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Abstract

This study used the 2020 General Social Survey to examine the association between immigrants' age at arrival in Canada and their social connectedness to their communities of settlement. Immigrants who arrived during adolescence had fewer close friends than Canadians in the third generation or more, but this disparity was not observed for immigrants who arrived during childhood and there was no significant difference for those who arrived during adulthood, after controlling for sociodemographic characteristics. The number of acquaintances immigrants had decreased with older age at arrival, and those who arrived during adulthood had significantly fewer acquaintances than Canadians in the third generation or more. The proportion of interethnic friendships in immigrants' social networks was consistently higher compared with Canadians in the third generation or more. Immigrants who arrived during adolescence or adulthood had less in-person contact with their friends than people from the third generation or more but were not less satisfied with their level of contact.

Keywords: age at arrival; immigrants; social integration; social networks

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Introduction

Age at arrival is a factor in the socioeconomic integration of immigrants (Boyd & Tian, 2016; Lee & Edmonston, 2011). Earlier research showed that immigrants who arrived during early childhood (ages 0 to 5) had higher levels of English language proficiency and educational and occupational attainment than immigrants who arrived during middle childhood (ages 6 to 12) (Rumbaut, 2004). Both groups had better outcomes than immigrants who arrived at older ages. However, immigrants who arrived during adolescence (ages 13 to 17) had lower levels of educational and occupational attainment than immigrants who arrived at older ages and those who arrived at younger ages. More recent studies have used a more granular definition of middle childhood (ages 6 to 9) and identified pre-adolescence (ages 10 to 12) as a life stage that further differentiates immigrants in their chances for socioeconomic integration (Lee & Edmonston, 2011; Myers et al., 2009).

Age at immigration is also a factor in the social integration of immigrants. In Sweden, Åslund et al. (2015) compared siblings who immigrated at the same time but at different ages during childhood (ages 0 to 14) regarding their social integration during adulthood. The authors showed that older age at arrival increased the level of social distance between immigrants and Swedish-born people in everyday life. The older childhood immigrants were at arrival, the lower their likelihood of having co-workers or neighbours who were born in Sweden. Older age at arrival also decreased immigrants' likelihood of intermarriage with Swedish-born people, which is among the strongest indicators of social integration. Similarly, Choi and Tienda (2018) found that intermarriage was lower for immigrants to the United States who arrived during adolescence than for immigrants who arrived during childhood or adulthood.

Generally, the size, composition and quality of social networks differ between immigrants and Canadian-born people. Kazemipur (2006) found that immigrants' networks were smaller, consisted of people with lower socioeconomic status and transmitted fewer resources, compared with the networks of Canadian-born people. Thomas (2011) observed a difference between immigrants and Canadian-born people in various types of social ties. Immigrants had fewer close relatives, close friends and acquaintances and also had less diverse networks than Canadian-born people. Turcotte (2015) found that both recent and established immigrants were less likely to have 3 or more close friends and 11 or more acquaintances than Canadian-born people, after controlling for duration of residence in the local community and sociodemographic characteristics.

Immigrants' social networks in Canada matter for several reasons. First, these networks consist of "strong ties" to the local community, which refer to close friends and relatives. Strong ties are sources of social support that reduce the costs of immigration and help with adaptation (Majerski, 2019). Second, networks also consist of "weak ties," or acquaintances, which are sources of informational resources that are unavailable from strong ties but are essential for job mobility, linking weak ties to the socioeconomic integration of immigrants (Majerski, 2019). Finally, networks consist of "bridging ties," or connections that cut across ethnic boundaries and overlap with the networks of Canadian-born people. Immigrants with few bridging ties tend to have less favourable socioeconomic outcomes than those with socially expansive networks (Nakhaie & Kazemipur, 2013).

This study compares immigrants who arrived in Canada during childhood, adolescence and adulthood with Canadian-born people regarding the size of local social networks, types of social ties and quality of networks. Immigrants were disaggregated into seven age-at-arrival groups to provide granular insights into the role of age at arrival and whether there are critical periods or life stages that are associated with less favourable outcomes. There are advantages to younger age at arrival, such as schooling and socialization in Canada, that may increase chances for establishing social networks in Canada. However, the life stage at which immigration occurred may have consequences that potentially overshadow the benefits of earlier age at arrival (Choi & Tienda, 2018; Hermansen, 2017). For example, the migration-

related disruption of peer networks during adolescence and the need to adjust to a new social environment at this life stage could have adverse effects.

Data and methods

The data for this study came from the 2020 General Social Survey (GSS) – Social Identity, a national cross-sectional survey focusing on social networks, civic participation and perceptions about Canadian society.¹ The study sample included 13,930 immigrants and 12,850 Canadians in the third generation or more (parents born in Canada) from the White population group. The latter is commonly used as a reference group for assessing levels of immigrant integration because it is the largest demographic group in Canada and because of its roots in Canadian society. The immigrant population was disaggregated into people who arrived in Canada during early childhood (ages 0 to 5), middle childhood (ages 6 to 9), pre-adolescence (ages 10 to 12), adolescence (ages 13 to 17), post-adolescence (ages 18 to 24), early adulthood (ages 25 to 34) and middle adulthood (ages 35 to 54).²

The study includes measures of close friends and relatives (strong ties), other friends and acquaintances (weak ties), and interethnic friendships (bridging ties). These variables were restricted to social ties that respondents had in the local community (Table 1). Network quality was measured with variables on the frequency of contact with friends and satisfaction with the level of contact. The means for the number of close relatives, close friends, and other friends and acquaintances were estimated for each age-at-arrival group. Logistic regressions were used to estimate the predicted probabilities of

- 3 or more close friends
- 10 or more other friends and acquaintances
- half of friends or more from a “visibly different” ethnic group
- weekly in-person and telephone contact with friends
- satisfaction with the level of contact.

1. The target population of the 2020 GSS was Canadians aged 15 and older from the 10 provinces, excluding full-time residents of First Nations reserves and institutions.

2. Immigrants aged 55 and older at arrival were excluded from the disaggregated analysis because of sample size constraints.

Table 1
Definition and measurement of dependent variables on social networks

| Concept | Survey question | Outcome measure |
|---------------------------|--|--|
| Strong ties | | |
| Close relatives | How many relatives do you have who you feel close to, that is, who you feel at ease with, can talk to about what is on your mind, or call on for help? | Number of close relatives who live in the same city or local community |
| Close friends | How many close friends do you have, that is, people who are not your relatives, but who you feel at ease with, can talk to about what is on your mind, or call on for help? | Number of close friends who live in the same city or local community |
| Weak ties | Not counting your close friends or relatives, approximately how many other friends do you have? | Number of other friends who live in the same city or local community |
| Bridging ties | Of all the friends you had contact with in the past month, approximately how many come from an ethnic group that is visibly different from yours? | Percentage of respondents with (1) no or a few friends from a "visibly different" ethnic group and (2) about half, most or all of their friends from a "visibly different" ethnic group |
| Network quality | | |
| Frequency of contact | Thinking of your friend/all your friends, in the past month how often did you do the following? (1) See your friend/any of your friends in person (2) Talk with your friend/any of your friends by telephone | Respondents with at least weekly contact (1) in person and (2) by telephone with their friends |
| Satisfaction with contact | Overall, how satisfied are you with how often you communicate with your friend/friends? | Percentage of respondents who are (1) very satisfied or satisfied versus (2) neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied with how often they communicate with their friends |

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2020.

The regressions included controls for sex, age, educational attainment, employment status, and whether the respondent lived in a census metropolitan area (population of 100,000 or more with at least 50,000 residing in the core) or a smaller city or rural area.³ Estimates were calculated with survey weights to account for possible over- or underrepresentation of some demographic groups. Bootstrap weights were used in calculations of statistical significance to address the complex survey design of the GSS.

Results

The average number of social ties that immigrants had depended on their age at arrival in Canada

The number of close relatives that immigrants had in the local community decreased with older age at arrival in Canada (Table 2). Immigrants who arrived during adolescence (ages 13 to 17) and post-adolescence (ages 18 to 24) had fewer than three close relatives, and those who arrived during early adulthood (ages 25 to 34) and middle adulthood (ages 35 to 54) had two close relatives. By contrast,

3. Age, age at arrival and duration of residence are perfectly collinear, and thus all three variables cannot be used simultaneously in a regression model (Oropesa & Landale, 1997). Duration of residence in Canada was excluded from the regressions for methodological reasons. First, age at arrival and duration of residence are highly collinear. Second, while duration of residence is a pertinent variable for recent immigrants (less than 10 years of residence in Canada), the average duration of residence is long for both childhood (32 years) and adulthood (19 years) immigrants. Third, childhood immigrants have a younger age structure than adulthood immigrants, and this is expected to account for some of the variation in social networks.

immigrants who arrived during early childhood (ages 0 to 5), middle childhood (ages 6 to 9) or pre-adolescence (ages 10 to 12) had three close relatives, about the same as Canadians in the third generation or more.

Table 2**Number and types of social ties in the local community by immigrant status and age at arrival in Canada**

| | Sample size | Number of close relatives | Number of close friends | Number of acquaintances |
|---|-------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| | number | | mean | |
| Third generation or more (reference) ¹ | 12,850 | 3.3 | 4.1 | 16.1 |
| Immigrants—total | 13,930 | 2.6 *** | 3.8 ** | 13.1 *** |
| Age at arrival (years) | | | | |
| 0 to 5 | 830 | 3.5 | 4.7 | 17.5 |
| 6 to 9 | 630 | 3.1 | 3.9 | 16.7 |
| 10 to 12 | 500 | 2.9 | 3.6 * | 16.8 |
| 13 to 17 | 1,000 | 2.8 * | 3.2 ** | 14.0 |
| 18 to 24 | 2,750 | 2.7 *** | 3.8 * | 12.6 *** |
| 25 to 34 | 4,790 | 2.0 *** | 3.6 ** | 11.9 *** |
| 35 to 54 | 3,120 | 2.1 *** | 4.1 | 11.2 *** |

* significantly different from reference category ($p < 0.05$)

** significantly different from reference category ($p < 0.01$)

*** significantly different from reference category ($p < 0.001$)

1. Restricted to respondents from the White population group.

Note: Sample size rounded to nearest 10.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2020.

Immigrants who were aged 10 to 34 at arrival (spanning pre-adolescence to early adulthood) had fewer close friends (strong ties) in the local community than people from the third generation or more. The largest difference was observed among immigrants who arrived during adolescence. Immigrants who arrived during early childhood and middle childhood had a similar number of close friends as Canadians in the third generation or more. Immigrants who arrived during middle adulthood were also similar to the reference group for this outcome.

The average number of acquaintances (weak ties) that immigrants had in the local community diminished with older age at arrival. Immigrants who arrived during early childhood had nearly 18 acquaintances, while those who arrived during middle adulthood had 11 acquaintances. Immigrants who were aged 18 to 54 at arrival had fewer acquaintances than Canadians in the third generation or more. For example, immigrants who arrived during post-adolescence had about three fewer acquaintances and those who arrived during middle adulthood had about five fewer acquaintances.

The life stage at immigration was associated with the size of networks

The extent to which immigrants have “atypically” small networks is examined in this section. On average, immigrants and Canadian-born people had at least 3 close friends (strong ties) and more than 10 acquaintances (weak ties), as reported above. These thresholds are used for comparing immigrants and Canadian-born people in terms of the percentage of people with atypically small networks of strong and weak ties in the local community.

About 58% of Canadians in the third generation or more were predicted to have at least three close friends in the local community (Table 3). By comparison, 46% of immigrants who arrived during adolescence were predicted to have at least three close friends in the local community, or 12 percentage

points lower than Canadians in the third generation or more, after adjusting for differences in sociodemographic characteristics. The differences between immigrants who arrived during childhood, pre-adolescence, post-adolescence and adulthood and Canadians in the third generation or more in terms of the probability of having three or more close friends were modest and not statistically significant.

Table 3

Predicted probabilities of the size, composition and quality of social networks in the local community by immigrant status and age at arrival in Canada

| | Three or more close friends | Ten or more acquaintances | Half or more of friendships are interethnic | Weekly in-person contact | Weekly telephone contact | Satisfied with contact |
|---|------------------------------------|---------------------------|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|
| | predicted probability ¹ | | | | | |
| Third generation or more (reference) ² | 58.2 | 56.4 | 16.8 | 40.0 | 40.4 | 75.8 |
| Immigrants—age at arrival (years) | | | | | | |
| 0 to 5 | 61.3 | 58.4 | 33.0 *** | 37.0 | 41.2 | 75.9 |
| 6 to 9 | 53.6 | 55.4 | 44.2 *** | 35.0 | 45.7 | 79.2 |
| 10 to 12 | 56.1 | 52.3 | 33.0 *** | 44.9 | 45.6 | 83.5 * |
| 13 to 17 | 46.2 ** | 50.4 | 34.0 *** | 30.5 * | 40.4 | 76.8 |
| 18 to 24 | 55.3 | 49.7 * | 36.1 *** | 31.3 *** | 48.4 ** | 73.6 |
| 25 to 34 | 54.4 | 46.2 *** | 36.4 *** | 30.6 *** | 52.6 *** | 79.6 * |
| 35 to 54 | 53.9 | 44.5 *** | 35.5 *** | 32.0 ** | 49.4 *** | 79.0 |

* significantly different from reference category ($p < 0.05$)

** significantly different from reference category ($p < 0.01$)

*** significantly different from reference category ($p < 0.001$)

1. The predicted probabilities are based on logistic regressions that control for sex, age, educational attainment, employment status and residence in a census metropolitan area (yes or no). The predicted probabilities were multiplied by 100 for presentation.

2. Restricted to respondents from the White population group.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2020.

The probability of having 10 or more acquaintances (weak ties) decreased with older age at arrival. Over 58% of immigrants who arrived during early childhood were predicted to have at least 10 acquaintances; the share decreased to under 45% of immigrants who arrived during middle adulthood. Compared with Canadians in the third generation or more, the probability of having 10 or more acquaintances was 7 percentage points lower for immigrants who arrived during post-adolescence, 10 percentage points lower for those who arrived during early adulthood and 12 percentage points lower for those who arrived during middle adulthood.

Across all age-at-arrival groups, immigrants' friendship networks were composed of a greater proportion of people from a "visibly different" ethnic group than the networks of Canadians in the third generation or more. Over two-fifths (44%) of immigrants who arrived during middle childhood reported that half or more of their friends were from a visibly different ethnic group. About one-third of immigrants from the other age-at-arrival groups reported that at least half of their friends were from a visibly different ethnic group, compared with less than one-fifth (17%) of Canadians in the third generation or more.

There were few differences between immigrants and Canadians in the third generation or more in network quality

In terms of the probability of weekly in-person contact with friends, there was a broad difference between immigrants who arrived aged 13 to 54 and Canadians in the third generation or more. Among those who arrived during adolescence to middle adulthood, about 30% were predicted to have at least weekly in-

person contact with friends, compared with about 40% of Canadians in the third generation or more. Because the 2020 GSS was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is likely that physical distancing measures decreased the frequency of in-person contact for many people, but it is not possible to disentangle whether this contributed to differences between immigrants and Canadians in the third generation or more.⁴

The probability of weekly telephone contact with friends was higher for immigrants who arrived aged 18 to 54 than for Canadians in the third generation or more.

Generally, most immigrants were satisfied with their level of contact with friends. About 84% of immigrants who arrived during pre-adolescence and 80% of those who arrived during early adulthood were satisfied with their level of contact with friends. These shares were higher than for Canadians in the third generation or more (76%). Other age-at-arrival groups had a probability of satisfaction with their level of contact with friends similar to that of Canadians in the third generation or more.

Summary

This study provides insights on whether immigrants' age at arrival in Canada is associated with their social integration, focusing on the size, composition and quality of their social networks in their communities of settlement. The study has several key findings:

- The social networks of immigrants who arrived during early childhood, middle childhood and pre-adolescence were no different in size than those of Canadians in the third generation or more.
- Immigrants who arrived during adolescence had fewer close friends in the local community, and thus a higher percentage of them had “atypically” small networks of strong ties than Canadians in the third generation or more.
- Immigrants who arrived during post-adolescence and early adulthood also had fewer close friends in the local community than Canadians in the third generation or more, but the percentage of these groups that had atypically small networks of strong ties was not higher than among Canadians in the third generation or more.
- Immigrants who arrived during post-adolescence, early adulthood and middle adulthood had fewer acquaintances in the local community, and a higher percentage of these groups had networks of acquaintances that were atypically small, compared with those of Canadians in the third generation or more.
- Immigrants who arrived from adolescence to middle adulthood had a lower probability of weekly contact with their friends than Canadians in the third generation or more, but there was no difference in their satisfaction with the level of contact.

In sum, the social networks of immigrants become smaller with older age at arrival. Further research is needed to understand whether immigrants who arrived during adolescence are at a disadvantage because of their atypically small networks of strong ties. Further research is also needed to understand whether immigrants who arrived from post-adolescence to middle adulthood are at a disadvantage because of their smaller networks of acquaintances, which are essential for socioeconomic mobility (Majerski, 2019).

4. Caution should be exercised when comparing the results on network quality from the 2020 GSS with pre-pandemic data because of these restrictions on in-person contact.

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