

Marriage behaviors of native-born and migrant youth in Canada and Australia

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Australia and Canada are both unusually open to immigration. In 2001, 23% and 18% of their respective populations were born abroad, and these percentages have been increasing over time due to continuing high levels of immigration in recent years. The futures of these countries will be greatly affected by how these immigrants adapt to life in their host societies. First and second generation youth are especially important, as they are transitional generations situated between the cultures of their parents and that of their new home countries during their key formative years. Exploring the patterns of family formation behaviour of these young people provides us with the ability to predict future trends of migrant populations as well as to understand the dynamics of settlement patterns.

This study examines patterns of marriages and consensual unions among first and second generation immigrant youth (ages 15–29), compared to non-immigrant youth, using 2001 census data from Australia and Canada. The process of leaving home and starting one's own family is considered central to the transition to adulthood (Settersten 1998, 2002). It reflects the transition from dependence to independence both financially and emotionally (Shanahan 2000). Recent trends show young people in many western societies are delaying home leaving (in part due to increased investment in education), and moving towards cohabitation rather than marriage for first union (Billari and Wilson 2001, Molgat 2002, McDonald and Evans 2003).

Settlement into a new society is generally viewed as a pattern of 'acclimatisation' or 'assimilation'. The level of assimilation into a society is influenced by local regulations and culture, the culture of the arriving immigrants and the size and visibility of the immigrant groups. Assimilation theory argues that the attitudes and behaviors of newly arrived migrants least resemble those of the local population with those of the children of migrants (second generation) falling in-between (Hirschman 1983; Alba and Nee 2003). In family formation the effect of assimilation should be evident in both rates of union formation, as well as in the choice of partner. High levels of ethnic intermarriage point to a greater level of assimilation as couples merge cultures (Giorgas and Jones 2002). Cohabitation, as a relatively recent phenomenon in Canada and Australia, is also a useful behaviour with which to test the extent to which immigrants adopt the patterns and norms of their host society. Previous work in Canada suggests that the propensity to cohabit increases across immigrant generations, and that immigrants from cultures placing great importance on the role of the family are less likely to cohabit (Boyd et al. 2006).

The questions we seek to answer in this paper include: To what degree do youth from important immigrant groups have distinct patterns in union behaviors? To what degree do early couple relations among immigrant groups differ from patterns prevailing in the two countries, in terms of type of union (consensual versus marital) by age, spousal age differences, early childbearing and the likelihood of being divorced? Do immigrants tend to marry within their own cultural groups, even after controlling for the relative size of these groups in the area? Across immigrant generations, do these patterns converge to those observed for the non immigrant population (people whose parents both were born in the country), and do some immigrant groups appear to be more resistant to this assimilation than others? And, finally, how does the Australian experience differ from that of Canada,

distinguishing Quebec (with its comparatively very high levels of consensual unions relative to marriages) from the other provinces?

Census data have both important advantages and drawbacks for a study of this type. On the positive side, the questionnaires and variable definitions with regard to the key variables of interest are quite similar for both countries, and the public use samples for these censuses are large, allowing for a more detailed examination of patterns by immigrant origin than is usually possible with survey data. In addition, both the 2001 Canadian (long-form) and Australian censuses are unusual in that they asked respondents about their parents' places of birth, allowing for an analysis of changing living arrangements across immigrant generations (this was not the case for the 2006 Canadian census nor, for that matter, for most other censuses across the world). A major disadvantage with these data is that most questions focused on people's characteristics at the time of the data collection, meaning that there is little retrospective information. As a result, our ability to examine transitions over time (e.g., moving into union) and studying the determinants of these behaviours is limited.

We use simple and multinomial logit regressions to capture and describe patterns in the data – the probability of a person being in union or in marriage versus consensual union), after controlling for factors such as immigrant status (born abroad, born into an immigrant family, or born to native-born parents), age, educational attainment (high school diploma for youth aged 20+), race (in Canada), religion, urban/rural place of residence and the relative size of the immigrant population and individuals' specific immigrant communities in the local area. Data from the World Values Surveys will be used to assist in interpreting our findings. These data allow us to compare attitudes towards migrants, intermarriage and family across the two countries.

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