

Polyamorous Families in Canada: Early Results of New Research from CRILF

By: John-Paul Boyd

Report Commented On: Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family, *Perceptions of Polyamorous Relationships: Preliminary Data*

On 20 June 2016, the [Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family](#) began a study on Canadian perceptions of polyamory, advertised with the assistance of the [Canadian Polyamory Advocacy Association](#), gathering preliminary data with a public survey. The information gathered thus far, from the 547 people who answered our survey, paints a nuanced picture of polyamorous individuals and their family arrangements.

The polyamorous families we are looking at are those created by three or more freely consenting adults, in distinction to faith-based, and often patriarchal, forms of polygamy that exist in much of Africa, the Middle East and North America, the latter of which have been popularized in shows like [Big Love](#) and [Sister Wives](#). The polyamorous population we are studying places a high value on equality and honesty, and the rights of individuals to leave a relationship when and how they wish.

The majority of survey respondents live in British Columbia (35.6%), Ontario (28.7%) and Alberta (17.6%) (see Figure 1), and are between 25 and 44 years old (74.4%) (see Figure 2). Respondents tend to be younger than the Canadian population as a whole, with 75% of respondents being between the ages of 25 and 44 (see Figure 2.1) (Canadian population data: [Statistics Canada 2011 Census, catalogue no. 98-311-XCB2011025](#)).

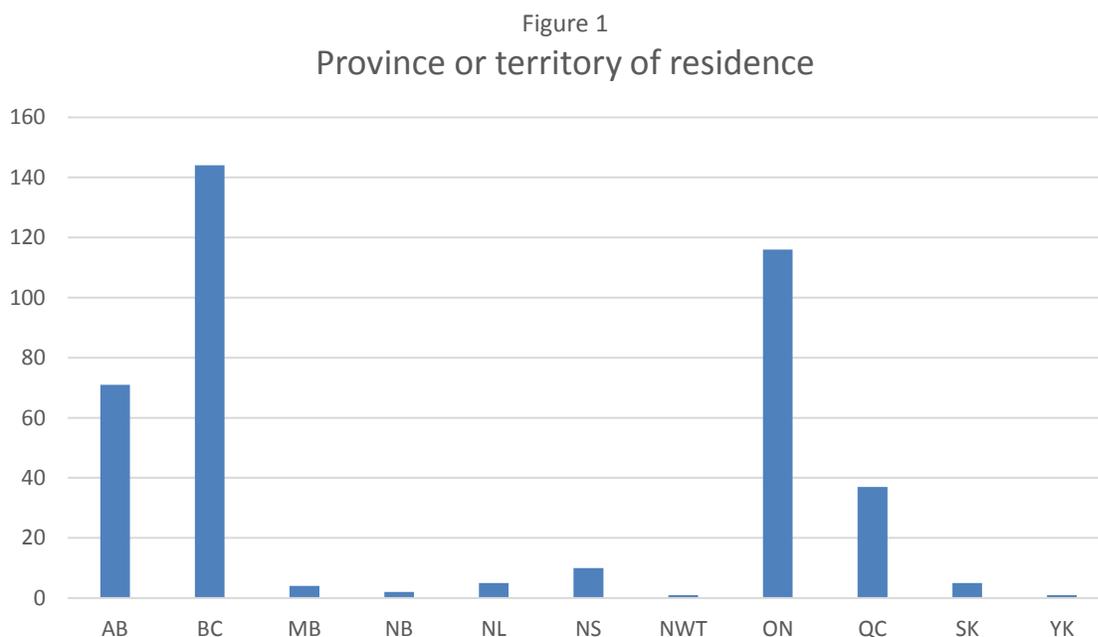


Figure 2
Age

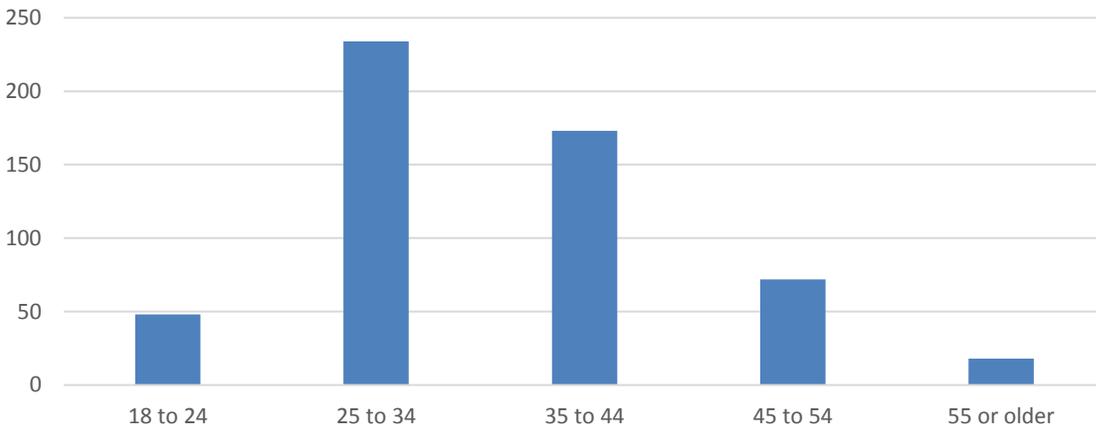
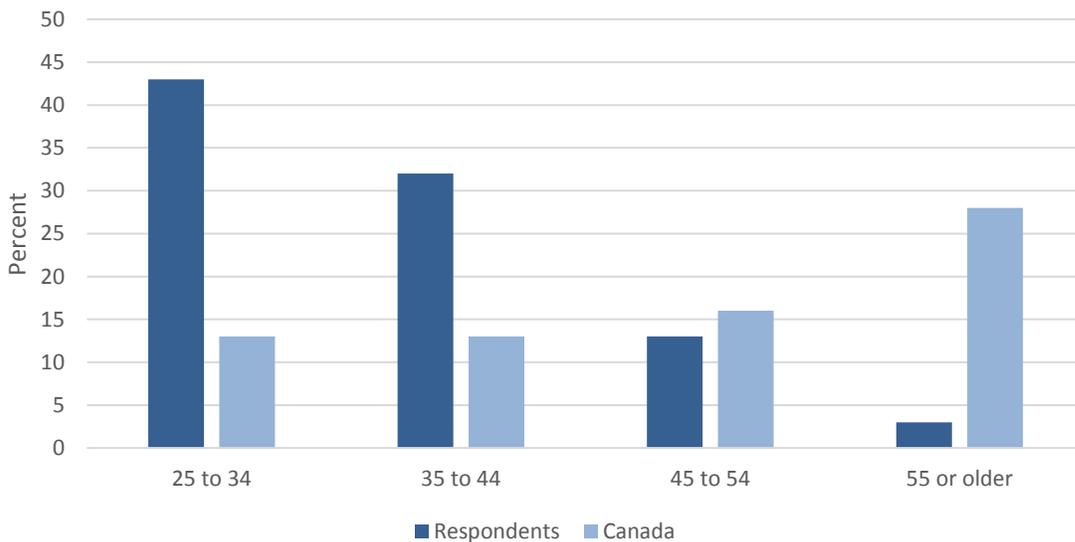


Figure 2.1
Distribution of age of respondents and general population



Most respondents had completed some form of post-secondary education, most commonly undergraduate degrees (26.3%), followed by post-graduate or professional degrees (19.2%) and college diplomas (16.3%) (see Figure 3). Respondents reported significantly higher levels of educational attainment than most Canadians: 37% of respondents reported holding an undergraduate university degree, compared to 17% of the general population, and 19% of respondents reported holding a post-graduate or professional degree, compared to 8% of the general population (see Figure 3.1) (Canadian population data: [Statistics Canada estimate for June 2016, CANSIM table 282-0003](#)).

Figure 3
Educational attainment

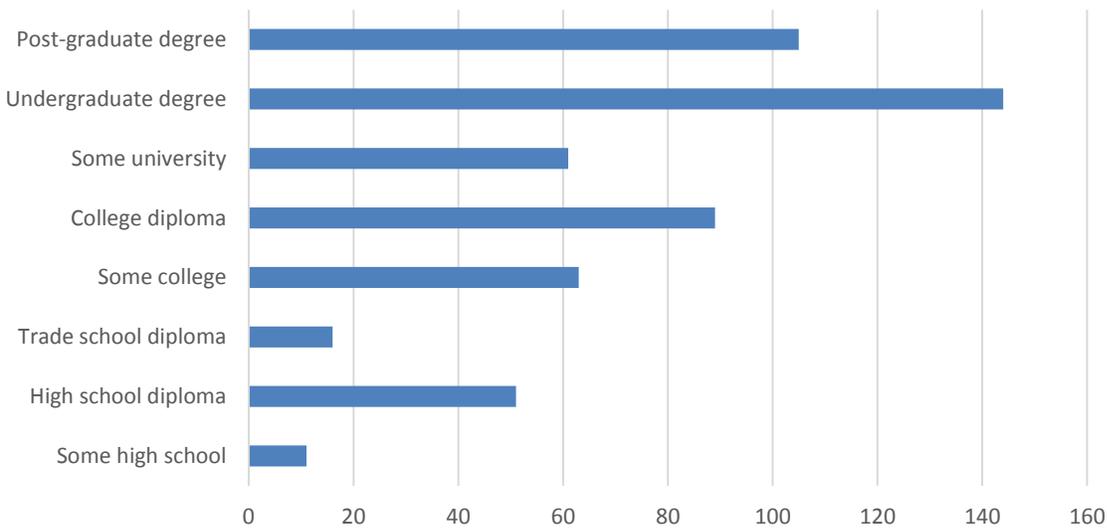
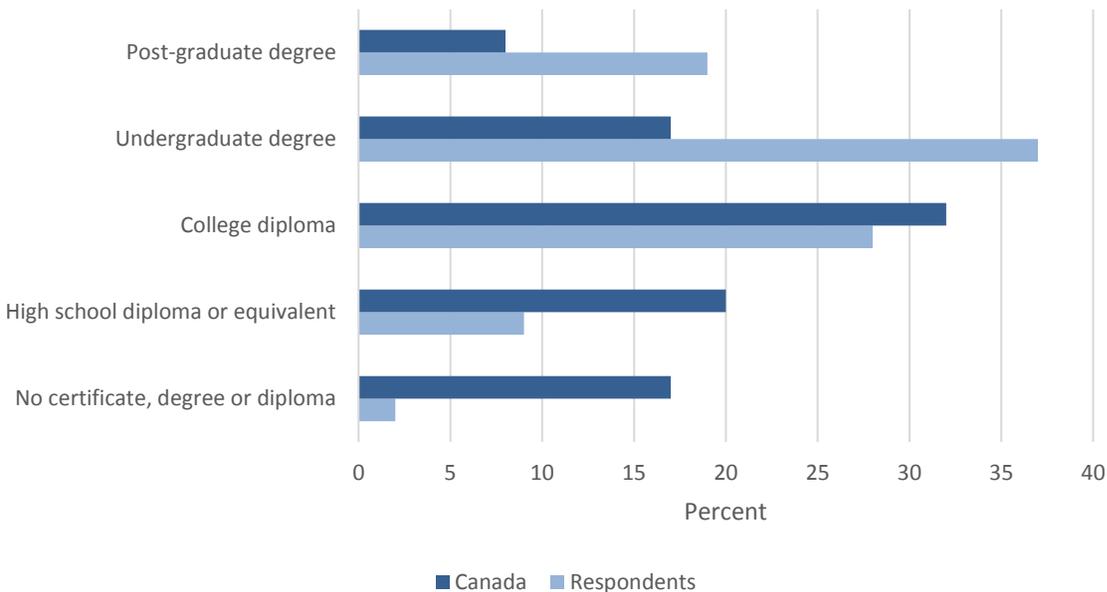


Figure 3.1
Distribution of educational attainment among respondents and general population

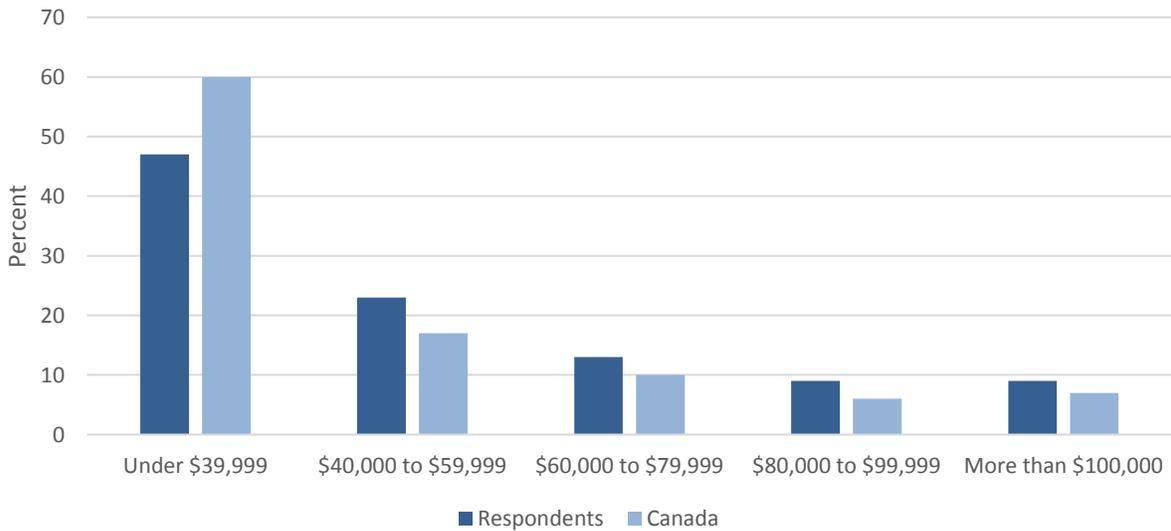


Although almost half of respondents had annual incomes of less than \$39,999 (46.8%) (see Figure 4), almost two-thirds of respondents were not the sole income-earner in their household (65.4%) and more than three-fifths of respondents' households (62.3%) had incomes between \$80,000 and \$149,999 per year (see Figure 4). Compared to the Canadian population, fewer respondents (47%) had incomes less than \$40,000 per year than the general population (60%), and more respondents (31%) had incomes of \$60,000 or more per year than the general population (23%) (see Figure 4.1) (Canadian population data: [Statistics Canada estimate for 2014, CANSIM table 206-0051](#)).

Figure 4
Annual income of individuals and households

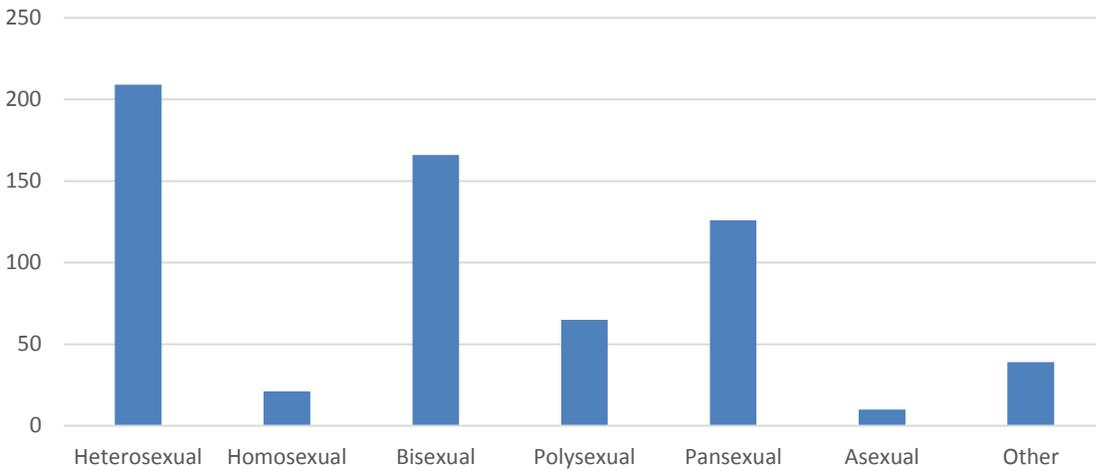


Figure 4.1
Distribution of income of respondents and general population



Slightly less than one-third of respondents identified as male (30%) and almost three-fifths identified as female (59.7%); the rest identified as genderqueer (3.5%), gender fluid (3.2%), transgender (1.3%) or “other” (2.2%). A plurality of respondents described their sexuality as either heterosexual (39.1%) or bisexual (31%) (Figure 5).

Figure 5
Sexuality



More than three-fifths of respondents (68%) said that they are currently in a polyamorous relationship. Almost two-fifths of the respondents who said that they are not currently in a polyamorous relationship (39.9%) said that they had been in such a relationship in the last five years.

Most of respondents' polyamorous relationships involved three adults (50.4%) (see Figure 6), but only a fifth of respondents said that the members of their relationship lived in a single household (19.7%). Where the members of a polyamorous family lived in more than one household, most lived in two households (44.3%) or three households (22.2%) (see Figure 7).

Where the members of a polyamorous family live in one household, three-fifths of respondents' households involved at least one married couple (61.2%), and there was only one married couple in those households. Where the members of a polyamorous family lived in more than one household, almost half involved at least one married couple (45.4%), and 85% of those households involved one married couple while the remainder involved two married couples (12.9%), three married couples (1.4%) and more than three married couples (0.7%).

Figure 6
Members per relationship

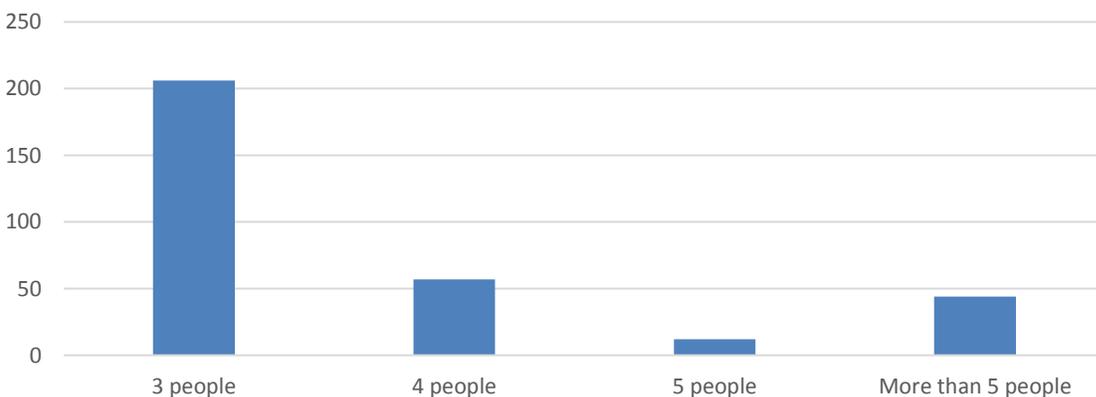
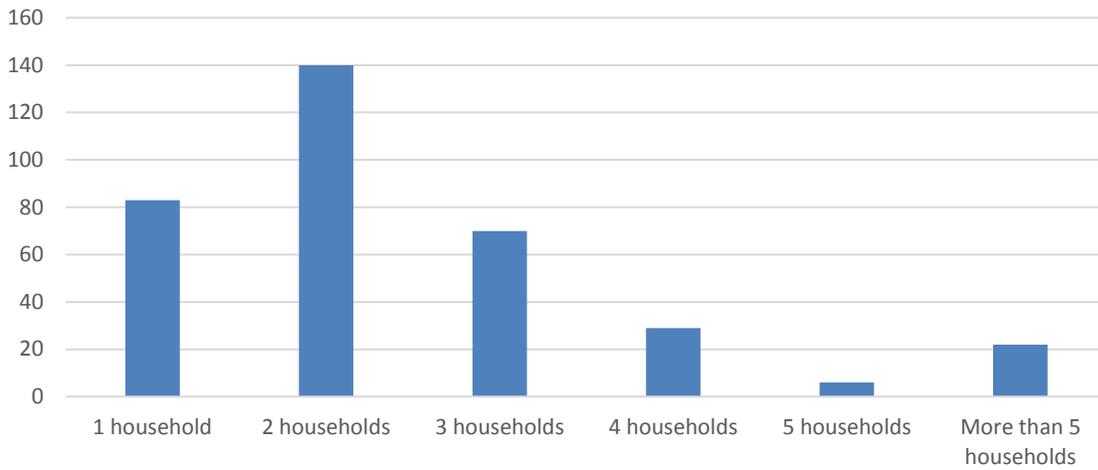


Figure 7
Households per relationship



In the past five years, 53.4% of respondents said that one or more individuals had been added to their family. Women and men tend to join and leave *ménages* in roughly equal numbers (see Figures 8 and 9).

Figure 8
Persons joining relationship in last five years

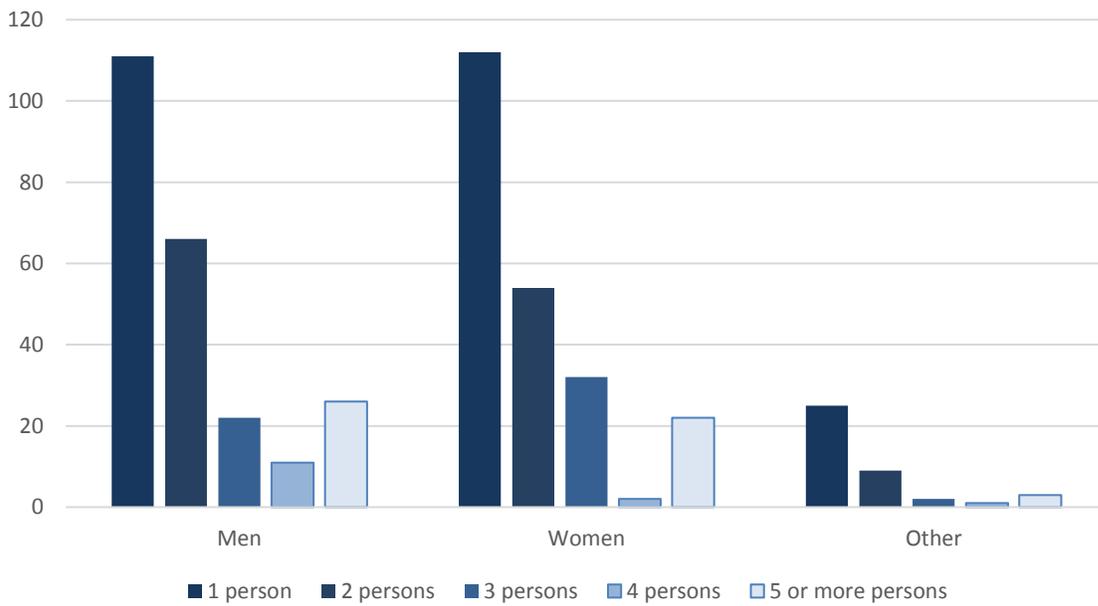
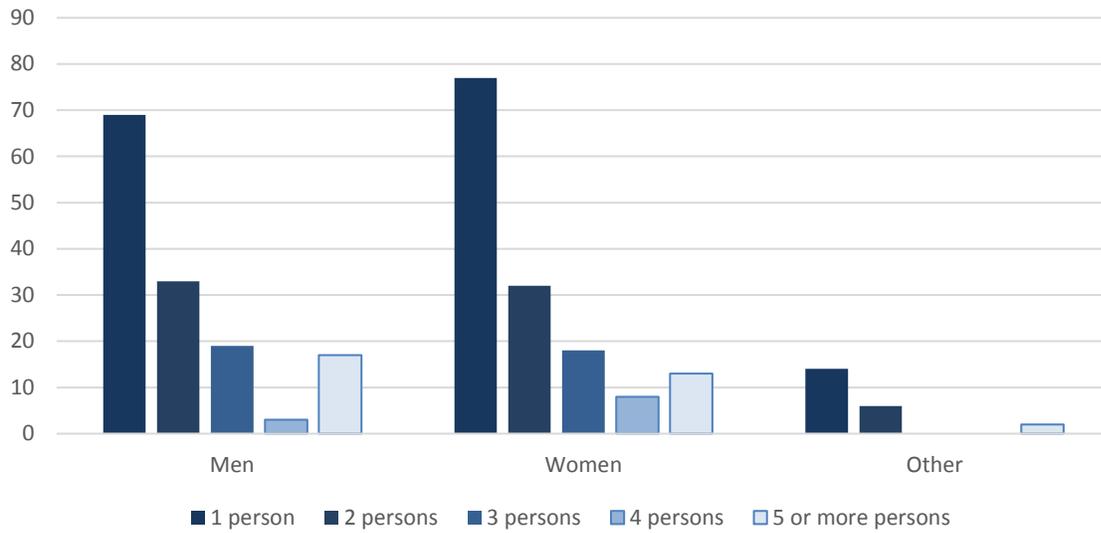
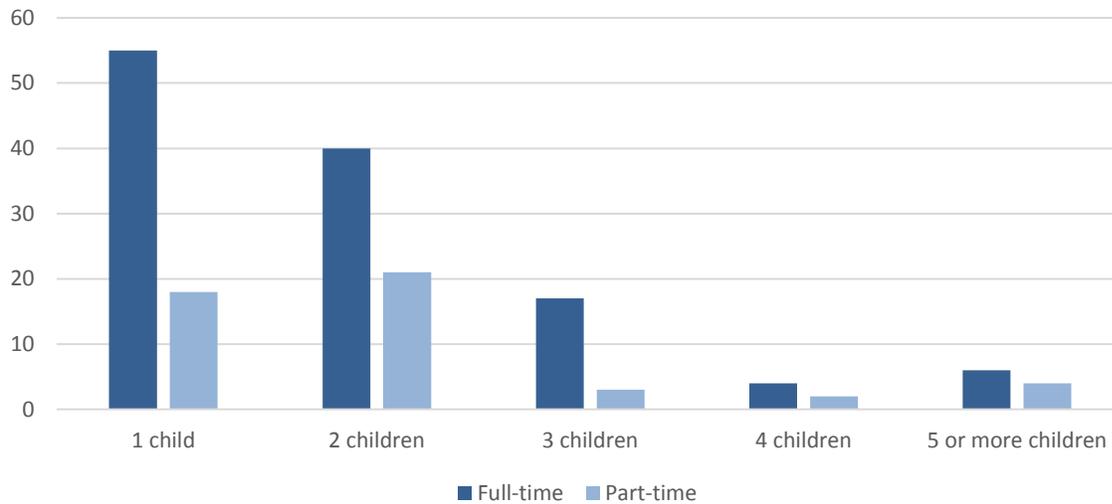


Figure 9
Persons leaving relationship in last five years



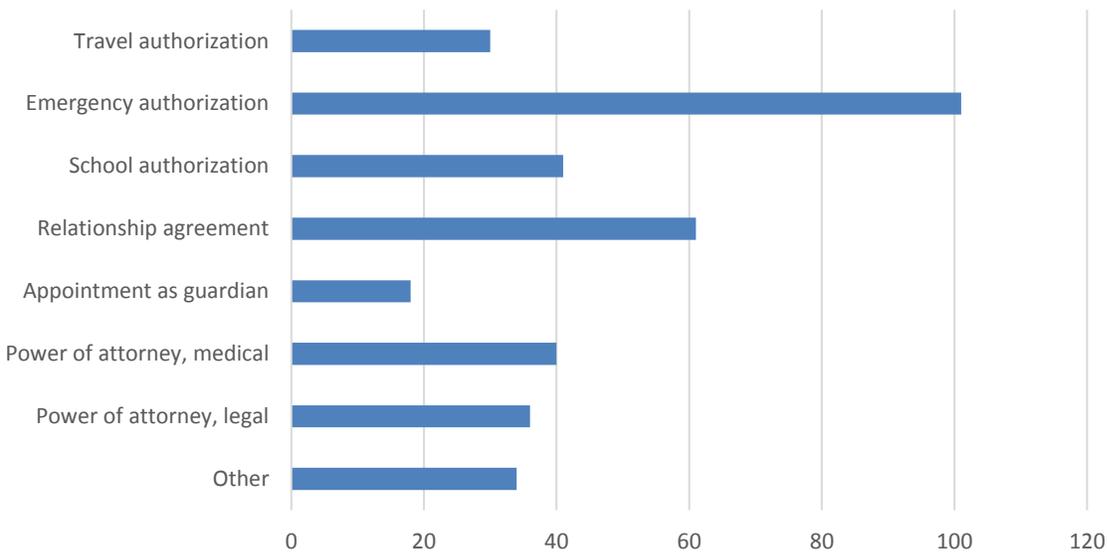
Almost a quarter of respondents (23.2%) said that at least one child under the age of 19 lives full-time in their household, and 8.7% said that at least one child lives part-time in their household under the care of at least one parent or guardian (see Figure 10).

Figure 10
Children present in household



Slightly less than one-third of respondents (32.2%) said that they had taken legal steps to formalize some aspect of the rights and responsibilities of the members of their family. Most of these respondents had signed emergency authorizations (57.4%), followed by relationship agreements (34.7%) and powers of attorney for medical matters (22.7%) (see Figure 11).

Figure 11
Formalization of rights and responsibilities



Most respondents said that they support the equality of members of their relationships, regardless of gender or parental status (see Figure 12), and that members have the obligation to be honest with each other and the right to have a say in changes to their relationship (see Figure 13). When asked about the extent to which they agreed that *everyone in a polyamorous relationship should be treated equally regardless of gender or gender identity*, for example, 82.1% strongly agreed and 12.5% agreed with that statement. More than half (52.9%) strongly agreed and 21.5% agreed with the statement that *everyone in a polyamorous relationship should be treated equally regardless of parental or guardianship status*. Most (89.2%) strongly agreed and 9.2% agreed with the statement that *everyone in a polyamorous should have the responsibility to be honest and forthright with each other*.

Figure 12
Attitudes toward equality

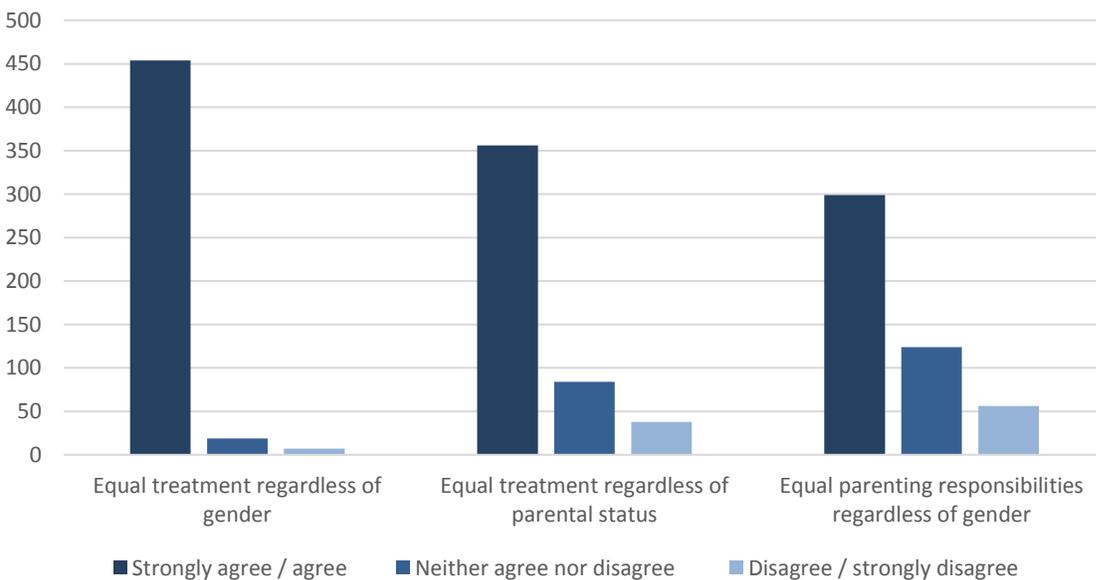
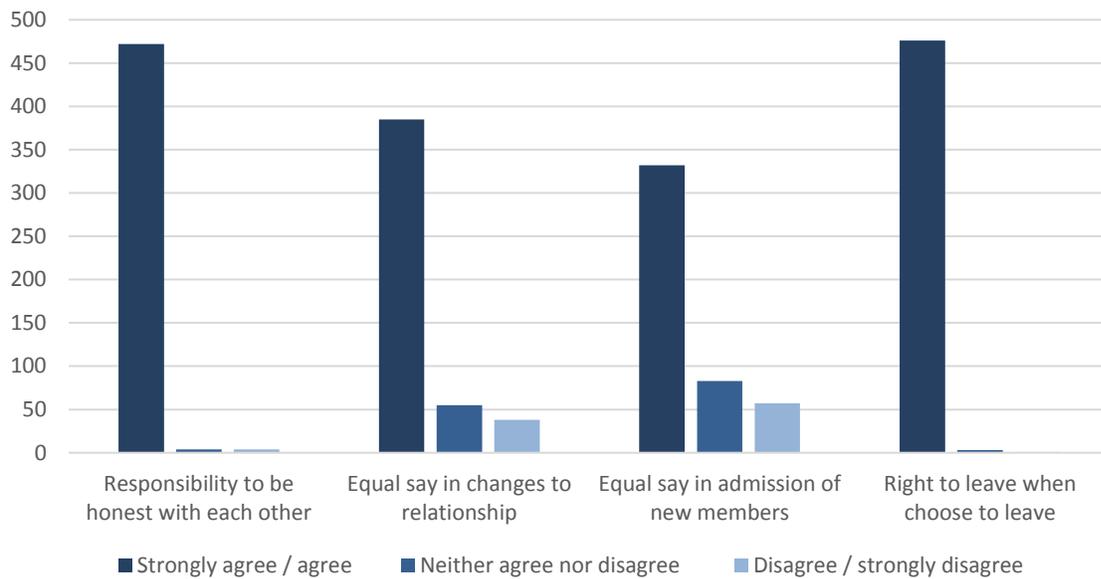
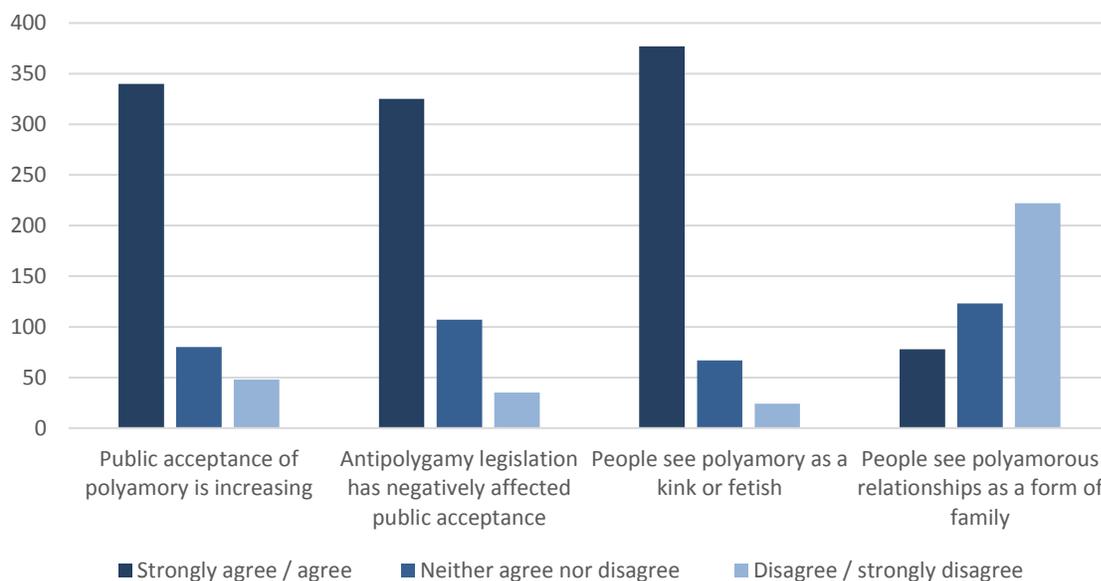


Figure 13
Attitudes toward relationship



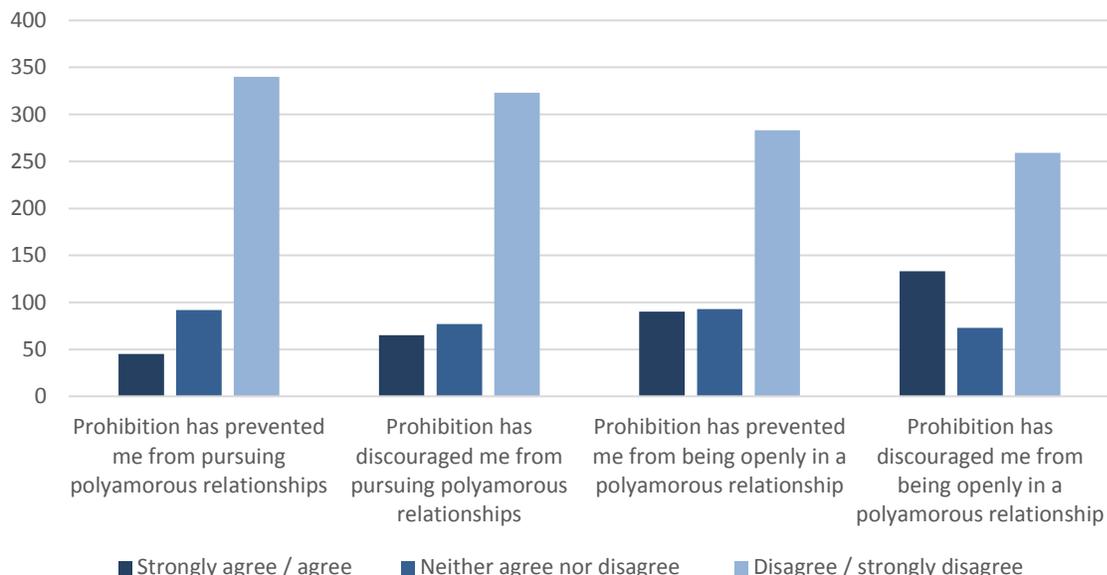
Although 82.4% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the number of people who identify as polyamorous is increasing, and 80.9% agreed or strongly agreed that the number of people who are openly involved in polyamorous relationships is increasing, respondents had mixed views about public attitudes toward polyamory (see Figure 14).

Figure 14
Perceptions of public attitudes toward polyamory



Despite concern about the impact of the prohibition against polygamy in section 293 of the [Criminal Code](#) on public acceptance of their relationships, the prohibition does not deter respondents from pursuing the relationships they choose (see Figure 15).

Figure 15
Impact of *Criminal Code* prohibition of polygamy



The growing popularity of polyamory suggests that the meaning of “family” continues to evolve in Canada. The traditional model of the western nuclear family, consisting of married heterosexual parents and their legitimate offspring, has undergone enormous change in the last two hundred years – attaching family status to unmarried partnerships and legalizing same-sex marriage are only the most recent changes. Perhaps expectations as to exclusivity and the dyadic nature of committed relationships are next.

The Institute’s complete report on this study, including the text of the survey, will be available on its [website](#) by December 2016.

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