

Changing Patterns of Cohabitation in Canada, 1981-2011

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This study documents trends and patterns of nonmarital cohabitation in Canada in the past three decades. It focuses on regional patterns of cohabitation, particularly the differences in the prevalence and meaning of cohabitation between the province of Quebec and other regions of Canada. Since the 1970s, Quebec has sharply diverged from other regions of Canada in the retreat from marriage and the preference for non-marital unions. The prevalence of cohabitation is far higher in Quebec than elsewhere in Canada, and the province's rate of cohabitation is indeed the highest among all western countries. Moreover, cohabitation in Quebec has rapidly developed into a functional alternative to marriage, whereas it remains predominantly a short-term union or prelude to marriage elsewhere in Canada. Comparing Quebec to other regions of Canada provides a "natural experiment" for isolating the historical and cultural roots of the intra-national divergence in patterns of family formation. The study demonstrates how cultural (and legal) shifts contributed to the diffusion of cohabitation in Quebec and traces its evolution into an alternative to marriage and the modal union for child-birth.