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# ***Differences in confidence in public institutions across generations of Canadians***

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## **Abstract**

Using data from the 2020 General Social Survey, this study provides insights on generational differences in confidence in the police, the justice system and courts, the federal Parliament, and the Canadian media. While immigrants who came to Canada in adulthood had higher levels of confidence in these institutions than Canadians of the third generation or more, those who immigrated during childhood had similar or lower levels of confidence. These age-at-arrival patterns among immigrants were largely consistent across racialized groups. Overall, second-generation Canadians had lower levels of confidence in the police, the justice system and courts, and the Canadian media than Canadians of the third generation or more.

Keywords: Confidence in institutions, generation status, immigrant generation, age at arrival, age at immigration

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## Introduction

Confidence in public institutions—such as the police, the justice system and courts, the federal Parliament, and the Canadian media—involves a perception about their general quality and performance (Newton & Norris, 2000). The evaluation of public institutions also has a relational component that captures whether a person feels fairly treated and represented by these institutions, and the extent to which these institutions are believed to be foundations of equality in society (Freitag & Bühlmann, 2009). Confidence in institutions is a headline indicator of [the Quality of Life Framework for Canada](#), and thus it is important to understand whether there are social differences in perceptions of public institutions (Statistics Canada, 2023).

In Canada, levels of confidence in public institutions vary across generations and racialized groups (Cotter, 2015; Statistics Canada, 2023). On average, immigrants have higher levels of confidence in the police, the justice system and courts, the federal Parliament, and the Canadian media than Canadian-born people. Recent immigrants (10 years or less since arrival) from racialized groups have mostly higher levels of confidence in these institutions than non-racialized Canadian-born people, but their perceptions of public institutions become less favourable with longer residence in Canada and much less favourable from the first to the second generation or more (Statistics Canada, 2023). For example, among racialized Canadian-born people, who are mostly second-generation Canadians, confidence in the police was far lower than among non-racialized Canadian-born people. A similar pattern of generational decline was observed for confidence in the justice system and courts.

Previous research suggests that immigrants have a “dual frame of reference” that informs their perceptions of the receiving society (Hendriks & Burger, 2020). In Europe, immigrants tend to have comparatively high levels of confidence in the public institutions of their receiving countries, partly because their experiences with lower-quality institutions in their source countries decrease their general expectations of public institutions (Röder & Mühlau, 2012). Canadian immigrants also appear to perceive public institutions through the lens of their pre-migration experiences. Immigrants from authoritarian regimes or illiberal democracies have more favourable perceptions of public institutions, compared with Canadian-born people, while immigrants from full democracies have perceptions that are similar to those of Canadian-born people (Bilodeau & Nevitte, 2003; Jung et al., 2019).

Early after arrival in the receiving country, the frame of reference is primarily the context of the sending country, but this gradually shifts as immigrants become accustomed to the conditions in the receiving country (Hendriks & Burger, 2020). This partly explains why immigrants’ perceptions of conditions in the receiving country become less favourable with longer duration of residence and across generations. Immigrants who arrived in adolescence and adulthood have memories of their source-country institutions to use as a frame of reference, but immigrants who arrived in childhood will have no or few memories of these institutions. Childhood immigrants are socialized and educated primarily in the receiving country, setting their experiences apart from immigrants who arrived at older ages (Wu et al., 2012). Coming from a foreign country and growing up in an immigrant-headed household also set their experiences apart from many Canadian-born people.

Using data from the 2020 General Social Survey (GSS),<sup>1</sup> this study examines whether immigrants’ perceptions of public institutions differ depending on their age at arrival in Canada. Age at arrival refers to where immigrants grew up (the receiving or sending country), which is distinguished from where immigrants came from (Hermansen, 2017). However, previous Canadian studies also show that where

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1. The target population of the GSS was Canadians aged 15 years and older from the 10 provinces, excluding residents of First Nations reserves and institutions. The survey was fielded from August 2020 to February 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

immigrants come from changes the association between age at arrival and levels of socioeconomic integration (Corak, 2012; Lee & Edmonston, 2011). Furthermore, confidence in Canadian institutions varies across racialized groups and is lower for racialized Canadian-born people than it is for non-racialized people (Statistics Canada, 2023). Hence, this study also considers whether the association between age at arrival and confidence in public institutions varies across racialized groups.

## Confidence in public institutions varied with generation status and age at arrival in Canada

In 2020, 71% of first-generation Canadians had confidence in the police, which was similar to the percentage of Canadians of the third generation or more who had confidence in this institution (Table 1).<sup>2</sup> By contrast, a smaller percentage of second-generation Canadians had confidence in the police (64%) than Canadians of the third generation or more.<sup>3</sup> Within each generation, levels of confidence in the police were higher than confidence in the justice system and courts, the federal Parliament, and the Canadian media.

To examine the association between age at arrival in Canada and confidence in institutions, the first generation was disaggregated into groups of immigrants who arrived in Canada in 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).<sup>4</sup> The disaggregated data focus attention on where immigrants grew up—in Canada or their source country.

Confidence in the police was lower for childhood immigrants than it was for those who arrived at older ages. A smaller percentage of immigrants who came to Canada in early childhood (62%) and middle childhood (60%) had confidence in the police than Canadians of the third generation or more (71%). Immigrants who came to Canada in pre-adolescence also had lower levels of confidence in the police than Canadians of the third generation or more, but this difference was not statistically significant. By contrast, a larger percentage of immigrants who arrived in middle adulthood (76%) had confidence in the police than Canadians of the third generation or more. Among immigrants who came to Canada in adolescence, post-adolescence and early adulthood, the percentages of those who had confidence in the police were similar to those of Canadians of the third generation or more.

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2. The 2020 GSS asked immigrants to rate their confidence in institutions on a scale of 1 (no confidence at all) to 5 (a great deal of confidence). In this study, having confidence in an institution was defined as a score of 4 or 5 on this scale. The analysis used logistic regressions to estimate the predicted probabilities of having confidence in institutions, controlling for sex, age group, educational attainment, employment status, family income, mother tongue and census metropolitan area. All estimates were calculated with survey weights, and bootstrap weights were used in the tests of statistical significance.
  3. The first generation was defined as people who were born outside Canada (i.e., immigrants), the second generation as people who were born in Canada and had at least one immigrant parent, and the third generation or more as people who were born in Canada with all parents born in Canada.
  4. Immigrants aged 55 years and older at arrival were excluded from the disaggregated analysis because of the small sample size.

**Table 1**  
**Confidence in public institutions by generation status**

	Sample size <sup>1</sup>	Police	Justice system and courts	Federal Parliament	Canadian media
			predicted probability <sup>2</sup>		
First generation	13,930	70.7	66.1 ***	56.8 ***	46.9 **
Second generation	4,320	64.4 ***	51.0 *	40.4	38.3 *
Third generation or more	12,850	71.0	54.9	42.7	41.7
<b>First generation—age at which immigrant came to Canada</b>					
0 to 5	830	61.9 *	54.1	44.8	45.9
6 to 9	630	60.4 *	53.5	41.0	41.2
10 to 12	500	63.2	56.7	42.8	39.7
13 to 17	1,000	74.6	67.4 **	55.0 **	43.5
18 to 24	2,750	73.4	69.3 ***	58.5 ***	45.7
25 to 34	4,790	74.6	71.7 ***	63.0 ***	49.7 ***
35 to 54	3,120	76.3 *	72.8 ***	69.5 ***	51.8 ***

\* significantly different from third generation or more ( $p < 0.05$ )

\*\* significantly different from third generation or more ( $p < 0.01$ )

\*\*\* significantly different from third generation or more ( $p < 0.001$ )

1. Rounded to the nearest 10.

2. The predicted probabilities are based on logistic regressions that controlled for sex, age group, educational attainment, employment status, family income, mother tongue and census metropolitan area. The predicted probabilities refer to the likelihood of a confidence score of 4 or 5 on a five-point scale, where 5 means "a great deal of confidence." The predicted probabilities were multiplied by 100 for presentation. The overall estimates for the first generation and the estimates for age-at-arrival groups were based on separate regressions.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2020.

A larger percentage of first-generation Canadians (66%) had confidence in the justice system and courts than Canadians of the third generation or more (55%). The percentage of second-generation Canadians (51%) who had confidence in the justice system and courts was lower than for Canadians of the third generation or more.

The overall difference between first-generation Canadians and Canadians of the third generation or more for confidence in the justice system and courts masks large age-at-arrival differences. Among immigrants who came to Canada in adolescence or later, confidence in the justice system and courts increased steadily with older age at arrival. For example, 67% of immigrants who came to Canada in adolescence had confidence in the justice system and courts. This increased to 73% of immigrants who came to Canada in middle adulthood. The overall average for immigrants also conceals a difference between immigrants who arrived prior to adolescence and those who arrived in adolescence and adulthood. About 54% of immigrants who came to Canada in early or middle childhood had confidence in the justice system and courts, similar to Canadians of the third generation or more, but lower than immigrants who arrived in adolescence or later.

A larger percentage of first-generation Canadians (57%) had confidence in the federal Parliament than Canadians of the third generation or more (43%), but this distinction also conceals differences among immigrants who came to Canada at varying life stages. Immigrants who came to Canada in adolescence or later had a higher level of confidence in this institution than Canadians of the third generation or more. The percentage of immigrants who had confidence in this institution increased from 55% of those who arrived in adolescence to 70% of those who arrived in middle adulthood. Thus, the difference with Canadians of the third generation or more widened with older age at arrival. By contrast, the level of

confidence in the federal Parliament among immigrants who came to Canada from early childhood to pre-adolescence was similar to that of Canadians of the third generation or more.

The percentage of first-generation Canadians (47%) who had confidence in the Canadian media was higher than that of Canadians of the third generation or more (42%), while a comparatively smaller percentage of second-generation Canadians (38%) had confidence in this institution. The difference between first-generation Canadians and Canadians of the third generation or more was attributable to the perceptions of immigrants who arrived in early and middle adulthood. These age-at-arrival groups had a higher level of confidence in the Canadian media than Canadians of the third generation or more, while younger age-at-arrival groups had similar levels of confidence in this institution as Canadians of the third generation or more.

## **Did the association between generation status and confidence in public institutions differ across population groups?**

Whether generational patterns of confidence in institutions differ across racialized groups is examined in this section. The first and second generations were disaggregated into population groups, which refer to self-identification as White, Black, Chinese, South Asian, Filipino or Southeast Asian, Arab or West Asian, or Latin American.<sup>5</sup> For the first generation, each of these population groups was further disaggregated into subgroups who came to Canada from ages 0 to 14, 15 to 24 and 25 to 54.<sup>6</sup> The third generation or more could not be disaggregated into population groups.

The results from the analysis of the disaggregated data were largely consistent with the overall patterns discussed above. Within each population group, most of the differences between first-generation Canadians and Canadians of the third generation or more were attributable to immigrants who came to Canada in post-adolescence or adulthood. There were few differences between immigrants who came to Canada from ages 0 to 14 and Canadians of the third generation or more.

Across the disaggregated groups of first-generation Canadians, the level of confidence in the police was significantly different from Canadians of the third generation or more in few cases, after controlling for sociodemographic characteristics (Table 2). Filipino and Southeast Asian immigrants who came to Canada from ages 0 to 14 had lower levels of confidence in the police than Canadians of the third generation or more. By contrast, their counterparts who came to Canada from ages 25 to 54 had higher levels of confidence in the police. South Asian and Arab and West Asian immigrants who came to Canada from ages 25 to 54 also had higher levels of confidence in this institution than Canadians of the third generation or more.

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5. Respondents from the Arab and West Asian groups and the Filipino and Southeast Asian groups were aggregated into single categories to increase the sample size. Respondents who reported White and a racialized group were coded as the latter. The Japanese and Korean groups (under 1% of GSS respondents) and those who reported multiple racialized groups (1% of respondents) were excluded because of the small sample size.
  6. The sample sizes of several population groups were too small to be disaggregated into the age-at-arrival categories used in the previous section.

**Table 2**  
**Confidence in public institutions by generation status, age at arrival and population group**

	Police	Justice system and courts	Federal Parliament	Canadian media
	predicted probability <sup>1</sup>			
<b>First generation—age at which immigrant came to Canada</b>				
<b>White</b>				
0 to 14	65.4	52.4	45.3	42.0
15 to 24	69.6	64.6 **	49.6 *	41.8
25 to 54	72.7	64.4 ***	54.7 ***	38.8
<b>Black</b>				
0 to 14	49.2	55.3	35.2	38.3
15 to 24	73.7	55.0	58.1 *	36.9
25 to 54	71.6	66.6 *	68.5 ***	61.1 ***
<b>Chinese</b>				
0 to 14	69.7	71.1 **	42.6	36.7
15 to 24	69.7	64.4	50.1	46.3
25 to 54	67.4	64.1 *	58.7 ***	40.8
<b>South Asian</b>				
0 to 14	65.0	66.3	59.4 *	56.8 *
15 to 24	79.3	78.4 ***	73.2 ***	50.9
25 to 54	81.5 **	82.0 ***	76.2 ***	63.0 ***
<b>Filipino or Southeast Asian</b>				
0 to 14	51.2 *	47.0	37.1	47.7
15 to 24	77.5	73.8 **	63.3 **	41.0
25 to 54	78.2 *	79.0 ***	75.3 ***	62.3 ***
<b>Arab or West Asian</b>				
0 to 14	66.1	54.5	36.0	52.0
15 to 24	77.7	76.5 *	74.1 ***	47.2
25 to 54	84.4 ***	86.6 ***	74.7 ***	49.2
<b>Latin American</b>				
0 to 14	79.8	58.9	63.9 *	45.4
15 to 24	74.1	74.0	73.3 **	71.4 **
25 to 54	78.1	82.3 ***	76.2 ***	61.1 **
<b>Second generation</b>				
White	66.6 *	52.8	39.8	39.1
Black	45.2 *	41.9	46.7	48.6
Chinese	73.7	52.2	44.2	42.0
South Asian	62.0	42.8	42.9	34.6
Filipino or Southeast Asian	53.8 *	46.6	37.7	25.5 *
Arab or West Asian	58.7	55.6	53.1	35.1
Latin American	45.6	55.9	19.2 *	30.5
<b>Third generation or more</b>				
	70.1	54.1	41.5	41.2

\* significantly different from third generation or more (p < 0.05)

\*\* significantly different from third generation or more (p < 0.01)

\*\*\* significantly different from third generation or more (p < 0.001)

1. The predicted probabilities are based on logistic regressions that controlled for sex, age group, educational attainment, employment status, family income, mother tongue and census metropolitan area. The predicted probabilities refer to the likelihood of a confidence score of 4 or 5 on a five-point scale, where 5 means "a great deal of confidence." The predicted probabilities were multiplied by 100 for presentation.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2020.



Within each population group, immigrants who came to Canada from ages 25 to 54 had higher levels of confidence in the justice system and courts than Canadians of the third generation or more, though these levels varied across groups. Among immigrants who arrived in adulthood, four-fifths of South Asian, Filipino and Southeast Asian, Arab and West Asian, and Latin American people, and two-thirds of White, Black and Chinese people had confidence in this institution, compared with about one-half of Canadians of the third generation or more. Among immigrants who came to Canada from ages 15 to 25, White, South Asian, Filipino and Southeast Asian, and Arab and West Asian people had higher levels of confidence in this institution than Canadians of the third generation or more. Among immigrants who came to Canada from ages 0 to 14, only Chinese people had higher levels of confidence in the justice system and courts than Canadians of the third generation or more.

Across population groups, immigrants who came to Canada from ages 25 to 54 had a higher probability of confidence in the federal Parliament. For several groups—South Asian, Filipino and Southeast Asian, Arab and West Asian, and Latin American—the percentage of people who had confidence in this institution was nearly double that of Canadians of the third generation or more. Immigrants who arrived from ages 15 to 24 also had higher levels of confidence in this institution, with the exception of Chinese people, whose level of confidence was not significantly different from Canadians of the third generation or more. Among immigrants who came to Canada from ages 0 to 14, South Asian and Latin American people had higher levels of confidence in the federal Parliament than Canadians of the third generation or more, but those from other population groups had similar levels of confidence.

Immigrants who arrived from ages 25 to 54 in the Black, South Asian, Filipino and Southeast Asian, and Latin American population groups had significantly higher levels of confidence in the Canadian media than Canadians of the third generation or more. Immigrants from the Latin American population group aged 15 to 24 at arrival and those from the South Asian population group aged 0 to 14 at arrival also had higher levels of confidence in this institution than Canadians of the third generation or more.

Among second-generation Canadians, White, Black, and Filipino and Southeast Asian people had lower levels of confidence in the police than Canadians of the third generation or more. Second-generation Canadians from the South Asian, Arab and West Asian, and Latin American population groups also had lower levels of confidence in this institution, but these differences with Canadians of the third generation or more were not statistically significant, after controlling for sociodemographic characteristics. Across population groups, levels of confidence in the justice system and courts, the Federal Parliament, and the Canadian media among second-generation Canadians were mostly similar to those among Canadians of the third generation or more. However, second-generation Canadians from the Arab and West Asian population group had a lower level of confidence in the federal Parliament and those from the Filipino and Southeast Asian population group had a lower level of confidence in the Canadian media.

## Conclusion

Canadians' levels of confidence in the police, the justice system and courts, the federal Parliament, and the Canadian media varied across generations. Among first-generation Canadians, there was a broad difference between immigrants who came to Canada in childhood and those who arrived in adolescence and adulthood. Immigrants who arrived as adults had the highest level of confidence, and this favourable perception of Canadian institutions weakened with younger age at arrival. Immigrants who arrived in childhood had similar levels of confidence in public institutions as Canadians of the third generation or more, and their levels of confidence in the police were indeed lower. This age-at-arrival pattern was largely consistent across immigrants from different racialized groups. Second-generation Canadians had lower levels of confidence in the police, the justice system and courts, and the Canadian media than Canadians of the third generation or more.

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