

Making Connections:

Executive Summary



Millions of people from more than 200 different cultural and ethnic backgrounds now reside in Canada's provinces, cities and communities. In 2001, about 18% of the population was born outside of Canada, and increasing numbers of immigrants are settling in Canada's major urban centres.

But how are immigrants to Canada faring? Are they engaged in the social, economic, and political activities of their cultural communities – and the broader community at large? Do they volunteer? Vote? Donate to charities? Join groups? Do they follow current affairs? In other words, how are they doing with respect to social inclusion?

This report tries to answer those questions by examining different measures of social and civic engagement among the immigrant population. In the report, social and civic engagement is broadly defined as “the active connections between people that foster mutual respect and facilitate cooperative action.”

The immigrant population in Canada is not one homogeneous group. Immigrant experiences are as varied as their ethnic, religious, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Indeed, what social or civic engagement means to an individual depends in large part on their past experiences and cultural practices. Recognizing that, the report examines broad patterns of social and civic engagement among immigrants by looking at the different ways in which they participate in Canadian society and whether factors such as age, gender, education level, employment status, household income, and length of time in Canada influence their participation levels.

Specifically, the following measures were used to gauge social and civic participation: rates of volunteering and donating, memberships in nonprofit and charitable community groups, voting rates, frequency of following the news and current affairs, and rates and methods of informal giving. Each of these measures is discussed in relation to the immigrant and Canadian-born populations, and some of the key findings are highlighted below.

This report uses data from two primary sources: the 2000 *National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating* (NSGVP) and the 2003 *General Social Survey* (GSS). These two surveys, while not always directly comparable, yield sufficient information to indicate trends and patterns in the behaviours of the immigrant and Canadian-born populations. Data from the 2001 Census are also used to enhance the findings.

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Immigrants as Volunteers

- Both the 2000 NSGVP and the 2003 GSS revealed that, on average, almost 30% of immigrants volunteered for nonprofit or charitable organizations, about 5% fewer than among the Canadian-born.
- The longer immigrants have lived in Canada, the more likely they are to volunteer at levels comparable to or greater than the Canadian-born population. Rates were lower among more recent immigrants, reflecting their primary concerns of finding housing and employment, and providing economically for their families. For immigrants who did not volunteer, lack of time was cited as the greatest deterrent.

- A clear pattern emerged between volunteer rates, and level of education and household income: the higher the level of education and income, the greater the participation rate in volunteer activities, but the fewer hours volunteered. This pattern was similar among Canadian-born respondents, but on average, Canadian-born residents had slightly higher volunteer rates and they volunteered for slightly more hours.
- Immigrants volunteered for the same reasons as Canadian-born respondents – to support a cause which they had been affected by or in which they believed. Immigrants also volunteered in order to be able to apply their skills and experiences, to better understand Canadian workplaces, and to improve their language skills. They were more likely than the Canadian-born to volunteer in order to fulfill a religious obligation.
- Immigrants were more likely to say that they had not been personally asked to volunteer or did not know how to become involved.
- Immigrants were more likely to volunteer with religious groups or organizations and less likely to volunteer with social service organizations than their Canadian-born counterparts.
- On average, immigrant women were more likely than men to volunteer, but immigrant men volunteered more hours than women. The presence of young children reduced the number of hours volunteered.
- Immigrants aged 55 to 64 were the most likely to volunteer, whereas for the Canadian-born population, the highest volunteer rates were among those aged 35 to 54.

Immigrants as Donors

- According to data in the NSGVP and GSS, the majority of both immigrants and the Canadian-born made financial and in-kind donations to nonprofit organizations, particularly health-related and religious groups. Immigrants gave larger donations, on average, than the Canadian-born population, and their level of giving rose in direct proportion to their length of time in Canada.
- Immigrants were more likely to donate to religious organizations than their Canadian-born counterparts: roughly 60% of immigrant charitable giving was to religious institutions, compared to 46% among Canadian-born respondents.
- Immigrants with a religious affiliation were more likely than those with no religious affiliation to give to both religious institutions and other charitable causes.
- Immigrants made donations for the same reasons as the Canadian-born, primarily compassion for those in need and a cause in which they believed. Again, immigrants were more likely to cite fulfilling religious obligations as a motivation for their charitable giving.
- Economic constraints constituted the biggest barrier to charitable giving for both immigrants and Canadian-born respondents. Those who did not give said they were saving to meet their own needs.

Immigrants as Group Members

- In 2003, over half of Canada's immigrants said they belonged to organizations, groups or community-based clubs. Their membership rates increased along with their length of residence in Canada. Immigrants over age 55 years were more likely than their Canadian-born counterparts to be members of community organizations and groups.
- Like the Canadian-born population, immigrants tended to meet people of similar age, education and income as members of groups, and the majority were involved with people of the same ethnic background. Unlike Canadian-born residents, however, about 25% of immigrants said they joined groups in which about half the other members were visibly different from them and spoke a different mother tongue.
- Immigrants were most likely to join work-related groups such as unions and professional associations. They were also more likely to be members of sports, cultural or recreational groups and religious organizations.
- For both the immigrant and Canadian-born population, participation in community groups was strongly associated with education: the higher the education level, the more likely they were to participate in a group.

Immigrants as Voters

- According to the 2000 NSGVP, almost 65% of immigrants and 75% of Canadian-born respondents said they had voted in a recent federal, provincial or municipal election. This pattern was confirmed by findings in the 2003 GSS.
- First-generation immigrants were more preoccupied with getting settled in Canada. In fact, immigrants cannot vote until they become Canadian citizens, which usually takes at least three years. Length of residence therefore significantly increased the likelihood of voting, and most immigrants took their franchise rights seriously, particularly immigrant seniors.
- Higher household incomes and higher education levels generally increased the likelihood of voting among immigrants. The exception to this trend was that those with a university degree were less likely to vote than those with a college education – a phenomenon that requires further study.

Immigrants as Consumers of Current Affairs

- Both surveys found that immigrants had a higher level of interest in news and current affairs than their Canadian-born counterparts. Over 70% of immigrants followed the news daily, compared to about 65% of the Canadian-born population.
- The consumption of news increased roughly with level of education, a pattern found among both immigrant and Canadian-born respondents.
- Over 90% of immigrant seniors followed the news and current affairs daily.

Immigrants as Informal Givers

- In 2000, about 90% of immigrants made informal donations to others. The longer immigrants had lived in Canada, the more likely they were to engage in informal giving, from donating to a food bank to providing direct financial support to others, especially relatives.
- Over 70% of immigrants provided informal care or assistance to others. Those who had resided in Canada for six to 15 years provided the most informal care (79%), including such activities as shopping or driving for others, and caring for the sick and elderly.

Looking Ahead

People come together to pursue common interests and forge social bonds through community organizations. Many factors shape these actions, including economic conditions, demographics, government policies, societal attitudes, and community values.

Together, the NSGVP and GSS paint a portrait which helps us better understand the social and civic activities of immigrants in Canada. And in these data we find that immigrants tend to be very involved in social and civic life, and to make significant contributions to Canada. They give generously of their time and money to the voluntary sector. They are interested and active citizens, engaged in current affairs and in helping others in their community.

Not surprisingly, recent immigrants are more heavily involved in adjusting to their new homeland, but the desire to contribute is there. Significant economic barriers tend to restrict their ability to contribute either time or money to community activities. Lower rates of participation among recent immigrants also suggest that additional community supports may be required to enable them to be more fully engaged in Canadian society.

Established immigrants tend to have much higher participation rates on all measures, suggesting that social and civic engagement grows with the length of residency. Faith-based organizations and cultural and religious festivals play an important role for many immigrants, serving as a focal point and basis on which to build both community identity and social resources.

The findings in this report are necessarily broad, and some results require further examination. There is a great deal still to be done to strengthen the social and economic connections that underlie individual and community well-being. This report sets the stage for further research to explore specific aspects of the contributory and participatory behaviour of immigrants in their communities. Understanding the context in which immigrants take part in social and civic activities can help create the conditions necessary for a more dynamic and inclusive society.

The full report of *Making Connections: Social and Civic Engagement among Canadian Immigrants* is available on the CCSD website at www.ccsd.ca, along with fact sheets and other materials.