



## **Canadians' satisfaction with public services** *Trend analysis and OECD comparisons*

**REPORT**  
**SEPTEMBER 2019**

### **Overview**

How satisfied are Canadians with some of the most important services that governments provide? This report tackles this question by providing an updated look at Canadian public opinion, as it is changing over time and in comparison to other countries around the world. The results show that Canadians are most satisfied with health care and education, and their level of satisfaction with these services is higher than the average for OECD countries. They are less satisfied when it comes to how they move around their cities – that is to say, with roads and public transit. And Canadians as a whole — and young Canadians in particular — are even less satisfied with the availability of good, affordable housing. This is also the one area where satisfaction is declining. These findings provide some evidence that, while Canadians' overall economic outlook is improving, some concerns are emerging about the issue of affordability, particularly among younger adults. The results also suggest that more attention could be paid to the question of how well-equipped local governments are to meet Canadians' expectations regarding transportation and housing.

### **Where Canada Stands Out**

Nothing brings Canada's good fortune into focus as well as comparative research. Whatever we may think of our own problems, they can still appear less acute than those facing other countries around the world.

Consider some of the most recent results from the Gallup World Poll, which is conducted annually in over 100 countries. On a variety of economic and social indicators, Canada scores well above the average for developed countries (those who are members of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)). Compared with the average for OECD countries, for instance, Canadians are more likely to have confidence in their national government, as well as in institutions such as the military, the local police force and the judiciary. They are also much more likely to have confidence in the honesty of elections.

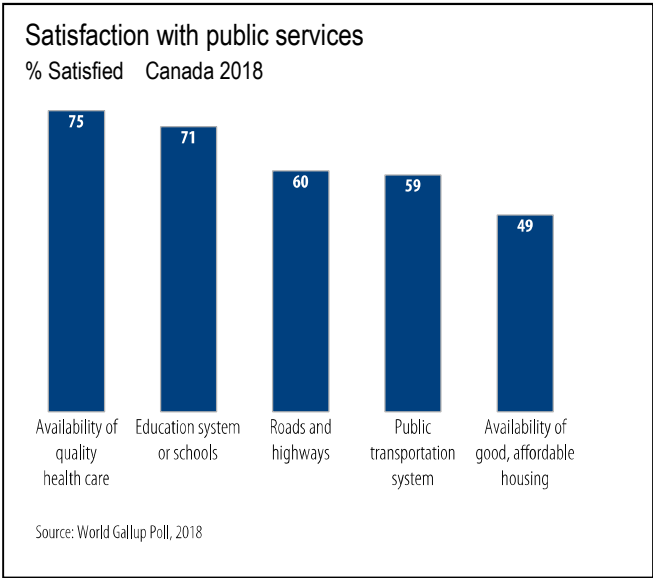
Canadians stand out even more conspicuously in the area of diversity. About nine in ten Canadians say that their community is a good place to live for racial and ethnic minorities, for immigrants and for gay or lesbian people, compared with the OECD average of about seven in ten. And in no other country in the OECD are citizens more likely to say that their community is a good place to live for both racial and ethnic minorities and immigrants: Canada ranks number one.

Findings like these can lead to a certain amount of self-congratulation. It would be a mistake, however, not to dig a little deeper into the survey results. More can be learned about what Canadians are and are not concerned about if we take a moment to focus, not only at the comparisons between Canada and other countries, but also the comparisons within Canada, across the different indicators the survey tracks.

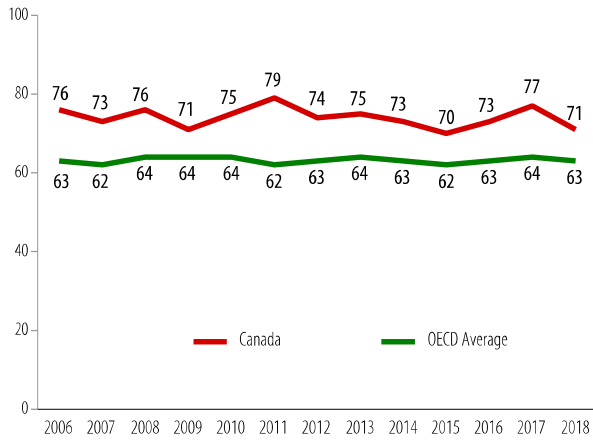
### Satisfaction with Public Services

Take, for example, a series of questions about how satisfied people are with different public services in their city or area where they live.

**Health care and education:** In 2018, three in four Canadians were satisfied with the availability of quality health care, and almost as many (71%) were satisfied with the educational system or schools. In both cases, the level of satisfaction has held steady over the past decade. Satisfaction with health care and education in Canada is also well above the OECD average. That said, Canada is only in the middle of the pack. Canadians are much more satisfied with these services than are South Americans, or Southern or Eastern Europeans, but much less satisfied than people in Northern European countries such as Norway, Denmark or the Netherlands. Satisfaction with education in Canada is well ahead of the level in the U.S. (64%), but, perhaps surprisingly for some, this is not the case for health care: as in Canada, three in four Americans (76%) are satisfied with the availability of quality health care.

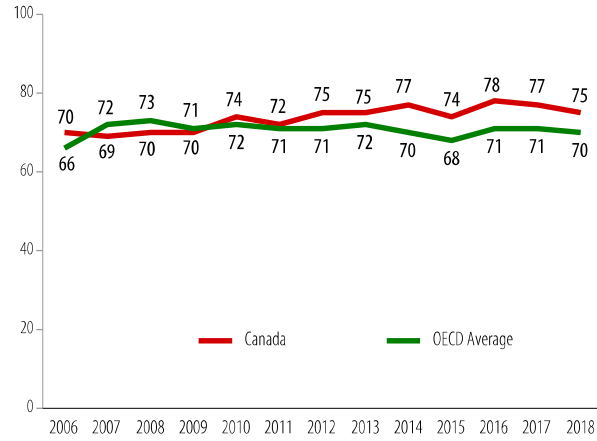


**Satisfaction with educational system or the schools**  
 % Satisfied Canada vs. OECD average 2006 - 2018



Source: World Gallup Poll, 2018  
 In the city or area where you live, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the educational system or the schools?

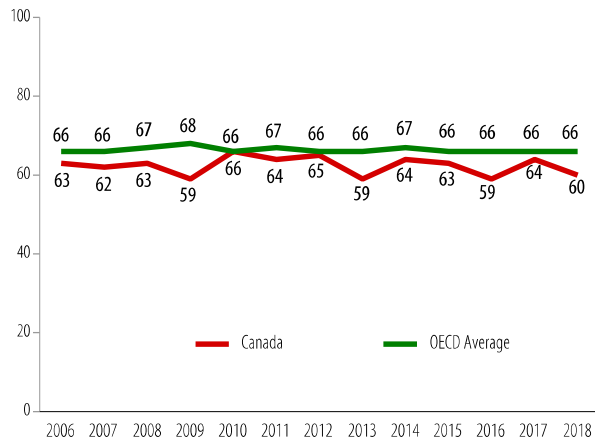
**Satisfaction with availability of quality health care**  
 % Satisfied Canada vs. OECD average 2006 - 2018



Source: World Gallup Poll, 2018  
 In the city or area where you live, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the availability of quality healthcare?

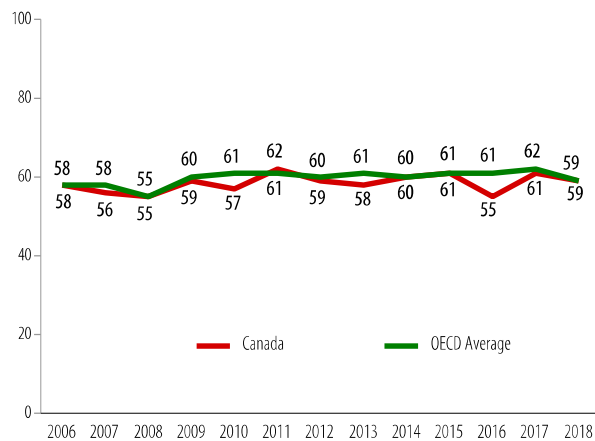
**Transportation:** Canadians are somewhat less satisfied with the services that help them move around their cities. Three in five are satisfied with the roads and highways in their community (60%), and the same proportion is satisfied with the public transportation system (59%). Whereas, in the case of both health care and education, the degree of satisfaction has been consistently higher in Canada than the average for OECD countries; this is not the case for roads and highways or public transportation, where Canada sits either at or slightly below the average. In 2018, Canada ranked 19<sup>th</sup> out of 35 OECD countries in terms of satisfaction with public transportation, and 22<sup>nd</sup> in terms of satisfaction with roads and highways. (By way of comparison, the U.S. ranks 32<sup>nd</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> on these measures, respectively.)

**Satisfaction with roads and highways**  
 % Satisfied Canada vs. OECD average 2006 - 2018



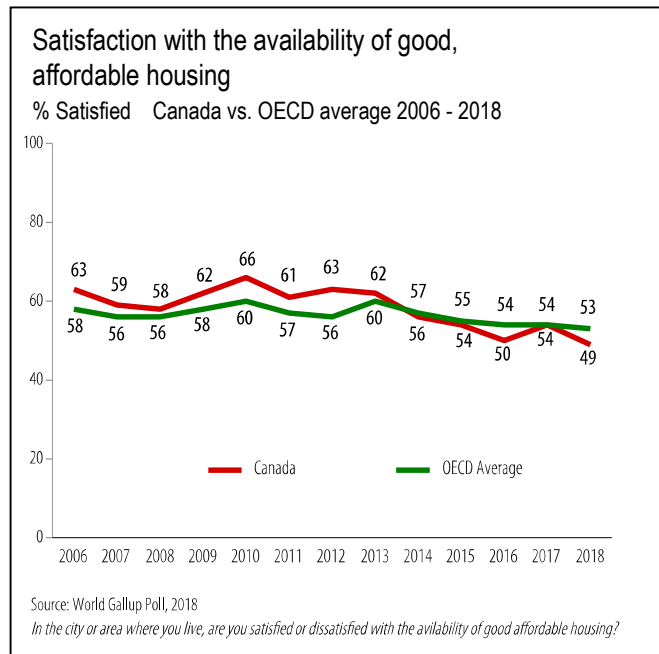
Source: World Gallup Poll, 2018  
 In the city or area where you live, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the roads and highways?

**Satisfaction with public transportation system**  
 % Satisfied Canada vs. OECD average 2006 - 2018

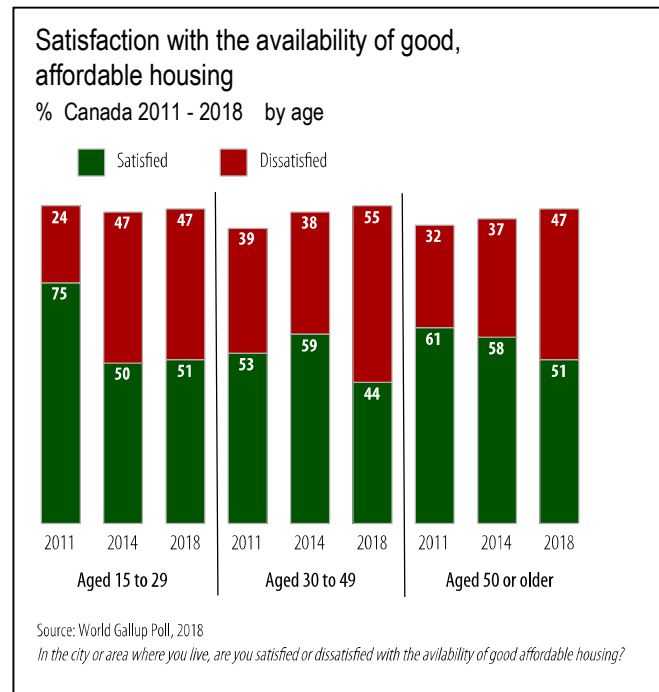


Source: World Gallup Poll, 2018  
 In the city or area where you live, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the public transportation system?

**Housing:** Of the services covered in the survey, the one with which the fewest Canadians are satisfied is housing. Only one in two Canadians are currently satisfied (49%) with the availability of good, affordable housing in their community. And notably, there has been a steady drop in satisfaction over time. In 2010, 66 percent of Canadians expressed satisfaction with the availability of good, affordable housing in their community, 17 points higher than in 2018. Over the same period, dissatisfaction has risen 20 percentage points, from 29 to 49 percent.



In comparative terms, Canada’s level of satisfaction with housing affordability used to be slightly higher than the OECD average; now it is slightly lower. In fact, as recently as 2012, Canada ranked fifth among OECD countries in terms of satisfaction with the availability of good, affordable housing; in 2018, it had fallen to 17<sup>th</sup>. In recent years, the countries in which satisfaction is highest have included Denmark, Finland, Estonia and Japan.



In Canada, the recent drop in satisfaction with affordable housing is evident across all age groups, but is a little steeper among younger adults. The proportion of Canadians age 15 to 29 that is *dissatisfied* with the availability of good, affordable housing in their community has doubled since the beginning of the decade, rising from 24 percent in 2011 to 47 percent in 2018.

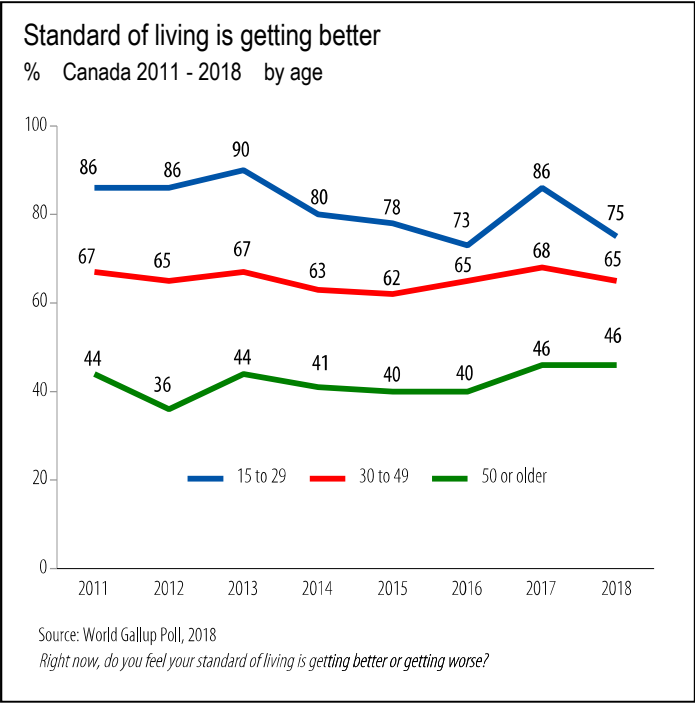
## The Standard of Living

The results relating to the availability of affordable housing raise the question of whether an increasing number of Canadians, especially younger Canadians, are finding it harder to make ends meet. As with the responses relating to public services, however, the survey results relating to perceptions of the economy paint a fairly nuanced picture, with generally positive results combined with some heightened concerns about the specific issue of affordability.

Feelings about employment and the economy, for instance, are far from alarming. The proportion of Canadians saying that now is a good time to find a job in the city or area where they live (61%) has been increasing in recent years and is now higher than at any time since the recession hit in 2008. The proportion saying that the economic conditions in the city or area in which they live are getting better (57%) has held steady over most of the past decade. While Canada doesn't lead the OECD on these indicators, it ranks in the top 10.

At first glance, the trend relating to feelings about one's standard of living appears no different. In 2018, 58 percent of Canadians said they felt that their standard of living was getting better, a figure which is in line with results for much of the past decade, and 10 points higher than the average for all OECD countries. But two further details give pause: one related to the trends for the different age groups in Canada, and one relating to Canada's edge over other OECD countries.

Younger Canadians are more likely than older Canadians to say that their standard of living is getting better, which is natural given their position in the life cycle; younger adults can expect to be moving up the economic ladder as they transition out of education and into the labour market. But in contrast to older Canadians, who have seen no real change in their outlook, the proportion of younger Canadians (those between the ages of 15 and 29) feeling that their standard of living is getting better has declined: from 90 percent in 2013 to 75 percent in 2018. In 2013, younger Canadians were 23 points more likely than their middle-aged counterparts to say their standard of living is getting better; in 2018, the gap had dropped to 10 points.



Canada's comparative edge on this indicator has also been eroding. Across the OECD as a whole, the proportion saying their standard of living is getting better is up 14 points since the recessionary low point reached in 2009. Over the same period in Canada, there has been no overall change. As a result, Canada's lead over the OECD average has dropped from 24 points to 10. Whereas Canada traditionally ranked first or second on this measure (ahead of the U.S.), it now ranks fourth (slightly behind the U.S.) – hardly a precipitous drop, but a subtle change that points in the wrong direction.

## Local Government and the Liveability of Cities

The purpose of focusing on these findings is not to cast doubt on the overall good news story. Canada continues to compare well to comparator countries across a broad range of measures, from confidence in public institutions, to economic outlook, to satisfaction with core public services.

While keeping this good news in mind, the additional findings presented here help to bring into focus those issues that are currently more concerning for Canadians. To recap:

- Health care and education are arguably the two most important services provided by government; they also happen to be the two that Canadians are most satisfied with, as well as ones for which the degree of satisfaction places us above the average for all the countries in the OECD.
- Canadians are both less satisfied, and less distinctive, when it comes to how they move around their cities – that is to say, with roads and public transit.
- And Canadians as a whole – young Canadians in particular – are even less satisfied with the availability of good, affordable housing. This is also the one area where satisfaction is declining.
- On top of that, while a majority of young Canadians feel that their standard of living is getting better, the proportion holding this view has declined.

What is perhaps most interesting about these findings is their potential to shift some of the focus from the national, and even the provincial, level of government and politics to the local level. Federal and provincial government have a vital role in ensuring there is adequate funding for transit infrastructure, and that there are policies in place to temper the rising cost of housing. But unlike economic growth and employment, or even health care and education, local governments remain top-of-mind for citizens when it comes to the liveability of cities. Perhaps it is time that more attention was paid to how well-equipped this level of government is to meet Canadians' expectations.

### Data Source

*This report features data from the Gallup World Poll, which is conducted annually in over 100 countries. This research includes a set of indicators that have been tracked in each country since 2006. Comparisons are drawn between Canada and the results for all 35 countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which comprise the most relevant benchmark for Canada. The Canadian survey data were collected by Gallup in August 2018 via telephone with a representative sample of 1,009 Canadians aged 15 and over.*

