

Mind and body

Impact of the pandemic on physical and mental health

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For Survey Research



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The Future Skills Centre (FSC) is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to preparing Canadians for employment success. We believe Canadians should feel confident about the skills they have to succeed in a changing workforce. As a pan-Canadian community, we are collaborating to rigorously identify, test, measure, and share innovative approaches to assessing and developing the skills Canadians need to thrive in the days and years ahead. The Future Skills Centre was founded by a consortium whose members are Ryerson University, Blueprint ADE, and The Conference Board of Canada, and is funded by the Government of Canada's Future Skills Program.

The Diversity Institute conducts and coordinates multi-disciplinary, multi-stakeholder research to address the needs of diverse Canadians, the changing nature of skills and competencies, and the policies, processes and tools that advance economic inclusion and success. Our action-oriented, evidence-based approach is advancing knowledge of the complex barriers faced by underrepresented groups, leading practices to effect change, and producing concrete results. The Diversity Institute is a research lead for the Future Skills Centre.

The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada.



Survey on Employment & Skills

The Survey on Employment & Skills

The Survey on Employment & Skills is conducted by the Environics Institute for Survey Research, in partnership with the Future Skills Centre and the Diversity Institute at Ryerson University. The first wave of the study was conducted between late February and early April 2020. This report is based on the second wave of the study, consisting of a survey of 5,351 Canadians age 18 and over, conducted between November 24 and December 22, 2020, in all provinces and territories. It was conducted both online (in the provinces) and by telephone (in the territories). The survey includes oversamples of Canadians living in smaller provinces and territories and Canadians who identify as Indigenous, in order to provide a better portrait of the range of experiences across the country. Unless otherwise indicated, the survey results in this report are weighted by age, gender, region, education and Indigenous identity, to ensure that they're representative of the Canadian population as whole (as reported in the 2016 Census).

In this report, results from this survey are compared with those from a previous study conducted a year and a half earlier, prior to the pandemic. The Race Relations in Canada 2019 Survey was conducted online between April 17 and May 6, 2019, with a sample of 3,111 Canadians age 18 and over. The sample included oversamples of individuals who self-identify as Chinese, Black, South Asian or Indigenous (First Nations, Métis, Inuit) (the four largest racialized populations in Canada).

Contents

<u>Executive summary</u>	1
<u>Physical and mental health</u>	2
Changes in physical health	2
Changes in mental health	4
The mental health of working parents	7
The mental health of young women	8
<u>Implications for governments and employers</u>	9

Executive summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected Canadians' health, and, in particular, their mental health. Between April 2019 and December 2020, Canadians' perceptions of their physical health deteriorated slightly. Overall, women experienced a larger decline in perceptions of physical health, while for men there has been no significant change. The decline has also been more significant for those age 65 and older. But it is the combination of age and gender that is most striking: compared to in spring 2019, in December 2020, younger men were significantly *more likely* to say their physical health was excellent or very good; at the same time, older women were significantly *less likely* to say the same.

Compared to the change in perceptions of physical health, the decline in Canadians' assessment of their mental health since the onset of the pandemic has been more substantial. Again, experiences vary significantly by both gender and age. The decline is slightly greater in the case of women than men. Further, while there has been no change in the case of younger Canadians, there has been significant change for those between the ages of 30 and 64, and a dramatic drop among those age 65 and older. As is the case with physical health, the most striking contrast in the case of mental health is between the situations of younger men and older women.

The decline in perceptions of mental health since 2019 has occurred among all major racial identity groups and among those identifying as Indigenous. However, this

decline is somewhat larger among those identifying as Chinese. This is notable as this decline represents a halving of Chinese Canadians who perceive their mental health as excellent or very good and means that Chinese Canadians' perceptions of their mental health are now significantly worse than other major racial identity groups.

While the *decline* in perceptions of mental health over the past year and a half have been greater among seniors than among younger adults, it remains the case that younger Canadians continue to rate their mental health more poorly than others. However, it is the situation of women that is more concerning. Among those between the ages of 18 and 29, one in two women say their mental health is fair or poor; the same is true of one in two women who are students (age 18 or older). The proportion of young women who say their mental health is fair or poor is broadly similar among those who identify as white, as racialized, or as Indigenous.

The findings highlighted in this report underline the importance of collecting data and conducting research that sheds light on how experiences differ according to age, gender, racial identity, Indigenous identity and other factors. The data presented here take one step forward in this regard, but further and more comprehensive research is needed to ensure the challenges facing specific peoples and communities are not overlooked.

Physical and mental health

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought with it risks to health, loss of income and employment, restrictions on activities, and prolonged uncertainty. It is no surprise that it has affected Canadians' health, and, in particular, their mental health.

In a separate study conducted a year prior to the pandemic, in April 2019, two in five Canadians (39%) rated their health as excellent or very good; almost as many said it was good (37%); and almost one in four (23%) said it was fair or poor. Perceptions of mental health at that time were somewhat more positive: one in two Canadians (53%) rated their mental health as excellent or very good; one in four (26%) said it was good; and one in five (21%) said it was fair or poor.¹

Changes in physical health

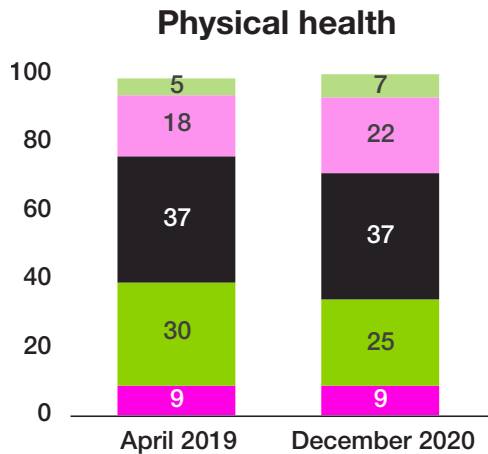
The second wave of the Survey on Employment and Skills, conducted in December 2020 after many months of cancelled sporting events and closed fitness centres, finds that perceptions of physical health have deteriorated slightly: 34 percent of Canadians now rate their health as excellent or very good, and 28 percent say it is fair or poor.² However, this change was not experienced equally among different population groups.

1 Data from the Race Relations in Canada 2019 Survey can be accessed on the website of the Environics Institute at <https://www.environicsinstitute.org/projects/project-details/race-relations-in-canada-2019>.

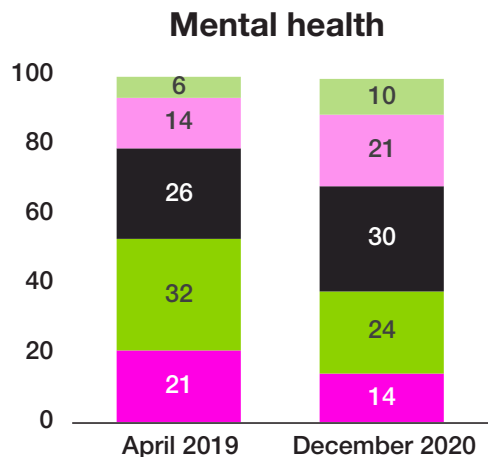
2 The two questions in the 2019 survey asked first about "health" and then about "mental health"; in 2020, the first question referred more specifically to "physical health," before the second question, which asked about "mental health."

Change in perceptions of physical and mental health

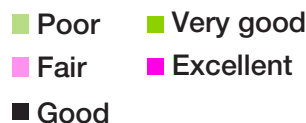
April 2019 – December 2020



Q10a. In general, would you say your *physical health* is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?



Q10b. In general, would you say your *mental health* is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?



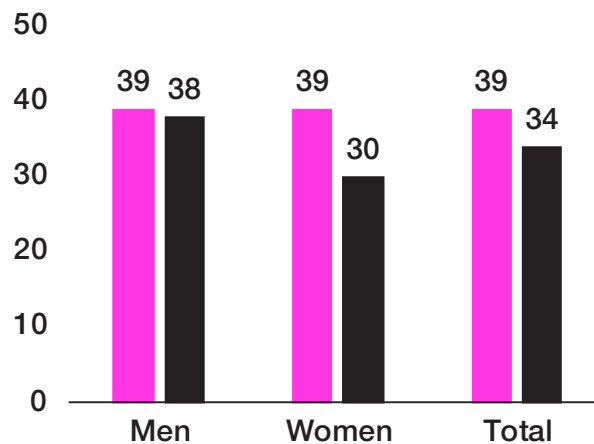
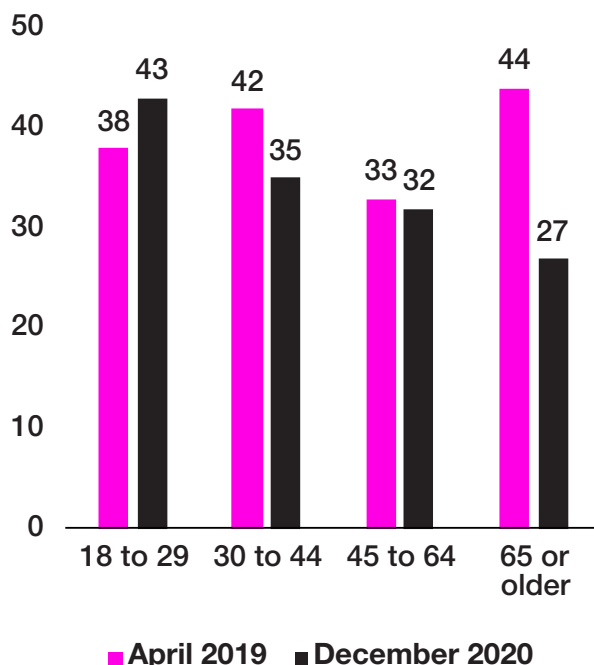
Overall, women have experienced a larger decline in perceptions of physical health, while men have not experienced a significant change. The decline is also very significant for those age 65 and older, while there has actually been a small improvement for those between the ages of 18 and 29.

However, it is the combination of age and gender that is most striking: compared to in spring 2019, in December 2020, younger men are significantly *more likely* to say their physical health is excellent or very good; at the same time, older women are significantly *less likely* to say the same. This suggests opposing experiences for the two groups: it is possible that younger men took advantage of the lockdowns to focus on physical exercise they could undertake at home or outside in their neighbourhoods, while for older women, the lockdowns meant severe restrictions on their ability to remain active.

There are also some differences in the experiences of different identity groups. There has been little or no change in the perceptions of physical health for those identifying as South Asian or Indigenous; a modest decline for those identifying as white or Chinese; and a more significant decline for those identifying as Black. In December 2020, 35 percent of Black Canadians said their physical health was excellent or very good, a decline of 14 percentage points since April 2019.

Change in perceptions of physical health

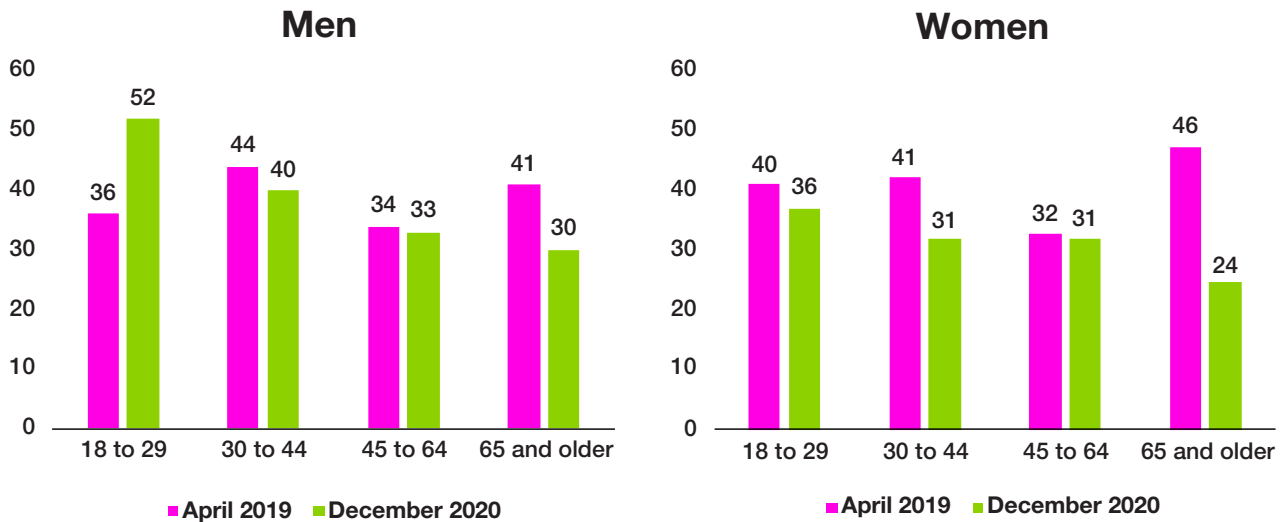
April 2019 – December 2020, excellent or very good, by age and by gender



Q10a.
In general, would you say your *physical health* is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?

Change in perceptions of physical health

April 2019 – December 2020, excellent or very good, by age and gender (combined)



Q10a.

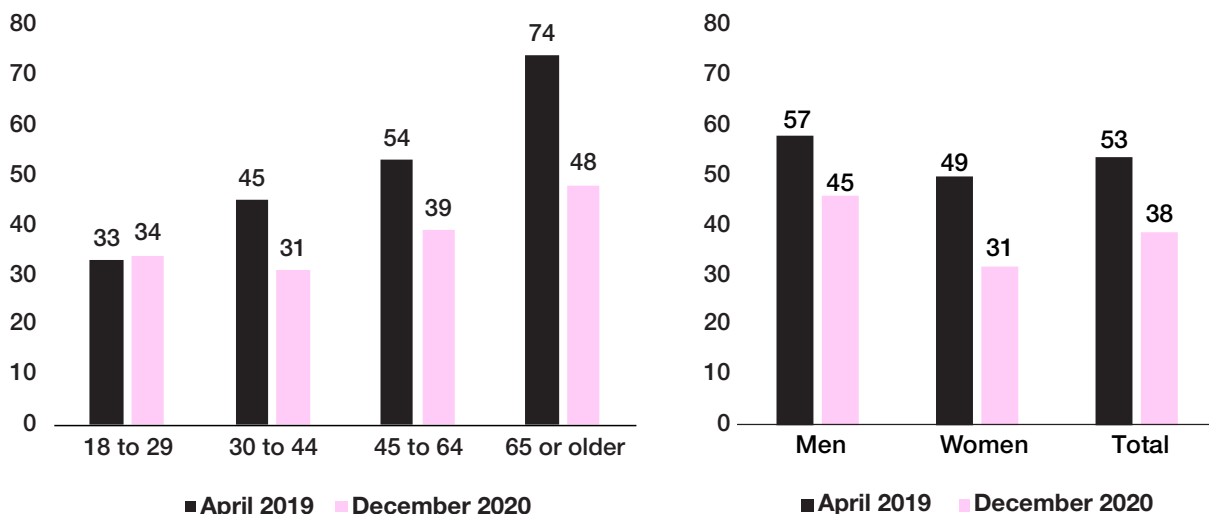
In general, would you say your *physical health* is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?

Changes in mental health

In contrast to the modest overall decline in perceptions of physical health, the decline in perceptions of mental health since the onset of the pandemic has been more substantial. In December 2020, 38 percent of Canadians said their mental health was excellent or very good, a 15-point drop since April 2019. The proportion saying their mental health is fair or poor increased by 10 points over the same period, from 21 to 31 percent.

Change in perceptions of mental health

April 2019 – December 2020, excellent or very good, by age and by gender



Q10b.

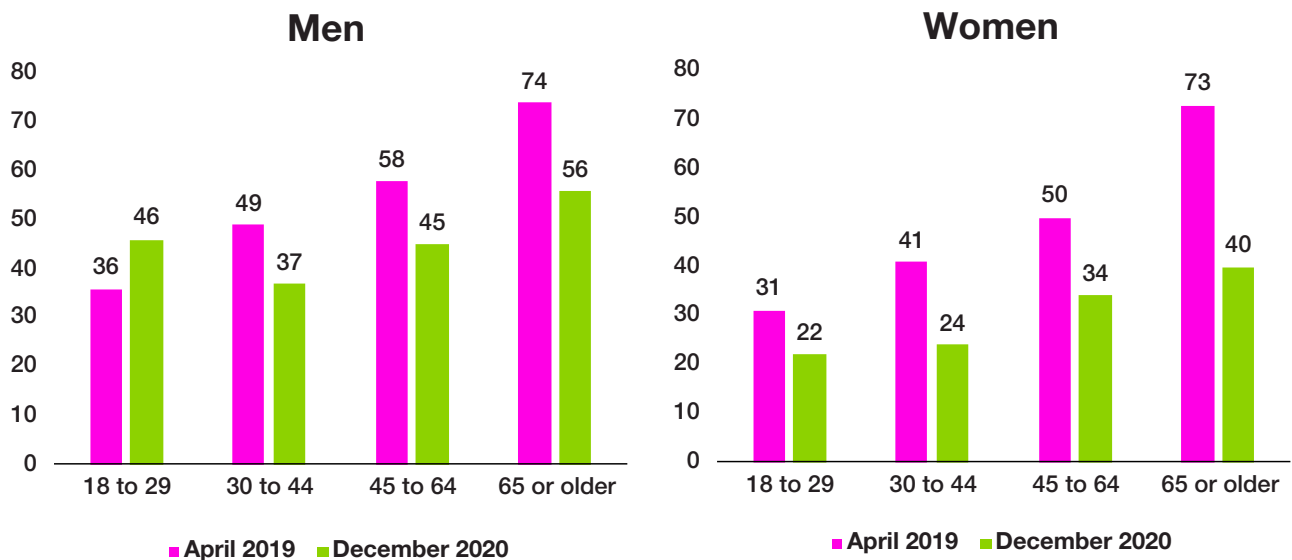
In general, would you say your *mental health* is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?

Again, however, experiences vary significantly by both gender and age. Ratings of mental health have declined for both men and women, but the decline is slightly greater in the case of women (18 points) than men (12 points). The difference among age groups is more acute. There has been no change in the case of younger Canadians (ages 18 to 29); a significant change for those between the ages of 30 and 64; and a dramatic drop among those age 65 and older. The proportion of seniors rating their mental health as excellent or very good fell by 26 points, from 74 percent in April 2019 to 48 percent in December 2020.

As with physical health, the most striking contrast in the case of mental health is between the situations of younger men and older women. Younger men's perception of their mental health has improved slightly since April 2019 – the sole group (combining age and gender) in which this was the case. In contrast, in the case of older women, there has been a dramatic decline; whereas in April 2019, 73 percent of women age 65 and older said their mental health was excellent or good, by December 2020 the proportion had fallen to 40 percent.

Change in perceptions of mental health

April 2019 – December 2020, excellent or very good, by age and gender (combined)



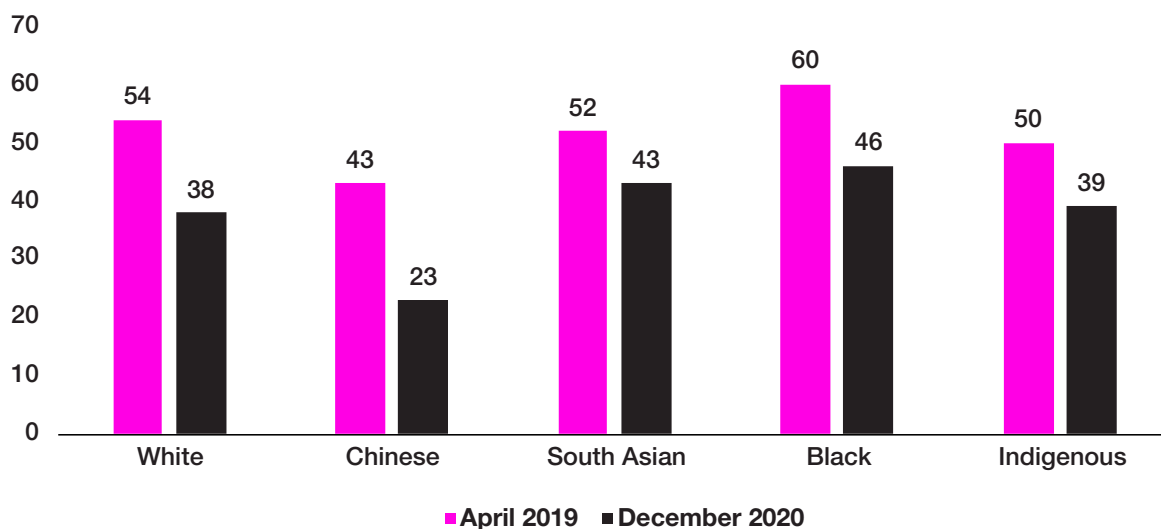
Q10b.

In general, would you say your *mental health* is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?

Looking beyond gender and age, since April 2019, there has been a decline in perceptions of mental health among all major racial identity groups and among those identifying as Indigenous. However, this decline is somewhat larger among those identifying as Chinese: there has been a drop of 20 points in the proportion of Chinese Canadians rating their mental health as excellent or very good, compared to an average decline of 15 points. More striking, however, is the fact that this 20 point decline represents a halving of the number of Chinese Canadians who report their mental health as excellent or very good in less than two years, with the result that this number is now significantly lower than all other major racial identity groups.

Change in perceptions of mental health

April 2019 – December 2020, excellent or very good, by identity



Q10b.

In general, would you say your *mental health* is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?

Among Indigenous Peoples, the overall drop in the proportion rating their mental health as excellent or very good is slightly larger among those who identify as First Nations (a 15-point drop, from 55% in 2019 to 40% in 2020), compared to those who identify as Métis (a 7-point drop, from 44% to 37%). (The sample for Inuit in 2019 is not large enough to allow for a comparison; in 2020, however, 62 percent of Inuit said their mental health was excellent or very good.)

Finally, it’s worth noting that there is an expected relationship between experiences of the pandemic and self-reported mental health. Those who say the pandemic has affected them to a great extent, for instance, are more likely to report poor mental health than are those who say they have been less affected (specifically, 41% of those who have been affected to a great extent say their mental health is fair or poor, compared to 24% of those who say they have been not very much or not at all affected). The same is true of those who have lost hours of work or income or become unemployed as a result of the pandemic, compared to those who have continued working as usual.

The mental health of working parents

Among Canadians in the labour force between the ages of 25 and 54, those with children at home report better mental health compared to those without children – likely a reflection of the challenges facing those living outside of a family situation.

Looking only at those with children at home, the situation for working men and working women is, however, very different. Looking again at those in the labour force between the ages of 25 and 54:

- > In the case of men, those with children at home under the age of five have more positive perceptions of their mental health than those whose children are older.
- > For women, the situation is reversed: perceptions of mental health are worse among those whose youngest child at home is under the age of five.
- > As a result, in the case of those whose youngest child at home is under the age of five, women (36%) are twice as likely as men (17%) to report fair or poor mental health.

These patterns hold regardless of whether one has been working at home during the pandemic, or whether one has continued to work outside the home.

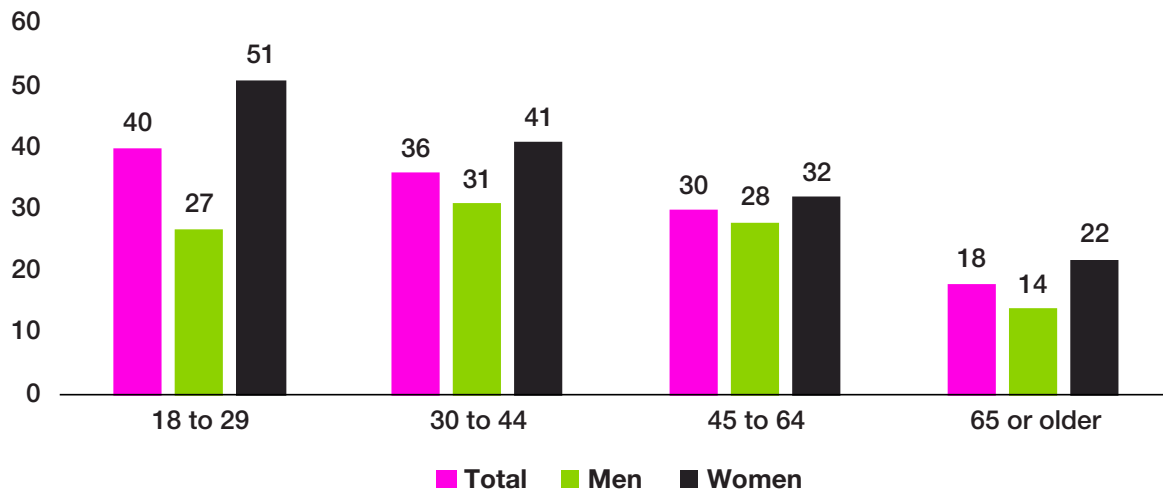
The mental health of young women

While the *decline* in perceptions of mental health over the past year and a half has been greater among seniors than among younger adults, it remains the case that younger Canadians continue to rate their mental health more poorly than others. Two in five (40%) of those between the ages of 18 and 29 say their mental health is fair or poor. Similarly, students (44%) are also much more likely to rate their mental health as fair or poor than are those in the labour force (31%) or those who are retired (21%).

But, in the case of both younger adults in general and students in particular, it is the situation of women that is most concerning. Among those between the ages of 18 and 29, one in two (51%) women, compared to 27 percent of men, say their mental health is fair or poor; among students, the proportions are 52 percent and 32 percent for women and men, respectively. The proportion of young women (ages 18 to 29) who say their mental health is fair or poor is broadly similar among those who identify as white (50%), as racialized (53%), or as Indigenous (47%).

Perceptions of mental health

December 2020, fair or poor, by age and gender



Q10b.

In general, would you say your *mental health* is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?

Implications for governments and employers

Poor physical or mental health are problems in and of themselves for those most affected: they are, by definition, indications of poorer well-being and reduced quality of life. Yet there are wider implications for the workplace and for the economy as a whole – implications that are particularly relevant to employers and governments as they begin the plan for a post-pandemic recovery.

In the workplace, poorer health is associated with lower employee satisfaction and strained relationships. For instance, those who report poorer mental or physical health are also much less likely to feel satisfied with their current job and much less likely to say that their employer has helped them to manage the changes to their work situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. These workers are also much less able to find a balance between their work and family lives. Poorer health can be either the cause or the outcome of these more fraught work situations – or both. Regardless, employees' health concerns have spillover effects in the workplace. Helping employees improve their physical and mental health can therefore be expected to bring benefits not only to those most directly affected but to businesses and the economy more generally.

Governments and employers should also be aware of the connection between health concerns and the disruption of work during the pandemic. For instance, those reporting poorer physical or mental health are more likely than average to have experienced job or income loss during the economic shutdowns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Poorer health may have increased

the likelihood of being laid off; it is likely also an outcome of that experience. In either case, the implication is that measures to ensure a complete economic recovery must go beyond the lifting of lockdowns. A recovery should also entail intentionally addressing the poorer health of those whom the pandemic has impacted the most.

In this context, it is worth emphasizing the strong connection between health and resilience. Canadians' confidence in their abilities when faced with challenges, and their sense of their ability to bounce back quickly after hard times, are very strongly related to their physical and mental health. For instance, 81 percent of those reporting excellent or good mental health say they always or often feel they can bounce back quickly after hard times; among those reporting fair or poor mental health, the proportion is only 27 percent. Similarly, 83 percent of those reporting excellent or good mental health say they always or often feel confident in their abilities, even when faced with challenges; among those reporting fair or poor mental health, the proportion is only 35 percent. These relationships are not surprising, for in many ways, self-reported mental health and measures of self-confidence in the face of adversity tap into the same underlying condition. The point remains, however, that Canadians are not all equally well-positioned to bounce back once the pandemic has passed. It falls to governments and employers to put in place policies that can ensure that the economic recovery is one that does not leave behind those Canadians facing health challenges.

Finally, the findings highlighted in this report underline the importance of collecting data and conducting research that sheds light on how experiences differ according to age, gender, racial identity, Indigenous identity and other factors. These more detailed findings are critical to advancing our understanding of diverging realities within Canadian society, not only during the pandemic, but at other times as well. The data presented in this and other reports in this series take one step forward in this regard, but further and more comprehensive research is warranted to ensure the challenges facing specific peoples and communities are not overlooked.

