

# Chapter 10: Changing Family Dynamics During COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic had complex effects on family structure and dynamics. For most people, family units took on an elevated primary social role. Stay-at-home measures meant family members living under the same roof were brought into closer and constant contact. (You literally couldn't run away from your family.) As universities and colleges closed and adult children returned home, the number of complex households increased. Some families expanded their households by quarantining with friends or extended family members. Contact with family outside the home moved online. Young people coached older relatives on how to get on Zoom calls where everyone complained about their need for a haircut. All these changes had major social effects—some positive, some negative, many yet-to-be determined.

On a positive note, many families found quarantining allowed them to bond through shared activities, to eat meals together, and to learn more about each other. In one [survey](#), 66% of survey respondents believed the pandemic had created greater closeness among family members. People also made a greater effort to check in with family members they didn't live with. People rediscovered the art of using a telephone; call traffic in major networks jumped [40% or more](#). So many people turned to video chatting that the term "Zoom fatigue," describing how exhausting video calls were, was invented. In a time of crisis and of isolation, many people rediscovered the importance of connection.

But the pandemic also made certain types of connection difficult. It [complicated](#) custody arrangements for some divorced parents, who had to consider how spending time in more than one household increased the risk of exposure for their kids. It [prevented](#) people from being able to contact or see relatives in hospitals and care homes. In some [tragic cases](#), they were unable to say goodbye to someone dying from COVID-19. Some people in [single-person households](#) suffered negative mental health consequences as a result of isolation.

Already troubled households often became worse. Incidents of domestic violence [rose](#) sharply. New [hotlines](#) were established in some provinces to deal with the increased volume of calls. The Canadian Women's Foundation created a [signal for help](#) to use during video calls.

Other effects of the pandemic on family life are unclear at this point. Many speculate divorce rates will climb as a result; early evidence from China suggests this may be [true](#). Marriage rates certainly dropped as people cancelled weddings—and will likely rise once larger gatherings are allowed. But the pandemic's effects on larger-term trends are unknown. Will people moving in with their partners during isolation result in an uptick of marriages? Speculation is rife whether the pandemic will result in a baby



*Illustration by Andre Ouellet on Unsplash*

boom (all that Netflix and chilling) or a baby bust (all that unemployment and financial insecurity). Some of these trends will take years to play out, giving sociologists' much fodder for future studies.

### As you read the chapter, consider the following questions:

- Did COVID change the way you interact with or think about your family? Did it change the importance you place on family relationships? Use your sociological imagination to connect your personal experience (perhaps in the context of your social location) with larger national and worldwide pandemic trends.
- This chapter provides details about nine ways Canadian families have changed over the past 50 years. Choose one and describe what effect, if any, the pandemic may have on this trend. Consider economic, political, and social factors.
- Why do you think cases of domestic violence increased while stay-at-home measures were in effect? If you worked for the government, what policies might you suggest to address this social issue?
- As part of easing stay-at-home measures, governments allowed people to create "social bubbles" or "circles." You were allowed to interact with these people without socially distancing ([here](#) are Ontario's guidelines). Many people placed extended family members in their bubble, but others chose another family or close friends. In a way, this could be seen as an opportunity to pick your own family. Describe a sociological study you might conduct to understand who people chose for their social bubbles and why. How might your study reveal larger social trends?



### Additional online resources

This article gives an indication of some of the challenges the pandemic posed for people living with abuse and those who want to help them.

- Forani, J. (2020, April 16). [Code words, hand signals and social media: How attempts to help abuse victims might backfire](#). CTV News.

What factors most affect birth rates according to this article?

- Jones, A. M. (2020, June 24). [Experts say baby 'bust' from pandemic won't hit Canada as hard as U.S.](#) CTV News.

This article describes lingering social effects of the COVID-19 lockdown in China. Do you see Canada facing the same challenges?

- Liu, Y. (2020, June 4). [Is Covid-19 changing our relationships?](#) BBC.

Many Canadian families faced additional challenges during the pandemic; this article describes those faced by families with autistic children.

- Vandinther, J. (2020, April 23). [COVID-19 pandemic taking harder toll on parents, families taking care of children living with autism](#). CTV News.