Children and family dissolution in Canada: 1992-2008.

Charles Jones.

Sociology Department, University of Toronto.

cjones@chass.utoronto.ca

Jing Shen.

Prentice Institute for Global Population and Economy, University of Lethbridge.

jing.shen@uleth.ca

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Abstract

Western Europe and North America have seen the emergence of more fluid and idiosyncratic family forms that are associated with greater gender equality within families as well as higher levels of women's participation in the paid labour force. Elevated levels of divorce mean that children are at higher risk of experiencing the separation of their parents, an event that may have become less traumatic for the child as it has become more common and as systems of family law have been reformed. Similar observations can be made with respect to the dissolution of common-law unions and the experience of children born into such families. This paper reports research on recent birth cohorts of Canadian children born to a co-resident couple and demonstrates a greater risk of parental separation in Quebec that is linked with its higher incidence of common-law unions but is also related to a greater social provision for lone parent families in that Province, most notably a highly subsidized system of day care for working parents, the historical context being a collapse of Catholicism in recent decades. Analysis of national Canadian samples shows that lower risk of parental separation is correlated with Asian ancestral origin while higher risk goes with having fewer siblings, being born to young mothers or into a stepfamily and to being of Aboriginal or African Canadian origin. Event history analysis (survival analysis with time varying predictors) shows that children in low income households and children of couples who rent rather than own their homes as well as the children of parents with depressive symptoms and low levels of family functioning are more likely to experience subsequent separation of their parents. Many of the factors predictive of parental separation have also been established as correlates of children's cognitive and behavioural outcomes so some care is necessary before parental separation is considered to be an independent cause of such outcomes.

Introduction: Themes, Motivations, Questions

Parents of young children split up in Canada, as they do in other countries. The experience of parental breakup may or may not be harmful to children and research on this important topic continues to be published. Our aim here is more modest. We report recent Canadian trends in the dissolution of unions where children were present, as well as the predictive correlates of such breakups. Confirming European research we find that children born to consensual unions are more likely to experience parental breakup than those born in wedlock. This overlaps quite strongly with cultural and socio-legal differences between Quebec and the rest of Canada but other factors are also involved.

While families need not include children this paper focuses upon those that do: indeed we consider the issue of union dissolution from the point of view of the child. This is appropriate because many of the utilitarian arguments in the area hinge on the degree to which children might be harmed by experiencing the separation of their parents, a subsequent period in a lone parent family and, possibly, by the re-partnering of the custodial parent, usually their mother: an event that results in the formation of a step-family, a structure often mentioned in folk tales such as Cinderella, and about which there is considerable sociological literature

The social norm that children should be born in marital wedlock, if not always conceived therein steadily weakened in many Western societies over the last half of the twentieth Century. This was discussed under such headings as a "flight from marriage", or a weakening of the traditional family. Childbearing by lone mothers, particularly by teenagers, continued to be viewed as undesirable, but non-marital cohabitation ("concubinage") evolved from being a scandalous repudiation of bourgeois values, as in the early life of Mary Wollstonecraft around the time of the French Revolution, through being a tolerated prelude to marriage to being an acceptable substitute for it. Over recent decades many jurisdictions have simplified the procedures for divorce, adding the possibility of non-fault grounds and shortening the waiting period until remarriage could take place.

Family law was also reformed, generally with the ambition of putting child-present or longer lasting common-law unions (concubinage, conjoints de fait, unions libres) under the same rubric of mutual obligation as marriages, removing gender-based assumptions, and clarifying the rules regarding how marital property should be divided as well as attempting to regulate post-breakup parental responsibilities for children particularly with regard to access, joint custody and payment of child support, (Klein, 1985). The evolution of family law as a continuing project is demonstrated by the introduction of new legislation (as in France in 2014) as well as by the existence of voluntary associations formed to defend the respective and sometimes conflicting rights of custodial and non-custodial parents, grandparents, step-parents, etc. with respect to their access and decision-making with regard to children. This is particularly important in those countries where traditional legal definitions of filiation have not been updated and protective legislation makes it difficult for unauthorized persons to interact with children, pick them up from school, accompany them to hospital, etc.

From around the 1990s the civil registration of non-marital partnerships became possible in many societies, sometimes being limited to persons of the same gender but in many cases being open to opposite-sex unions as well. In France an increasing number of opposite sex couples have opted to register for the PACS (Davie, 2011).

Western societies are ambivalent about the dissolution of child present marital or marriage-like unions. Aside from notions of marriage as sacramental union, much faith used to be placed in the utilitarian idea that parents should "stay together for the sake of the children" but this argument can be countered by the claim that breakup might relieve the pressures of a "toxic" family environment and the hope that cooperative post-dissolution joint decision making and other aspects of co-parenting will ensure that children of the former union will not suffer. The mainstreaming of these ideas can be seen in the example of Gwyneth Paltrow, a film star, and her husband Chris Martin who broke up their marriage in March, 2014, just before the 8th birthday of their second child, Moses and announced the event via the Internet, beginning the announcement with the phrase, "As we conscious uncouple and co-parent..."

Simple answers are elusive but it is certainly the case that union dissolution has become more accepted in recent decades, not only for childless couples about which there is a literature concerning the "starter marriage", but also in child-present families. Barbara Dafoe Whitehead (1996) calls this a "Divorce Culture": one where serial monogamy is accepted as normal, even desirable, and it is considered that children may even benefit from growing up in diverse family environments.

It is well established that children whose parents break up almost always experience a period of time in a single parent family, usually headed by their mother, and often experience gradual reduction in the amount of time spent with the non-custodial ex-spouse, usually their father. As Ross Finnie has shown with Canadian tax filer data from the late 1980s, one or both of their parents will likely re-partner within a few years of the breakup. Such children will experience life with a step-parent and possibly with step-siblings and/or half-siblings.

Children in lone-parent families are on average more likely to be below the poverty line than those in two-parent families while there is evidence that those living with a step-parent are at higher risk of experiencing documented physical abuse. Hence there are good reasons to predict that parental breakup can be harmful to children and indeed a meta-analysis by Amato and Keith (1991) demonstrates this, although the average effect sizes are fairly small, the only ones reaching even moderate size being linked with "conduct disorders" and (unsurprisingly) the quality of the relationship with the non-custodial parent. From a public policy perspective an increase in the number of children who spend time in lone parent families likely implies increased demands for public investment in subsidized child care and related areas.

Breakup tends to be followed by re-partnering.

Whatever one's personal views on the emergence of new family forms and processes it may be important to establish the sequence of events that lead some children to be at greater risk of experiencing separation of their parents.

The formation and dissolution of marital or marriage-like unions takes place over time: a period of searching for a suitable mate or of matchmaking, often coinciding with the later stages of formal education or the earlier parts of the career, is followed by the formation of a union that may be more or less stable and, very important for this paper, children may well be conceived at any point in this process. An unplanned pregnancy can lead to lone parenthood or to the formation of a union that may or may not work out. The well-established tendency of teen marriages to have higher incidence of divorce is usually ascribed to lack of "maturity" and/or to an insufficiently lengthy search process.

An influential, though dated, perspective for explaining why some unions are dissolved and others not is due to the late Gary S. Becker (Becker et al., 1977). Simply stated, men and women accumulate or invest in various forms of "capital" as they age and one of these is specific to whatever marital or marriage-like union may have been formed. Such "marital specific" capital is those investments of time and treasure that would be lost upon dissolution of the union (Becker, 1974: 338). Hence the greater the amount of marital specific capital at any given time the more stable the union will be (Manning, 2004). In a passage that seems to take the husband's point of view, assuming maternal custody of children after divorce, Becker et al. suggest that specific marital capital, can be composed of investments in children, sexual adjustment with one's spouse and specialized market and non-market skills used relatively more while married. (1977: 1152). Non-specific capital, like marital-specific capital, is built up as the partners to a union grow older while whatever "erotic capital" (as Catherine Hakim has called it) might be possessed by the partners generally depreciates as they age. A further wrinkle on age-dependence is that women become less fertile after their late thirties. The Becker model can be elaborated by analyzing the decision to break up in the light of potential benefits that might be obtained by subsequent re-partnering. We can extend this further by considering more recent practice regarding access to and custody of children as well as what community, family or state supports are available to custodial parents.

Becker defined “marital specific” capital as investments that are worth significantly more when the union is maintained than when it is dissolved (1974: 338). Given the growth in consensual non-marital unions this term might be modified and called “relationship capital”. Such investments may be financial, as with a commitment to home ownership or to a gendered division of career-related or domestic labour: they may also involve commitments that are both financial and psychological, for example commitments to the bringing up of children. Dissolution of a union through annulment, desertion, divorce or separation, means that one or both partners decides to cut their losses on what can be regarded as their investment in “marital capital”.

Some analysts of society consider stable marriage to be good in itself. For example Emile Durkheim famously argued in 1904 that divorce “par consentement mutual” would be undesirable not so much because of any direct effects on children but rather because it would have, “a very dangerous influence on marriage and its normal functioning”. In this he echoed, among other sources, the conservative rationale for marriage given the Book of Common Prayer in the Anglican Church (1662). If marriage-as-long-term-commitment tends to reduce anomie and egoism modern followers of Durkheim might claim that it contributes to the social capital of a community.

Be that as it may, neither Becker nor Durkheim nor the authors of the Book of Common Prayer imagined a society where large proportions of children were born into common-law unions, some of which are, no doubt, as stable as comparable marriages but which, on average, are at significantly higher risk of breakup, as shown in a study of three cohorts of Norwegian children by Jensen and Clausen (2003).

Elevated levels of union dissolution mean that children are at higher risk of experiencing the separation of their parents, an event that may have become less stigmatizing for the child and somewhat less likely to bring about a period of very low family income for the custodial parent as it has become more common, as mothers have increasingly tended to work outside the home for most of their lives, and as systems of family law have been reformed in many jurisdictions (Glendon, 1987.)

The sociological literature divorce has identified numerous risk factors for union dissolution, the most obvious one being contextual: the degree to which it is cheap, legal, relatively simple and non-stigmatized at a given historical moment in the relevant community, state, province or country. In Canada, as well as in some other jurisdictions, marriage was none of those things until the late 1960s but has gradually become easier since that time. It has always been easy to end a common-law union (concubinage, union libre) but these were quite highly stigmatized until relatively recently. Divorce is a jurisdiction of the States in the USA but has been one of the Federal powers in Canada since Confederation in 1867. There are many other historical particularities: for example within the United Kingdom Scots law has different jurisprudence and need not be drafted or amended in the same way as legislation south of the Border.

Canada is a society of regions each associated with its own legal and political arrangements in areas that are outside Federal jurisdiction. Many studies have documented the special nature of Québec which is mostly French-speaking and has a distinctive Civil Code, not based on the English Common Law tradition. Non-marital consensual unions have been more prevalent in Québec than in other Provinces for over two decades (Laplante, 2006) but La Belle Province has never recognized common-law partnership as such. In Québec, common law partners are known as "de facto" partners. A number of laws in Québec explicitly apply to "conjoints de fait". The major areas of Provincial jurisdiction are education, health, welfare and many aspects of family law and policy, including frameworks for child custody, child and spousal support as well as division of common property upon the dissolution of a marital or common-law union. While the Provinces carry out vital registration including that of marriage, the legislation governing divorce, originally taken over from Great Britain under the 1867 British North America Act (now the Constitution Act) has been within the Federal power for many decades. The Federal power also determines Canadian citizenship and permanent residency status, areas where the definition of marriage can be important. Each of the Provinces determines its own rate of income tax as well as relevant tax credits, deductions, sales taxes, etc., but all except Quebec have their income collected on their

behalf by the Canada Revenue Agency which also administers Federal tax rates and rules regarding tax credits, deductions, determination of married or common-law union status where relevant, etc. There is a contributory social security arrangement at the Federal level (the Canada Pension Plan as well as Old Age Security) though, again, Quebec operates its own version. Overall then, Canada is a highly decentralized confederation and Quebec already has many of the devolved powers desired by Basques, Catalans and Scots. This makes comparisons between Canadian Provinces a useful tool when investigating the impact of social policies upon child outcomes.

While marriage and divorce are essentially determined at the Federal level in Canada the civil registration of births, deaths and marriages remains the work of the Provinces, some of which permit registration of a civil partnership – "Union civile", as introduced into the Quebec Civil Code in 2002. Family Law, especially as it affects marital property, child or spousal support and inheritance is largely determined at the level of the Provinces and the 1970s and 1980s saw each of them successively attempt to amend, reform or update its family law, largely reflecting changing attitudes regarding gender equality but also in response to an increased prevalence of divorce and of common-law unions, (Klein, 1985)

Contextual and socio-legal aspects aside the social-demographic literature abounds with empirical studies seeking to establish the correlates of longer or shorter lasting unions. Consensual or informal unions were once conceptualized as a relationship-testing stage that might be followed by marriage or some similar contract either upon pregnancy / childbirth or for some other reason. A series of studies in the 1980s and 1990s asked whether pre-marital cohabitation, considered as "trial marriage" acted in such a way as to make a subsequent marital union more resilient to dissolution. Since non-marital cohabitants were different in many ways from non-cohabitants there was an obvious self-selection into the period of pre-marital cohabitation (Axinn and Thornton, 1992). Jose et al. (2010) used meta-analysis to summarize 16 empirical studies, most but not all from the United States. Overall there was a negative effect of premarital cohabitation on subsequent marital stability, though the statistical significance disappeared when analysis

was restricted to those studies that focused on premarital cohabitation with the eventual marriage partner.

Hall and Zhao (1995) used retrospective General Social Survey data from ever-married Canadians and were able to control for several important individual level characteristics. This study, whose basic data refer to events that had taken place between the 1950s to the 1980s, confirmed that pre-marital cohabitation can increase the risk that a first marriage will end in divorce and also demonstrated the role of other risk factors as follows. A younger age at marriage, having parents who lived apart, more than five years age difference between partners, the presence of step-children, having attained post-secondary levels of education, attending religious services less than once a year and being from a post-1945 birth cohort all increased the risk that a first marriage would end in divorce. Births within marriage reduced the risk of divorce even births from pre-marital pregnancies. Perhaps surprisingly neither province of residence nor a pre-marital birth had a statistically significant effect but we must bear in mind that these are all "partial" effects, estimated after subtraction of the modeled effects of other predictors.

In similar fashion Clark and Crompton (2006) used data from a later cycle of Canada's General Social Survey to examine the correlates of dissolution of first and second marriages. As with the Hall and Zhao the design was retrospective, covering social conditions over several decades the earliest marriage studied having started before 1960 and the latest during the 1990s. Replicating the findings of other studies they reported that marriages starting when the bride was under 25 had higher risk of dissolution while those starting when she was over 30 were more stable. Consistent with ideas about marriage specific investments as well as with Canadian cultural norms of those times they report that marriages with children present had markedly lower risk of dissolution. One of the items in the 2001 General Social Survey was the question "Would You Stay in A Bad Marriage for the Sake of Your Children?" Most studies show that the presence of children typically reduces the risk of union dissolution (Andersson, 1997). It further seems that, as predicted by sociobiologically oriented perspectives, men are less likely to display commitment when the children may not be theirs, as occurs in some stepfamilies (Anderson et al., 2007).

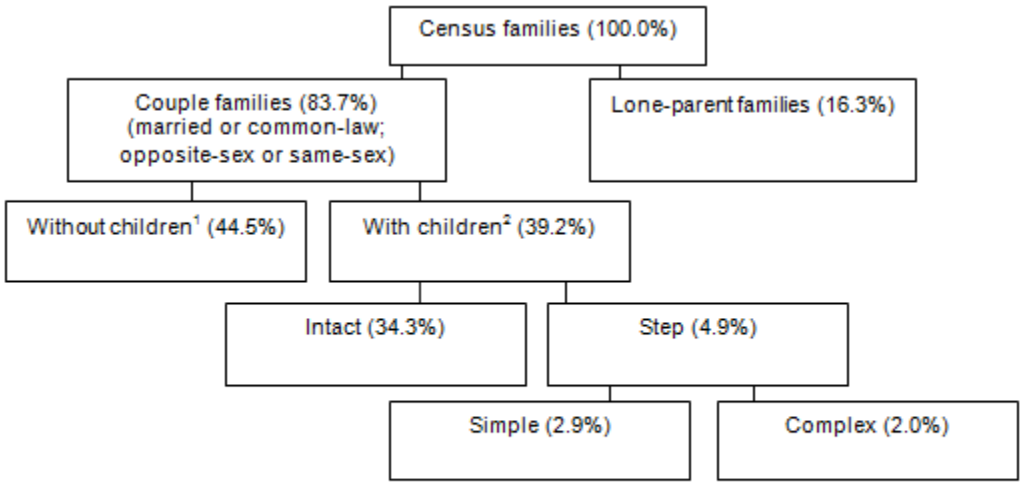
This paper reports research on recent birth cohorts of Canadian children born to a co-resident couple and demonstrates a greater risk of parental separation in Quebec that is linked with its higher incidence of common-law unions (Pollard and Wu, 1998) but is also related to a greater social provision for lone parent families in that Province, most notably a very highly state-subsidized system of day care for working parents that was implemented in the late 1990s, the longer term historical context (Laplante, 2006) being the transition to a post-Catholic society, an arguable collapse of traditional Catholic family values in recent decades and their replacement by values associated with what may well be the most European-style welfare state in North America.

DATA

Tabulations from the 2011 Census of Canada

The 2011 Census was the first in Canada to include specific questions about step-family relationships. Being a cross-sectional snapshot the Census cannot provide direct evidence about children's experiences of parental breakup. That said, the given today's fairly low level of mortality among adults of parenting age, the prevalence of children in stepfamilies provides useful evidence, indirect and circumstantial as it may be, about the parental breakups that must often have preceded re-partnering. As shown in figure 1, step-families were 12.5% of child-present couple families and 8.8% of all child-present families (including lone parent families).

Figure 1. Canadian Families at 2011.



1. Without children aged 24 and under.
2. With children aged 24 and under.

Source: Census family structure showing stepfamilies and conjugal status for couple census families in private households, Catalogue no. 98-312-X2011002.

Among other things the 2011 Census results demonstrate that the prevalence of stepfamilies, as a share of couple families, is highest for traditional metropolitan areas in Quebec: Trois-Rivières (18.7%), Saguenay (18.5%), & Sherbrooke (18.4%). Prevalence is lowest in immigrant receiving metropolitan areas of Toronto (7.8%) & Vancouver (8.4%). As we shall see later it is also relevant that Toronto & Vancouver include significant percentages of Asian origin families while traditional Quebec metropolitan areas tend to be "pure laine".

Counting children rather than families the 2011 Census shows that the percent enumerated in stepfamilies as opposed to intact families increases with age, being highest (just over 12 per cent) for those aged 10 to 19. Among children under five only eight per cent were living in stepfamilies. This appears to exclude children enumerated in lone parent families or in non-family households.

We would expect this pattern since re-partnering after breakup occurs over one or more years. Data from Canadian tax records linked over the 1987 to 1993 period show that about one third of men (30%) and about one quarter of women (26%) formed a new relationship in the year following separation. Five years after separation, 54% of men had a new partner compared with 45% of women (Finnie, 1993).

Longitudinal Analysis of Multiple Birth Cohorts of Children

Our sample data arise from Canada's National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY / ELNEJ). This includes eight cohorts of young children of which four were interviewed on least four occasions and five were interviewed on at least three occasions. The outcome of interest in this paper is whether or not a given child had first experienced a parental separation and the child's age in years and months at that date. This was determined by retrospective questions administered in a "custody history module" at several of the data collection interviews the key question being, "What was this child's age in years and months when his parents' breakup first occurred?" Other retrospective questions established parental civil status at the child's birth as: married, common-law (union libre), previously married, previously common-law or never together). Very unfortunately Statistics Canada omitted the custody module for certain cohorts in the 2008-9 data collection sweep.

RESULTS

Children born into marital unions, consensual unions or to lone mothers

As has been noted by Jensen and Clausen, among others, the family situation into which a child is born has clear influence on her or his subsequent life events, including the risks of parental breakup, risks of experiencing low income and risks of experiencing a better or a worse life as a member of a stepfamily. Data from the NLSCY show how cohort membership, as well as other factors, is associated with the relative risks of a child being born into a family with married, cohabiting or lone parents.

Since the 1994-5 NLSCY data collection sampled children aged 0 to 11 years the retrospective question about parental status at the child's birth can be used to demonstrate trends in the probability of being born to a married couple, a couple in a non-marital consensual union or to an unpartnered mother. While it necessarily ignores immigration and emigration over the period this source permits us to create synthetic birth cohorts from 1982 to 1984. We compared children from Quebec with those from the rest of Canada (RoC) and estimated two linear trends:

a) the log odds of being born to a married couple rather than to a non-married mother (whether or not she was in a consensual union)
b) the log odds of being born into a consensual union rather than into a marital union, given that the child was born to a couple living together.

In subsequent data collection sweeps the NLSCY sampled more recent birth cohorts of children under two years old. These constitute prospective birth cohorts for the years 1992 to 2008 and are much less subject to whatever bias might arise because of changes in the composition of the immigrant population. As with the synthetic cohorts we compared children from Quebec with those from the rest of Canada (RoC) estimating the same two linear trends as before. While we pooled data from the prospective birth cohorts we chose not to pool with the synthetic cohorts, our rationale being that the populations are not strictly comparable.

Quadratic or cubic trends being small to non-existent within each of the two time periods we focus on the significant linear trends, the first being consistent with a "flight from marriage" demonstrated by a particularly strong negative slope for children born in Quebec between 1982 and 1995 and a somewhat gentler negative slope for the later period to 2008.

The second major linear trend, this time a positive one, is for the odds of being born to a couple in a consensual union. Again the trend is stronger for children born in Quebec and again it is more pronounced in the earlier period.

Linear Trend: log odds born to married couple vs. else.

1982 to 1995

Slope for Quebec: -0.139

Slope for RoC: -0.062

1992 to 2008

Slope for Quebec: -0.039

Slope for RoC: -0.020

Linear Trend: log odds born into consensual union vs. marital union

1982 to 1995

Slope for Quebec: +0.137

Slope for RoC: +0.051

1992 to 2008

Slope for Quebec: +0.042

Slope for RoC: +0.027

These results are presented graphically in figures 2 and 3, the fitted odds having been transformed to predicted probabilities and the two separately estimated regressions having been spliced at the 1993-1994 birth years. It should be noted that the splice does not reflect a step change: merely the transition from one predicted set of values to the next. The most striking thing about these charts is the degree to which Quebec has diverged from the rest of Canada since the early 1980s. The next most striking thing is that Quebec graph in Figure 3 is markedly steeper in the earlier than in the later period.

Figure 2

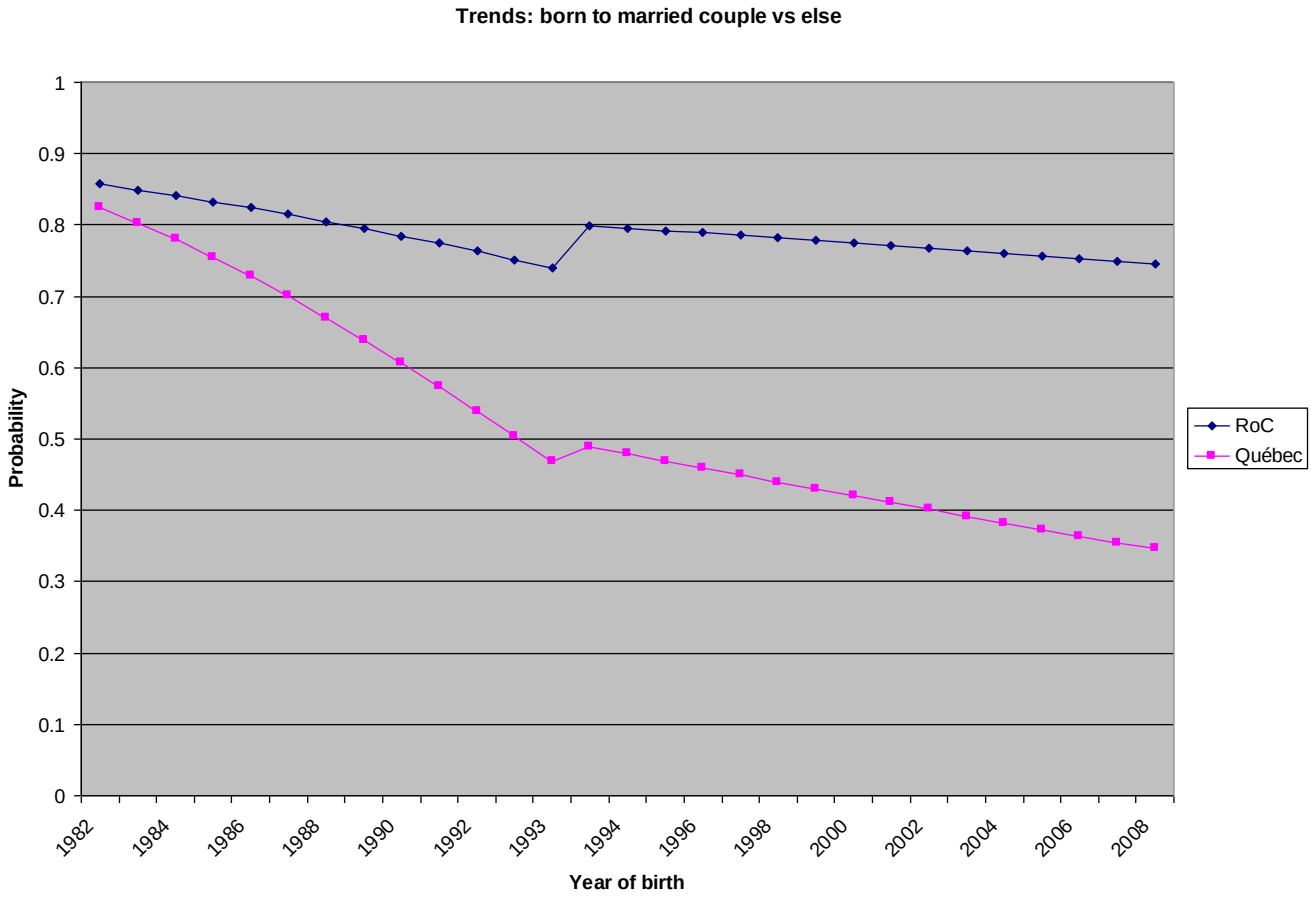
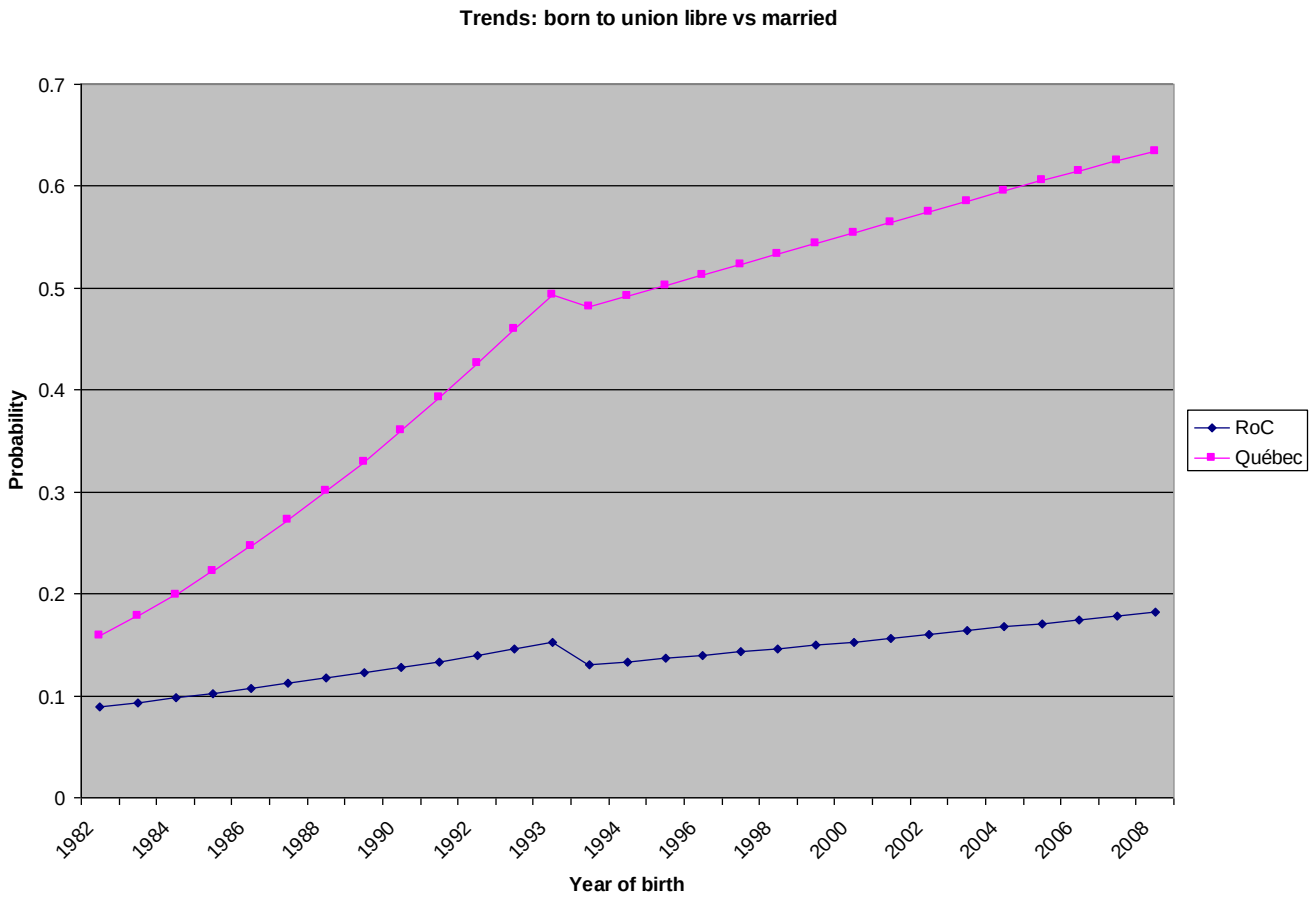

Trends: born to married couple vs else
Probability
1
0.9
0.8
0.7
0.6
0.5
0.4
0.3
0.2
0.1
0
1982
1984
1986
1988
1990
1992
1993
1994
1996
1998
2000
2002
2004
2006
2008
Year of birth
RoC
Québec

Figure 3



Factors predisposing birth to a consensual union and to a lone parent

The previous analysis demonstrates general trends consistent with a "flight from marriage", as well as an accelerating Quebec difference within Canada. Focusing on data from pooled prospective birth cohorts the secular trend is shown by a steady progression from 72.5% of children from the 1992-3 cohort being born to a married couple down to only 64.7% from the last birth cohort, fourteen years later. The other side of the coin is that the share of children born to couples in a consensual union steadily rose from 19.3% for the 1992-3 birth cohort to 26.4% for the last one in 2008-9.

Multinomial logistic regression allows us to examine the effects of other factors on whether a child was born to a marital union, a consensual union or to a lone parent. This

analysis is carried out over the whole of Canada and space does not permit us to present results where the estimates are made within region, though there are good reasons to suppose that the pattern of associations within the Quebec population could be different from that obtaining in other Provinces. Many of the correlates of being born to a consensual non-marital union are also correlates of being born to a lone parent, (Aboriginal origin, Black, Religion "none", born to a mother under 30) and (inversely) highest educational level and foreign-born category of the child's mother.

Table 1. Multinomial Logistic Regression

Outcome	Number of obs	27,454
Parents at Child's Birth	Population size	5,057,003
1. Married	Replications	1,000
2. Cohabiting	df for Wald chisq	50
3. Lone Parent	Wald chisq(50)	2,891

Risks:
Born to Cohabiting Parents vs. Born to Married Parents
Born to a Lone Parent (parents never together) vs. Born to Married Parents

Born 1992 to 2008	**Union Libre**	**Never Together**
Annual Increase	Upward trend	flat
Quebec vs. Ontario	10.79	1.74
Maritimes vs. Ontario	1.48	1.90
Prairies vs. Ontario	0.85	0.71
Big City (500,000 plus)	0.76	ns
Foreign-born mother	0.27	0.53
Aboriginal	4.05	5.91
Arab / West Asian	0.12	0.12
Black	1.95	6.97
Religion "none"	2.29	1.77
Born to teen mother	15.18	22.39
Born to mother in her twenties	1.98	2.12
Post-2ndary education.	0.48	0.16

Children experiencing parental breakup: given birth to a marital or consensual union.

Children must be followed up for several years before it is possible to estimate their risk of experiencing parental breakup. Selecting from the original NLSCY cohort those who had been born between 1991 and 1994 allows us to report on a risk period of roughly 14 years. The life table shown as Table 2 and as a chart in Figure 4 demonstrates clear differences between Canadian regions with the risk of parental breakup being highest in Quebec, second highest in British Columbia and lowest in Ontario. One quarter of children in this cohort had experienced parental breakup before their eighth birthday in Quebec and British Columbia, the 25th percentile being just under 14 in Ontario. Ontario and Quebec being the regions with the largest populations of children the overall Canadian average is not particularly informative.

Table 2

Life table analysis — Cumulative proportions of children experiencing parental separation

No. of years living with both parents		1991-94 birth cohort (<4 at first interview) Region Ontario	Quebec	BC	Maritimes	Prairies	
Age Interval							
0	2	0.043	0.062	0.062	0.056	0.044	
2	4	0.085	0.147	0.120	0.106	0.092	
4	6	0.127	0.211	0.218	0.152	0.157	
6	8	0.174	0.290	0.257	0.192	0.197	
8	10	0.204	0.332	0.285	0.248	0.235	
10	12	0.229	0.355	0.324	0.270	0.255	
12	14	0.255	0.385	0.354	0.290	0.284	
14	16	0.263	0.400	0.362	0.309	0.301	
16	.	0.263	0.427	0.362	0.335	0.311	
Sample n		1,017	780	294	778	969	Beginning total
Population N		522,000	331,500	169,900	98,500	240,200	Rounded to the near 100
25th %ile	(years)	13.7	7.0	7.0	9.6	11.2	

Statistical tests are based on the unweighted data

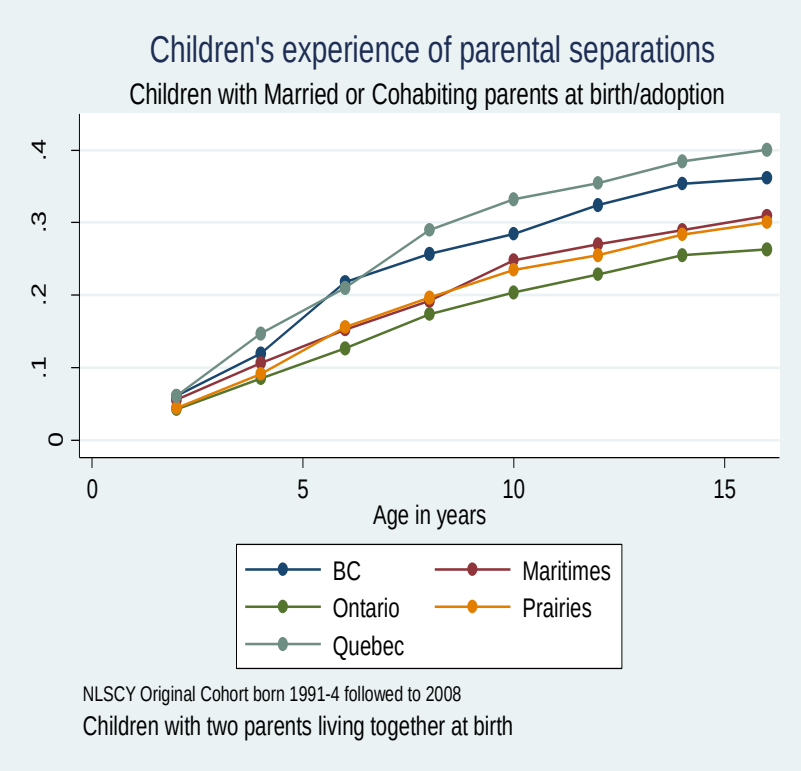
Likelihood-ratio test statistic of homogeneity (group=region) on unweighted data

chi2(4) = 26.6

Log-rank test for equality of survivor functions

chi2(4) = 25.14

Figure 4



We carried out a similar life table analysis for a later birth cohort: those children born in 1997-98 whose first data collection sweep took place in 1998-9 with a considerable over-sampling of one-year olds. These children were only followed up to 2007-8 so the maximum risk period was around ten years. As with the earlier life table Quebec children are at higher risk of experiencing parental breakup, their 25th percentile again being just before their eighth birthday. The results are shown as Table 3 and figure 5.

Table 3. Cumulative proportion experiencing a first parental separation
Weighted data

No. of years living with both parents Age Interval		Region: Ontario	Quebec	BC	Maritimes	Prairies
0	2	0.040	0.062	0.059	0.046	0.060
2	4	0.077	0.149	0.080	0.109	0.129
4	6	0.123	0.202	0.115	0.158	0.192

	6	8	0.149	0.254	0.145	0.181	0.226	
	8	10	0.168	0.299	0.177	0.198	0.240	
	10	.	0.168	0.299	0.177	0.198	0.240	
n			1,152	852	402	1,303	1,209	Beginning total
Population N			241,600	142,500	77,300	39,400	104,900	Rounded to the nearest 100
25th %ile	(years)			7.5				

Statistical tests are based on the unweighted data

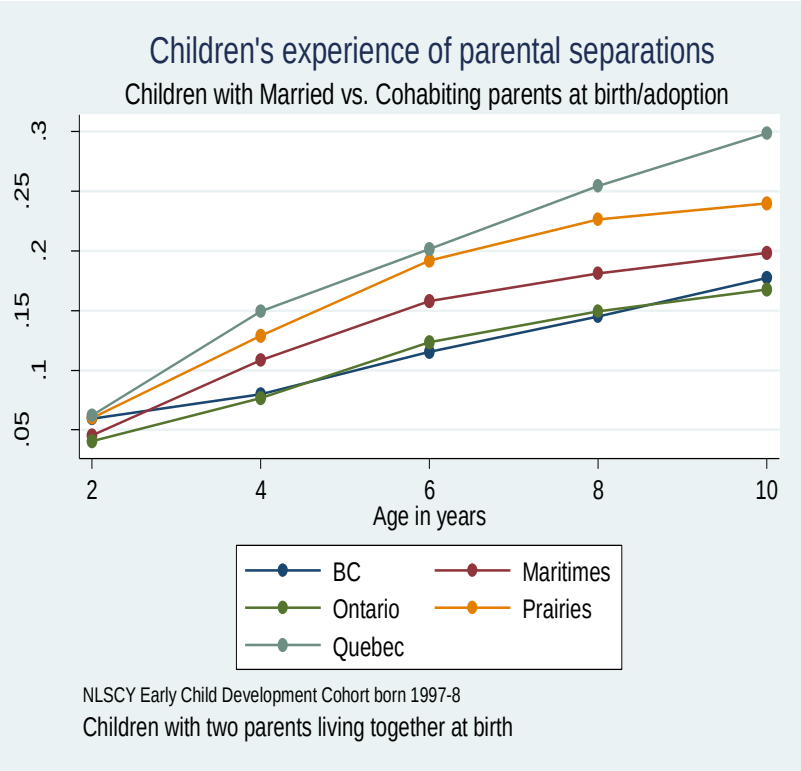
Likelihood-ratio test statistic of homogeneity (group=region) on unweighted data

chisq(4) 9.70

Log-rank test for equality of survivor functions

chisq(4) 41.57

Figure 5



Risk of experiencing parental breakup before the child's fourth birthday.

Is the risk of a child's parental breakup increasing over time? Is there a secular trend? Such important questions can best be answered by comparing the fortunes of children from successive birth cohorts. This is possible, despite a number of technical issues that

we briefly outline here. Sample sizes for the NLSCY prospective cohorts of 0-1 year olds vary: the largest being for the cohort whose members were born in 1997-8, first interviewed in 1998-9 and last interviewed in 2006-7 when the youngest was eight and the oldest just over ten. Other such cohorts had similar sized populations but smaller sample size and include 0-1 year olds from the original cohort, mostly born in 1992 or 1993 and followed up until 2008-9, as well as a cohort consisting of children born 1998-9 and first interviewed in 2000-1 and another of children born 2000-1 and first interviewed in 2002-3. For each of the last two cohorts the final data collection took place when the youngest child was aged five and the oldest seven. We were not able to include children born in 2003-2004, first interviewed in 2004-5 because Statistics Canada did not include the relevant parental breakup question for this cohort in the 2008-09 data collection sweep. No satisfactory explanation for this omission has yet been forthcoming.

For comparability purposes then, we pooled children from four independently sampled cohorts and used logistic regression to predict the risk that a child would have experienced parental breakup before her or his fourth birthday.

We carried out data analysis within the sub-population (domain) of children who had two parents living together when they were born or adopted. This was established by retrospective questions at the first and subsequent interviews which also collected a great deal of data including whether the parental couple was married or living common-law at the child's birth or adoption. We excluded the very small number of children recorded as having experienced a parental separation at birth or adoption (at age zero years and zero months). The risk period for parental breakup begins just after the child's birth or adoption and continues until a first separation or the final interview.

Independent variables of interest here are those whose values were obtained at the first interview but that are unlikely to have been affected by any parental separation that might have occurred. As in our earlier analysis these include the region of residence, community size, the age of biological mother when child was born, the region of birth of the person interviewed about the child (almost always a parent and predominantly the

mother), the gender of the child and her or his ancestral origin coded in a way that separates out Aboriginal, Asian and Black groups from the numerically dominant non-visible minority (White) population. It is possible that parental breakup might cause the custodial parent to change residence to a community of greater or lesser size but we consider this unlikely.

Using these as independent variables we pool four birth cohorts in order to predict the odds that a child experienced a first parental separation in the period from birth to her or his fourth birthday. Pooling birth cohorts boosts sample size and thus permits the inclusion of ancestral origin indicators as well as allowing a test for any over time linear trend. While the four samples to be pooled represent theoretically distinct longitudinal populations we consider that these are adjacent to each other in time and space: thus can reasonably be treated as a highly similar to each other.

For birth cohorts starting at 1993-4 and ending at 2001-2 roughly one in ten children experienced a first parental breakup before their fourth birthday, the prevalence being lower in Ontario (95% confidence interval from 8.0% to 10.6%) than in Quebec (95% confidence limits being 12.1 to 16.0). There was no significant trend over time.

	Breakup		
Birth yrs	Percent	Lower Limit 95%	Upper Limit 95%
1993-4	9.7%	8.1%	11.4%
1997-8	11.1%	10.0%	12.3%
1999-2000	12.3%	10.6%	14.1%
2001-2	11.1%	9.5%	12.7%

	Breaukup		
Region	Percent	Lower Limit 95%	Upper Limit 95%
Maritimes	10.5%	8.9%	12.0%
Quebec	14.0%	12.1%	16.0%
Ontario	9.2%	7.9%	10.6%
Prairies	11.8%	10.3%	13.3%
BC	10.6%	8.4%	12.8%

Table 4. Outcome is child experienced first parental breakup between birth and her/his 4th birthday.
Three nested models.
Wald chisq(22) for model 2: 223.0
Wald chisq(23) for model 3: 439.0

	Number of obs	14,584
	Population size	2,613,990
Binary Logistic Regression	Subpop. no. of obs	13,298
Bootstrapped	Subpop. size	2,358,976
With STC provided weights	Replications	1,000
Longitudinal data pooled over four birth cohorts	Wald chisq(23)	439

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Trend over 4 birth cohorts	flat	flat	flat
Quebec vs. Ontario	1.69	1.60	ns
Prairies vs. Ontario	1.34	ns	ns
Major urban	0.67	ns	ns
Rural	0.79	0.75	.75
Aboriginal		2.23	1.73
Black		2.84	2.78
Religion “none”		1.86	1.62
Born to teen mother		4.64	2.76
Born to mother in her twenties		1.94	1.68
Post-2ndary education.		0.49	0.55
Born into Union Libre			3.33

The table above clearly shows the effect of Province of residence, even when controlling for other factors Compared to Ontario children those from Quebec had 1.6 times the odds of experiencing parental breakup before their fourth birthday, (95% CI from 1.24 to 2.07). Another major predictor of children’s experience of parental separation is the age of the biological mother at their birth: those born when their mothers were under 20 or even under 30 being at higher risk than those born to older women. This confirms much previous research.

Identity variables such as religiosity and ancestral origin are also correlated with the risk of parental breakup. Children with Aboriginal or Black origins were at higher risk of experiencing a parental separation than the White population while children with Asian origins were at lower risk: patterns that fit quite well with what is known about family forms in these ancestral origin groups. The effect of having a foreign-born parent had been significant but overlapped with the effect of Asian origin. There was also a correlation (not shown) with whether or not the biological mother smoked cigarettes during her pregnancy: children with smoker mothers being at higher risk of subsequent parental separation: a pattern we attribute to maternal smoking being, at this point in history, a cultural marker of membership of a "bohemian" social class that rejects the bourgeois values of "health promotion". Contrary to what has been found by some scholars there was no effect of the child's gender.

Model 3 added the married / cohabiting status of the child's parents at the time of her or his birth. Even after other factors had been held constant those children who had been born into a common-law union had three times the odds of experiencing parental breakup before their fourth birthday. Including this predictor had little effect on the size of odds ratios for most other independent variables but resulted in the effect of Quebec residence becoming non-significant, thus suggesting an important overlap between these two correlates of parental breakup.

Several post facto explanations might be adduced but we speculate that Quebec culture and socio-legal institutions encourage the bearing of children by unmarried cohabiting couples and this in turn may encourage union dissolution. Unmarried cohabitation is not a single well-defined social institution and likely includes a range of implied long-term commitment: from what used to be called "concubinage" all the way to the more formalized union civile. Establishing that a union is or was "common law" can be tricky (Knab and McLanahan, 2006).

Time-constant and time-varying predictors of parental breakup.

Young children from the original cohort of the NLSCY were followed up to their teenage years. Aside from that only those born in 1997 and 1998 were followed up until their ninth birthday. Pooling children born in 1993-4 from the original cohort with those born in 1997-8 from the slightly later cohort increases sample size and permits us to identify risk factors for parental breakup over the period up to the child's ninth or tenth birthday.

The sub-population (domain) of interest for this analysis is those children who were living with two parents at the time of the first interview and had not experienced any separation before that date. This permits characteristics of both parents to be used when predicting the risk of a subsequent parental separation.

Analysis time begins at the child's birth but in this case observation time starts at the date of the first interview. (See Cleves et al. (2010: 62-3). Some children were only a few months old at the date of the first interview but others were as old as 24. We adjusted for such differences by including the child's age in years and months at the first interview as an independent variable in the prediction of the risk of parental separation.

Some predictors can change their values over time and most of these are likely to be affected by separation of the parents, important examples being housing tenure, household income in relation to the poverty line (what Statistics Canada calls the "low income cutoff") the child's number of siblings and social psychological measures of parental depression and family functioning. A form of event history analysis allows updating the values of such variables in successive data collection sweeps (Cleves et al. 2010: 195-7). This involves splitting the sample and creating as many episodes as there are failure times ("failure" here being parental breakup). Appropriate sample weights were used but it was not possible, as it has been in our previous analyses, to use Statistics Canada supplied sets of bootstrap weights that adjust standard errors for the complex

sample design. The results of statistical tests applied in table 5 should therefore be interpreted conservatively.

Table 5. Seven nested Cox models to predict the relative risk of parental breakup. Time-constant predictors are entered before time-updated predictors.
Risk ratios for models 1 through 7 are reported in the columns of the table.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Quebec	1.60	1.68	1.54	1.49	1.42	ns	ns
Religion “None”		1.49	1.39	1.39	1.27	1.25	1.29
Mother <30 @ birth		1.75	1.76	1.79	1.57	1.55	1.57
Foreign born			0.67	0.65	0.65	0.69	ns
Post-sec education			0.75	ns	ns	ns	ns
Stepfamily				2.20	2.03	1.95	1.90
#Siblings					0.73	0.74	0.76
Rent dwelling					2.19	2.11	2.04
Depressed parent					1.99	2.00	1.99
Spouse smokes					1.96	1.92	1.90
Union Libre						1.37	1.41
Asian origin							0.18

Table 5 shows estimates of the risk ratio that expresses the effect of each predictor in a series of seven nested models where the dependent variable is the hazard of a child’s experiencing parental breakup between the first and last interview of the longitudinal study. Only those estimates that were statistically significant are shown, others being indicated by “ns”. Children from Quebec have a 60% higher risk of experiencing parental breakup than those from Ontario in model 1 but this effect eventually becomes non-significant after the inclusion of such predictors as housing tenure, parental depression, parental smoking and whether or not the parental union was consensual rather than marital.

Several independent variables have statistically significant effects upon the risk of parental breakup in all seven models. These include children from stepfamilies, those whose families' religion was given as "none", those whose mother was under 30 at their birth, those with more siblings and those whose accommodation was rented rather than owned. Family income had been included as a predictor but its effects overlap considerably with those of housing tenure. The effects of sibship size and housing tenure are consistent with Becker's "marital capital" perspective on union dissolution. This analysis treats the type of parental union as time-varying and, as already mentioned, it is significantly predictive of parental breakup, even after all other variables in the table have been held constant. Children with at least one foreign born parent have significantly lower risk of parental breakup but, given Canada's recent immigration history, this overlaps with Asian ancestry and the effect becomes non-significant once the latter predictor has been introduced in model 7. Parental depression had been assessed with a shortened 12-item version of the full 60-item CES-D scale, the cut-point for labeling a parent as "depressed" being taken as a score of 9 or greater since this is proportional to the official cutoff for the full scale (Poulin et al, 2005). Children with a depressed parent had twice the hazard of experiencing subsequent parental breakup. There was also a link with parental smoking. Children whose main caregiver's partner smoked daily were at significantly higher risk of subsequent parental breakup.

Our final analysis shows the longitudinal correlation between type of parental union at the child's birth and family status in the 2006-7 data collection sweep. The child's family status could be "intact family", "stepfamily", "blended stepfamily" or "lone parent family". Two separate birth cohorts are involved, those born in 1993-4 being older at the 2006-7 data collection than those born in 1997-8. We used multinomial logistic regression, estimating the results with appropriate sets of bootstrap weights that correct for the complex sample design.

Table 6 shows substantial relative risk ratios in both birth cohorts. Children born into a consensual non-marital union have lower odds of being in an intact family at 2006-7. In fact they have over three times the odds of being in a blended (complex) stepfamily and

over three times the odds of being with a lone parent. They also have significantly higher odds of being in a simple stepfamily as compared to an intact family.

Table 6. Multinomial logistic regression.
Prediction of family status at 2006-7: Intact, Step, Blended or Lone Parent Family.
Effect of child being born to Consensual Union (Union Libre) vs. Marital Union.

Two birth cohorts: 0-1 yr olds	**1993-4**		**1997-8**	
Relative Risk Ratios (RRR)				
Effect of Union libre vs. Married at birth on status at 2006-7.	RRR	z	RRR	z
Predicting child status 2006-7				
In step-family vs intact	4.54	4.2	2.34	2.3
In blended family vs intact	3.18	3.3	5.04	4.8
In lone parent family vs intact	3.36	5.1	3.01	5.8

Discussion

To some extent these results are consistent with Becker's "marital capital" perspective and confirm the findings of longitudinal studies carried out some years ago in Britain and the USA (Cherlin et al., 1991). Couples at greater risk of divorce tend to be earlier in the family life cycle and from more marginalized social classes, a pattern consistent with McLanahan and Percheski's (1998) view that the intergenerational reproduction of economic inequality is bound up with family structure, including the propensity for lone parenthood and union dissolution. Our research confirms previous work showing that children born into consensual non-marital unions are at greater risk of experiencing parental breakup than those born in wedlock. This in turn makes them more likely to experience life in a lone parent family or in a simple or complex blended family. In the

Canadian situation this overlaps with residence in Quebec, a province where the bearing of children into “unions libres” went from being unusual to being the dominant pattern over the period between 1982 and 2008. The mainstreaming of childbearing in easily dissolved common-law unions may be especially harmful to the economic prospects of children from marginal groups. Our finding that parental depression is predictive of subsequent parental breakup confirms the Cherlin team’s finding that families that eventually divorce are already troubled before the breakup occurs. The association with parental depression is also consistent with analyses of the Fragile Families data reported by Dush (2006).

Many of the factors we have shown to be predictive of parental separation have also been established as correlates of children’s cognitive and behavioural outcomes (Juby et al., 2005; LeBourdais et al., 2005). Our results show that undesirable child outcomes might, to simplify the explanations, be interpreted as being caused by the same factors that are implicated in parental separation so that some considerable care is necessary before parental separation is considered to be an independent cause of such outcomes.

One puzzle is that while the percentage of children born to couples living in non-marital rather than marital unions has steadily increased over the period covered by the NLSCY (1992 to 2007) there has been no corresponding trend in the children’s risk of experiencing parental breakup: at least not in the first few years of their lives.

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