

The Perspectives of Second-generation Immigrants in Canada

BY NICOLE JARRETT & ANDREW PARKIN

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Executive summary

What is the challenge?

One of the key tests of Canada's success in integrating newcomers is the outcomes for the children of immigrants - the so-called second-generation. This report provides new information on how second-generation immigrants in Canada are doing by exploring their views on a range of questions related to such things as life satisfaction, goals and priorities, experiences in education, identity, and civic engagement.

Key issues

Outcomes for second-generation immigrants are typically measured in terms of educational attainment, employment rates and income. These indicators are important, but they tell us little about the experience that second-generation have balancing the values and expectations of their immigrant parents with those of Canadian society more generally. The children of immigrants to Canada may do well on a number of economic measures, and yet may still encounter obstacles, including discrimination. They have the benefit neither of their parents' optimism as newcomers in country full of promise, nor of the deep roots that non-immigrants have in Canada. This paper addresses this knowledge gap by exploring the outlook of second-generation immigrants in Canada, and how it compares both to those of first-generation immigrants, and to non-immigrants.

Research findings

This study draws upon a unique survey of Canadians between the ages of 18 and 40 (those described as Generation Z or Millennials) conducted in the autumn of 2020. It finds that the experiences of second-generation immigrants cannot be easily generalized: this group of Canadians is neither consistently similar to, nor consistently different from, the other two groups.



Broadly speaking, second-generation immigrants resemble non-immigrants when it comes to economic priorities such as obtaining work-life balance, but less so on things more closely related to heritage or culture.

- All three groups appear equally confident about achieving their career goals, and about eventually having enough money to live their desired life in the future. First-generation immigrants, however, stand out as being somewhat more satisfied with their life, as well as more focused on attaining higher education and financial security. On these questions, the outlook of second-generation immigrants resembles that of non-immigrants.
- On questions relating to identity, and particularly on the importance of ethnicity and religion to personal identity, the views of second-generation are more similar to those of first-generation immigrants. Broadly speaking, second-generation immigrants resemble non-immigrants when it comes to economic priorities such as obtaining work-life balance, but less so on things more closely related to heritage or culture.
- In terms of civic engagement, second-generation immigrants often appear as an “in-between” group, whose opinions fall in a range between those of first-generation immigrants and non-immigrants. For instance, they are less satisfied than first-generation immigrants with the way Canadian democracy works, but more satisfied than non-immigrants.

Key takeaways

Taken together, this study's findings are encouraging. In many ways, the perspectives of children of immigrants in Canada, particularly as they relate to life and career goals, resemble those of non-immigrants. And while their opinions about life in Canada, and of Canadian democracy, are less rosy than those of first-generation immigrants, they are not more negative than those of non-immigrants.

These findings are suggestive of a process in which integration occurs first in aspects related to more material aspects of life, and then later in terms of more cultural aspects. But more importantly, the analysis does not find that second-generation immigrants are outliers in a negative sense; that is, while in some cases they have more pessimistic views than first-generation immigrants, they do not tend to have more pessimistic views than non-immigrants - views that, were they present, would point to the existence of major barriers to integration into Canadian society.

These findings are suggestive of a process in which integration occurs first in aspects related to more material aspects of life, and then later in terms of more cultural aspects.

Second-generation immigrants certainly have worries, with many expressing concerns about their current financial situation, or about the performance of governments. But these concerns are shared by younger Canadians of all backgrounds, and do not divide the country according to how long their families have lived here.

Introduction

Immigrants face a range of challenges when it comes to adjusting to life in their new country, including overcoming language barriers, navigating a new culture, and finding employment without the benefit of local work experience. It may take time for immigrants to find their way to the type of jobs and income to which they aspire.

One of the key tests of Canada's success in integrating newcomers, however, is the outcomes for the children of immigrants - the so-called second-generation. Unlike their immigrant parents, second-generation immigrants, who are born in Canada, do not face issues related to the recognition of foreign work experience or credentials. They grow up speaking one of Canada's official languages and immersed in Canadian culture. Their personal and professional networks have been built within Canada as well. As the children of immigrants, they may retain an attachment to the culture of their parents' country of origin. But, in principle, they should face no barriers to equal participation in Canadian society.

Outcomes for second-generation immigrants are typically measured in terms of educational attainment, employment rates and income. In Canada, these outcomes in Canada are encouraging. The educational achievement and attainment of second-generation immigrants surpasses those of Canadian students without an immigration background. And employment rates and income levels are broadly comparable.

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These indicators are important, but are incomplete. They tell us little about the experience that second-generation have balancing the values and expectations of their immigrant parents with those of Canadian society more generally. The children of immigrants to Canada may do well on a number of economic measures, and yet may still encounter obstacles, including discrimination. They have the benefit neither of their parents' optimism as newcomers in country full of promise, nor of the deep roots that non-immigrants have in Canada.

This paper addresses this knowledge gap by exploring the outlook of second-generation immigrants in Canada, and how it compares both to those of first-generation immigrants, and to non-immigrants.¹ It does so by drawing upon a unique survey of Canadians between the ages of 18 and 40 (those described as Generation Z or Millennials) conducted in the autumn of 2020 by the Environics Institute for Survey Research, in partnership with Apathy is Boring. The survey was conducted online with a representative sample of 5,264 people in this age group, including 1,084 first-generation immigrants, 1,319 second-generation immigrants, and 2,861 non-immigrants. As all the survey participants are between the ages of 18 and 40, it is important to keep in mind that, in this report, first-generation immigrants are a comparison peer group, rather than an older or "parent" group, relative to second-generation immigrants.

This report explores views on a range of questions related to such things as life satisfaction, goals and priorities, experiences in education, identity, and civic engagement. The report highlights both similarities and differences among the three groups. Specifically, it highlights:

- **Same as others:** Areas where first-generation immigrants, second-generation immigrants and non-immigrants share similar attitudes and preferences.

1 In this paper, "non-immigrant" or "third-generation plus" refers to those who are neither first- nor second-generation immigrants; non-immigrants are born in Canada to Canadian-born parents.

- **Same as non-immigrants:** Areas where the viewpoints and attitudes of second-generation immigrants resemble those of non-immigrants, but differ from those of first-generation immigrants.
- **Same as first-generation immigrants:** Areas where the viewpoints and attitudes of second-generation immigrants resemble those of their first-generation immigrant counterparts, but differ from those of non-immigrants.
- **Different from others:** Areas where second-generation immigrants have distinct views that differ from those of either first-generation immigrants and or non-immigrants.

The fact that the various survey results fall into these four general patterns, rather than only one or two, is itself an initial significant finding, as it signals that the experiences of second-generation immigrants in Canada cannot be easily generalized. This group of Canadians is neither consistently similar to, nor consistently different from, the other two groups.

Beyond that, the analysis presented in this report confirms that second-generation immigrants often appear as an “in-between” group, whose opinions fall in a range between those of first-generation immigrants and non-immigrants. But there are exceptions. On questions related to personal identity, for example, second-generation immigrants resemble their first-generation counterparts. On other types of questions, such as on those about education and careers, second-generation immigrants resemble non-immigrants. This is suggestive of a process in which integration occurs first in ways related to more material aspects of life, and then later in terms of more cultural aspects. But more importantly, the analysis does not find that second-generation immigrants are outliers in a negative sense; that is, while in some cases they have more pessimistic views than first-generation immigrants, they do not tend to have more pessimistic views than non-immigrants - views that, were they present, would point to the existence of major barriers to integration into Canadian society.

Career goals and financial security

Questions asked:

- Thinking about what you want to achieve in terms of your work and career, how much importance do you place on achieving each for the following in your lifetime?
- How confident are you feeling today about achieving your current work and career goals over time?
- Do you currently earn or have enough money to lead the kind of life you want, or not? If not, do you think you will be able to earn or have enough money in the future to lead the kind of life you want, or not?

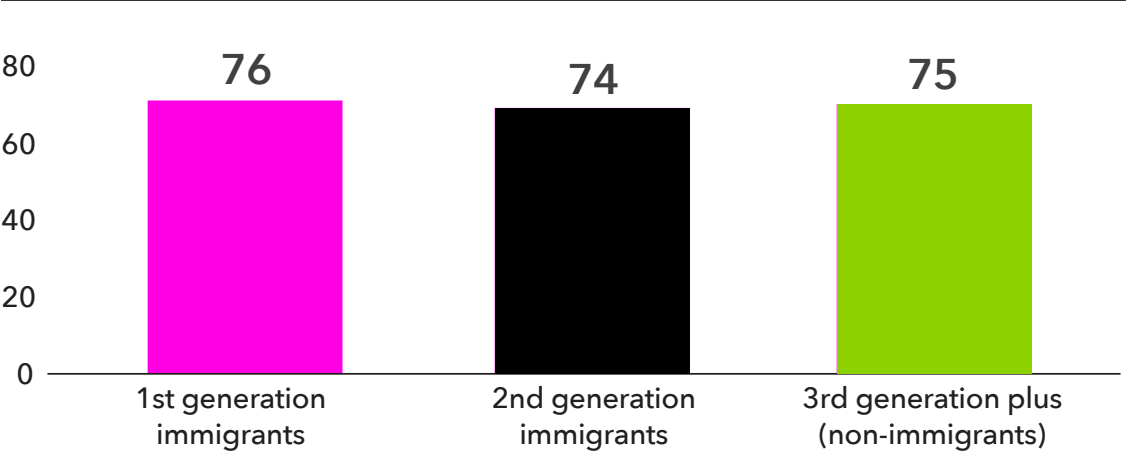
Canadians age 40 and under from all backgrounds prioritize both financial security and work-life balance the most, in terms of their work and career. However, both second-generation immigrants and non-immigrants rank work-life balance first, slightly ahead of financial security, whereas the reverse is true for first-generation immigrants. First-generation are also more likely than the other two groups to prioritize creating wealth for themselves and their families.

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Importantly, however, all three groups - first-generation immigrants, second-generation immigrants, and non-immigrants - are all equally confident about achieving their work and career goals over time.

FIGURE 1

Very Confident in Achieving Current Work and Career Goals Over Time



Canadians age 40 and under generally do not feel that they currently have enough money to live their desired life. This is the case for over 60 percent of first- and second-generation immigrants as well as for non-immigrants. However, second-generation immigrants are the least likely among the three groups to express this concern.



FIGURE 2

"I do or do not not currently have enough money to live my desired life."

"I do not currently have enough money to live my desired life."

65%

First-generation immigrants

61%

Second-generation immigrants

67%

Third-generation plus (non-immigrants)

"I do currently have enough money to live my desired life."

35%

First-generation immigrants

37%

Second-generation immigrants

33%

Third-generation plus (non-immigrants)

Most of those (about two in three) who do not feel that they currently have enough money to live their desired life nonetheless believe they will have enough money to live their desired life in the future. In this case, there are no significant differences among the three groups.

Post-secondary education

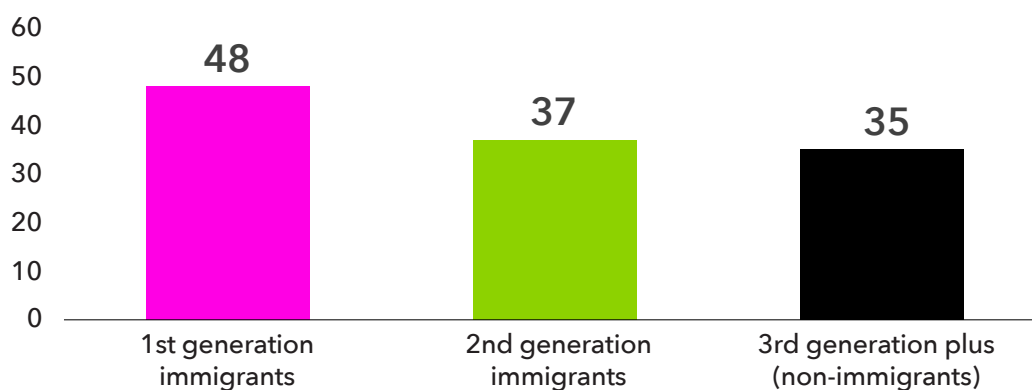
Questions asked:

- Do you have plans, or are you considering, getting further education at the college, university or post-graduate level, including trades and apprenticeship training?
- How important do you believe it is to have a post-secondary (college or university) degree to have a fulfilling life?

Among those age 40 and under who have not completed post-secondary education, first-generation immigrants are significantly more likely than second-generation immigrants or non-immigrants to plan to do so. On this question, second-generation Canadians thus resemble their non-immigrant peers more so than first-generation immigrants. Among second-generation immigrants, however, women are more likely than men to plan to obtain post-secondary education.

FIGURE 3

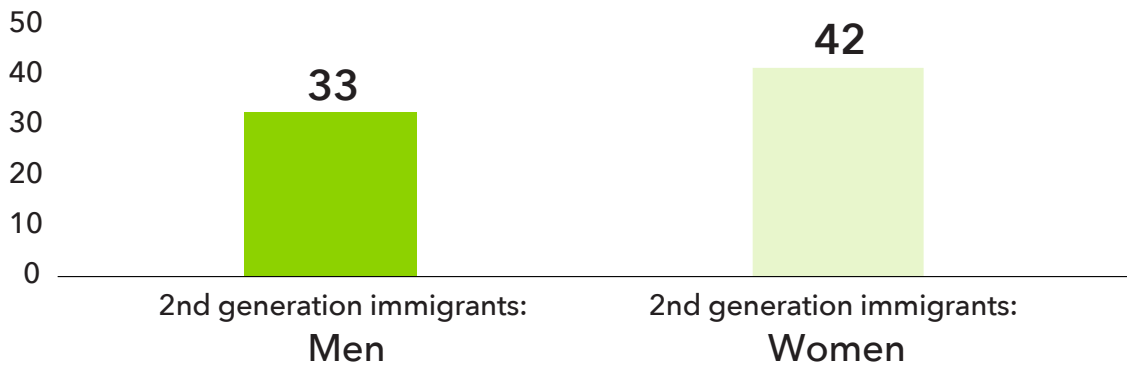
Planning to Obtain Post-Secondary Education



Note: This is a subsample of respondents who have not completed post-secondary education

FIGURE 4

Planning to Obtain Post-Secondary Education

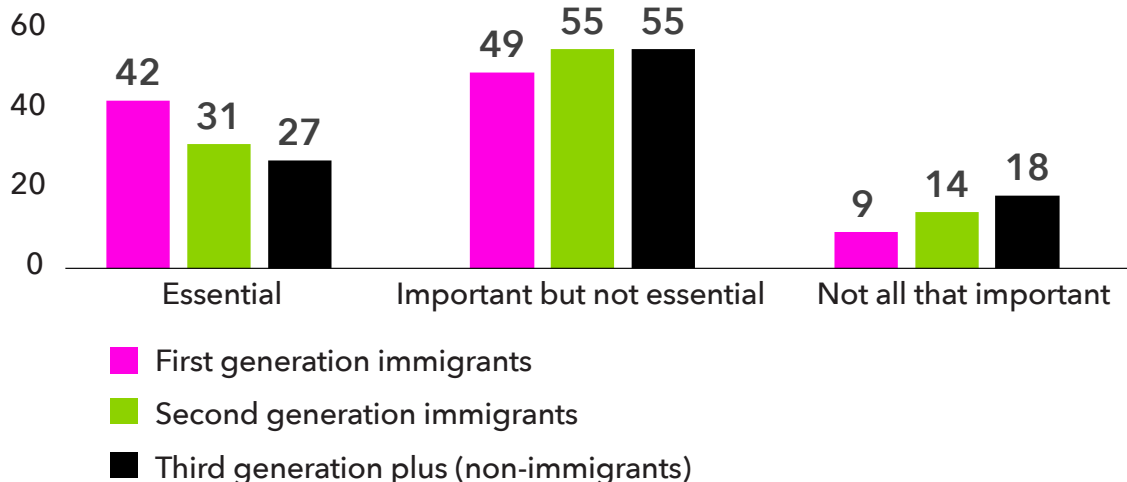


Note: This is a subsample of respondents who have not completed post-secondary education

Those who had continued their education past high school were asked to say how important having a post-secondary (college or university) degree is to have a fulfilling life. First-generation immigrants are significantly more likely than the other two groups to say that post-secondary education is essential. In contrast, second-generation immigrants and non-immigrants are more likely to feel that post-secondary education is important, but not essential.

FIGURE 5

Perceived Importance of Post-Secondary Education

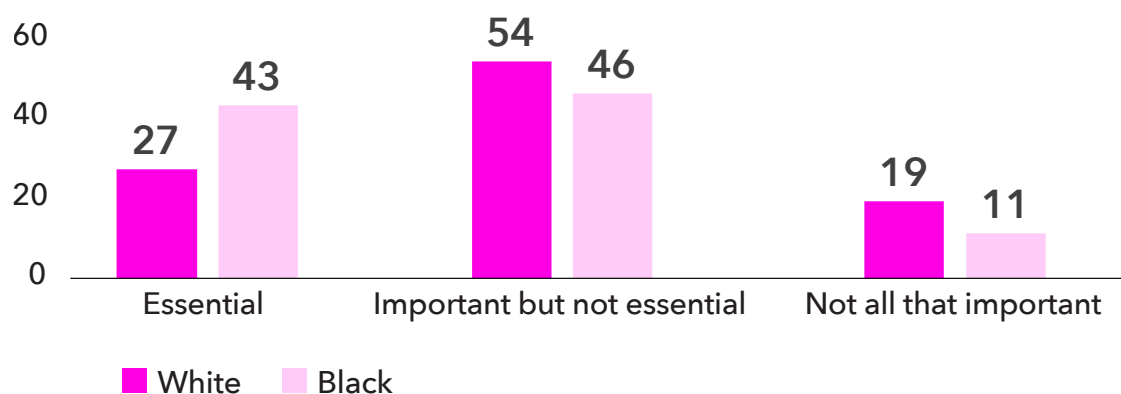




Within the group of second-generation Canadians who had completed post-secondary education, those who identify as Black are particularly likely to say that post-secondary education is essential to have a fulfilling life.

FIGURE 6

Perceived Importance of Post-Secondary Education



Note: Second-generation respondents only.

Components of personal identity

Questions asked:

- I will read you a number of factors which may contribute to one's personal feeling of identity. For each, please tell me whether each of the following it is very important, somewhat important, not very important, or not at all important to your own sense of identity.
- Please indicate whether you totally agree, agree somewhat, disagree somewhat or totally disagree with each of the following statements:
 - I consider myself to be a member of a religious faith
 - My religious beliefs are very important to me

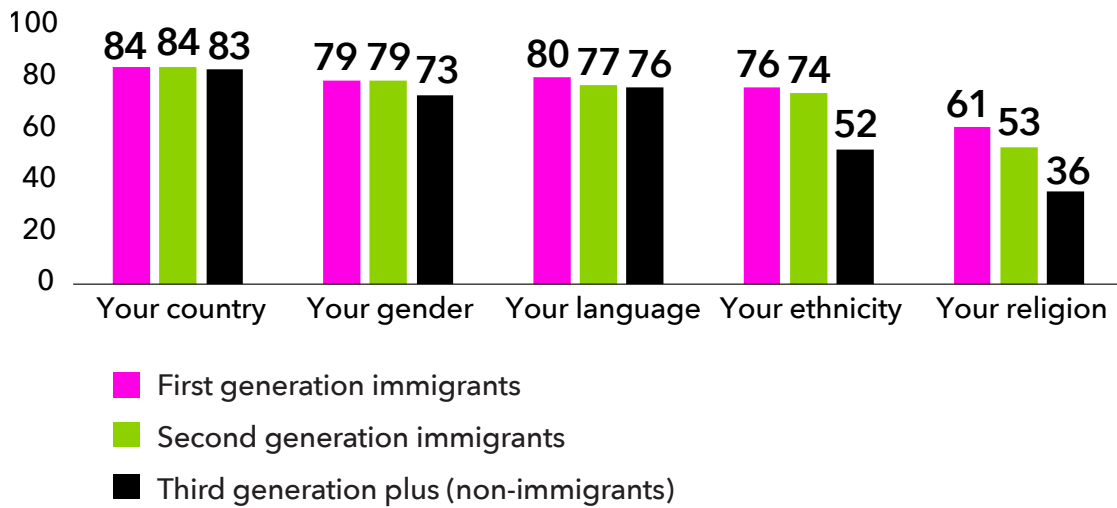
Majorities of Canadians age 40 and under from all backgrounds say that their country (Canada), their gender and their language are important to their own sense of identity.

First- and second-generation Canadians, however, are more likely than non-immigrants to say each of these is important to their identity. The difference is particularly noticeable in the case of gender.

Second-generation Canadians also differ from their non-immigrant counterparts on the extent to which ethnicity and religion is seen as important to their personal identity: second-generation immigrants (along with first-generation immigrants) are significantly more likely than non-immigrants to consider ethnicity and race, as well as religion, to be important to their personal identity.

FIGURE 7

Components of Personal Identity: % Important



These differences in identity in part reflect underlying differences in religiosity. About one in two second-generation Canadians age 40 and under consider themselves to be a member of a religious faith – which is similar to the proportion of first-generation immigrants, but higher than the proportion of non-immigrants (about one in three). Similarly, 52 percent of second-generation immigrants agree that their religious beliefs are very important to them, compared to a somewhat higher proportion of first-generation immigrants (63%), but fewer non-immigrants (37%).

About 1 in 2 second-generation Canadians age 40 and under consider themselves to be a member of a religious faith.

Life satisfaction

Question asked:

- All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays?

About one in two Canadians age 40 and under rate their overall life satisfaction as “medium” - meaning that they scored in the mid-range of a scale.² This is the case regardless of immigration background.

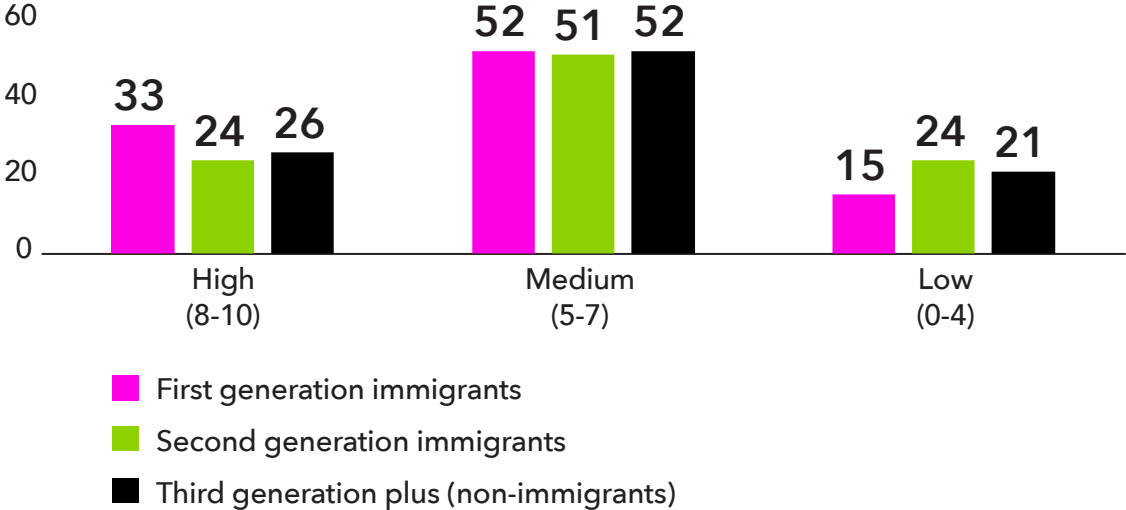
In terms of low life satisfaction, however, second-generation Canadians appear more similar to non-immigrants and differ from their immigrant counterparts. Second-generation Canadians, as well as non-immigrants, are significantly more likely than first-generation immigrants to report low life satisfaction. First-generation immigrants, in contrast, are more likely than the other two groups to report high life satisfaction.

In terms of low life satisfaction, however, second-generation Canadians appear more similar to non-immigrants and differ from their immigrant counterparts.

FIGURE 8

2 Survey participants were asked to rank their level of satisfaction with their life on a scale of 0 to 10. A score of 0 to 4 was categorized as low life satisfaction, 5 to 7 was categorized as medium life satisfaction and 8 to 10 was categorized as high life satisfaction.

Life Satisfaction



Comparing the average (mean) scores on the scale for each group, first-generation immigrants are highest (a mean of 6.4 on the scale from zero to 10) and second-generation immigrants are lowest (a mean of 5.9).

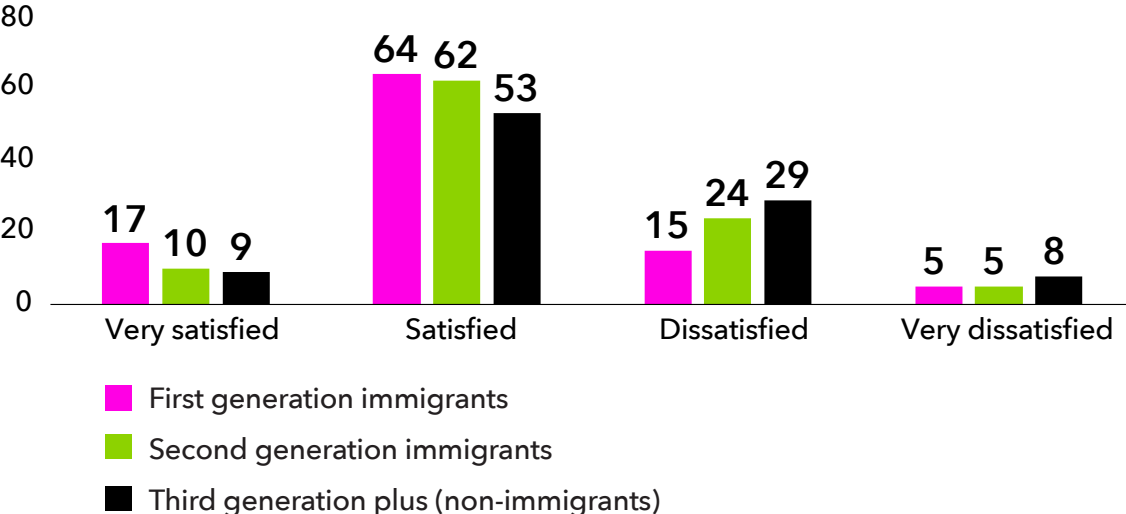
Democracy and civic engagement

Question asked:

- In general, would you say that you are very satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the way democracy works in Canada?
- Would you say that [the federal/your provincial/your municipal] government today is generally working; working, with major problems; broken, but working in some areas; completely broken?
- In your view, how well do you think the country's major institutions (such as governments, post-secondary institutions and the private sector) have been doing to support the needs and aspirations of people in your generation?
- How much confidence do you have in each of the following institutions?
- Generally speaking, how interested are you in politics?
- How often, if at all, do you discuss politics with others whose political views are clearly different from your own?
- If a close friend asked your advice about what career path he or she should take to help make the world a better place, which of the following would you most likely recommend?
- How confident are you today that your generation of Canadians will make a positive impact on the country and society for the better over the next several decades?

There is a gradient of satisfaction with the way democracy works in Canada, with non-immigrants being the least satisfied and first-generation immigrants being the most satisfied. Second-generation Canadians consistently fall in-between the two other groups. First-generation immigrants are significantly more likely to be very satisfied with Canadian democracy, while non-immigrants are significantly more likely to be dissatisfied.

FIGURE 9
Satisfaction with the Way Democracy Works in Canada

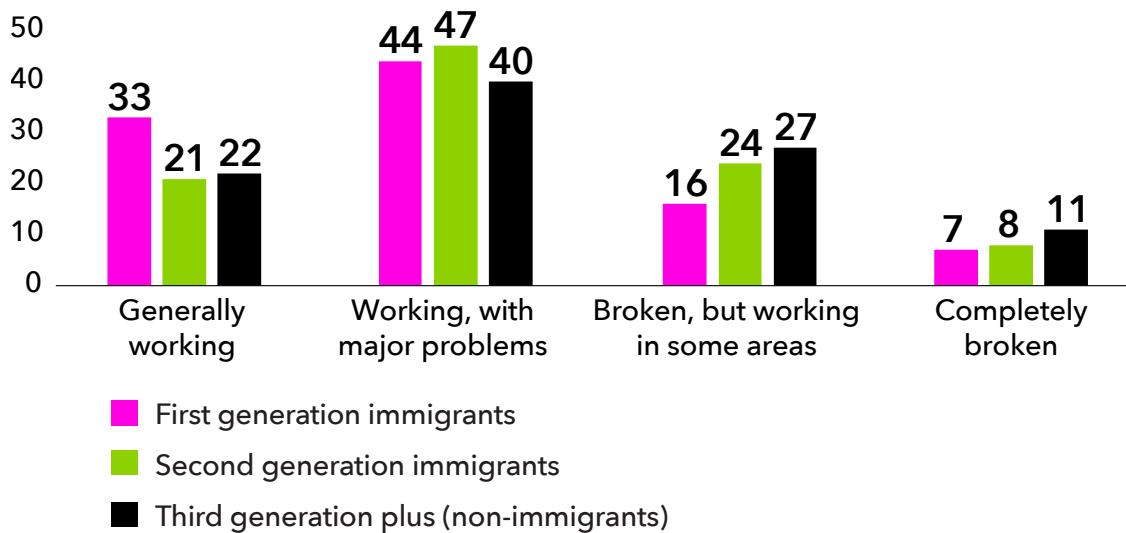


While first-generation immigrants are more likely than their counterparts to be satisfied with democracy in Canada, they are also more likely to say that governments in Canada are generally working.³ Second-generation Canadians exhibit beliefs that are more similar to those of non-immigrants, as these two groups are both more likely to say that government in Canada is broken.

3 One-third of survey respondents were asked about the federal government, one-third about their provincial government, and one-third about their municipal government.

FIGURE 10

Is Government Working or Broken?



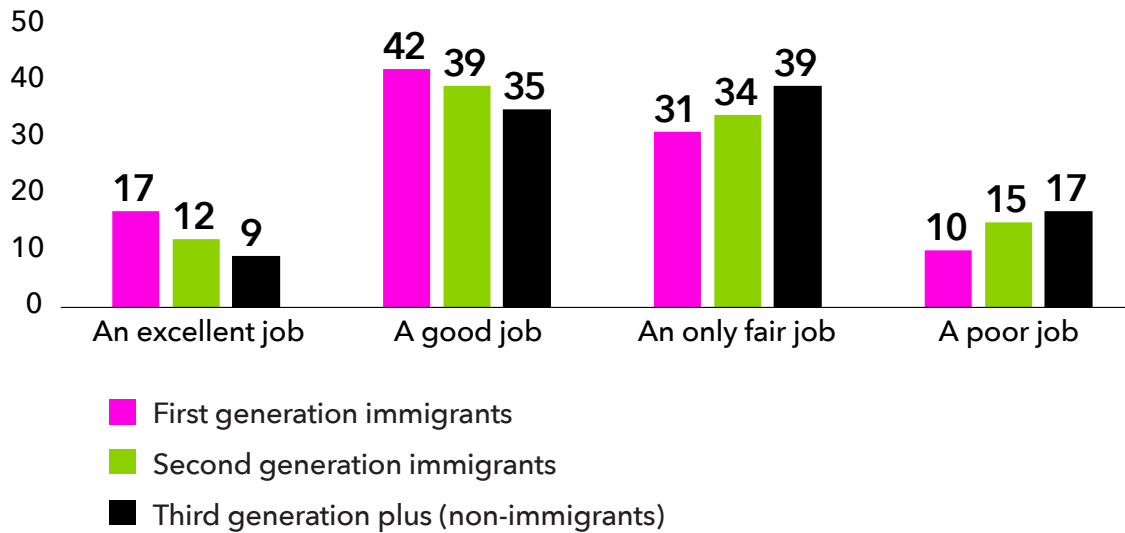
When it comes to rating the performance of the country's major institutions (such as governments, post-secondary institutions and the private sector), the pattern is similar, with first-generation immigrants the most satisfied, and non-immigrants the least. Second-generation Canadians are not quite as satisfied as their first-generation counterparts, but not as dissatisfied as their non-immigrant counterparts.

Specifically, second-generation Canadians are less likely than first-generation immigrants, but more likely than non-immigrants, to say that the country's major institutions are doing an excellent or good job to support the needs and aspirations of people in their generation.

Second-generation Canadians are not quite as satisfied as their first-generation counterparts, but not as dissatisfied as their non-immigrant counterparts.

FIGURE 11

Perceived Performance of Institutions

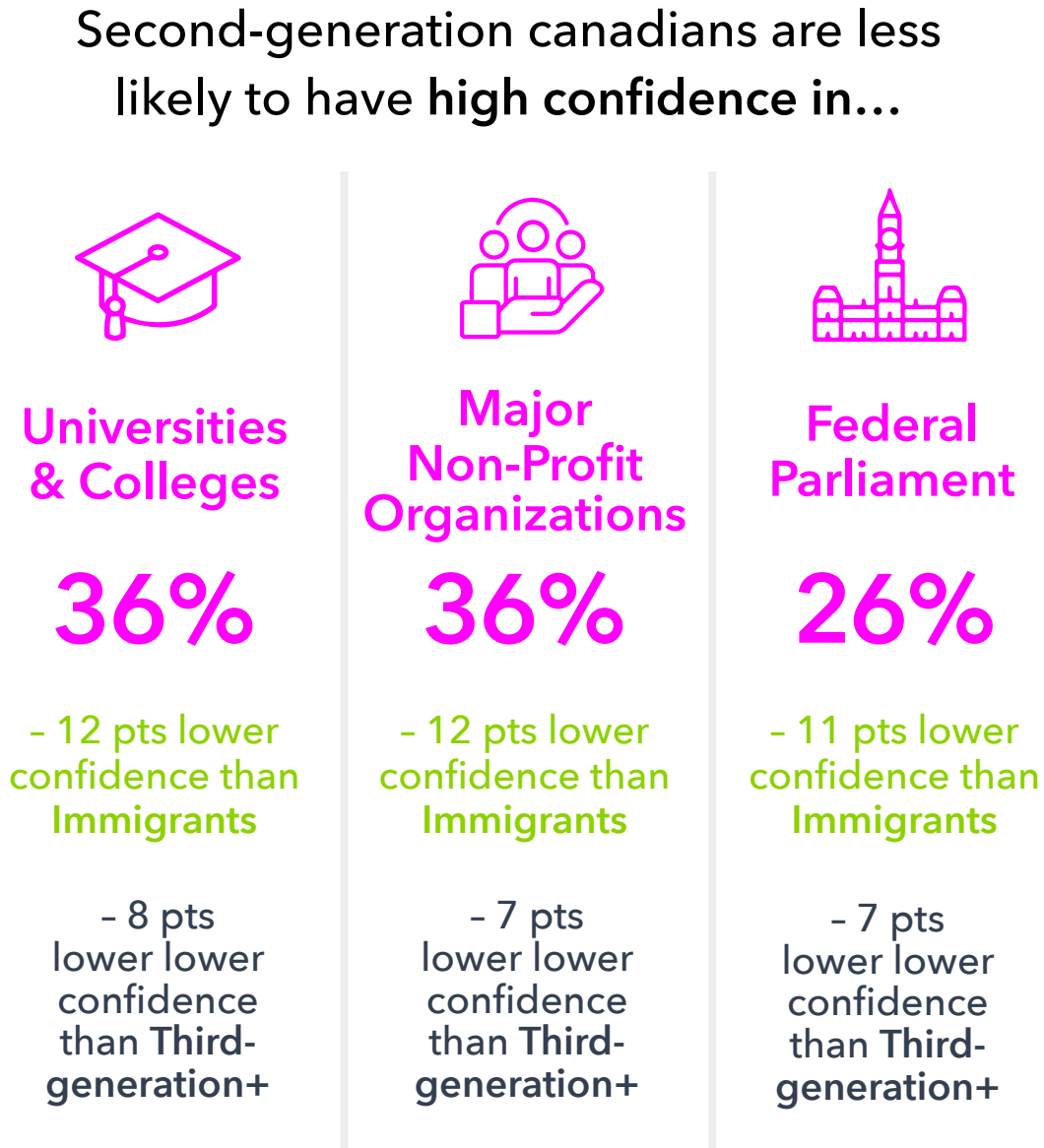


When asked about a list of specific institutions, rather than institutions in general, first-generation immigrants generally stand out in terms of expressing more confidence. The views of second-generation Canadians tend to resemble those of non-immigrants.

There are a few key instances, however, where second-generation Canadians have a view that is distinct from that of both first-generation immigrants and non-immigrants. They are significantly less likely to express a high degree of confidence in universities and colleges, and in major non-profit organizations. In the case of confidence in the federal parliament, second-generation Canadians have less confidence than first-generation immigrants, but more confidence than non-immigrants.

FIGURE 12

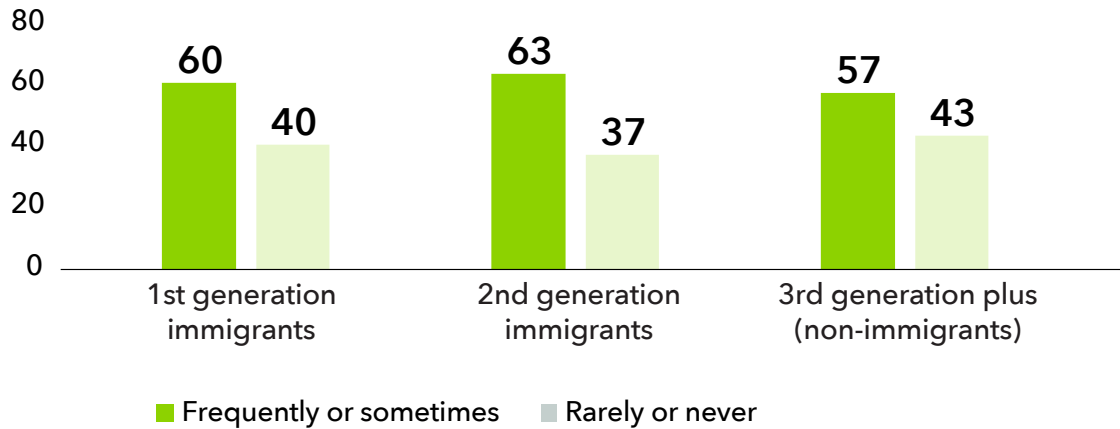
Second-generation Canadians are Less Likely to Have High Confidence in...



While second-generation Canadians express less confidence in some political institutions such as the federal parliament, they are slightly more likely than non-immigrants to say they are interested in politics (and just as likely as first-generation immigrants). Second-generation Canadians are also more likely, compared to each of the other two groups, to say they discuss politics with people with different political views.

FIGURE 13

Frequency of Engaging in Political Discussion with People of Opposing Political Views

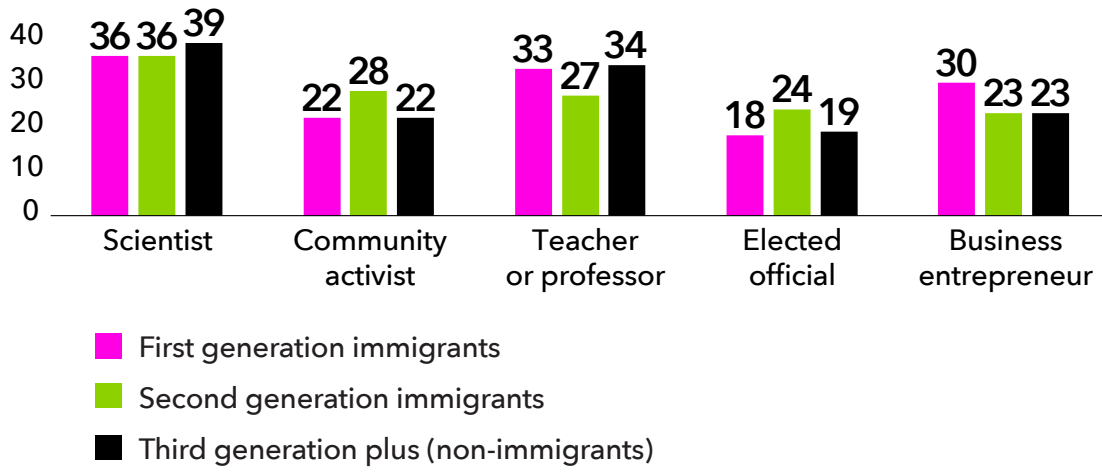


Second-generation Canadians also have some distinct views on which career path is the best one to follow to help make the world a better place. Regardless of background, Canadians in this age group are most likely to recommend to a close friend that being a scientist is the best career path to take to make the world a better place. But second-generation Canadians are significantly more likely than third-generation Canadians or immigrants to recommend being a community activist or an elected official.



FIGURE 14

Most Impactful Career Path



Finally, a majority of Canadians in each of these groups have some confidence that their generation will make a positive impact on the country and society for the better over the next several decades. However, immigrants are significantly more likely to be very confident (and not just somewhat confident), when compared with the other two groups. Both second-generation immigrants and non-immigrants are more likely to say they are not very or not at all confident.

A majority of Canadians in each of these groups have some confidence that their generation will make a positive impact on the country and society for the better over the next several decades.

FIGURE 15

Confidence in Making a Difference

“I am very confident that my generation will make a difference”

20%

First-generation immigrants

12%

Second-generation immigrants

14%

Third-generation plus (non-immigrants)

“I am not very confident that my generation will make a difference”

22%

First-generation immigrants

31%

Second-generation immigrants

32%

Third-generation plus (non-immigrants)

Conclusion

The outlook of second-generation immigrants in Canada age 40 and under, compared to their first-generation and non-immigrant counterparts, is difficult to summarize because the patterns are not always consistent. In some cases, second-generation immigrants resemble their first-generation counterparts; in others, second-generation immigrants resemble non-immigrants. And in other cases still, the views of second-generation immigrants are somewhat distinctive.

All three groups appear equally confident about achieving their career goals, and about eventually having enough money to live their desired life in the future. First-generation immigrants, however, stand out as being somewhat more satisfied with their life, as well as more focused on attaining higher education and financial security. On these questions, the outlook of second-generation immigrants resembles that of non-immigrants.

On questions relating to identity, however, and particularly on the importance of ethnicity and religion to personal identity, the views of second-generation immigrants are more similar to those of first-generation immigrants. Broadly speaking, second-generation immigrants resemble non-immigrants when it comes to economic priorities such as obtaining work-life balance, but less so on things more closely related to heritage or culture.

In terms of civic engagement, second-generation immigrants often appear as an “in-between” group, whose opinions fall in a range between those of first-generation immigrants and non-immigrants. For instance, they are less satisfied than first-generation immigrants with the way Canadian democracy works, but more satisfied than non-immigrants. But on some questions in this area, the views of second-generation immigrants are most distinctive. For instance, compared to

In many ways, the perspectives of the children of immigrants in Canada, particularly as they relate to life and career goals, resemble those of non-immigrants.

each of the other two groups, they discuss politics with people with different political views more often, and are more likely to recommend being a community activist or an elected official as the best career path to take to make the world a better place.

In the end, these various findings, taken together, are encouraging in that they do not highlight evidence of major barriers to the integration of immigrants into Canadian society. In many ways, the perspectives of the children of immigrants in Canada, particularly as they relate to life and career goals, resemble those of non-immigrants. And while their opinions about life in Canada, and of Canadian democracy, are less rosy than those of first-generation immigrants, they are not more negative than those of non-immigrants. Second-generation immigrants certainly have worries, with many expressing concerns about their current financial situation, or about the performance of governments. But these concerns are shared by younger Canadians of all backgrounds, and do not divide the country according to how long their families have lived here.



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