

HOME ALONE

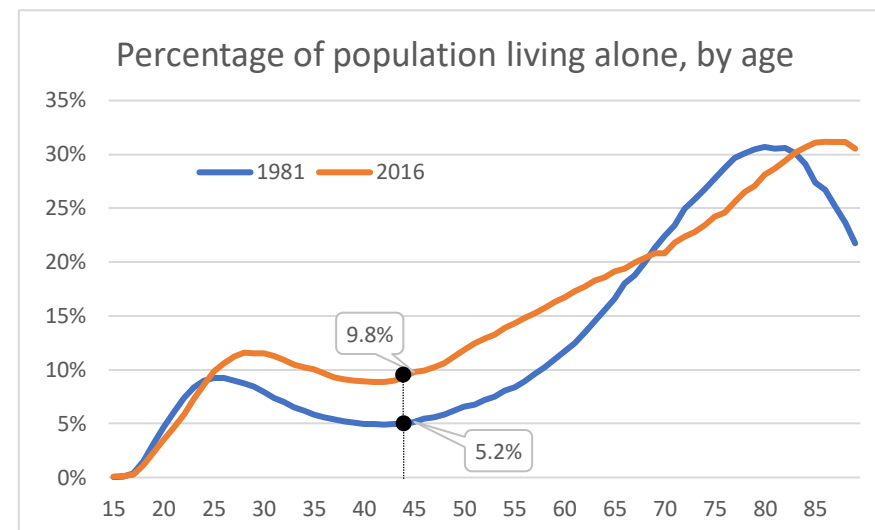
The number of people living alone in Canada more than doubled between 1981 and 2016, from 1.7 million to 4.0 million. By 2016, one-person households had become the most common household type.

In March 2019, Statistics Canada released a [study](#) reporting on the number and characteristics of people in Canada who live alone. In this month's *Social Policy Trends*, we look at some of the findings of that report, findings that carry greater significance because of the need for social distancing required for safety during the COVID pandemic.

In 2016, single-person households comprised 28% of all Canadian households, the highest share ever [reported](#), and had become the most common household type, surpassing couples with children at 26.5%. The data provided in the Statistics Canada report shows that the number of people who live as a single household varies by age. Using those data, the figure at right presents, for 1981 and for 2016, the percentage of persons of every age from 15 to 89 years who were living alone. For example, in 1981, 5.2% of 45-year-olds lived alone. By 2016, that percentage had nearly doubled.

Increases in the percentage of the population living alone has consequences for such disparate issues as rates of homeownership, the size of retirement incomes, consumer spending patterns, and perhaps long-term health.

The increased percentage of working-aged adults living alone has the potential for far reaching implications. It has, for example, significantly affected the real estate market by increasing the demand for condominiums and rental accommodations and by delaying or reducing purchases of single-family homes. It has also likely contributed to women choosing to [delay](#) when they have children. A greater percentage of working-aged adults living alone may also mean a greater number of people with a reduced ability to accumulate wealth and so ensure a more secure retirement income. Retailers are increasingly focussed on meeting the demands of single households.



Sources: Data on the number of people living alone is from Statistics Canada, [Living alone in Canada](#). Data on population by age is from Statistics Canada Table 17-10-0005-01. Population data for persons aged over 89 years of age is incomplete and so not included here. Author's calculations.

Why has the number of people living alone increased? Increased rates of divorce offer part of the explanation, but generally rising incomes mean people are better able to afford to live alone and so may simply be choosing to do so. The figure shows that a greater percentage of people in their 80s were living alone in 2016 than in 1981 suggesting that increased life expectancy and better health may be enabling more single seniors to choose to remain in their homes and delay moving into retirement homes. This has implications for public policies currently being considered with respect to long-term care facilities.

Some [research](#) suggests that living alone, and particularly aging alone, affects both physical and mental health. As COVID-19 public health measures have increased all Canadians' social isolation, the particular effects of these policies on those living alone suggest the need for close policy attention.