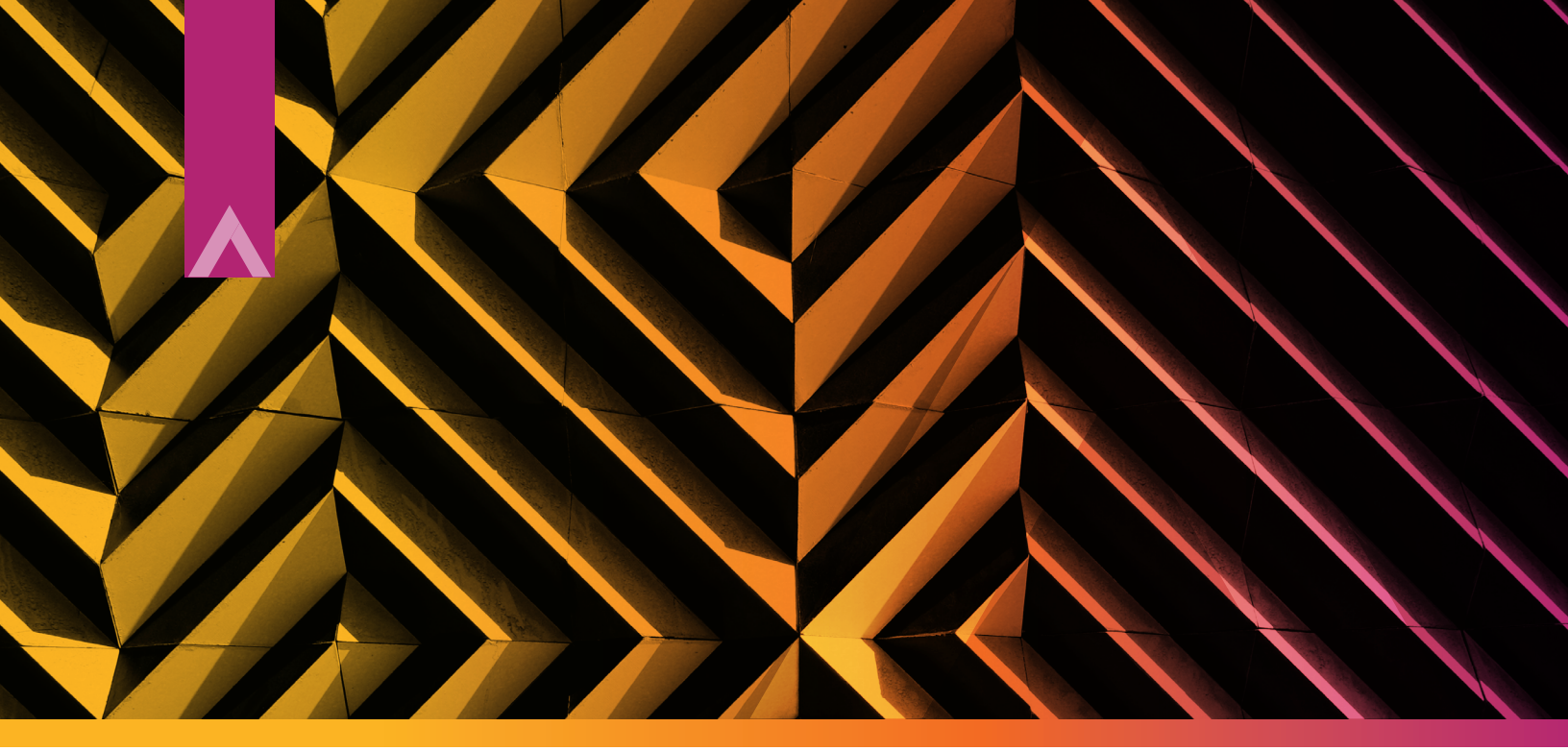

The Canadian Married Family Index

The Uneven Decline of Marriage Across Canada

Peter Jon Mitchell and Jeneya Ko

September 2026

A Cardus Research Report

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Mitchell, Peter Jon, and Jeneya Ko. "The Canadian Married Family Index: The Uneven Decline of Marriage Across Canada." Cardus, 2026. https://www.cardus.ca/research/family/reports/the-canadian-married-family-index.

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cardus.ca

𝕏@cardusca

Head Office: 1 Balfour Drive, Hamilton, ON L9C 7A5

info@cardus.ca

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About the Authors



PETER JON MITCHELL is director of the Family Program at Cardus. Peter Jon has been researching and writing about Canadian families and public policy for nearly two decades. His current research interests include the challenges young adults face in forming families, and the relationship between public policy and children and their families. He co-authored the book, *I . . . Do? Why Marriage Still Matters*, and his articles have appeared in the *National Post*, *Toronto Sun*, and the *Financial Post*, among other publications. Peter Jon holds a ThM and MTS from Tyndale Seminary and a degree in history and political science from the University of Western Ontario.



JENEYA KO is a researcher at Cardus. Jeneya holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Alberta, where she specialized in Economics, Finance, and Sociology. She also studied abroad at the University of Sheffield and the London School of Economics in the United Kingdom. She is passionate about translating data and research into practical insights that can guide policy decisions and improve everyday life for Canadians. She is motivated by her faith and a desire to see individuals and communities flourish.

About Cardus Family

Cardus Family conducts, compiles, and disseminates research on family stability and healthy marriage, and their strengthening impact on civil society. We envision public policy and social institutions that support flexibility for families to make the best decisions for their children.

Key Points

- The married family structure is the most common family form for raising children among Canada's diverse families.
- A complex mix of cultural and economic stressors over decades have contributed to the decline of the married family as a portion of all family forms.
- Empirical evidence suggests that marriage is correlated to economic advantages, increased social mobility, and better health and well-being. In general, children born in married parent families have lower involvement in risk behaviours and higher levels of educational attainment.
- The Married Family Index examines the tempo of change in the prevalence of married families over a twenty-year period from 2001 to 2021 in each province and territory. The index compares provinces and territories to themselves rather than to a single national standard.
- The results demonstrate a general decline in the married family structure, but that this decline has occurred unevenly across the country.
- In general, Ontario and the provinces to the west of that province showed the smallest change in index scores compared to the provinces to the east of Ontario.
- Alberta's index score declined 8 points between 2001 and 2021, the smallest decline among all provinces and territories. Nunavut had the largest index score change, declining almost 30 points between 2001 and 2021.
- What might be the long-term effect of the decline of married families, particularly for those who desire to marry in the future? What supporting structures are necessary to help all families thrive, and what barriers exist across Canada that prevent and delay the transition into married life?

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Introduction

Canadian families are diverse,[1] but the married family structure remains the most common family form for raising children and the most common way in which parents integrate emotional intimacy and economic cooperation within a commitment that is intended to be permanent.[2] Married couples tend to be less prone to dissolution. Yet the married family structure has been affected by a complex mix of cultural and economic stressors over decades, which have contributed to married families' decline as a portion of all family forms.

A wealth of evidence suggests that being married is correlated with improved health and wellbeing,[3] economic advantages,[4] and increased social mobility[5] for the adults, and improved outcomes for children, including lower involvement in risk behaviours and higher levels of educational attainment.[6] Most children in Canada are born to married women.[7]

Most young adults aspire to marry and have children, but many struggle to achieve the stable family life they would like to have. Cardus research shows that while many Canadian women and men report wanting children, about one in two report that at the end of their reproductive years they have fewer children than they wanted. This research also reveals that the gap between desired family size and achieved family size is correlated with the adults' lower sense of well-being.[8]

Canadians transitioning into family life are experiencing challenges, including lack of affordable, family-friendly housing, precarious employment prospects, and a high cost of living. In addition, young Canadian adults perceive a tension between personal development and increased demands of parenthood.[9] Many young adults simply don't feel ready for the family life they say they want someday.

In light of the challenges that young Canadian adults face in entering marriage, and the decline of the portion of adults who are married, this paper examines the tempo of change in the prevalence of married families over a twenty-year period in each province and territory, resulting in a Married Family Index.

1 Statistics Canada, *The Diversity of Families in Canada*. Complete citations are provided for all sources at the end of this report.

2 Wilcox and Marquardt, *State of Our Unions*. This paper uses the Statistics Canada definition of marriage, that is, legally married persons who are not separated, persons in civil unions, and (beginning in 2006) same-sex married persons. Legal married unions are distinguished from common-law unions in this paper.

3 Martinuk, "Marriage Is Good."

4 Mrozek and Mitchell, *I …Do?*, 35.

5 Winship and Díaz, *Re-Centering Family Structure*.

6 Brown, "Marriage and Child Well-Being"; Ribar, "Why Marriage Matters."

7 Statistics Canada, "Live Births, by Marital Status of Mother."

8 Stone, "Home Alone."

9 Stone, "Home Alone."

Methodology

The Married Family Index measures three variables: the total fertility rate, the portion of Canadians aged 25 to 54 who are married, and the portion of children aged 0 to 14 who live with married parents. Data for the index was drawn from Census years 2001, 2006, 2011, 2016, and 2021.

The chosen variables are similar to those used in the US-based Family Structure Index, published by the Institute for Family Studies.[10] The Cardus index is different in two meaningful ways. First, the parameters used in our index were aligned with established Canadian Census categories. Second, our methodology is designed to compare results to province/territory baselines rather than a national baseline. As a result, the Married Family Index scores are not comparable to the index in the US.

The Married Family Index uses 2001 as the base year for each province and territory. The following formula was used for each of the three variables, for the subsequent Census years:

$$(\text{current provincial value} / 2001 \text{ provincial value}) \times 100.$$

The geometric mean of the three values was used to determine the index score for each province for a given year. This method allows for a more holistic representation, as index scores with one or two low variables alongside a high variable will be penalized more than an index score with three moderately high variables, even if their arithmetic mean is identical.

Rationale for the Selected Variables

Total Fertility Rate

The total fertility rate (TFR) is an estimate of the average number of children that a woman is projected to have over her lifetime. This standard measure allows for comparison across provinces and over time.[11] A TFR of 2.1 is the rate at which a population replaces itself without immigration. Canada is among the lowest of low fertility countries in the world, with a TFR of 1.25 in 2024.[12]

The TFR is used in the Married Family Index since the majority of children are born to married mothers in most of the country (with some exceptions that we will discuss).[13] Marriage remains positively correlated with childbearing.[14]

10 Wilcox, Zill, and Baily, "Family Structure Index."

11 Statistics Canada, "Data Quality, Concepts and Methodology."

12 Statistics Canada, "Canada's Total Fertility Rate."

13 Statistics Canada, "Live Births, by Marital Status of Mother."

14 Stone and James, "Demonstrating the Link Between Marriage and Fertility."

Portion of Adults Aged 25 to 54 Who Are Married

The mean age of first marriage in Canada was 31.2 years in 2020, the most recent year for which data are available.[15] The average age at which women give birth was 31.4 years in Census year 2021.[16] The index's age range of 25 to 54 represents the span during which Canadians tend to marry and have children.

Portion of Children Aged 0 to 14 with Married Parents

A large majority of children living in married-parent families live in intact families, that is, they live with their birth or adoptive parents. In 2021, about 93 percent of children aged 0 to 14 in married-parent families were in an intact family. In comparison, about 71 percent of children in cohabiting families live in intact families.[17] The portion of children aged 0 to 14 with married parents captures both intact families and stepfamilies, as the Census began distinguishing between intact and stepfamilies partway through our study period in 2011.

Results

The results demonstrate a general decline in the married family structure, as the 2021 index scores are lower than the 2001 scores in every province and territory (figure 1). There are some notable fluctuations in the overall trend. Two outliers, British Columbia and Alberta, exceeded the baseline in 2006 before declining over the next three Census cycles. Upon further analysis, we find that these two provinces had a substantial increase in their TFR in 2006, while the portion of children living with married parents remaining relatively stable and the portion of married adults declined slightly. We also find that while the Northwest Territories had an even larger increase in TFR in 2006, the other two variables decreased considerably, lowering the overall score (table 1). Interestingly, as the years progressed, British Columbia's score ended in the middle of the pack at 87.43, whereas Alberta's score remained the highest of all the provinces and territories for the entire period, ending at 91.56 in 2021.

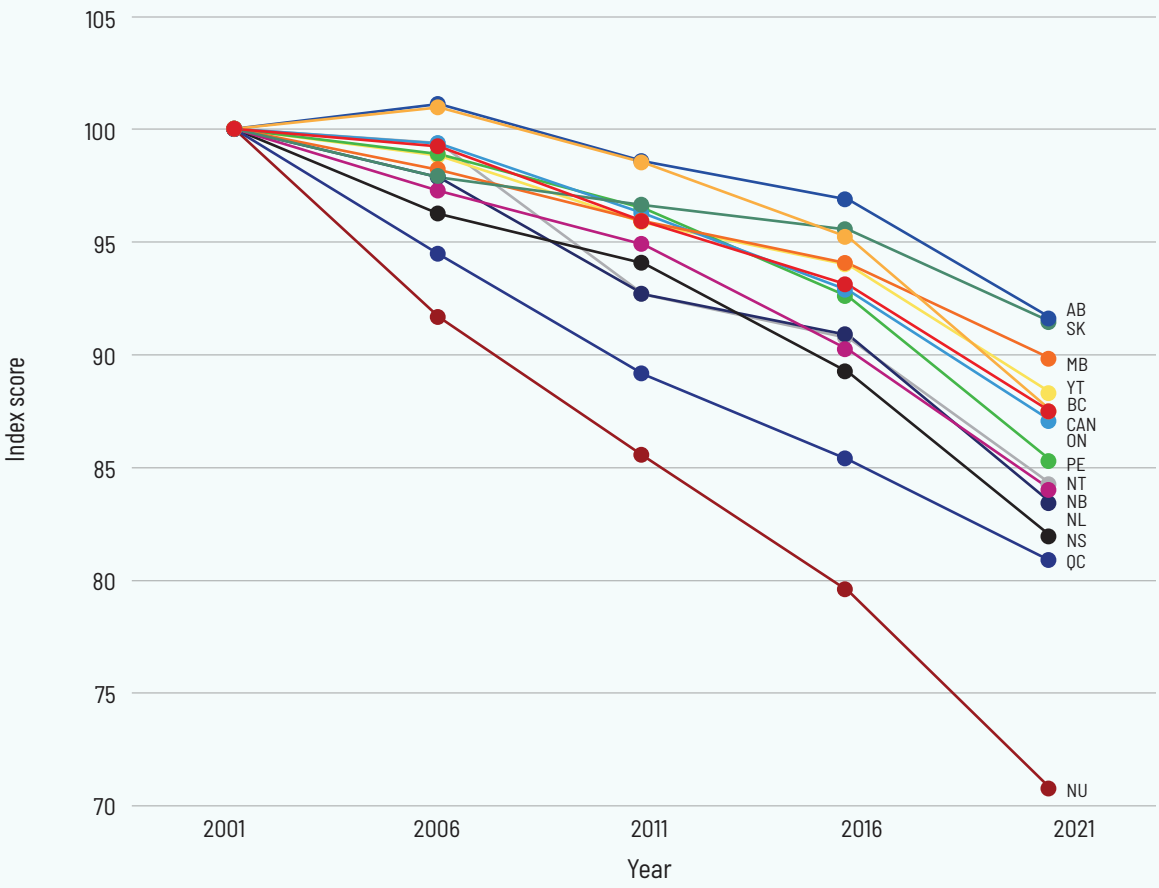
Two other notable outliers are Nunavut and Quebec. Changes in their TFR over the years were modest, averaging a decrease of 0.02 children per year for Nunavut and an increase of 0.02 children per year for Quebec over the total study period. Changes in the portion of children aged 0 to 14 living with married parents, and the portion of adults aged 25 to 54 who are married, decreased much more aggressively. Hence, the overall scores for Nunavut and Quebec display a steeper decline than scores for other parts of Canada. Nunavut had the largest overall change in score from 2001 to 2021, declining 29.34 points.

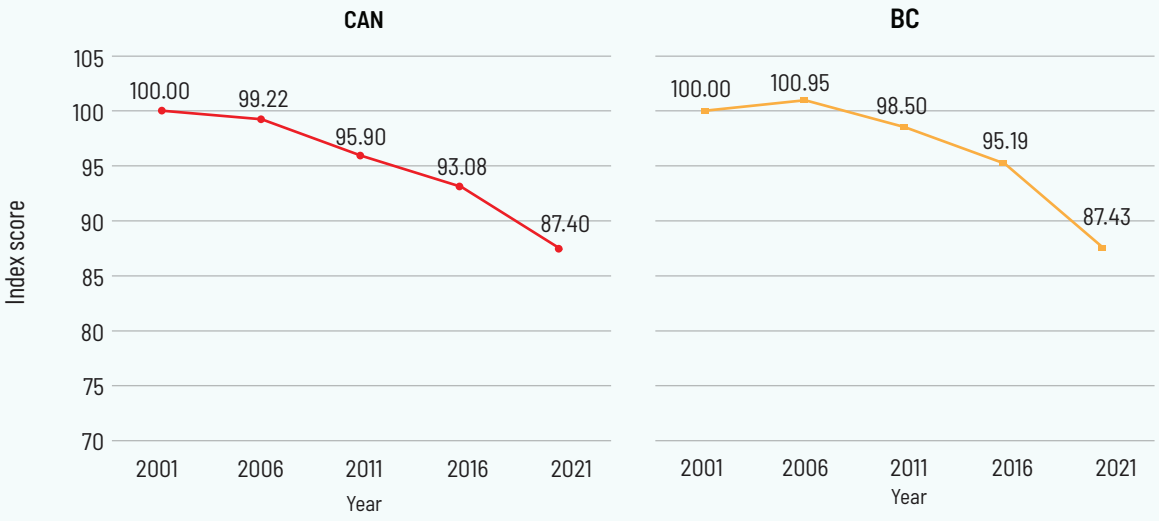
15 Statistics Canada, "Mean Age and Median Age."

16 Statistics Canada, "Mean Age of Mother."

17 Statistics Canada, "Customized Census Family Structure."

Figure 1. Married Family Index, by Region, 2001–21





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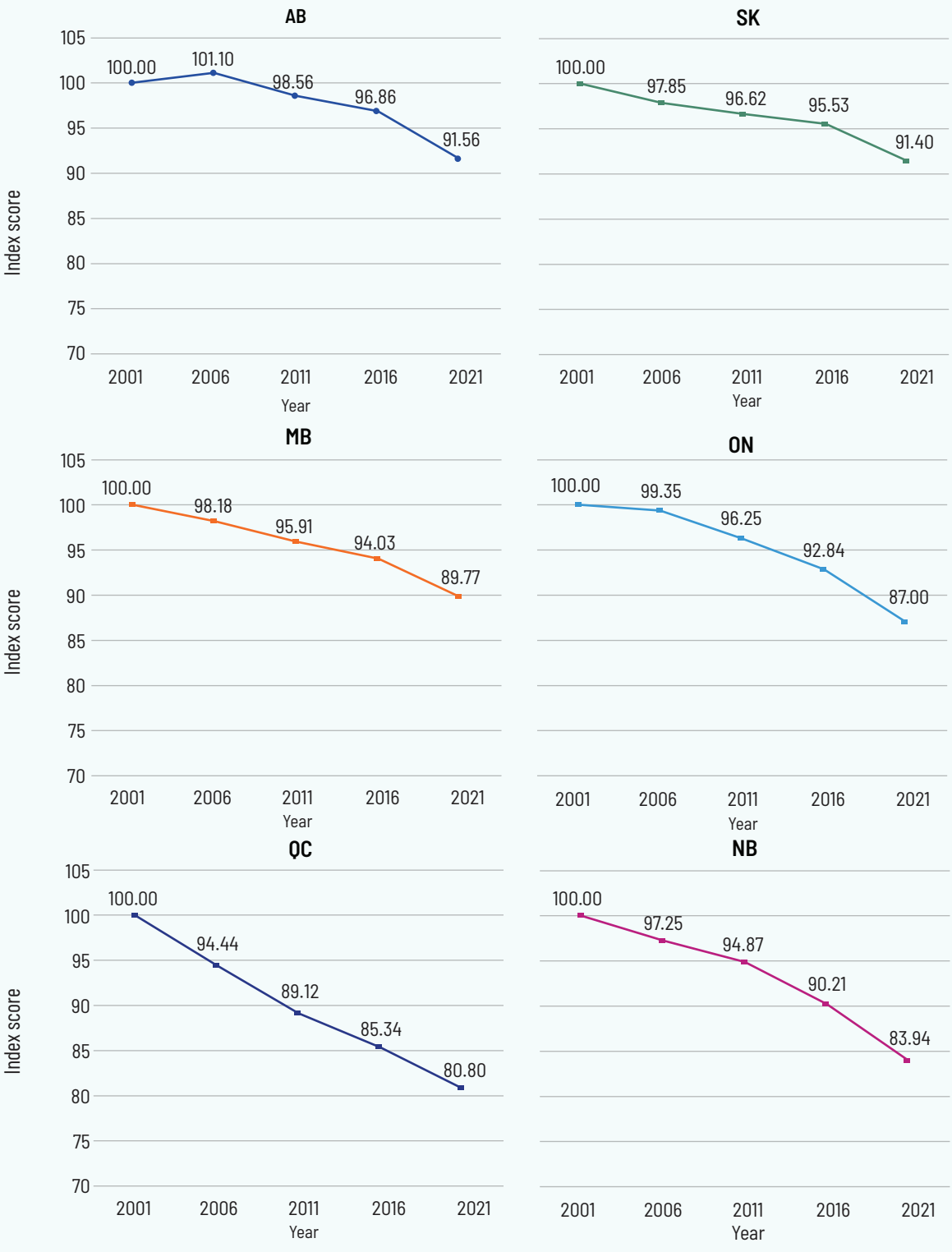

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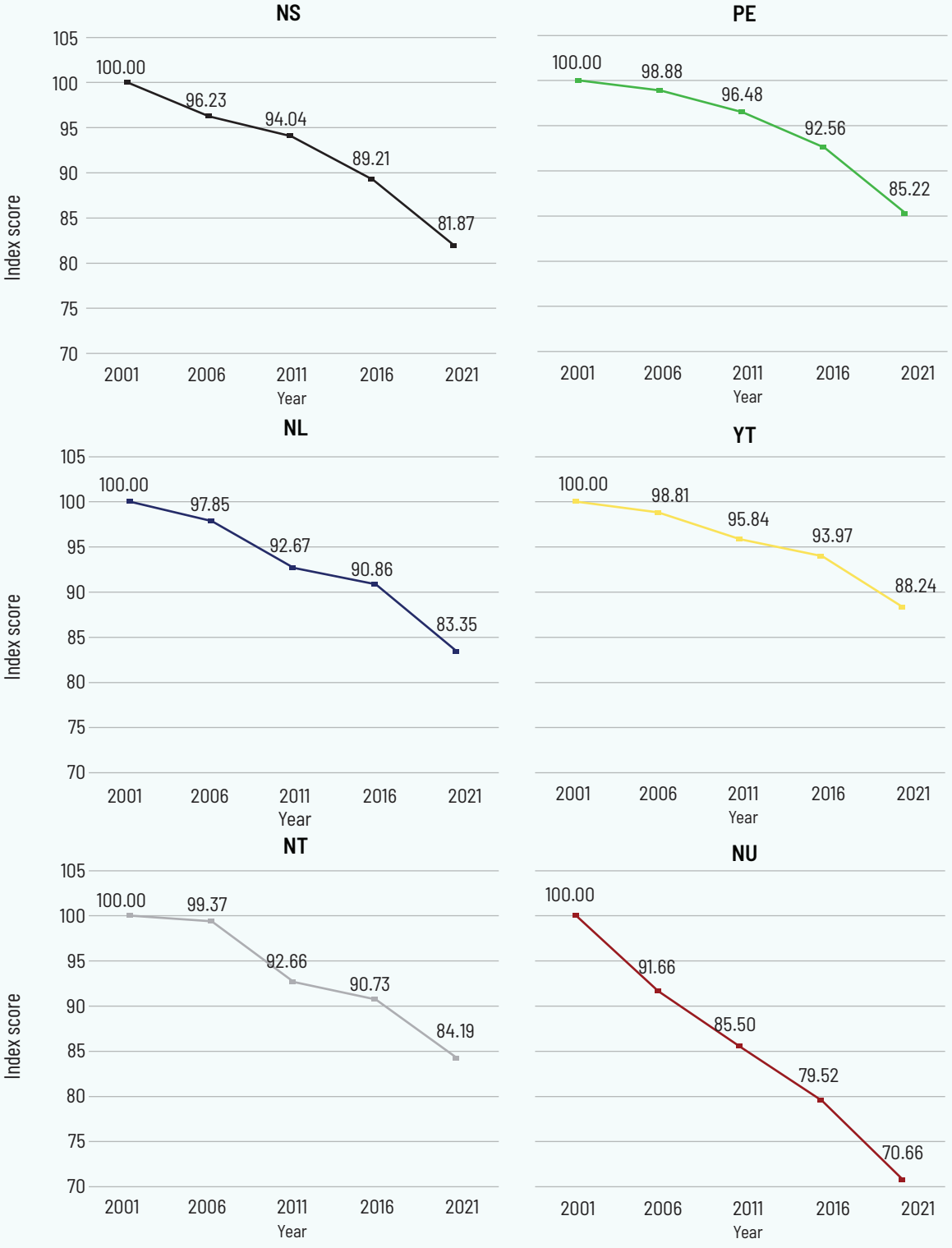


Sources: Authors' analysis of Statistics Canada, "Fertility Indicators, Provinces and Territories: Interactive Dashboard"; Statistics Canada, "Customized Census Family Structure for Children Aged 0 to 14 in Private Households of Canada, Provinces and Territories, 2016 and 2021"; Statistics Canada, selected Census data tables.

Table 1. Actual Change in Total Fertility Rate, and Changes in Index Scores for Portion of Children Ages 0–14 Living with Married Parents, and Portion of Adults Aged 25–54 Who Are Married

	Actual change in total fertility rate				Portion of children aged 0–14 living with married parents				Portion of adults aged 25–54 who are married			
	2006	2011	2016	2021	2006	2011	2016	2021	2006	2011	2016	2021
CAN	**0.09**	**0.00**	**-0.04**	**-0.15**	**-1.80**	**-3.00**	**-1.30**	**-2.20**	**-2.99**	**-2.95**	**-2.20**	**-2.57**
BC	0.07	-0.02	-0.07	-0.20	0.00	-1.00	-1.20	-3.00	-1.17	-2.57	-1.93	-2.80
AB	0.14	-0.04	-0.03	-0.19	-0.80	-1.20	-1.00	-1.90	-2.25	-2.19	-1.21	-1.47
SK	0.01	0.08	0.02	-0.13	-4.20	-1.50	-0.70	-1.40	-0.47	-3.27	-1.86	-2.35
MB	0.07	-0.01	0.02	-0.13	-3.30	-1.70	-2.40	-1.40	-2.74	-2.28	-1.83	-2.47
ON	0.05	-0.02	-0.05	-0.14	-1.30	-2.30	-1.90	-2.70	-2.10	-3.01	-2.76	-3.13
QC	0.15	0.03	-0.02	-0.09	-6.60	-3.90	-1.70	-1.30	-5.44	-3.75	-2.54	-2.31
NB	0.07	0.09	-0.01	-0.11	-4.10	-3.70	-4.20	-2.80	-4.07	-3.98	-3.63	-4.25
NS	0.01	0.10	-0.05	-0.19	-3.20	-4.20	-2.90	-2.00	-4.33	-3.82	-3.82	-3.90
PE	0.10	0.02	-0.03	-0.21	-2.50	-3.80	-2.80	-1.30	-3.87	-1.84	-3.64	-4.78
NL	0.11	-0.01	0.07	-0.10	-4.60	-4.40	-2.40	-4.80	-5.11	-5.18	-3.76	-5.24
YT	0.03	0.06	-0.13	-0.21	-0.20	-2.50	1.60	-0.20	-2.34	-3.47	-0.34	-1.54
NT	0.26	-0.20	-0.05	-0.23	-3.50	-2.10	0.20	-1.90	-3.66	-2.81	-1.66	-1.98
NU	-0.15	-0.07	0.19	-0.04	-4.70	-4.70	-5.70	-5.90	-4.41	-2.58	-4.12	-4.24

Sources: Authors' analysis of Statistics Canada, "Fertility Indicators, Provinces and Territories: Interactive Dashboard"; Statistics Canada, "Customized Census Family Structure for Children Aged 0 to 14 in Private Households of Canada, Provinces and Territories, 2016 and 2021"; Statistics Canada, selected Census data tables.
Note: Change in fertility rate is based on the fertility rate displayed in the Census prior. Table shows change since previous Census year.

It should be remembered that indexes were made with a provincial base and not a national base. Hence, a change in score represents how well a province or territory is doing compared to how well that province or territory was doing in 2001.

All provinces and territories experienced a sharp decline in scores between 2016 and 2021.This decline may be related to the COVID-19 pandemic in such areas as the economic downturn, difficulty accessing services associated with marriage and divorce, and general uncertainty (figures 2, 3, and 4). The country experienced a notable decline in fertility during the pandemic,[18] as some couples delayed having children amid the uncertainty of the times. There was a significant decline in the number of marriages and divorces registered in 2020, the most recent year for which data are available.[19] Economic uncertainty and reduced access to legal services may have contributed to fewer divorces in 2020 compared to previous years. Similarly, economic

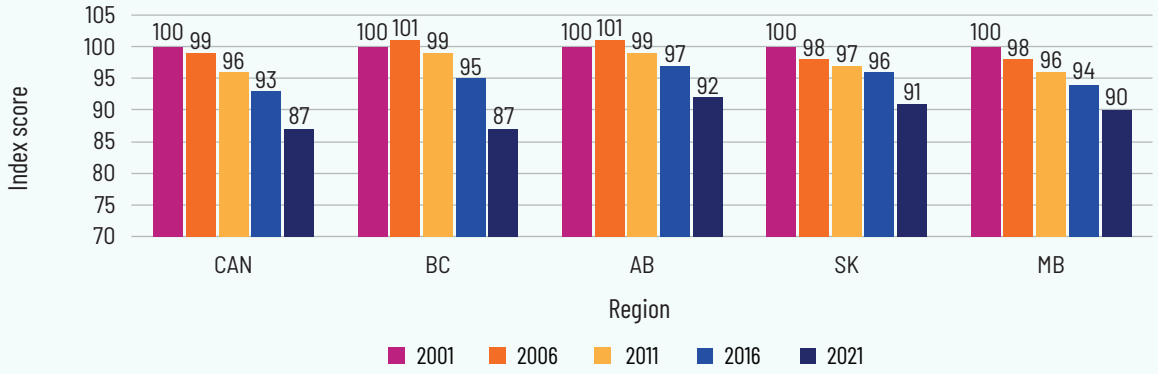
18 Fostik and Galbraith, "Changes in Fertility Intentions."

19 Statistics Canada, "Number of Marriages and Nuptiality Indicators."

uncertainty and restrictions on public gatherings may have contributed to fewer registered marriages in 2020. The decline in registered marriages may have had a small effect on the overall portion of adults aged 25 to 54 who were married in 2021.

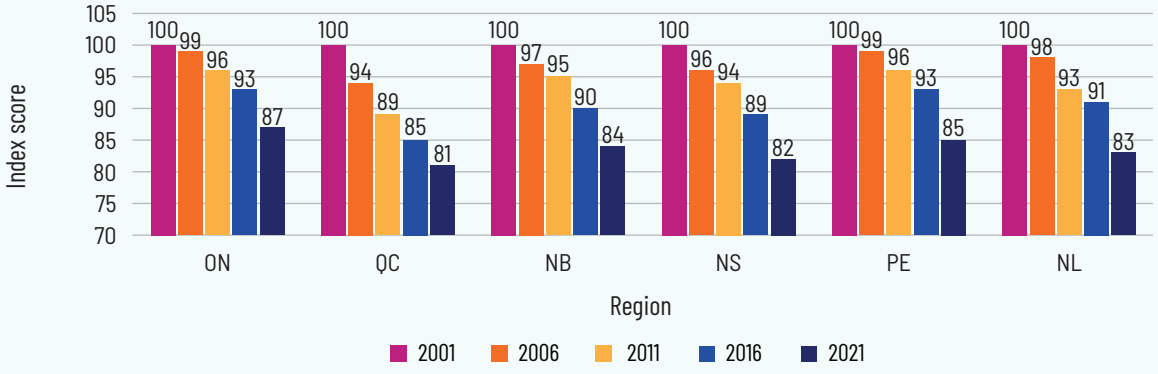
Nunavut had the largest score decline, decreasing 29.34 points between 2001 and 2021. The waning score was largely due to the significant decrease in the portion of children living with married parents and the notable decline in the portion of married adults. These declines coincided with an increase in the portion of cohabiting couples across the country during the years studied. The territory had the highest absolute TFR in the country, which fluctuated during the years studied. The relatively high fertility in Nunavut is owing in part to the lower average age of the population, compared to other parts of Canada. In 2001, the absolute TFR in Nunavut was 3.07, which then declined until it reached 2.85 in 2011, and was followed by an increase to 3.00 in 2021. To put Nunavut's TFR in perspective, no other part of Canada exceeded a TFR of 2.15 in the period studied.

Figure 2. Married Family Index, Canada, Western and Central Provinces, 2001–21



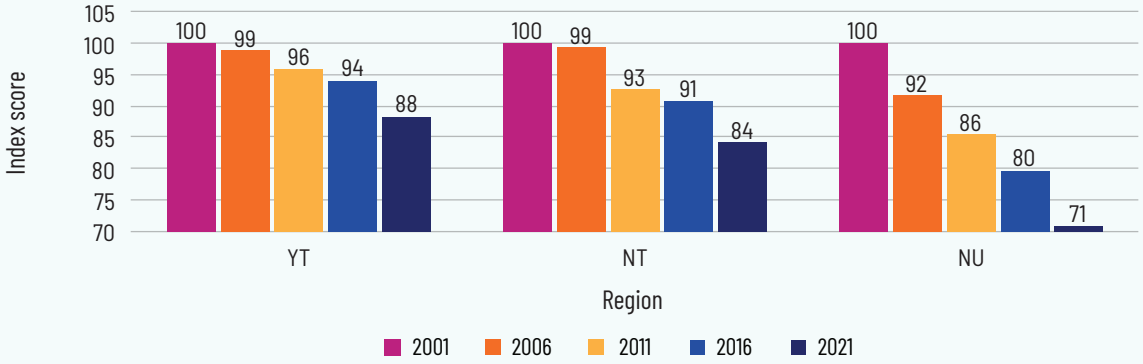
Sources: Authors' analysis of Statistics Canada, "Fertility Indicators, Provinces and Territories: Interactive Dashboard"; Statistics Canada, "Customized Census Family Structure for Children Aged 0 to 14 in Private Households of Canada, Provinces and Territories, 2016 and 2021"; Statistics Canada, selected Census data tables.

Figure 3. Married Family Index, Eastern Provinces, 2001–21



Sources: Authors' analysis of Statistics Canada, "Fertility Indicators, Provinces and Territories: Interactive Dashboard"; Statistics Canada, "Customized Census Family Structure for Children Aged 0 to 14 in Private Households of Canada, Provinces and Territories, 2016 and 2021"; Statistics Canada, selected Census data tables.

Figure 4. Married Family Index, Territories, 2001–21



Sources: Authors' analysis of Statistics Canada, "Fertility Indicators, Provinces and Territories: Interactive Dashboard"; Statistics Canada, "Customized Census Family Structure for Children Aged 0 to 14 in Private Households of Canada, Provinces and Territories, 2016 and 2021"; Statistics Canada, selected Census data tables.

Discussion

A complex interplay of social and economic factors contributes to shifting family structures. Most Canadians view marriage as a positive aspect of family life[20] but view marriage as one family option among many.[21] Still, most Canadians are open to getting married. A survey conducted by the Angus Reid Group in partnership with Cardus (the results of which are not yet published) found that among unattached Canadians aged 18 to 44 years old, 62 percent of men and 58 percent of women report that getting married is important to them. Most Canadians hold positive attitudes toward marriage, and many desire to marry, yet the family form continues to decline. Furthermore, this decline is not evenly dispersed across the country.

Healthy children grow up in many types of families, but as stated earlier, empirical evidence shows that those with married parents are more likely to experience higher educational attainment, less risk of poverty, and better behavioural outcomes. Economist Melissa Kearney, writing about the US context, states, "Marriage is the most reliable institution for delivering a high level of resources and long-term stability to children. There is simply not currently a robust, widespread alternative to marriage in US society. Cohabitation, in theory, could deliver similar resources as marriage, but the data show that in the US, these partnerships are not, on average, as stable as marriage."[22]

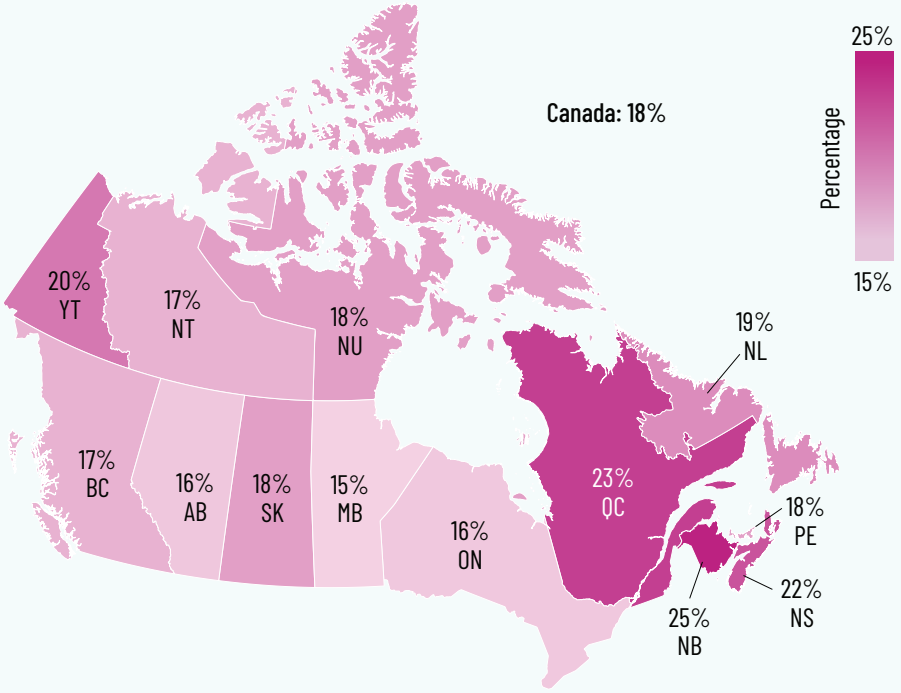
Some provinces with lower index scores also have higher indicators of family dissolution. For example, index scores in Quebec and Atlantic Canada showed a steep decline. These regions also have larger portions of children who experience the divorce or separation of their parents than those in Ontario or western Canada. The pattern is less discernible in the territories.

20 Mrozek and Mitchell, "The Canada Family Life Project."

21 *"I Don't": Four-in-Ten Canadian Adults*.

22 Kearney, *The Two-Parent Privilege*, 15.

Figure 5. Percentage of Children Aged 1 to 17 Who Have Experienced the Divorce or Separation of Their Parents, 2019



Source: Statistics Canada,"How Many Children in Canada Have Experienced the Separation or Divorce of Their Parents? Results from the 2019 Canadian Health Survey on Children and Youth."

The Married Family Index demonstrates the scale of change in the portion of married families in each province and territory over twenty years. There is merit to further investigating shifting family structures at the provincial level, given the desire for stable partnerships among Canadians and the benefits for children in stable families. While Canadians make various choices about family life, complex factors also affect timing and choices in family formation. We should better understand the provincial dynamics that influence these decisions.

Quebec and the Territories

There are significant variations in family structure across Canada. Differences in family structure are owing in part to cultural differences in family life across the country. These differences are statistically evident in Quebec and the territories. For this reason, the Married Family Index uses baselines for each province and territory rather than a national baseline.

Nearly as many children in Quebec live in cohabiting families as in married families.[23] In fact, the large portion of cohabiting families in Quebec has contributed to Canada's having the highest rate of cohabiting couples in the G7.[24] Adults in Quebec are much less likely to be married than

23 Statistics Canada, "Customized Census Family Structure."

24 Statistics Canada, *The Daily—State of the Union*.

adults in other provinces. Although marriage is generally associated statistically with fertility, Quebec's TFR was higher than the national rate during the study period.

As for family stability, cohabitation in Quebec is generally more stable than cohabiting relationships elsewhere in Canada, but is still more prone to dissolution than marriage is in Quebec and the rest of Canada.[25] Overall, children in the province are more likely to witness the dissolution of their parents' partnership than are children in Canada as a whole, as shown in figure 5. About 23 percent of children aged one to seventeen in the province have experienced their parents' divorce or separation, compared to the national average of 18 percent.[26]

Yukon, the Northwest Territories, and Nunavut also have unique family structure patterns. The territories have lower portions of children living with married parents and lower portions of married adults than does Canada as a whole. For example, in 2021 more children in Nunavut lived with cohabiting couples than with married couples.[27] The TFRs are higher than the national average, with Nunavut having the highest TFR in the country. The populations in the territories tend to be younger than the national average.[28]

The distinctions in family structure were present in Quebec and the territories at the baseline year of 2001. As the index shows, however, the portion of married couples and portion of children living with married parents has shifted significantly in these parts of Canada over the twenty-year study period.

Conclusion

The Married Family Index shows changes in the prevalence of this family structure over time. These changes have not occurred evenly across the country.

Canadians are having fewer children than they say they would like, and in most parts of Canada marriage has a generally positive correlation with having children. Marriage is linked to greater family stability, social mobility, and personal well-being, and is beneficial for children. Furthermore, many unmarried Canadians want to marry in the future. For these reasons, we should be concerned about the decline of the married family in Canada.

Canadians remain free to form the families they want, but we should consider the complex factors contributing to the decline in the married family structure. What might be the long-term effect of the decline of married families, particularly for those who desire to marry in the future? What supporting structures are necessary to help all families thrive, and what barriers exist across Canada that prevent and delay the transition into married life?

25 Mrozek and Mitchell, *I . . . Do?*, 58.

26 Statistics Canada, *How Many Children in Canada*.

27 Statistics Canada, "Customized Census Family Structure."

28 Statistics Canada, "Demographic Estimates by Age"; Government of Canada, Indigenous Services, *An Update on the Socio-Economic Gaps*.

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