorce. Source: GSS 2011

<b>divorced</b>	Odds Ratio	S.E.	
<b>marriage_order</b>			
1st (reference)			
2nd	0.3926428	0.058349	***
3rd+	0.3781421	0.115927	**
<b>income</b>			
<20,000 (reference)			
20,000-39,000	3.524889	0.5628364	***
40,000-59,999	3.214725	0.4981278	***
60,000-79,999	2.335267	0.4087295	***
80,000-99,999	2.922335	0.5079304	***
>=100,000	1.881099	0.4281722	**
<b>education</b>			
< high school (reference)			
high school diploma some	0.694145	0.1046736	*
university/college	1.089733	0.1725784	
university diploma +	0.7425066	0.0936288	*
<b>generation</b>			
Silent (reference)			
Baby Boomers	0.861184	0.0893019	
Generation X	0.7614666	0.1184497	
Millennials	0.3436201	0.0507833	***
<b>Province</b>			
Newfoundland & Labrador (reference)			
Prince Edward Island	1.205423	0.3271776	
Nova Scotia	1.860047	0.4288938	**
New Brunswick	0.9696449	0.2414771	
Quebec	1.708453	0.333351	**
Ontario	1.442518	0.2755385	
Manitoba	1.17577	0.2964203	
Saskatchewan	1.042077	0.2417337	
Alberta	1.551327	0.3183709	*
British Columbia	1.88052	0.3835547	**
_cons	0.0869122	0.0203127	

N = 6,053 weighted \* p < 0.05 \*\* p < 0.01 \*\*\* p < 0.001

Robust standarderrors

Pseudo R2 = 0.0674

## 5.2 Marital biography factors

In order to analyze the factors that impact the divorce rates across generations, I built a logistic model with data from the GSS 2011 (Cycle #25 Family). The resulting model is presented in Table 2. My logistic regression model shows that marital, economic, and demographic factors influence the odds of divorce in Canada<sup>8</sup>.

The model indicates that higher marriage orders decrease the odds of divorce significantly. For 2nd marriages, it is 61% less likely to divorce as compared to first marriages, and similarly for 3rd marriages (slightly higher, 62.2%). The decreased odds of divorce for higher order marriages is not surprising since those in higher order marriages have been married before; therefore, they have already undergone some form of marriage disruption (divorce or the death of a spouse), and they might not want to experience a similar disruption again. The lower odds of divorce for higher order marriages could also be explained by greater selectivity when re-marrying. However, US studies showed the opposite: higher order marriages were more likely to end through divorce than first marriages (Sweeney, 2010). The author hypothesized that it could be the case that those who divorced in the past presumably are willing to divorce again, whereas a fraction of those in their first marriage is unwilling to ever divorce. The opposite trend could be a difference between patterns in the US and Canada, also confirmed by (Clark and Crompton 2006).

Most studies were focused only on women, except (Brown and Lin, 2012). They showed that marital biographies may have differential associations with women's and men's risks of

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<sup>8</sup> My model shows some significant effects, but it does not seem to fit the data very well. The pseudo R2 score is 0.0674, showing that it only explains 6.74% of the variance. It could become higher if additional dependent variables can be included, such as the duration of the marriage and number of years of cohabitation before marriage.

divorce, as women are less likely than men to remarry after divorce and women are more likely to marry older men (on US data).

### 5.3 Socioeconomic factors

My logistic regression model shows the influence of the economic factors income level and education. Income levels affect the odds of divorce a lot. It is about 3 times higher for income ranges of \$20,000-\$59,999, and only about 2 times for higher incomes. The risk decreases as the income is higher. For education, the statistical significance was lower ( $p < 0.05$ ). It seems that obtaining a high school diploma decreases the odds of divorce compared with those not finishing high school (with 30%). For those with some university or college studies, the model does not show a correlation. For those who have a university degree or higher, the odds of divorce are lower by 26%.

Socio-economic factors related to divorce have been widely discussed in the literature. The starting point for practically all research is that the spouses' socio-economic resources have different influences. This assumption is often based on an economic approach to family life, which sees economic resources as an exchange for unpaid domestic work and in which the spouses roles are complementary (Becker, 1981). In practice, this perspective predicts that man's socioeconomic resources—such as education, employment, and earnings—stabilize marriages, whereas women's resources destabilize them.

The relationship between female education and marital stability is a case in point. Nonetheless, in the United States, women with higher levels of education have had lower rates of divorce for a long time and this gap is growing (Martin, 2006).

In North America, society places a high value on post-secondary education. This encourages young adults to stay in school longer and delay entering the workforce. This delay is

often a setback for financial stability, an aspiration many people want to achieve before starting a family. Due to this, the average age of marriage in Canada has increased, where women marry around age 28 and men around age 30 (Statistics Canada, 2019).

Financial autonomy allows older women to consider divorce as a viable alternative to remaining married. Thus, gender and economic resources have interactive effects on the risk of divorce.

In modern families, the spouses' division of labor, their overall financial resources, and the wife's ability to support herself in the event of divorce are associated with the risk of divorce; these associations have changed after 1975 (Killewald, 2016). Many explanations point to the change in gender roles—from gender asymmetry to increasing gender symmetry and equality—and, in particular, to the dramatic increases in married women's labour market activity. The trends in female employment and in divorce rates have closely followed one another and a positive relationship between the two is also visible (Cherlin, 2010). Most researchers have interpreted the causality to run from female employment to divorce. A problem with this interpretation is that the micro-level evidence regarding this link is not conclusive (Kennedy and Ruggles 2014). Other economic explanations have focused on the relative deterioration of men's economic fortunes in many countries. The man does not always need to be the bread winner in modern families (Stevenson and Wolfers, 2007).

My model showed that women with university diplomas or postgraduate studies have lower odds of divorce. For medium income, the odds of divorce increase, while for high levels they are lower. This is in line with recent results reported by other researchers. Lundberg and Pollak (2015) argue that the sources of gains from marriage have changed in such a way that families with high incomes and high levels of education have the greatest incentives to maintain

long-term relationships. As women's educational attainment has overtaken that of men, and as the ratio of men's to women's wages has fallen, traditional patterns of gender specialization in household and market work have weakened. The primary source of gains from marriage has shifted from production of household services to investment in children.

#### 5.4 Demographic characteristics

The **demographic characteristics** of age and province of residence had an influence on the divorce rates, according to my logistic regression model from Table 2.

Across generations, the odds of divorce decrease, but the model cannot show significant influence, except for the Millennials. For them, the odds of divorce are significantly lower. Relative to the Silent generation, the odds that Millennials divorce are 66% less likely. Cohen (2019) shows similar patterns for the Millennials in US. His study shows that the divorce trend in the last decade has been driven by younger women, despite higher divorce rates among older women than in the past, because marriage became more selective and more stable, even as attitudes toward divorce became more permissive, and cohabitation grew less stable. The US is progressing toward a system in which marriage is rarer, and more stable, than it was in the past. Cohen goes even further to predict that the divorce rate for the Millennials will continue to decrease. That is, they might not divorce as they grow older, due to a different pattern of family formation: newly married couples shifted toward more protective characteristics (such as higher education, older ages at marriage, and lower rates of higher-order marriages). Cohen also warns that there might be an increasingly central component of the structure of social inequality: lower income millennials might have to live with their parents for longer periods than young people in

previous generations; they might not afford to buy a house and they might not afford to enter into marriage.

For the province of residence, the logistic regression model showed that the odds of divorce were higher in British Columbia (1.88 times higher as compared to the reference of Newfoundland & Labrador), Nova Scotia (1.86), Quebec (1.7), and Alberta (1.5). For the other six provinces, the model could not find a difference.

In Quebec, the risk of divorce is high, but at the same time, there are fewer marriages in Quebec than in the other provinces, because the number of common-law unions is the highest (Statistics Canada, 2012, 2019). Figure 2 also shows that Quebec has the lowest percentage of married people (40%) compared to the other provinces (where it is 52-57%) and the highest percentage of people living in common-law unions (24% vs. 10-12%).

Quebec can be considered the “capital of common-law unions”, with more people living in common law than in the other Canadian provinces (Le Bourdais et al., 2005), (Lardoux and Pelletier, 2014). In 2017, there were 31% common-law unions in Quebec, compared to 15% in the Atlantic provinces, 11% in British Columbia, 10% in Ontario, and 9% in the Prairie provinces (Statistics Canada, 2019). This increased number of non-marital cohabitation (which are more likely to dissolve) masks the overall instability of couple relationships.

## 6. Conclusion and Future Work

### 6.1. Conclusion

This paper investigated the recent family formation and divorce trends in Canada. There was a decrease in the number of marriages that could be explained in part by the increase in the number of common-law unions and the number of people choosing to not live in a couple. The divorce rates increased from 1996 to 2016, but the increase is small between 2011 and 2016.

I analyzed the divorce trends by age group and generation and showed that despite a slightly increasing divorce rate in recent years, there is a decline in divorce rates for the younger generations, in particular for the Millennials.

I also investigated the factors that influence divorce trends. According to my regression model, the odds of divorce are the lowest for younger women (in particular the generation of Millennials), with high levels of education that allow them to reach financial stability.

Knowing the trends that I presented in this study can have possible implications for social and economic programs, as well as for health care policies, at federal and provincial level.

In general, divorce has negative consequences for the two partners and for their children (if there are any). A decline in economic well-being after divorce is inevitable, and women's economic status is often more affected. Women are more likely to retain custody of the children after divorce (80% of the lone-parent families in Canada were female lone-parent families in 2011). Governments could provide targeted support for single parent families and improve child support policies. Women might have greater difficulty reintegrating back into the labour force; special policies could be developed to help them return to employment after divorce.

Divorce also impacts the health status of the family members. Children who experience divorce and its economic consequences often suffer from problems, such as deviance and health

problems, reduced educational and occupational attainment and even barriers to social mobility (Amato, 2000).

The rise in divorce among middle-aged and older adults is not only likely to shape the health and well-being of those who experience it directly but also to have ramifications for the well-being of family members (e.g., children and grandchildren) and intensify the demands placed on the broader institutional support systems available to middle-aged and older adults (Brown and Lin, 2012). Mitigating the effects of the increased number of late-life divorces may require coordinated responses through public health or policy initiatives.

## 6.2 Future work

My logistic regression model is based on data from 2011 because a more recent version of the GSS Cycle #31, Family, 2017 was not yet released by Statistics Canada (except for the aggregate statistics). An overview was released in February 2019, but the full data was not made available yet. My first data source (census data) contains more recent information, till 2016, but only about the marital status. It does not have the level of details about marital histories that I need for analyzing the factors that affect the odds of divorce. Therefore, in future work, I plan to rebuild my regression model on the new data from the GSS 2017 Cycle #31 Family as soon as it will become available.

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