

'I don't': Four-in-ten Canadian adults have never married, and aren't sure they want to

Half say marriage is not necessary, though most see it as a more genuine commitment than common-law

May 7, 2018 – Is what was once a societal expectation of young couples now little more than a social event?

While wedding planners have fashioned an entire industry centred on that “special day,” Canadians themselves appear unconvinced that the day – or the institution it represents – is all that special anymore.

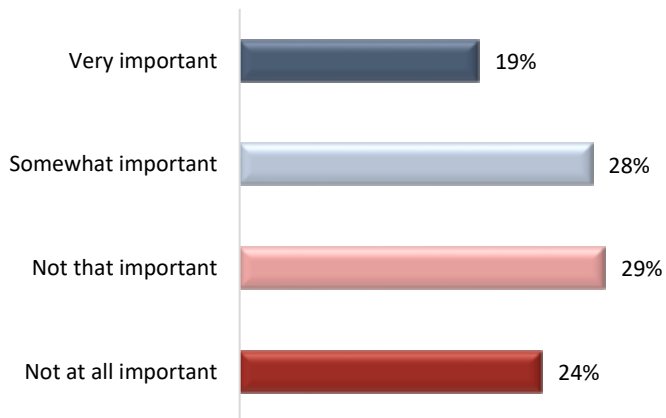
A wide-ranging new public opinion poll from the Angus Reid Institute finds people in this country decidedly lukewarm on marriage.

Fewer than half (47%) say it is important to them that a couple that plans to spend the rest of their lives together get legally married. Slightly more than half (53%) say “marriage is simply not necessary.”

That said, a majority are of the view that getting hitched is “a more genuine form of commitment” than living in a common-law relationship.

These shifting views on the role of marriage in Canadian society are reflected in respondents' reporting on their own marital status. Nearly three-quarters of 18-34-year-olds (73%) have never been married, and one-in-six in this group say they're not particularly inclined to, ever.

When two people plan to spend the rest of their lives together, how important is it to you that they legally marry (meaning exchange vows in a public ceremony, whether civil or religious)?



METHODOLOGY:

The Angus Reid Institute conducted an online survey from January 23 – 26, 2018, among a representative randomized sample of 1,520 Canadian adults who are members of the [Angus Reid Forum](#). For comparison purposes only, a probability sample of this size would carry a margin of error of +/- 2.5 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. Discrepancies in or between totals are due to rounding. The survey was self-commissioned and paid for by ARI. Detailed tables are found at the end of this release.

More Key Findings:

- Age has a significant influence on Canadians' experiences with marriage – whether they've been married, whether the ceremony was civil or religious, etc. – but a less pronounced effect on opinions about marriage as an institution
- On the topic of religion, Canadians reject the notion that a religious wedding is more 'legitimate' than a civil one (76% disagree with a statement to this effect), but most of those who have walked down the aisle in their lives did so at a religious service

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- In general, Canadians favour treating marriages and common-law relationships identically when it comes to taxation and assets, with majorities saying those who legally marry should not get extra tax benefits (59% say this) and that those in common-law relationships should divide assets equally when the relationship ends (58% say this)

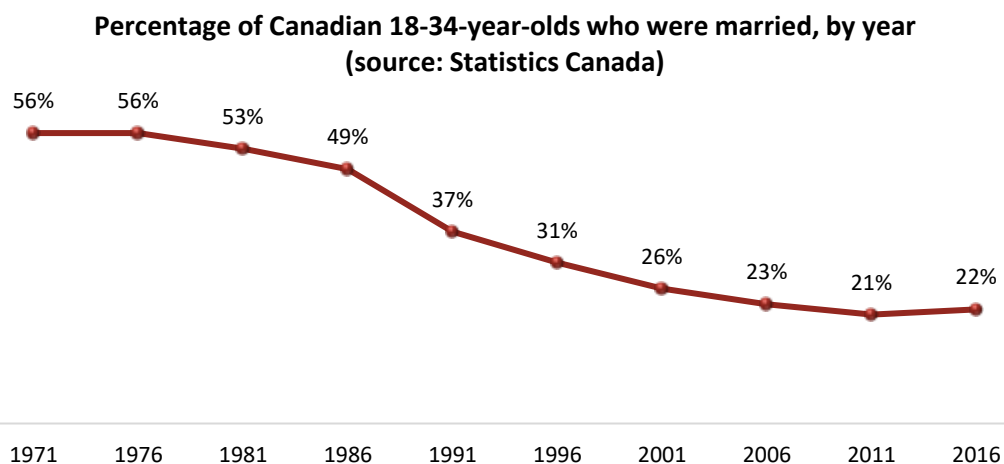
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Part 1 – Marriage in Canada today

The trend has been well-documented: Canadians are waiting longer to get married, if they are tying the proverbial knot at all. According to Statistics Canada, nearly three-quarters (73%) of adults ages 25-29 reported in the 2011 census that they had never been married. Thirty years earlier, in 1981, the total was just 26 per cent.

Indeed, the percentage of 18-34-year-olds telling the national statistics agency that they are married dropped precipitously between the 1980s and the early 2000s, as seen in the graph that follows:



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Previous Angus Reid Institute research [has found](#) that Canadians generally view this long-term trend of delaying marriage as a good thing for society, though they have mixed feelings about lower overall rates of marriage. This survey aims to go beyond raw statistics and look at attitudes toward marriage, and experiences with it, in Canada today.

Marriage: Still important?

When two people want to spend the rest of their lives together, how important is it that they exchange vows publicly, in either a civil or religious wedding ceremony?

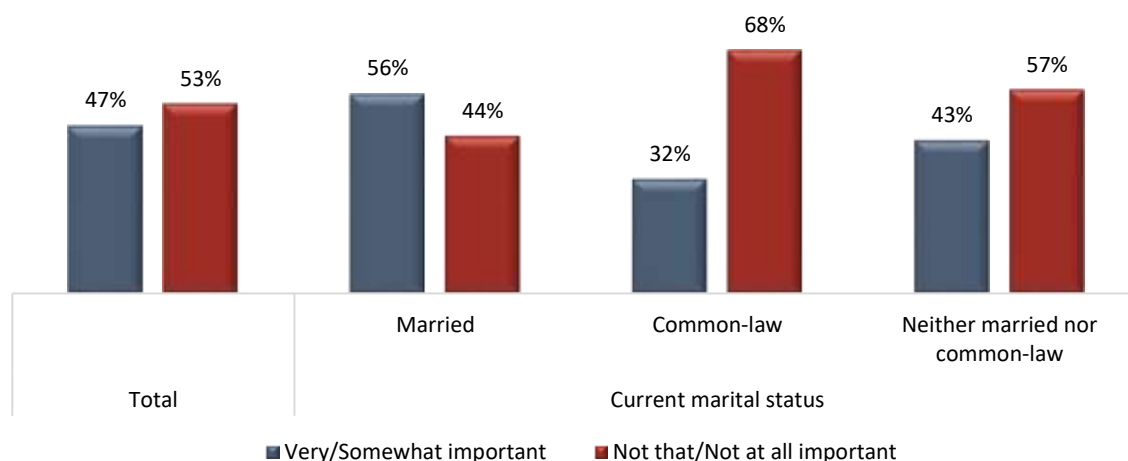
As recently as 2014, more than two-thirds of Americans [told Pew Research](#) that this was either very or somewhat important to them. Nearly half (47%) said it was very important.

In Canada today, the perceived importance of marriage is considerably lower than this. More than half (53%) say it's "not that important" or "not at all important" to them that people who want to spend their lives together get married.

This perspective is fairly consistent across demographic groups, but there are a few factors that seem to drive belief that couples getting formally married is important. First, one's own personal experience with marriage and long-term relationships is highly correlated with views on this question.

Most of those who are currently married (56%) say it's important to them that couples who plan to stay together long-term get married, while those who are currently living in common-law partnerships – perhaps predictably, given that they have so far eschewed wedding their current partners – overwhelmingly view marriage as less important:

When two people plan to spend the rest of their lives together, how important is it to you that they legally marry (that is, exchange vows in a public ceremony, whether civil or religious)?

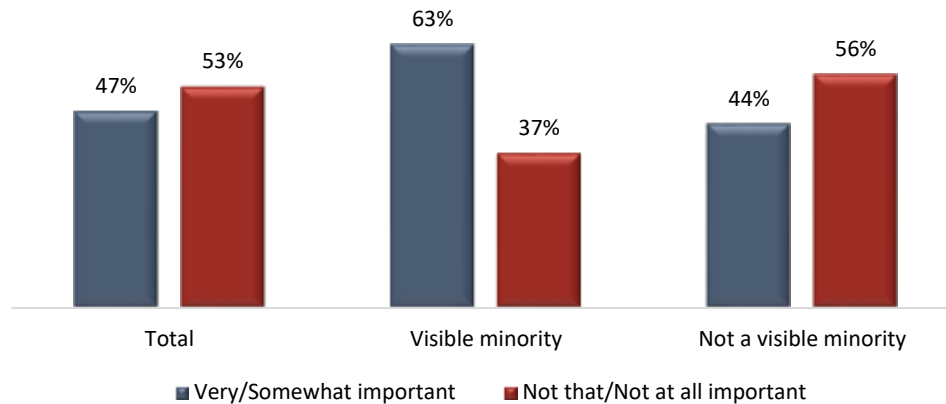


Belonging to a visible minority community is also a key driver of opinion on the importance of marriage in this context. Those who self-identify as visible minorities are much more likely than those who do not to say getting married is important:

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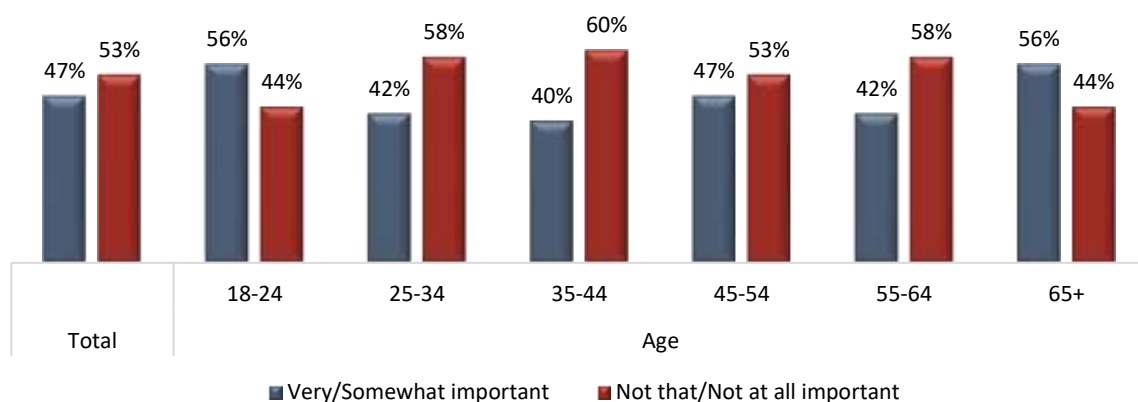
When two people plan to spend the rest of their lives together, how important is it to you that they legally marry (that is, exchange vows in a public ceremony, whether civil or religious)?



Age and gender seem to be lesser factors in shaping opinion on this question, but it's worth noting their influence nonetheless.

The oldest Canadian adults (those ages 65-plus) and the youngest ones (those ages 18-24) are the only age groups more likely to say marriage is important than unimportant in this scenario in which two people plan to spend their lives together. Among those in-between, "not important" is a more common response:

When two people plan to spend the rest of their lives together, how important is it to you that they legally marry (that is, exchange vows in a public ceremony, whether civil or religious)?



Gender has even less influence on responses to this question. Women of all ages are more likely to say marriage is not important than important, as are men under age 55. The only age-gender cohort in which a majority say it is important for couples who plan to spend their lives together to get hitched is men ages 55 and older ([see comprehensive tables for greater detail](#)).

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Notably, regional differences on this issue are minimal. Despite its history of rejecting religious institutions beginning with the Quiet Revolution in the 1960s, Quebec is no more likely than other regions to say marriage is not important. This pattern is consistent throughout this survey, with Quebecers tending to find themselves aligned with the mainstream view on most questions, rather than as outliers.

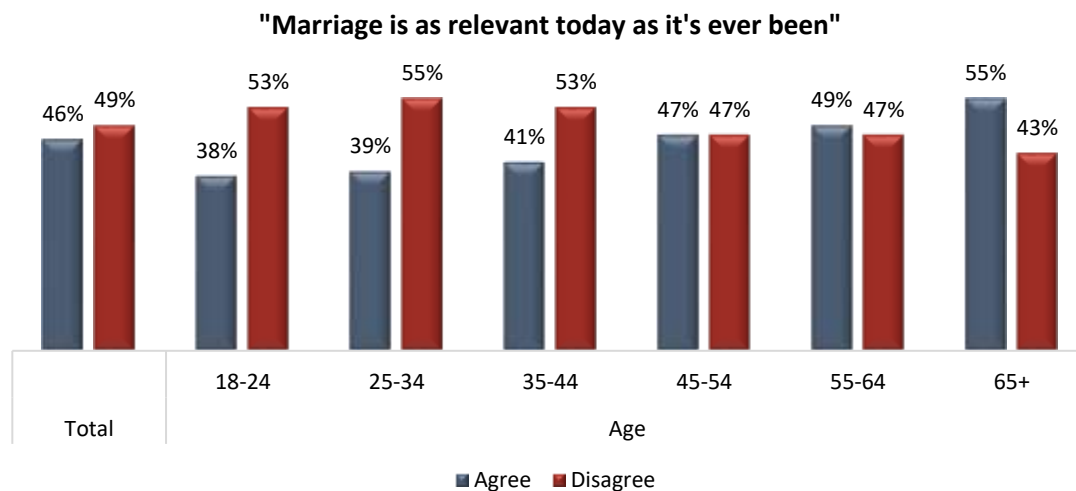
Half say marriage unnecessary

The sense that marriage is a less-than-crucial part of life in Canada today is reflected in several other attitudes expressed in this survey. Slightly fewer than half of respondents (46%) agree with the statement, "Marriage is as relevant today as it's ever been."

Age plays an important role in this belief, with younger Canadians more likely disagree. Some four-in ten Canadians between the ages of 18-24 (38%) and 25-34 (39%) say marriage is as relevant as ever. In comparison, more than half (55%) in the 65-plus age group hold this belief, as seen in the graph that follows.

These findings correspond with a [well-documented pattern](#) of younger Canadians waiting longer to tie the knot, or not marrying at all.

This phenomenon – which has also been seen in the U.S. and other developed countries – could be a result of a shift from more traditional values, like marriage, to values such as [education and careers](#). For women, this shift could be as simple as no longer feeling like marriage is necessary for financial stability. While older generations of women participated in the work force [at a lower rate](#), today's marriage-age women are working and earning more than women their age ever have. Other issues, including [finances](#) and the cost of weddings, are also concerns for millennials that may lead to putting off or rejecting marriage altogether.

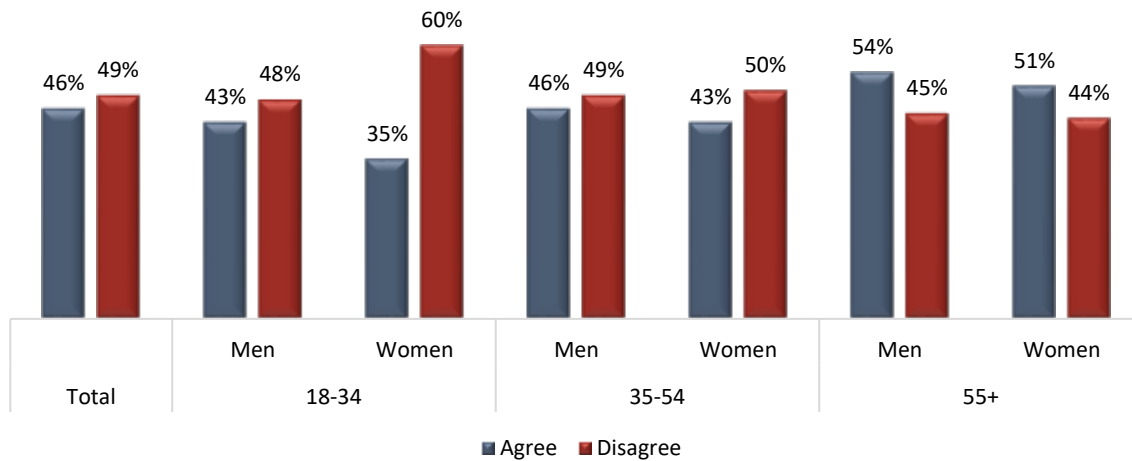


Younger women are especially skeptical of this statement. Some 60 per cent of them disagree, compared with fewer than half of men their age:

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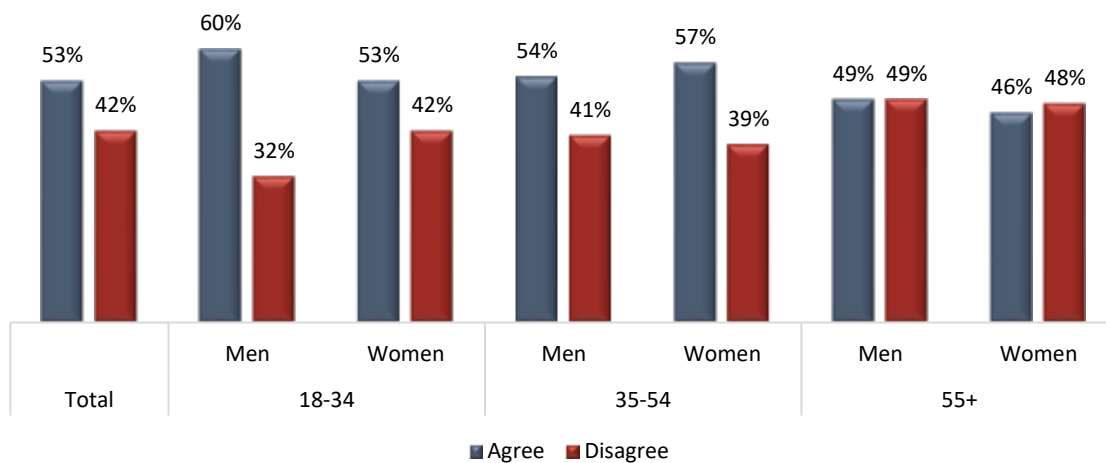
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"Marriage is as relevant today as it has ever been"



Relatedly, most Canadians (53%) say marriage is “simply not necessary.” This statement is especially compelling to young men, six-in-ten of who agree with it:

"Marriage is simply not necessary"



What about the kids?

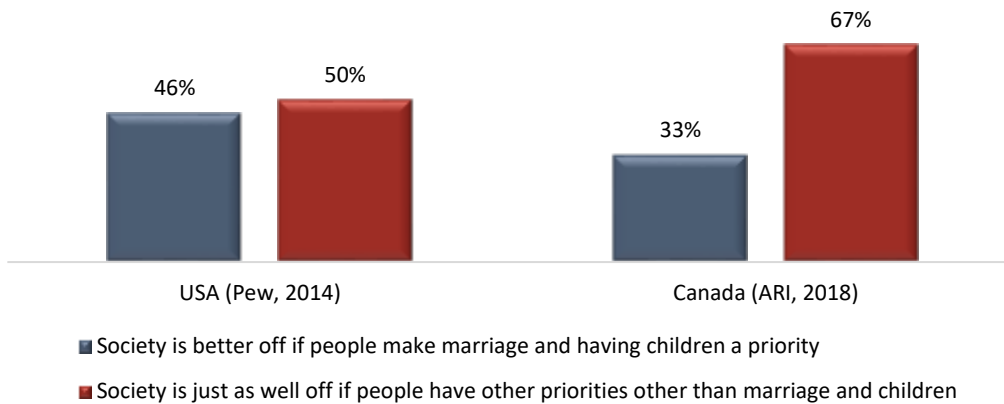
Marriage is both an emotional and financial commitment, and it’s a commitment not everyone is prepared to make. When people choose to prioritize other things in their lives, rather than marriage and children, what effect does this have on the broader society?

This survey replicated a question Pew Research asked in the United States in 2014, which sought to measure views on the significance of marriage to society as a whole. Notably, Canadians are much more likely than Americans to say that society is “just as well off” if people have priorities other than marriage and children, as seen in the following graph:

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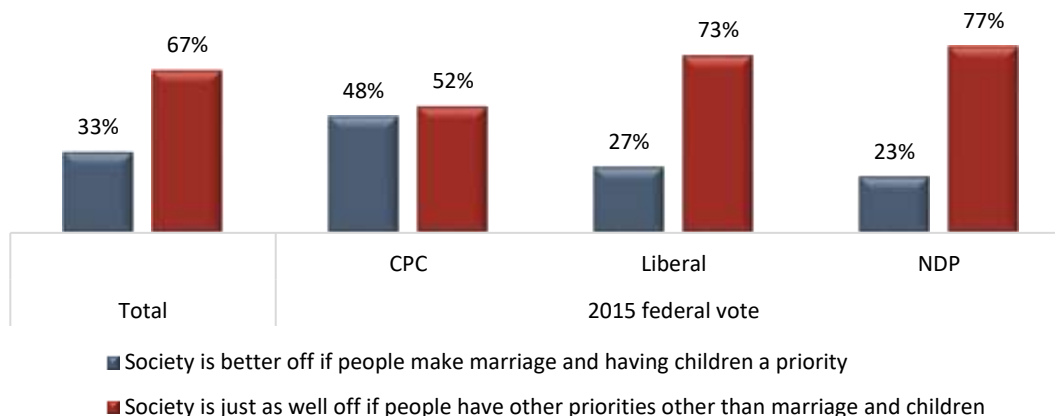
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Which of the following is closer to your own view, even if neither is exactly right?



This view is consistent across major demographic groups, with past Conservative voters (48%) and older men (44% of those ages 55-plus) the most likely to say society is better off if people make marriage and having children a priority ([see comprehensive tables](#)):

Which of the following is closer to your own view, even if neither is exactly right?

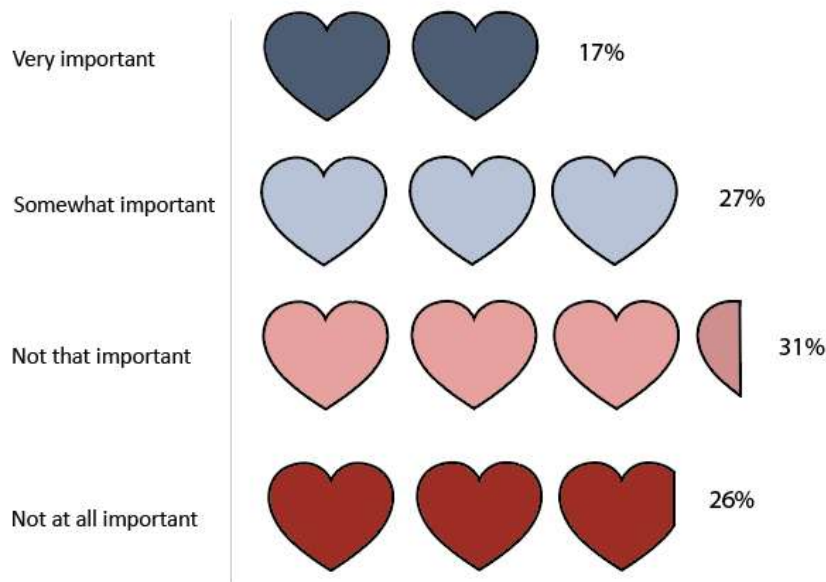


Having children before getting married, or without ever getting married, is becoming an increasingly [popular choice](#) for millennials. While most Canadians find it acceptable to have priorities other than marriage and children, they are more divided on the notion of whether it's important for unmarried people who have children together to legally marry, as seen in the following graph:

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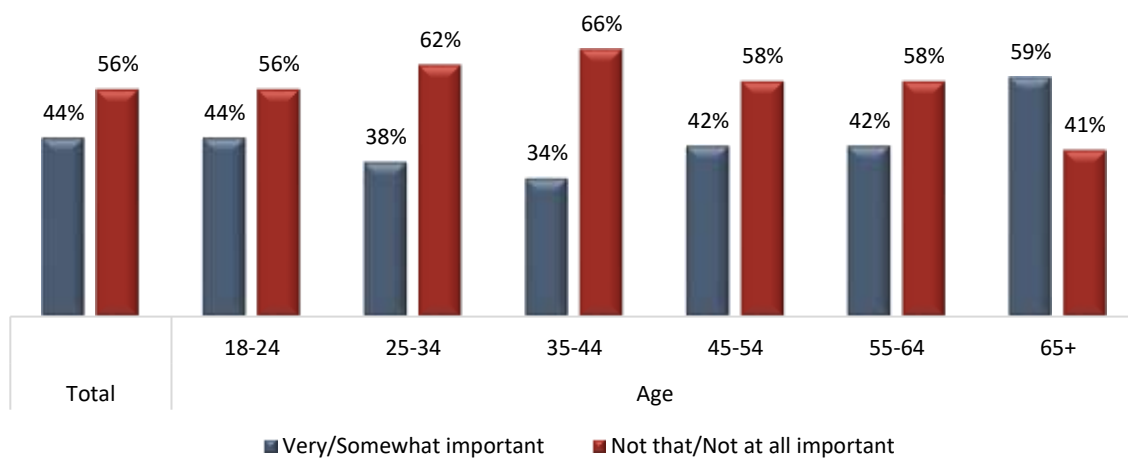
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When an unmarried man and woman have a child together, how important is it to you that they legally marry (meaning exchange vows in a public ceremony, whether civil or religious)?



The perspective that parental marital status is of minimal importance holds sway for a majority of Canadians across all age groups under 65. Among those ages 65 and older, however, nearly six-in-ten say unmarried couples who have children together should exchange vows:

When an unmarried man and woman have a child together, how important is it to you that they legally marry?

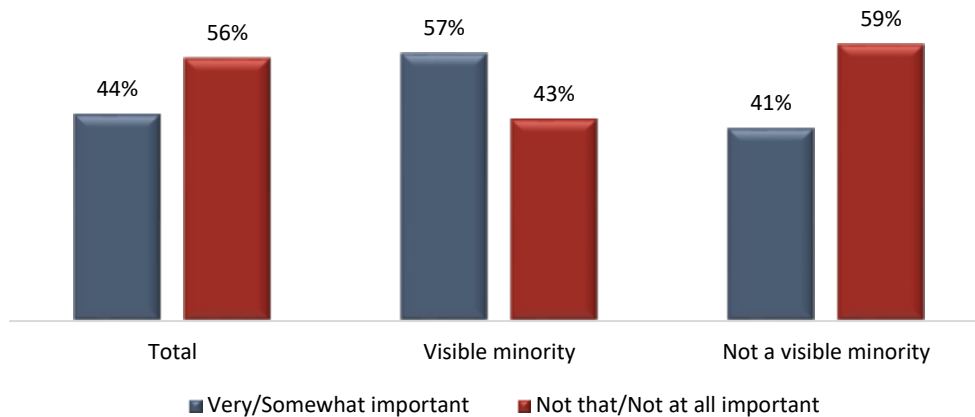


Those who identify as visible minorities (57%) are also more likely to believe it is important for parents to get married than those who don't identify as such (41%):

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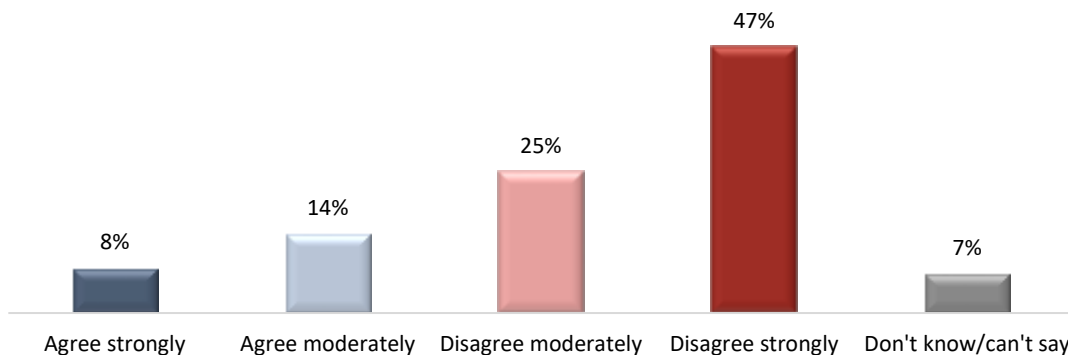
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When an unmarried man and woman have a child together, how important is it to you that they legally marry?



While 44 per cent of Canadians say it's important that unmarried men and women who have children together get married, they are far less likely to believe that such children will not fare as well as those with married parents. Fewer than one-in-four (22%) agree with the notion that the children of unmarried parents will be less well-adjusted. Indeed, a plurality of Canadians (47%) strongly disagree:

"Children whose parents are not married won't be as well adjusted as those whose parents are married"



The religion factor

As Canadians adopt less traditional views on marriage, they also place less value on the institution's historically religious component. Fewer than one-in-five Canadians (18%) agree with the statement, "A religious wedding ceremony is more legitimate than a civil wedding."

This perspective is consistent across age groups, with Canadians under age 35 agreeing at the same roughly one-in-five rate as those in older age groups ([see comprehensive tables](#)).

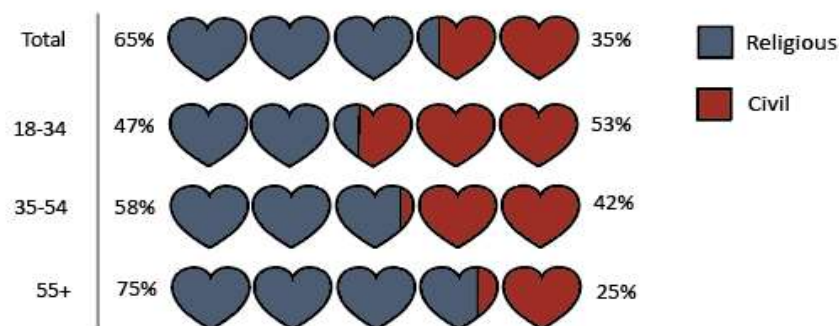
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But while Canadians of all ages reject the notion that religious weddings are more “legitimate,” there is a significant age gap when it comes to participation in such ceremonies.

Three-quarters of Canadians ages 55 and older who have been married in their lives did so in a religious ceremony. Among younger respondents who have been married, civil weddings are more common than religious ones:

Did your marriage take place in a religious or civil ceremony? (Asked of those who have been married, N=917)



Part 2 – Long-term relationships

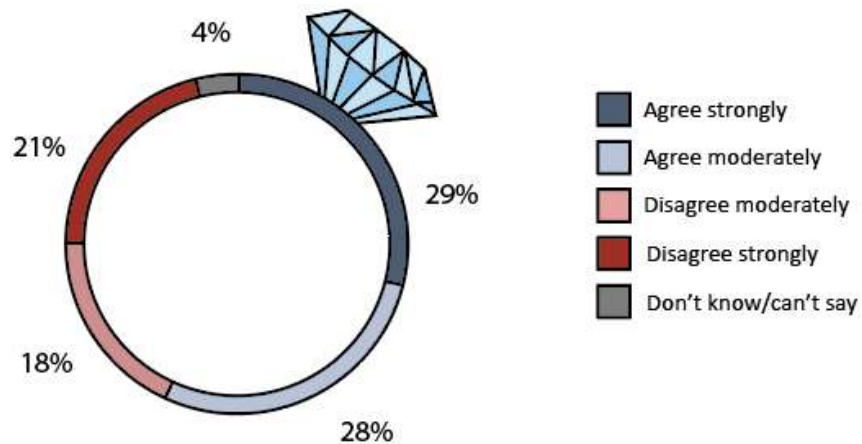
Commitment and common-law

While a small majority of Canadians say it’s not important to them that people who want to spend the rest of their lives together legally marry, most Canadians also view the alternative to marriage – a common-law relationship – as a lesser form of commitment. Some 57 per cent agree with a statement to this effect, as seen in the graph that follows:

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“Marriage is a more genuine form of commitment than a common-law relationship”



This finding, too, is quite consistent across demographic groups ([see comprehensive tables for greater detail](#)).

Although most Canadians view common-law relationships as less genuine than marriages, more than seven-in-ten (71%) say couples should live together before deciding to tie the knot:

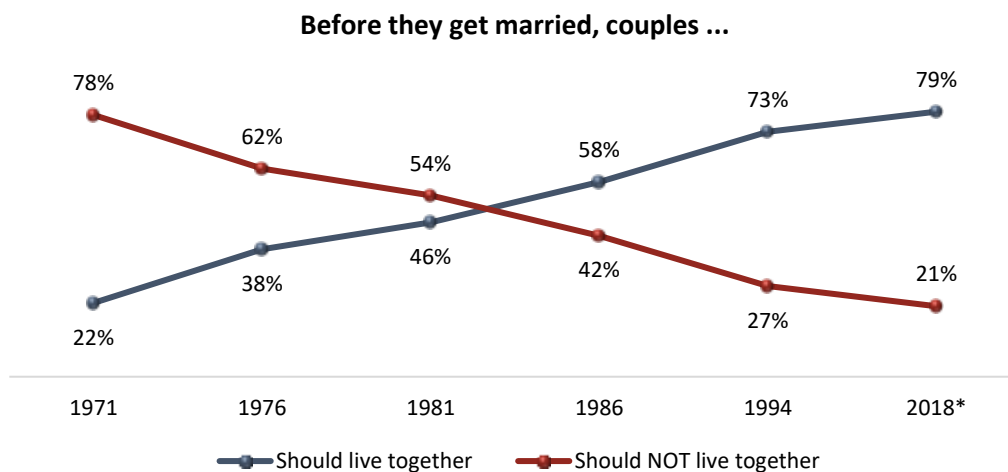
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“Couples should live together before getting married”



Notably, agreement with this statement follows a long pattern of public opinion polling in Canada. Historical data from Gallup and Angus Reid shows the vast majority of Canadians were opposed to couples living together before marriage when asked in 1971, but became more accepting of the idea as the 20th century progressed:



*2018 ARI question was phrased as “couples should live together before getting married” and respondents were asked to agree or disagree. Those answering “don't know” in each year are excluded for the purposes of the trendline.

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Equal treatment for marriage and common-law?

From a legal perspective, Canadians are inclined to see marriages and common-law relationships in a similar light. This survey asked respondents whether current tax rules – which treat couples the same way whether they are married or common-law partners – are adequate, or if there should be extra benefits for people who legally marry.

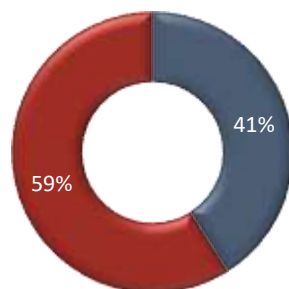
Almost six-in-ten (59%) say couples who legally marry should not receive extra tax benefits unavailable to common-law couples.

In a similar vein, roughly the same number of Canadians (58%) say common-law relationships should be treated the same as marriages when it comes to divvying up assets if the relationship ends. British Columbia **currently allows** common-law spouses to claim half of their partners' assets if the relationship ends, but other provinces do not treat common-law relationships this way.

The symmetry in these two findings – shown in the graphs that follow – suggests that, for most Canadians, marriages and common-law partnerships should be treated as equivalent in the eyes of the law:

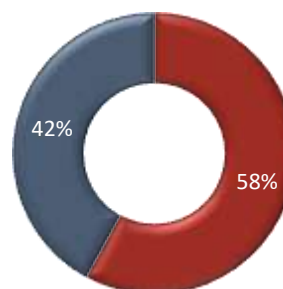
Canada's federal tax code treats married couples and common-law partners the same way. What are your views on this?

- Couples who legally marry should get extra tax benefits not available to those in common-law relationships
- Couples who legally marry should NOT get extra tax benefits



In British Columbia, common-law spouses can legally claim half of their partners' assets if the relationship ends. Regardless of the province in which you live, would you say:

- Common-law relationships should be treated the same as marriage when it comes to assets
- Common-law relationships should NOT be treated the same as marriage when it comes to assets



Part 3 – The Single Life

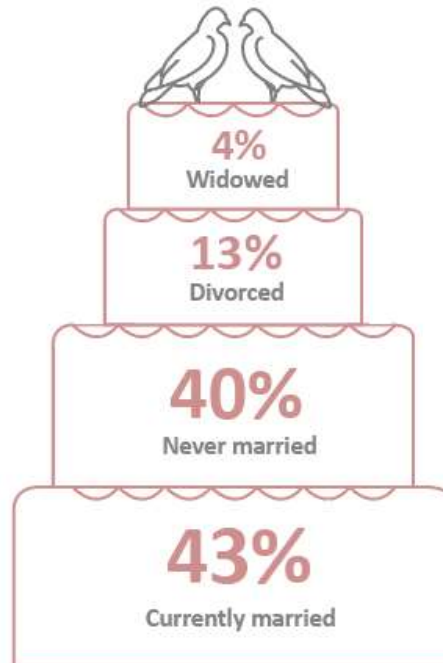
Who's married? Who's not?

Attitudes toward marriage in Canada may be changing, but most Canadians still report having walked down the aisle at least once in their lives. Some six-in-ten (60%) have been married at some point, and 43 per cent are married currently.

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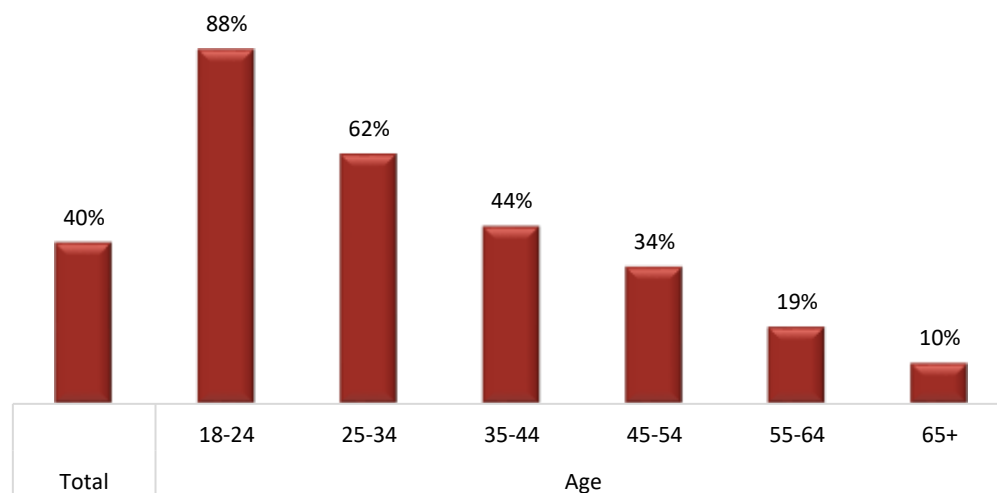
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Have you ever been married?



The percentage of Canadians who have never been married is – predictably – highly correlated to age. Full majorities of those ages 18-24 and 25-34 have never tied the knot, and nearly half of those ages 35-44 say the same, as seen in the following graph:

Percentage of Canadians who have never been married:



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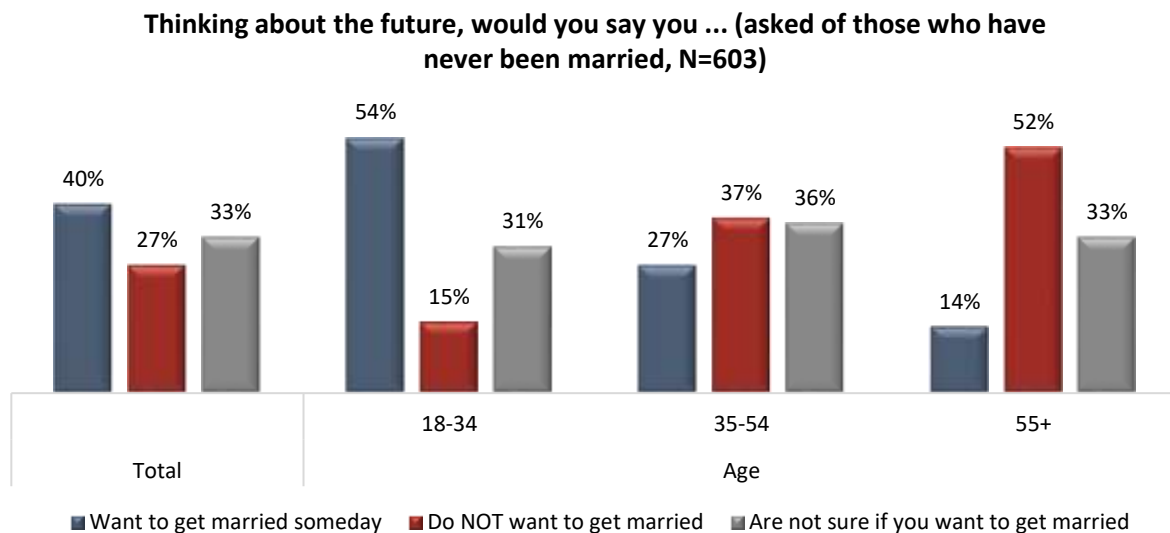
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In addition to the 43 per cent of Canadians who are currently married, some 26 per cent of unmarried Canadians (15% of adults overall) are currently in common-law relationships.

What's holding never-married adults back?

While 40 per cent of adults in Canada have never been married, most of them are not opposed to the idea of marrying someday. Some four-in-ten Canadians who have never been married (40% of this never-married subgroup) say they would like to walk down the aisle someday, and one-third (33%) are not sure if they want to get married, but aren't ruling it out.

This leaves one quarter of never-married adults (27%) who are not interested in changing their marital status. Notably, the majority of never-married Canadians under the age of 35 say they would like to get married one day, but this number drops significantly among those 35 and older:



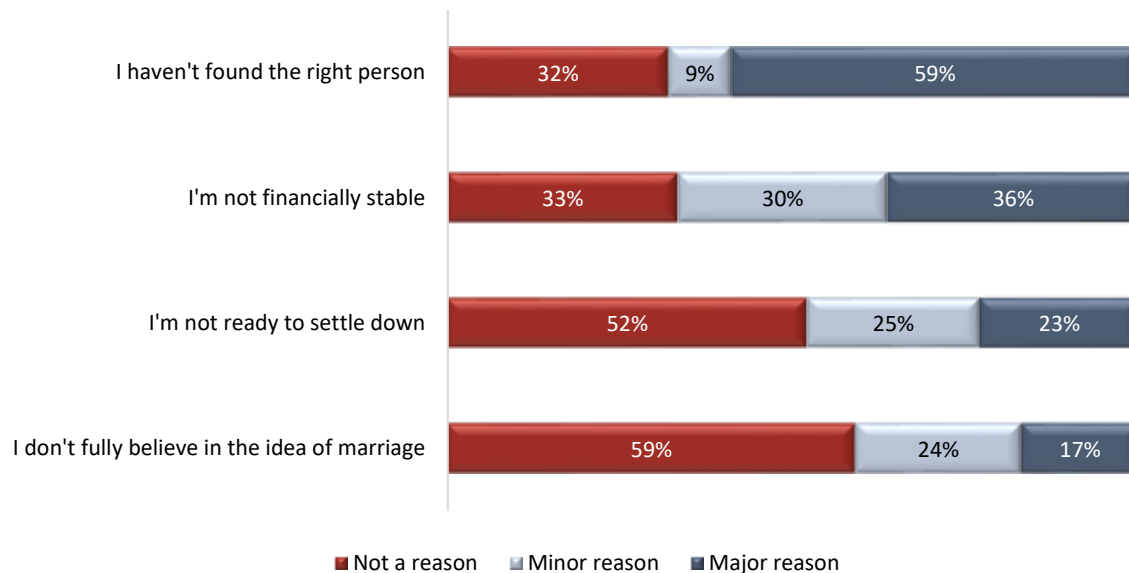
While never-married Canadians have many different reasons for their current marital status, the most common one is that they just haven't found the right person yet.

Other concerns – including a lack of financial stability – are less likely to be seen as major inhibitors to getting hitched:

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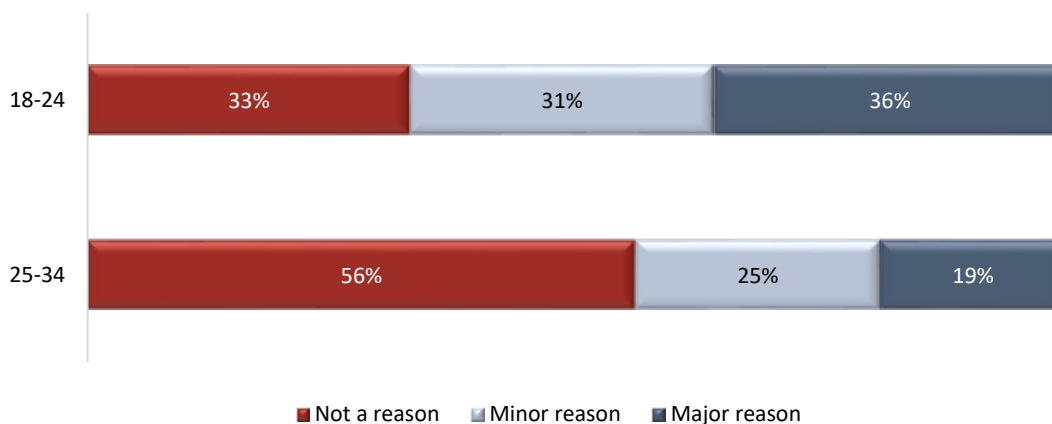
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For each of the following, please indicate whether it is a major reason, minor reason, or not a reason why you are not currently married (Asked of never-married Canadians open to marriage, N=437)



Being “ready to settle down” is much more of a consideration for the youngest respondents (those ages 18-24) in this never-married group. More than one-in-three (36%) list not being ready as a major reason they haven’t gotten married yet. This concern drops considerably among those ages 25-34, as seen in the following graph:

For each of the following, please indicate whether it is a major reason, minor reason, or not a reason why you are not currently married (“I’m not ready to settle down” shown; question asked of never-married Canadians open to marriage, N=437)



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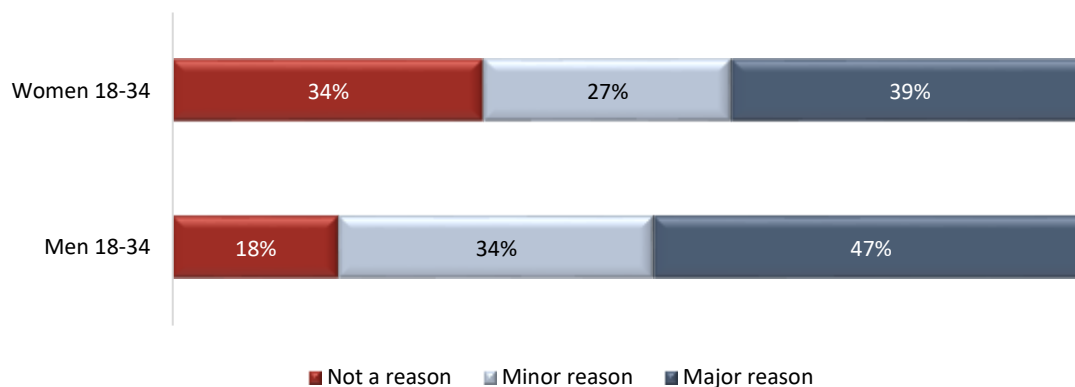
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Marriage is just too expensive for many

Though financial concerns may not be the main thing holding never-married Canadians back from the proverbial altar, they play at least a minor roll in the thinking of two-thirds of such respondents.

Young men who have never been married, especially, are inclined to feel inhibited by a lack of funds. Nearly half of them (47%) list not being financially stable as a “major reason” for not being married, and fewer than one-in-five (18%) say this is “not a reason.” Almost twice as many never-married young women say financial stability is not holding them back from marriage, as seen in the following graph:

For each of the following, please indicate whether it is a major reason, minor reason, or not a reason why you are not currently married ("I'm not financially stable" shown; question asked of never-married Canadians open to marriage, N=437)



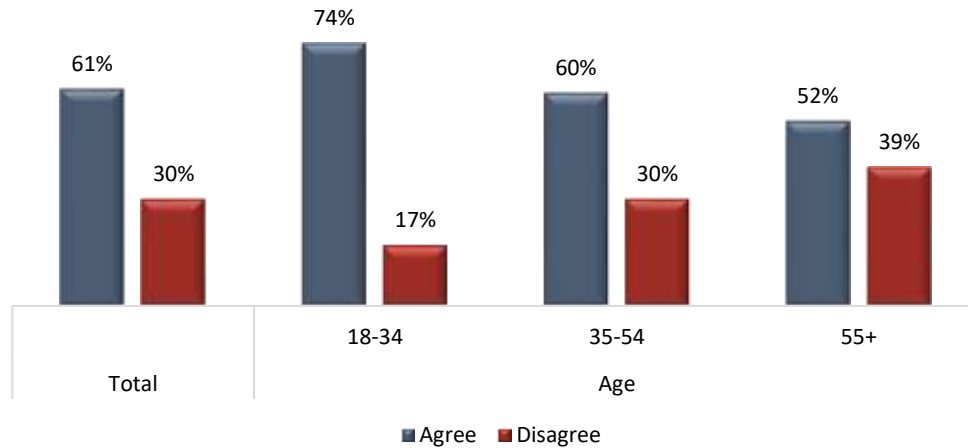
The cost of a wedding can be astronomical, and pressure from family, friends, or society generally can prevent couples from skipping costly “traditions” or taking other steps to save money.

Would people be more likely to get married if the price of a wedding wasn’t so high? Most Canadians seem to think so. Fully six-in-ten (61%) agree with the statement, “More people would get married if weddings weren’t so expensive and stressful,” and agreement rises to three-quarters (74%) among those in the prime age group for first marriages (18-34):

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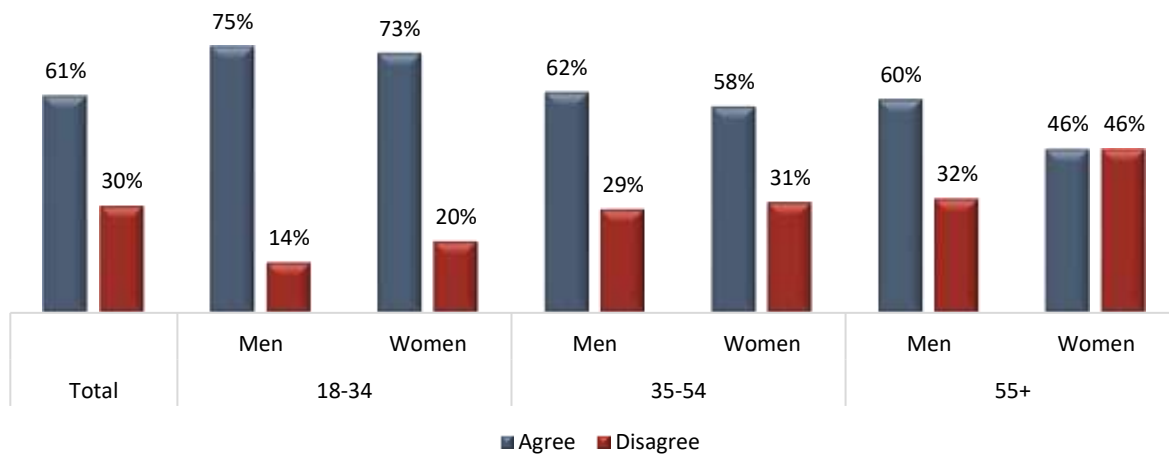
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"More people would get married if weddings weren't so expensive and stressful"



Men are generally more inclined to agree with this sentiment than women (65% of men do, compared to 58% of women), but this gender gap is driven almost entirely by the gulf between older men and older women. Among those under age 55, the genders tend to agree on this question, as seen in the graph that follows.

"More people would get married if weddings weren't so expensive and stressful"



*The **Angus Reid Institute (ARI)** was founded in October 2014 by pollster and sociologist, Dr. Angus Reid. ARI is a national, not-for-profit, non-partisan public opinion research foundation established to advance education by commissioning, conducting and disseminating to the public accessible and impartial statistical data, research and policy analysis on economics, political science, philanthropy, public administration, domestic and international affairs and other socio-economic issues of importance to Canada and its world.*

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Summary tables follow. For detailed results by age, gender, region, education, and other demographics, [click here](#).

When two people plan to spend the rest of their lives together, how important is it to you that they legally marry (that is, exchange vows in a public ceremony, whether civil or religious)?				
(Weighted sample sizes)	Total (1520)	Current Marital Status		
		Married (655)	Common-law (228)	Neither married or common-law (637)
Very important	19%	28%	6%	16%
Somewhat important	28%	28%	26%	28%
Not that important	29%	28%	30%	29%
Not at all important	24%	16%	38%	27%

When an unmarried man and woman have a child together, how important is it to you that they legally marry?			
(Weighted sample sizes)	Total (1520)	Do you identify as a visible minority?	
		Visible minority (238)	Not a visible minority (1282)
Very important	17%	26%	15%
Somewhat important	27%	31%	26%
Not that important	31%	21%	32%
Not at all important	26%	21%	26%

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When two people plan to spend the rest of their lives together, how important is it to you that they legally marry (that is, exchange vows in a public ceremony, whether civil or religious)?

(Weighted sample sizes)	Total (1520)	Do you identify as a visible minority?	
		Visible minority (238)	Not a visible minority (1282)
Very important	19%	31%	17%
Somewhat important	28%	32%	27%
Not that important	29%	19%	30%
Not at all important	24%	18%	26%

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