



Single-person households grow

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The notion that men who live alone are bachelors while women are spinsters, or worse – cat ladies – is disappearing, but the fact that more and more Canadians are shacking up solo certainly isn't going out of fashion.

And with the technological revolution sweeping in to completely overhaul how people interact, Internet-based social networking sites like Facebook and MSN Messenger are making it easier for loners to stay in touch.

According to the latest census data released Wednesday by Statistics Canada, there were 3,327,050 one-person households across the country last year, more than three times as many households with at least five people.

The proportion of people living alone rose five per cent since 2001, continuing a full decade of rapid growth in one-person households.

Solo dwellers were most common in the Yukon and Quebec, while Nunavut and Newfoundland and Labrador had the lowest proportion of people living alone.

Canadian cities with the highest proportion of single-person households include Trois-Rivieres, Sherbrooke and Victoria. Almost 34 per cent of people living alone were 65 and older.

"It's a very mixed picture," Susan McDaniel, a Canadian sociologist who now works at the University of Utah, said of the reasons why people live alone.

"There are people living that way because they want to or they have no choice and it's kind of a semi-permanent arrangement, so the reasons there would be very different than those who were in transition to something else."

While some may simply be in and out of a marriage or relocating for a job while maintaining a long-distance relationship, she suggested a good

portion of the more settled solo-dwellers include elderly people who either lost a spouse or never married and have few relatives.

Rich widows who winter in Florida sipping Pina Coladas with friends by the pool may account for some of them, but McDaniel said there are others living a rather isolated existence, often in poverty on a fixed income.

"The kind of image of the lady with no food in the fridge and nobody to call and she's eating cat food and stuff, that's still real despite the fact that there's been a dramatic increase in the well-being of seniors," she said.

But while most young people do eventually end up married or in some sort of union, McDaniel said many are focused on career and are delaying marriage.

She said it's worked out for many who've made it a personal choice to dump the roommates and live solo.

"They're financially capable and they're socially permitted to," McDaniel said. "Previously... you went from the family home right into marriage... but now it's not so totally weird if you live alone."

At 33, Melissa Bigelow moved out of her parents' place nine months ago and into a downtown Toronto condo she purchased with her own savings.

The property administrator works 12-hour days trying to build her career and has yet to find Mr. Right, but she's enjoying the independence that comes with solo living.

"I think a lot of people... are realizing that you don't have to be married and have a family as young anymore," she said.

"People are focusing more on careers and really wanting to get settled with that before they kind of settle down with family."

Financially challenging at times, shopping and cooking for one also takes some getting used to, but Bigelow said it certainly hasn't affected her social life.

In fact, the social stigma that once clung to the notion of women living alone doesn't hold up, McDaniel said, noting unattached women have been found to lead extremely active social lives.

Men, on the other hand, tend to do less well living alone, she said.

"They don't know how to take care of themselves as well. They don't know how to cook proper food. They don't know how to keep their place neat... and they don't know necessarily how to reach out and find friends," she said.

But while some singles may be perfectly content living alone, most are keen on finding a partner eventually, something Calgary-based dating expert Christine Hart said can get tough once you fall into certain habits.

"People that live alone are often very protective and very proud that they're very self-sufficient," said the founder of speed dating club Six Minute Dates.

"They can fix their car. They can fix their dishwasher. They can do everything on their own, but when meeting potential partners, that partner needs to know they could potentially fit into that person's life."

Hart said many modern, independent women are stricken with the problem as they try to defend their decision to live alone.

She said single men who live alone are often reluctant to get involved for fear of having to give up certain routines like ``Tuesday night football."

"People are scared because they know what to expect in their very solid, single, independent lives," she said. "They get too comfortable."

But the proliferation of Internet-based social networking sites is making it easier for people who live alone to stay connected with friends and relatives, University of Toronto sociology professor Barry Wellman said.

While a small minority of people have online-only relationships, sometimes at the expense of real ones, he said sites like Facebook have actually expanded people's social lives as they get back in touch with old friends while maintaining current ones.

Those who spend their evenings online likely used to pass their time in front of the television. He suggested the Internet has actually "cut into TV viewing time," thereby replacing an ``antisocial medium" with a "social medium."

"The Internet is helping those folks who do live alone stay connected and not be isolated," he said.