

FOCUS CANADA – FALL 2021

Canadian public opinion about Indigenous Peoples and reconciliation

FINAL REPORT

As part of its Focus Canada public opinion research program (launched in 1976), the Environics Institute updated its research on Canadian attitudes about Indigenous Peoples and reconciliation. This survey was conducted in partnership with Century Initiative and is based on telephone interviews conducted (via landline and cellphones) with 2,000 Canadians between September 7 and 23, 2021. A sample of this size drawn from the population produces results accurate to within plus or minus 2.2 percentage points in 19 out of 20 samples. The survey sample includes 90 individuals who identify their background or origins as Indigenous (either solely or in combination with another identity). While their responses are included in this report, the results can generally be interpreted as representing a largely non-Indigenous perspective.

Summary

The 2021 Focus Canada survey finds growing awareness of the mistreatment of Indigenous Peoples in Canada, including through the system of residential schools, and a growing willingness to say that the policies of Canadian governments, and not Indigenous Peoples themselves, is the main obstacle to achieving economic and social equality. Recent events and media coverage related to Indigenous Peoples appear to have dampened national pride in Canada; and while a majority remain optimistic about the prospects for reconciliation, the proportion that is optimistic has declined slightly.

The attitudes of younger Canadian adults are distinctive. They are less likely than their older counterparts to see Indigenous Peoples themselves as the main obstacle to greater economic and social equality. Young Canadians have also experienced a larger than average decline in strong feelings of national pride, as well as a larger than average decline in optimism about the prospects for achieving reconciliation in their lifetime.

Background

While the news headlines in 2020 and 2021 have been dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic, several events relating to Indigenous Peoples have also attracted attention. These include disputes over land and resources on both the West and East coasts; the ongoing failure to ensure all Indigenous communities have access to clean drinking water; and, most prominently, the discovery of the unmarked graves of hundreds of children at the sites of former Indian residential schools. The 2021 Focus Canada survey, conducted by the Environics Institute for Survey Research in partnership with Century Initiative, reveals that, in the wake of these events, attitudes in Canada have shifted. There is a

growing awareness of the mistreatment of Indigenous Peoples in Canada, including through the system of residential schools, and a growing willingness to say that the policies of Canadian governments, and not Indigenous Peoples themselves, is the main obstacle to achieving economic and social equality.

These survey results are being made public on Thursday, September 30, 2021, to mark the first National Day for Truth and Reconciliation.

Canadians' impression of Indigenous Peoples

The 2021 Focus Canada survey suggests that Canadians have become more aware of the history of Canada's mistreatment of Indigenous Peoples, including through the Indian residential school system.

The survey asked Canadians to say, in their own words, what first comes to mind when they think of Indigenous Peoples in Canada. In a previous survey, conducted in 2016, several of the top responses were worded in general terms: mentioning Indigenous Peoples as the first inhabitants of Canada, listing the main Indigenous population groups (First Nations, Métis or Inuit), or noting Indigenous history or culture. In 2021, however, fewer answer in these general terms, and more mention mistreatment, abuse or residential schools specifically.

- In 2021, 28 percent mention mistreatment or abuse as the first thing that comes to mind when they think of Indigenous Peoples in Canada, compared to 17 percent in 2016.
- In 2021, 10 percent mention residential schools or the removal of children, compared to only two percent in 2016.
- In 2021, 12 percent mention Indigenous Peoples as the first inhabitants of Canada, compared to 20 percent in 2016.

Other items mentioned in 2021 include poverty and poor living conditions (6%), the need for reconciliation or more support for Indigenous Peoples (5%), disputes over treaties and land claims (5%), and assimilation and oppression (4%).

A small proportion of Canadians mention negative stereotypes (such as Indigenous Peoples asking for handouts), but positive images (such as Indigenous Peoples being hardworking or deserving of respect) are no less prevalent.

Currently, women (44%) are more likely than men (31%) to say that *either* mistreatment or residential schools comes to mind first when they think of Indigenous Peoples in Canada. In 2016, the comparable figures were 22 percent for women, and 15 percent for men.

Table 1:

Q.15 What first comes to mind when you think of Indigenous Peoples in Canada? (top mentions)

	2016	2021
Mistreated/abused/misunderstood by citizens/government (current or historic)	17	28
First inhabitants of Canada/lands/continent	20	12
Residential schools/took away children/abuse	2	10
History/culture/traditions/art	17	8
First Nations/Métis/Inuit/Indians	9	6
Poverty/poor living conditions	7	6
Good people/generous/proud/strong/peaceful/deserve respect	2	6
Deserve more support/reconciliation/reparations/are being neglected	–	5
Land/treaty claims/disputes/protests	4	5
Loss of culture/assimilation/oppression	7	4
No different/same as any other Canadian citizen	4	4
Reserves	8	4

Obstacles to achieving economic and social equality for Indigenous Peoples

A growing number of Canadians believe the main obstacle to economic and social equality for Indigenous peoples lies with the policies of Canadian governments, while fewer blame Indigenous Peoples themselves.

Five years ago, the Canadian public was somewhat divided when asked about the biggest obstacle to achieving economic and social equality for Indigenous Peoples: 26 percent said that the biggest obstacle is the policies of Canadian governments; an equal number (26%) said it is Indigenous Peoples themselves; and 18 percent said it is the attitudes of the Canadian public (an additional 17% said it was all three of these, and 10% mentioned other combinations of these obstacles).

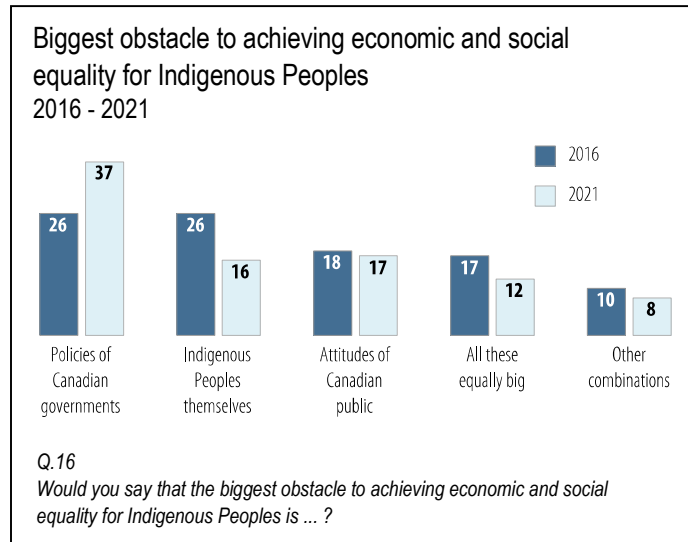
Since then, opinions have shifted, with a higher proportion of Canadians saying the main obstacle is the policies of Canadian governments, and fewer blaming Indigenous Peoples themselves.

In 2021, the proportion saying the biggest obstacle is the policies of Canadian governments has risen by 11 points, to 37 percent, while the proportion saying the biggest obstacle is Indigenous Peoples themselves has dropped by 10 points, to 16 percent. While these two factors were previously equally mentioned as the main obstacle, they are now separated by a 21-point gap.

The proportion saying the biggest obstacle is the attitudes of the Canadian public is currently 17 percent, virtually unchanged from 2016. Currently, 12 percent say it is all three factors, and eight percent mention other combinations of these obstacles.

There is considerable variation in opinions on this question among population groups.

- Canadians living in the Prairie provinces (Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta) (24%) are less likely than those living elsewhere in the country (40%) to say the biggest obstacle to achieving economic and social equality for Indigenous Peoples is the policies of Canadian governments. Prairie residents are somewhat more likely to name either of the other two obstacles separately, or all three obstacles combined.



- About one in ten Canadians under the age of 40 (9%) say the biggest obstacle to achieving economic and social equality for Indigenous Peoples is Indigenous Peoples themselves. Canadians age 40 and older are twice as likely (19%) to say this is the case.
- Among supporters of the different federal political parties, the proportion naming Indigenous Peoples themselves as the biggest obstacle ranges from lows of six percent for the NDP and eight percent for the Green Party, to 13 percent for the Liberals and 14 percent for the Bloc Québécois, to 23 percent for the Peoples' Party and 27 percent for the Conservatives.

Pride in being Canadian

While most Canadians are proud of their national identity, the strength of this pride has declined in the wake of the discoveries of the unmarked graves of hundreds of children at the sites of former Indian residential schools.

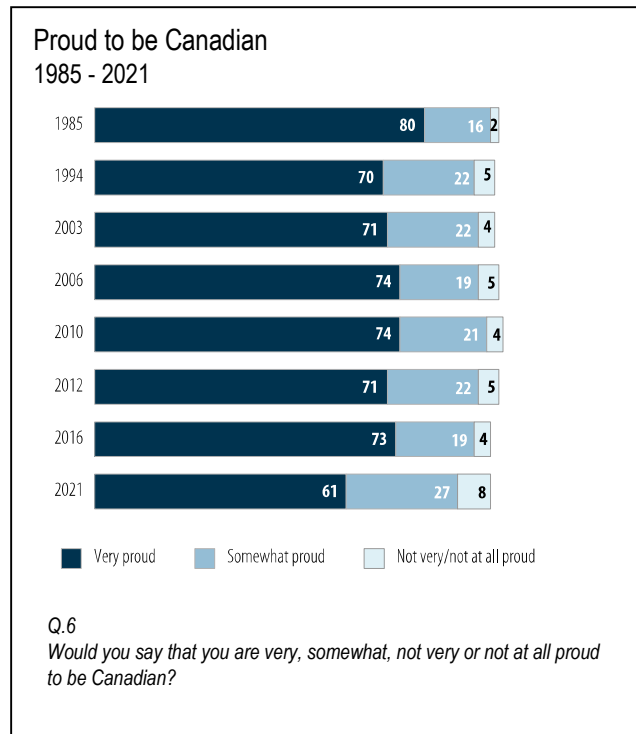
Currently, 61 percent say they are very proud to be a Canadian, and 27 percent say they are somewhat proud. Only eight percent say they are not very or not at all proud.

While about nine in ten Canadians express at least some pride in being a Canadian, the strength of this pride has ebbed somewhat. The proportion saying they are very proud is 12 points lower than in 2016, and in fact is the lowest figure recorded since this question was first asked in 1985.

Compared to earlier years, strong pride in being a Canadian has declined in each region of the country, with the exception of Quebec, where it was already much lower than average. Strong pride has declined among all age groups, but more noticeably among those under the age of 45, compared to those age 45 and older.

The survey cannot say definitely why this decline has occurred; however, it is possible that it comes in reaction to the recent revelations about the deaths of Indigenous children while attending Indian residential schools before this system was ended. A separate study by the Environics Institute conducted this summer in the days following a more muted Canada Day, but using a slightly different measure of national pride, reported a similar decline.¹

In this context, it is notable that those who identify the policies of Canadian governments as the biggest obstacle to achieving economic and social equality for Indigenous Peoples are somewhat less likely than average to say they feel very proud to be Canadian (57% of this group feels this way, compared to the average of 61%). Conversely, those who say the biggest obstacle is Indigenous Peoples themselves are more likely than average to feel very proud to be Canadian (68%). The relationship between the two questions suggests that growing awareness of the mistreatment of Indigenous Peoples in Canada could be linked to the decline in feelings of strong national pride.



Hopes for reconciliation

A majority of Canadians remain optimistic that there will be meaningful reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in their lifetime, although the proportion that is optimistic has declined, especially among young Canadians.

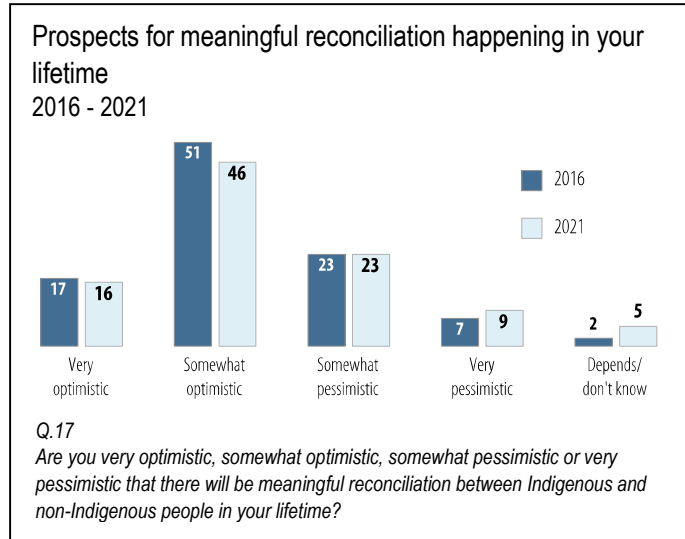
Ongoing conflicts between Indigenous communities and Canadian governments over land and resources can give the impression that progress toward reconciliation is stalled. And the discovery earlier this year of the unmarked graves of hundreds of children on the sites of former Indian residential schools brought home to many how far we have to go before the goal of reconciliation can be achieved. Nonetheless, a majority of Canadians remain optimistic about the prospects for meaningful reconciliation in their lifetime.

¹ See: Environics Institute for Survey Research, *Support for Democracy in Canada* (September 2021); <https://www.environicsinstitute.org/projects/project-details/support-for-democracy-in-canada>.

Currently, 62 percent of Canadians say they are optimistic that there will be meaningful reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in their lifetime, including 16 percent who are very optimistic, and 46 percent who are somewhat optimistic. One in three (32%) are somewhat (23%) or very (9%) pessimistic about achieving reconciliation.

Optimism has declined by six points over the past five years, from 68 percent to 62 percent. Pessimism is essentially unchanged, from 30 percent to 32 percent.

However, the decline in optimism has occurred principally among younger Canadians, rather than evenly across age groups. Among those age 18 to 29, optimism about achieving meaningful reconciliation in their lifetime declined from 79 percent in 2016 to 65 percent in 2021. Among those age 30 and older, the change is much smaller, from 65 percent to 62 percent. While, in 2016, younger Canadians were much more likely to be optimistic than their older counterparts, this is no longer the case in 2021 (although majorities in all age groups remain optimistic).



The Environics Institute for Survey Research was established in 2006 as an independent non-profit organization to promote relevant and original public opinion and social research on important issues of public policy and social change. It is through such research that organizations and individuals can better understand Canada today, how it has been changing, and where it may be heading. www.EnvironicsInstitute.org.

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