

## Quality of Employment in Canada

### Collective bargaining coverage rate, 2023

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# Collective bargaining coverage rate, 2023

The proportion of employees covered by a collective bargaining agreement, also known as the union coverage rate, includes union members and non-members covered by a collective agreement or a union contract. In Canada, 3 in 10 employees (30.4%)—or 5.3 million people—were covered by a collective bargaining agreement in 2023. Public sector employees (76.7%) were nearly five times as likely to be covered by a collective agreement than employees in the private sector (15.5%). In general, the collective bargaining coverage rate has followed a downward trend from 1997 to 2023, almost entirely due to a decline in coverage in the private sector.

The coverage rate can reflect the industrial relations system and the types of labour regulations in a given country. Positions covered by a collective agreement are often associated with higher average wages, more benefits, and greater job security. The collective bargaining coverage rate indicator can be used to help assess trends in industrial and labour relations in a country.

The union coverage rate for all employees aged 15 years and older, and for different demographic and worker characteristics, is calculated using annual averages from the Labour Force Survey (LFS).

## Historical trends, 1997 to 2023

Based on historical data sources, the union membership rate in Canada followed an upward trend from the mid-1930s to the mid-1950s, before declining slightly from 1955 to 1965.<sup>1</sup> Membership then rose more slowly in the 1970s and reached its peak in the 1980s. Most of the decline in the union membership rate that has occurred since was due to a decrease from 1981 to 1997.<sup>2</sup> In 1997—the year when data on unionization status first became available in the LFS—33.7% of employees were either members of a union, or non-members covered by a collective agreement or a union contract. By 2023, the union coverage rate had declined to 30.4%.

The decrease in the collective bargaining coverage rate from 1997 to 2023 was driven largely by employees in the private sector, who saw a 5.8 percentage point decline in coverage from 21.3% in 1997 to 15.5% in 2023.

For public sector employees, the union coverage rate was 74.7% in 1997. In 2023, it stood at 76.7%, up from 1997, but down 1.0 percentage point compared with 2020, when the coverage rate reached a peak of 77.7%.

The manufacturing industry contributed the most to the decline in the collective bargaining coverage rate. In 1997, manufacturing was the largest private sector industry by number of employees and had one of the highest coverage rates (36.2%). From 1997 to 2023, both the total number of private sector employees working in manufacturing and the proportion covered by a collective bargaining agreement declined—the number of employees declined by 169,000 to 1.7 million and the proportion covered by a collective bargaining agreement fell 13.4 percentage points to 22.8%. At the same time, the overall share of employees in manufacturing fell from 16.8% of total employment in 1997 to 9.9% in 2023.

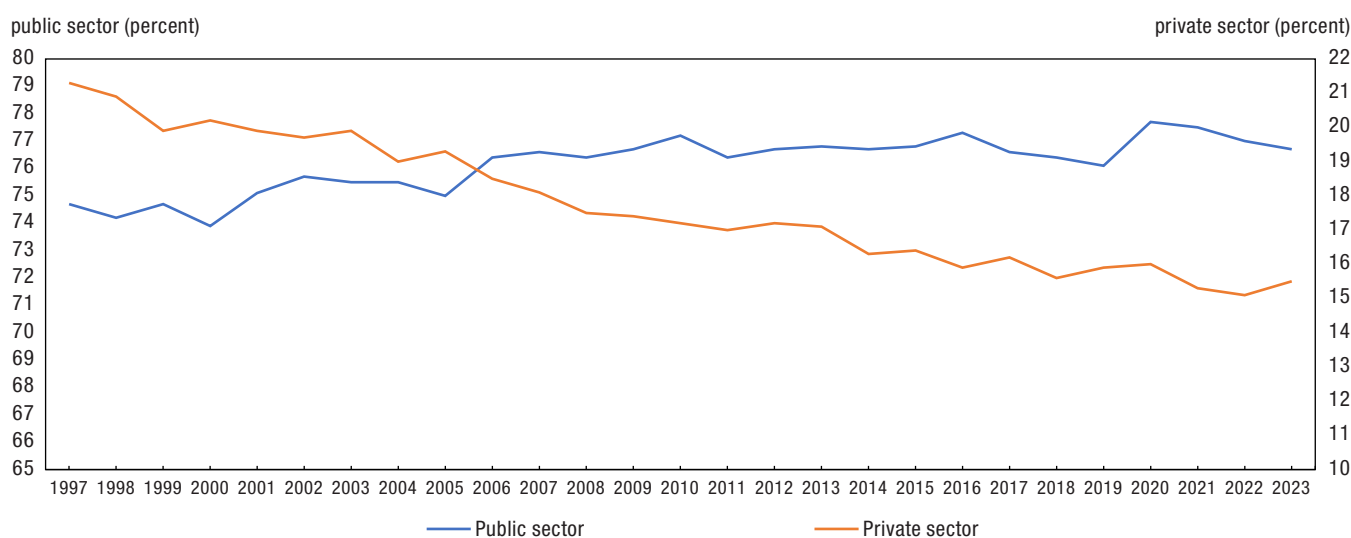
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1. Based on data for union membership in non-agricultural paid employment, the union membership rate was 14.5% in 1935, 33.7% in 1955, and 37.1% in 1980. While the data concern union membership, collective bargaining coverage followed a similar trend. See Riddell, W. Craig. 1993. "[Unionization in Canada and the United States: A Tale of Two Countries](#)." *Small Differences That Matter: Labor Markets and Income Maintenance in Canada and the United States*. David Card and Richard B. Freeman (eds.). University of Chicago Press. p. 109 – 148. (accessed July 18, 2024).

2. See [Unionization in Canada, 1981 to 2022](#).

**Chart 1**

**Collective bargaining coverage rate by private and public sectors, employees 15 years and older, Canada, 1997 to 2023**



**Note:** Due to rounding, estimates and percentages may differ slightly between different Statistics Canada products, such as analytical documents and data tables.  
**Source:** Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey, custom tabulation.

## Collective bargaining coverage rate higher among women than men

In 1997, male employees (35.2%) had a higher union coverage rate than female employees (32.1%). This pattern had reversed by 2008, and women have had a higher collective bargaining coverage rate since. In 2023, among all employees, 32.5% of women were covered by a union agreement, compared with 28.4% of men. Because the proportion of female employees working in the private sector was lower than for men throughout this period, women have been less impacted by the declining coverage in the private sector. Furthermore, among women, the percentage of employees who work in the public sector increased from 27.9% in 1997 to 31.2% in 2023. Female employees working in the public sector are largely concentrated in healthcare and social assistance (36.5%) and educational services (31.9%). Among men, the proportion of employees working in the public sector fell from 19.2% in 1997 to 17.7% in 2023.

## A recent snapshot

### Industries with a greater concentration of public sector employees have higher rates of collective bargaining coverage

In 2023, the industries with the highest collective bargaining coverage rates were public administration (75.4%), educational services (72.2%), utilities (61.9%) and health care and social assistance (53.8%). These industries all had relatively large proportions of public sector employees. In contrast, employees in agriculture (3.1%), professional, scientific and technical services (4.2%), and accommodation and food services (5.2%) had the lowest coverage rates. The vast majority of employees in these industries were in the private sector.

### Collective bargaining coverage higher among occupations requiring some post-secondary education

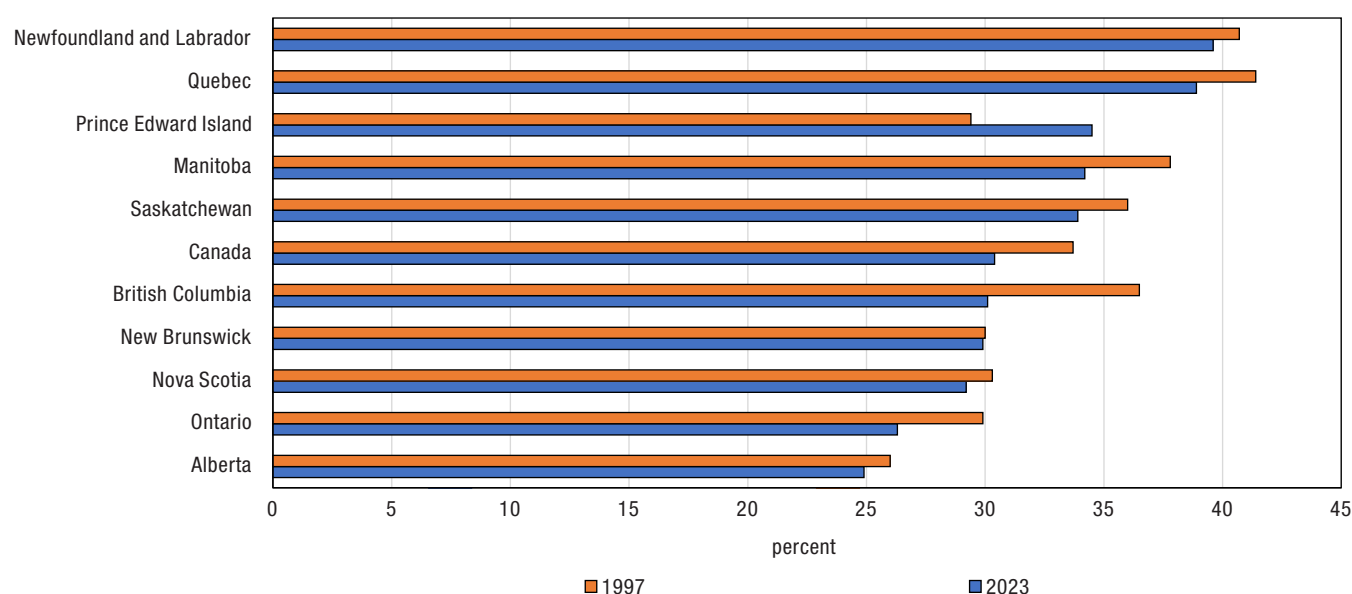
Professional occupations that typically require post-secondary education<sup>3</sup> had higher rates of collective bargaining coverage in 2023. For example, just over 2 in 5 employees (42.0%) working in a professional occupation that typically requires a university degree were covered by a union agreement. In contrast, occupations that only typically require a high school diploma (24.4%), or those needing no formal education (23.5%) had a lower collective bargaining coverage rate.

### Newfoundland and Labrador and Quebec had the highest collective bargaining coverage rates

Across the provinces, collective bargaining coverage rates were highest among employees in Newfoundland and Labrador (39.6%) and Quebec (38.9%) in 2023, while Alberta (24.9%) and Ontario (26.3%) had the lowest union coverage rates. These differences are consistent with historical patterns in union coverage rates across the provinces.<sup>4</sup>

#### Chart 2

**Collective bargaining coverage rate by province, employees 15 years and older, Canada, 1997 and 2023**



**Note:** Due to rounding, estimates and percentages may differ slightly between different Statistics Canada products, such as analytical documents and data tables.  
**Source:** Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey, custom tabulation.

Overall, employees who worked full-time<sup>5</sup> in their main job (31.9%) had a higher collective bargaining coverage rate compared to those who worked part-time (22.8%). The gap was notably large in the Atlantic provinces, such as New Brunswick (32.4% versus 14.1%), as well as in Quebec (41.2% versus 28.3%). There was little difference in union coverage rates between full-time (25.2%) and part-time employees (23.3%) in Alberta.

3. See [Variant of the National Occupational Classification \(NOC\) 2021 Version 1.0 for Analysis by TEER \(training, Education, Experience and Responsibility\) categories](#).

4. See (1) [Unionization in Canada, 1981 to 2022](#), (2) [Long-term trends in unionization](#), and (3) [Unionization 2011](#).

5. Usual work hours of 30 or more per week.

### **Younger employees had the lowest collective bargaining coverage rate**

Largely as a result of their concentration in the private sector and because of their higher likelihood of being employed part-time, employees aged 15 to 24 (16.2%) were about half as likely to be covered by a collective bargaining agreement than core-aged employees aged 25 to 54 (33.1%) and those aged 55 years and older (32.2%) in 2023.

### **South Asian employees have among the lowest collective bargaining coverage rates**

In 2023, 20.1% of South Asian employees in Canada were covered by a collective bargaining agreement compared to 32.7% of employees who were non-racialized and non-Indigenous. The lower rate of coverage among South Asian employees may be partly attributable to the fact that a larger share work in the private sector (84.4%) compared to their non-racialized and non-Indigenous counterparts (73.5%). A higher proportion of South Asian employees also worked in industries which have lower rates of collective bargaining coverage, such as retail trade (13.7%) and professional, scientific and technical services (12.6%). In line with the national trend, South Asian men (17.8%) had a lower union coverage rate compared to South Asian women (22.3%).

Black employees (34.7%) had one of the highest collective bargaining coverage rates in 2023, surpassing employees who were non-racialized and non-Indigenous (32.7%). Compared with the national average for all racialized employees<sup>6</sup> (18.9%), a larger percentage of Black employees were employed in the public sector (24.1%).

### **Employees born in Canada and established immigrants more likely to be covered by a collective bargaining agreement**

In 2023, employees born in Canada (32.8%) and established immigrants who had landed in Canada more than 10 years earlier (28.9%) had a higher union coverage rate than recent immigrants who had landed 5 or less years prior (17.8%) and those who had landed between 5 to 10 years earlier (23.2%). Paralleling this trend, employees born in Canada (26.8%) and established immigrants (22.6%) were more likely to work in the public sector, while a smaller segment of both recent immigrants and those who had landed 5 to 10 years prior were employed in this sector (11.3% and 15.5%, respectively).

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6. Excludes employees who are non-racialized and non-Indigenous, as well as all Indigenous employees.

### Information on the indicator

#### Description or definition

The **collective bargaining coverage rate** indicator measures the union coverage rate, which is the number of employees in a union and non-members covered by a collective agreement or a union contract, expressed as a percentage of the total number of employees.

#### Source

Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey, 1997 to 2023.

#### Information for interpretation

For more information on the Labour Force Survey (LFS) methodology and population coverage, please consult the [Guide to the Labour Force Survey, 2020](#).

The LFS estimates are based on a sample and are therefore subject to sampling variability. The analysis focuses on differences between estimates that are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. Due to rounding, estimates and percentages may differ slightly between different Statistics Canada products, such as analytical documents and data tables.

Industry coding is based on the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) 2017.

Occupation coding is based on the National Occupational Classification System (NOC) 2021.

Beginning in January 1997, employees are classified as: a) union member; b) not a member, but covered by a union contract or collective agreement; or c) non-unionized.

#### Other related information

Additional Statistics Canada data are available on the following subjects:

[Unionization and industrial relations](#)

[Earnings, wages and non-wage benefits](#)