



THE NEW VALUES: LOVE CHILDREN AND DINKS

Quebec, by far, leads the nation in children born out of wedlock

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Guyline Drouin jokes that the only way she will ever marry the man she's lived with for 13 years is if there's a civil war, and the government calls up all unmarried men.

"To me, marriage doesn't have much significance," says the Quebec government administrative assistant. "It's just a piece of paper. We live like a married couple without being married."

Only when Drouin, 37, and partner Michel Dauphinais, 39, who works at Montreal's casino, decided to have a kid did they even discuss marriage.

But after finding the legal implications of having children while unmarried were minimal, they decided to stick with their common-law relationship. Son Eric Dauphinais is now eight years old.

In the past, it was looked upon badly for couples to be unmarried and have children, Drouin says, but people's philosophies have changed greatly in Quebec.

Have they ever. Once the most religious and God-fearing part of Canada, the "Distinct Society" now leads the country by far in common-law relationships and in children born out of wedlock.

A recent Statistics Canada study found dramatic differences between Quebec and Ontario when it comes to marriage and the family. The federal agency found that in 1992, unmarried women - most of whom are in common-law relationships - accounted for 41% of all births in Quebec, compared with only 16% in Ontario.

By contrast, in the early 1970s, less than 1% of births in Quebec were to unmarried women, while the rate was about 5% in Ontario.

At 3.5 marriages for every 1,000 persons, Quebec's marriage rate has dipped well below the national average of 5.5. It has reached a point that Nicole Marsil Gratton, a Universite de Montreal demographer, predicts that if 1993 marriage rates persist, barely one in three Quebec men and only 37% of Quebec women will ever get married. That's down from 85% to 90% as recently as the early 1970s.

Still, it's not just in Quebec that common-law is big. In the "indistinct society" of so-called Rest of Canada there is also a soaring number of young people in common-law relationships.

University of Western Ontario demographer Zenaida Ravanera has found that among Canadian women aged 15 to 29 in 1991, for everyone who was living common-law, two were married - up from a ratio of one in six just 10 years earlier.

But outside Quebec, couples often treat common-law relationships as trial periods prior to marriage, says Dr. Robert Glossop, executive director of programs at Ottawa's Vanier Institute of the Family. People living common-law will usually get married when they decide to have children.

In Quebec, especially over the last 10 years, common-law relationships have become a legitimate alternative to marriage as a way in which to bring children into the world and raise them, he says.

"Some would say that what is happening in Quebec is simply paving the way for the rest of Canada," says Glossop, who is not sure he shares that view.

The drop in popularity of marriage in Quebec is usually attributed to the Catholic church's decline in influence.

The church exercised a dramatic authority over people's personal and private lives until the Quiet Revolution rolled along in the 1960s, and Quebec became a modern industrialized and secularized society.

The result seems to be that the pendulum swung even further in Quebec than it did in other provinces, which weren't so clearly identified with a particular religious tradition, Glossop says.

Common-law relationships may also have grown like wildfire because Quebec's French-speaking population is far less mobile than any other group in North America, says Caroline Knowles, a sociology professor at Concordia University in Montreal.

Knowles says it has reached a point that many young women she knows choose not to get married, in large part because there is a family tradition of not getting married.

"Eyebrows are raised if they decide to get married," she says. "What you see is a sort of local tradition growing up, in which it's perfectly acceptable to not get married."

It also seems that Quebecers fear separation (and divorce) - at least when it comes to marriage.

"Marriage doesn't guarantee anything," says Francine Lalibert, a 44-year-old legal assistant at Quebec's Revenue Ministry, who has lived six years with boyfriend Marc Quirion, 32, manager of a gas station. They live in the Montreal suburb of Pierrefonds and co-own a condo.

Americans, she says, stress that marriage is a commitment - and then they turn around and divorce and remarry three or four times. "Oh, what a commitment," she says sarcastically.

Lalibert wouldn't mind getting married, if only for the ceremony, but boyfriend Marc Quirion, who was married once before, isn't interested in remarrying.

Noting there's an old custom that women can ask men to marry them in a leap year, Lalibert says that when she teases her boyfriend that she will to him this year, he freezes.

Registered nurse Ginette Giguere, 33, admits she would have liked to get married when she was younger - just for the thrill of the ceremony.

But she no longer finds it necessary to have a ring. She and aircraft mechanic Cliff Sanders, 34, have been together for nine years and live in the Montreal suburb of Dorval.

"I don't need to have it legalized. It's less trouble, it's not expensive."

The Catholic church does not exactly look upon Quebec's common-law couples with approval.

Father Francois Sarrazin, vice-chancellor of the Archdiocese of Montreal, says common-law relationships are contrary to Christian morals and offend the Christian notion of marriage as something that is dignified and noble.

But the church will still baptize children of unmarried parents because "the child should not have to pay for the error of the parents."

Montrealer Nina Gauvin, 33, who has been living common-law for eight years and is the mother of two girls, notes the church has become irrelevant to many Quebecers.

"My generation no longer believes what the church preached," she says. "We believe in our own personal values. We don't have to prove anything because we love somebody."

Of course, not everybody is staying common-law in Quebec.

Jerome Blais, 30, a composer and music teacher at the Universite de Montreal, and Juliette Valcke, a 28-year-old teacher doing a Ph.D. in Medieval Literature at the Universite de Montreal, are tying the knot this summer after living together for 2 1/2 years.

"For us, it's a way to tell the world that we love each other and want to spend the rest of our lives together," Blais says of marriage. "And it's more solid for children to have parents who are really married."

Still, "we don't feel like we're obligated to get married," he says.