Portrait of the South Asian Populations in Canada:

Diversity and Socioeconomic Outcomes

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Portrait of the South Asian Populations in Canada: Diversity and Socioeconomic Outcomes

by **Sadjad Kalhor, Alejandro Paez Silva** and **Jane Badets**

Introduction

The *Portrait of the South Asian Populations in Canada: Diversity and Socioeconomic Outcomes* is part of a portrait series that Statistics Canada developed to inform the initiatives under Canada's Anti-Racism Strategy (Government of Canada, 2024)[1] which seeks to address challenges faced by racialized groups. This analytical paper aligns with the Disaggregated Data Action Plan, a whole-of-government approach led by Statistics Canada to enhance data collection, analysis and dissemination that are representative of Canada's diverse populations (Statistics Canada, 2021b). The topics explored in this portrait were shaped by informal consultations and engagement with South Asian community groups and subject-matter experts.

South Asian populations are defined in this analytical report by responses to the population group question on the Census of Population long-form questionnaire[2] and include individuals who self-reported as "South Asian" or as "South Asian" and "White" in the census (Statistics Canada, 2020a). Further details about the definition are provided in the "Population of interest" text box.

The portrait provides a descriptive analysis of the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the South Asian populations in Canada, primarily based on data from the 2021 Census of Population. Individuals reporting as South Asian in the 2021 Census reflect different ethnocultural backgrounds and places of birth, including Canada, with distinct demographic characteristics and socioeconomic outcomes. These distinctions can be obscured when examining the South Asian population as a whole. To address this, the portrait presents data disaggregated by place of birth, place of birth of parents and gender, depending on the dimension examined. This disaggregated data approach provides valuable insights to better understand the differences between groups and can inform programs and services to meet the specific and diverse needs of South Asian populations in Canada.

South Asian populations[3] have been a part of Canada's multicultural landscape for over 150 years. Today, this population group in Canada is more diverse than in the past and continues to grow. In 2021, over 2.57 million individuals reported as South Asian in the census, making it the largest racialized group in Canada. Since the 1996 Census, the South Asian population has nearly quadrupled, and its share of the total Canadian population rose from 2.4% in 1996 to 7.1% in 2021.

In 2021, nearly 3 in 10 South Asians were Canadian-born individuals,[4] mainly second-generation individuals (those born in Canada but with at least one parent born outside Canada), with a smaller proportion belonging to the third generation or more (those whose parents were both born in Canada). While these generations share Canada as their birthplace, the places of birth of their parents reveal a notable diversity. The largest group is the children of South Asian immigrants born in India, followed by those whose parents were born in Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

Additionally, a substantial segment of the total South Asian population was born outside Canada, mainly in South Asia, including countries such as India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. Smaller yet significant groups trace their roots to Africa (notably Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda); Europe (largely the United Kingdom); Oceania (almost entirely Fiji); the Caribbean, and Central and South America (mainly Guyana, and Trinidad and Tobago); and other parts of Asia (outside South Asia, such as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan). Each of these three broad groups (those born in South Asia, those born in regions outside South Asia and those born in Canada) is discussed in detail in this portrait.

1. This analytical report was funded by the Department of Canadian Heritage, Government of Canada.
2. The term "South Asian" appears on the census questionnaire for the population group question as a mark-in response category. The mark-in response categories listed in the population group question, except for "White," are based on the visible minority groups identified by the *Employment Equity Technical Reference Papers*, published by Employment and Immigration Canada in 1987. The groups identified by these papers include South Asian; Chinese; Black; Filipino; Latin American; Arab; Southeast Asian; West Asian; Japanese; Korean; and other groups, such as Pacific Islanders.
3. In this portrait, the terms "South Asians," "South Asian population" and "South Asian populations" are used interchangeably. This paper often pluralizes the South Asian population group (for example, South Asian populations) in recognition of the plurality of ethnicities, nationalities and geographic groups that the South Asian population group encompasses.
4. In this portrait, the term "Canadian-born" refers to people born in Canada, irrespective of their immigrant status. Some non-immigrants are born outside Canada (for example, the children of Canadian citizens who were living abroad or travelling when their child was born), and a small number of immigrants are born in Canada (for example, the children of foreign diplomatic personnel).

The portrait is structured as follows: it begins with a brief overview of the history of South Asian populations in Canada, followed by two text boxes—one defining the population of interest and the other outlining the disaggregation by place of birth and place of birth of parents. For South Asian individuals born in South Asia, selected places of birth are highlighted in the analysis. Those born outside South Asia are grouped by broader geographic region. For South Asians born in Canada, the place of birth of their parents is examined. An executive summary of key findings is provided, followed by a detailed analysis of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of South Asian populations in Canada.

South Asian presence in Canada: A brief history

In this box, the term "South Asian" is broadly used, depending on the historical source, and does not necessarily reflect how individuals may have reported or been recorded in current or historical censuses, or in other historical accounts about these populations.

The presence of South Asian populations in Canada reflects a long history of growth and change from a relatively small population to a large and diverse one. South Asian communities today reflect the cultural diversity of South Asia and other parts of the world, influenced by distinct immigration pathways over time to Canada (Government of Canada, 2025).

In terms of census records, South Asians first began to have a presence in Canada with the 1871 Census recording 11 individuals classified as "Hindoo"—8 in Ontario and 3 in Nova Scotia (Statistics Canada, 1873). Assuming these individuals had ties to the Indian subcontinent, this may represent the earliest recorded presence of South Asians in Canada.

From 1905 to 1908, some 5,000 South Asians came to Canada, mostly Punjabi Sikh men. They mainly lived in British Columbia, drawn by economic and employment opportunities in railroad construction and in the logging and lumber industries, and later in agriculture. They established communities in areas close to these industries (Government of Canada, 2025; Tran, Kaddatz & Allard, 2005; Cook & Mawani, 2017).

As they established themselves in Canada, organizations to support their cultural and religious heritage were created. One example is the formal establishment, in 1906, of the Khalsa Diwan Society in Vancouver, considered the oldest Sikh gurdwara society in Canada (South Asian Studies Institute, University of the Fraser Valley, n.d.).

In 1908, Canada introduced the "continuous journey regulation," an amendment to the *Immigration Act*, requiring potential immigrants to travel non-stop, by continuous passage, from their country of origin. This regulation created a significant barrier to immigrants from South Asia, as trips by shipping companies from this region included stops, restricting South Asian immigration to Canada for a number of years (Government of Canada, 2025; Cook & Mawani, 2017). This regulation remained in place until 1947.

In 1914, the Komagata Maru sailed from Hong Kong through Shanghai and Japan, finally arriving in Vancouver. Its passengers, mostly Sikhs from the Punjab and British subjects, were denied entry to Canada given that they did not come directly from their country of birth or citizenship, according to the continuous journey regulation. The ship was not allowed to dock, and the passengers were forced to remain on the ship for two months. The ship eventually returned to India, where 19 passengers died in a subsequent clash with British soldiers (Government of Canada, 2025). In 2016, the Government of Canada formally apologized for the Komagata Maru incident to the victims and their relatives in the House of Commons (Government of Canada, 2025; Government of Canada, 2016).

Based on census records, the Canadian population born in India and Pakistan decreased from 4,491 in 1911 to 3,848 in 1921 (Statistics Canada, 1963). In parallel, the number of people recorded as "Sikhs and Hindus" fell from about 1,758 to 849 during the same period (Statistics Canada, 1924). These decreases are in part a reflection of the continuous journey regulation.

Racial and nationality restrictions were gradually removed from Canadian immigration regulations throughout the 1950s and 1960s, opening the door to increased South Asian immigration (Government of Canada, 2025). Specifically, the 1960s and 1970s marked a turning point as the focus of Canada's immigration policies shifted from race or country of origin to skills, education and language proficiency for the selection of immigrants (Government of Canada, 2025; Tran, Kaddatz & Allard, 2005; Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2016). During this period, the size and diversity of South Asian communities in Canada expanded as immigration from India, Pakistan and other countries increased (Government of Canada, 2025; Cook & Mawani, 2017).

Over time, the community evolved into a vibrant and diverse one, shaped by migration not only from South Asia but also from regions such as Fiji, the Caribbean, East Africa and Europe (Cook & Mawani, 2017; Tran, Kaddatz & Allard, 2005). Starting in the 1800s, South Asians were brought to regions such as the Caribbean, Fiji and South Africa as indentured labourers, and many remained there after their period of indenture was over (Tran, Kaddatz & Allard, 2005). Data from the 1996 Census indicate that immigration of South Asians from the Caribbean, Africa and Oceania to Canada largely dates to the 1960s onwards. In 2021, nearly 40% of South Asian immigrants who immigrated to Canada before 1980 had been born outside South Asia (Statistics Canada, 2024b).

More recently, the South Asian population in Canada grew from just over 220,000 in 1981 to more than 915,000 in 2001 and over 2.5 million in 2021, largely from increased immigration.

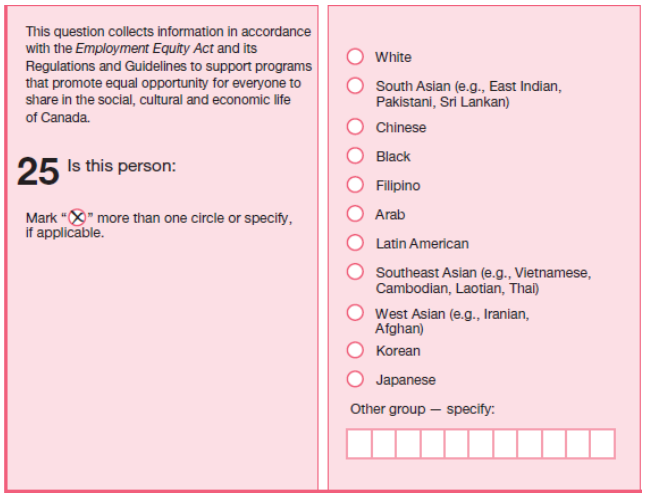
These immigrants brought their unique cultural traditions, languages and religious practices, which, with their children and subsequent generations born in Canada, continue to shape and enrich the fabric of Canadian society.

Population of interest

For this portrait, South Asian populations were defined based on the population group question on the Census of Population long-form questionnaire. Since the 1996 Census, "South Asian" has been one of the population groups listed on the census questionnaire, based on the Employment Equity Act and its regulations. Respondents can choose to mark one or more population groups or provide write-in responses. According to the current standard, this approach considers all those who self-report as "South Asian" or "South Asian" and "White" as part of the South Asian population.[5]

Details on populations who reported as South Asian and one or more other racialized groups are provided in a highlight box. These populations are excluded from the main analysis because the total population reporting as South Asian and another racialized group cannot be identified in a comparable way across census cycles. This approach is consistent with the methodology used in the rest of the portrait series. As of 2021, about 83,300 South Asians reported as South Asian and another racialized group, representing 3% of the entire South Asian population in Canada.

Figure 1
Question 25, 2021 Census of Population 2A-L questionnaire


This question collects information in accordance with the *Employment Equity Act* and its Regulations and Guidelines to support programs that promote equal opportunity for everyone to share in the social, cultural and economic life of Canada.

25 Is this person:

Mark "⊗" more than one circle or specify, if applicable.

- White
- South Asian (e.g., East Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan)
- Chinese
- Black
- Filipino
- Arab
- Latin American
- Southeast Asian (e.g., Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, Thai)
- West Asian (e.g., Iranian, Afghan)
- Korean
- Japanese

Other group — specify:

Source: Statistics Canada, 2021 Census of Population 2A-L questionnaire.

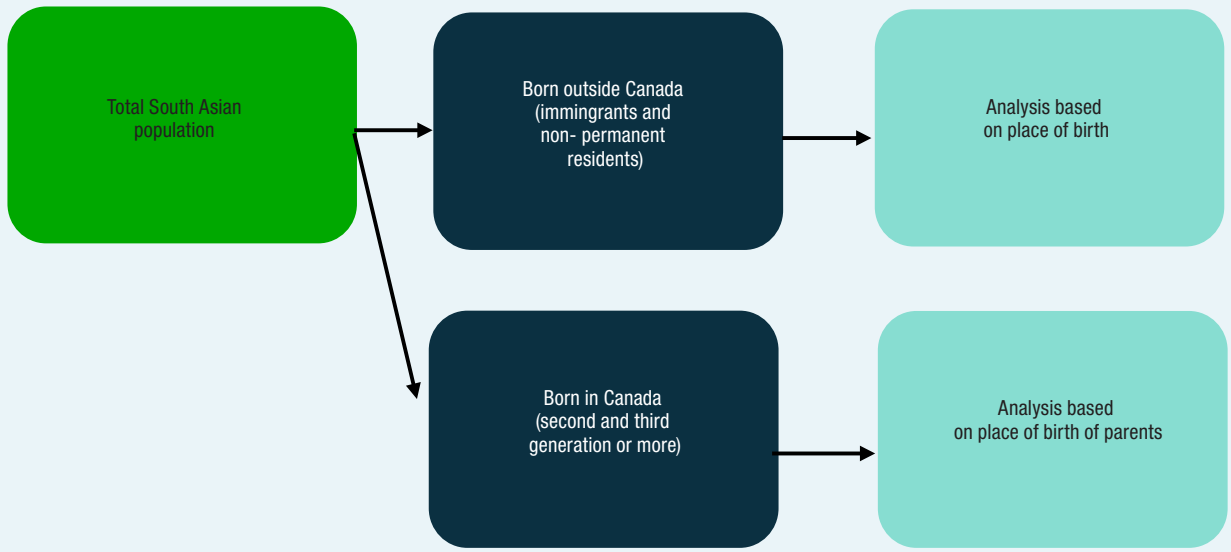
5. For more information on the population group and its derivation, refer to *Visible Minority and Population Group Reference Guide, Census of Population, 2021* (Statistics Canada, 2022d).

Analyzing the South Asian populations in Canada by place of birth and place of birth of parents

The analysis categorizes individuals reporting as South Asian in the census into distinct groups based on place of birth (Figure 1). In the 2021 Census, "place of birth" is defined according to the 2019 Standard Classification of Countries and Areas of Interest variant Countries and Areas of Interest for Social Statistics (Statistics Canada, 2020b). The first major category consists of individuals born outside Canada, further divided into two key groups: South Asians born in South Asia—specifically in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives—and South Asians born outside South Asia in regions such as the United States of America; the Caribbean, and Central and South America; Africa; Europe; Oceania; and other parts of Asia (outside South Asia).

The second major category focuses on South Asians born in Canada. For this group, disaggregated analysis is presented based on the place of birth of their parents, looking at generational status (e.g., second generation, third generation or more).

Figure 2
Breakdown of the South Asian population based on place of birth and place of birth of parents



Source: Flowchart created by the authors.

Executive summary

- In the 2021 Census, over 2.57 million individuals in Canada reported as South Asian, an almost fourfold increase since 1996.
- South Asians represented 7.1% of Canada's total population and were the largest racialized group in 2021. According to the latest available population projections, the South Asian populations could number from 4.7 million to 6.5 million people by 2041, constituting 11.0% to 12.5% of the population in Canada.
- In the 2021 Census, the South Asian populations in Canada reported many places of birth—over 110. Nearly 6 in 10 South Asians (63%) were born in South Asia, with 44% born in India; 9% in Pakistan; 5% in Sri Lanka; 3% in Bangladesh; and smaller proportions born in Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives.
- In 2021, nearly 3 in 10 South Asians (29%) were born in Canada. While their parents were born in a variety of places, the largest groups had both parents born in South Asia, specifically in India (44%), Pakistan (12%), Sri Lanka (10%) or Bangladesh (3%).

- Nearly 1 in 10 South Asians (9%) were born in regions other than South Asia or Canada. Their birthplaces included countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan in Asia; Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda in East Africa; Guyana, and Trinidad and Tobago in the Caribbean, and Central and South America; the United Kingdom in Europe; and Fiji in Oceania.
- In 2021, South Asian populations in Canada reported more than 145 different ethnic or cultural origins, either as single origins or in combination with others. While some South Asians identified with ethnic or cultural origins distinct from national identities, the majority reported origins that were closely associated with their birthplaces.
- Among South Asian immigrants, most of those born in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh (around 75%) immigrated to Canada in the 2000s or later, while the 1990s or earlier was the period of immigration for most (around 75%) of those born in Africa; the Caribbean, and Central and South America; and Oceania. South Asian immigrants born in Sri Lanka and Europe were nearly evenly split in terms of immigration to Canada, with 51% immigrating in the 1990s or earlier and 49% in the 2000s or later.
- According to the 2021 Census, 54% of South Asian immigrants who immigrated to Canada from 1980 onwards were economic immigrants, while 36% were sponsored by family and 9% came as refugees.
- South Asians generally immigrated to Canada in their mid to late 20s, while immigrants from the United States, Europe and other parts of Asia (outside South Asia) often immigrated at a young age, typically 18 or younger.
- Overall, the median age of the total South Asian population was 32 in 2021, nine years younger than the total Canadian population, which had a median age of 41. Some South Asians were relatively older (median age of 49 or older): those born in Sri Lanka; Oceania; Africa; and the Caribbean, and Central and South America. Those born in Canada and the United States had the youngest median ages (14 for both).
- There were 411,455 South Asian youth aged 15 to 24 in 2021, representing 16% of the total South Asian population and nearly 10% of all Canadian youth. Over half of South Asian youth (58%) were born outside Canada (mainly in South Asia), while 4 in 10 (42%) were born in Canada.
- The mother tongues of the South Asian populations in Canada included English (36%), Punjabi (29%), Urdu (11%), Hindi (8%), Tamil (7%), Gujarati (6%) and Bengali (4%), among others.
- In 2021, the South Asian population in Canada was religiously diverse, with Sikhism (30%), Hinduism (30%) and Islam (23%) being the most commonly reported religious affiliations. Sikhism was most common among those born in India (45%), while Hinduism was most commonly reported by those born in Sri Lanka (61%), Nepal (79%) and Bhutan (56%). Islam was the main religion reported by those born in Pakistan (92%) and Bangladesh (84%).
- The average household size among the South Asian population was 4.3 people, with variations ranging from 3.1 to 4.9 people when disaggregating by place of birth. In comparison, the average household size was 3.0 people for the total population in Canada.
- In 2021, the educational attainment of over half (58%) of the South Asian population in Canada aged 25 to 54 was a bachelor's degree or a higher, an increase from 39% in 2006.
- Among those born in South Asia, about two-thirds of South Asians born in Bangladesh (66%), India (63%) or Pakistan (61%) held a bachelor's degree or higher in 2021. Smaller proportions were observed among those born in Sri Lanka (29%) and Bhutan (8%). The rate was 56% for South Asians born in Canada.
- According to the 2021 Census, the employment rate of South Asians aged 25 to 54 was 77%, four percentage points lower than that in the non-racialized, non-Indigenous population (81%). South Asian women born in Pakistan (47%) and Bangladesh (55%) were less likely than those in other South Asian populations to be employed.
- Among those aged 25 to 54, South Asians were as likely as the total population to work in health, and business and finance professions, but were more likely to be employed as computing professionals, drivers, salespersons, cashiers, food support workers and customer service representatives.
- The occupational profile of South Asians varied by place of birth and by gender. For example, 14% of South Asian men aged 25 to 54 worked as truck, bus, taxi and delivery drivers, compared with 5% of all men in Canada in this age group, with those born in India (18%) and Pakistan (15%) having the highest proportions.

- Among South Asian women aged 25 to 54, 14% worked as salespersons, cashiers, food support workers and customer service representatives, compared with 10% of all women in Canada, with nearly one-quarter (24%) of Bangladeshi women working in these jobs.
- In 2021, 29% of South Asians aged 25 to 54 with a bachelor's degree or higher worked in an occupation usually requiring only a high school diploma or less, compared with 12% of the non-racialized, non-Indigenous population.
- According to the 2021 Census and as measured by the Market Basket Measure, South Asians aged 25 to 54 were more likely to live in poverty (10%) than the non-racialized, non-Indigenous population (6%), with those born in Bangladesh (13%) and Bhutan (13%) having higher poverty rates.

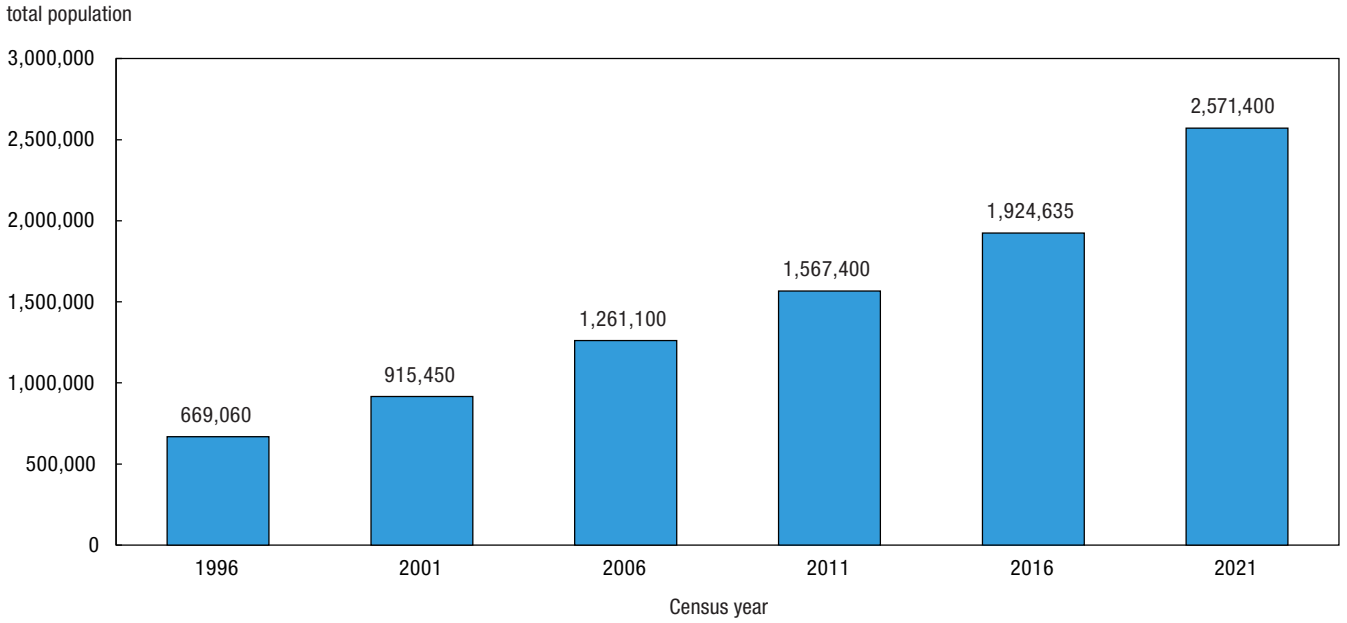
Demographic profile

Population size and growth

The South Asian population has almost quadrupled in numbers since the 1996 Census

In 2021, the South Asian population in Canada reached 2.57 million people, marking an almost fourfold increase since 1996 (Chart 1). Growth in the South Asian population was consistent during these 25 years. Periods of higher growth occurred from 2001 to 2006, with an increase of over 345,000 individuals, and from 2016 to 2021, with an increase of over 646,000 individuals.

Chart 1
South Asian population size, Canada, 1996 to 2021



Sources: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 1996 to 2021, and National Household Survey, 2011.

According to the 2021 Census, South Asian populations were the largest racialized group, representing 7.1% of Canada's total population in 2021, an increase from 2.4% in 1996. During the same period, the share of the South Asian population in the racialized, non-Indigenous population grew from 21% to 27%.

Looking to the future, according to the latest available population projections by racialized group and based on the low-growth and high-growth scenarios, the South Asian population is projected to reach 4.7 million to 6.5 million people by 2041, making up 11.0% to 12.5% of the total population. Based on these projections, the South Asian population would maintain its place as Canada's largest racialized group (Statistics Canada, 2022a).

Place of birth

In 2021, South Asian populations in Canada reported 111 places of birth, with those born in India being the largest group

Place of birth refers to the place where an individual was born. In the 2021 Census of Population, the geographic location for place of birth is based on the 2019 Standard Classification of Countries and Areas of Interest variant Countries and Areas of Interest for Social Statistics (Statistics Canada, 2020b).

Examining the places of birth of South Asians offers a perspective on their migration patterns and generational trends. In 2021, South Asians in Canada reported 111 places of birth. This is a notable increase from 2001, when the population—approximately 1 million at the time—reported 86 places of birth.[6]

The South Asian population consisted of diverse groups, each originating from different regions or countries (Table 1). Based on the 2021 Census, nearly 3 in 10 South Asians (29%) were born in Canada. However, the majority (63%) were born in South Asia: 44% in India, 9% in Pakistan, 5% in Sri Lanka, 3% in Bangladesh, 1% in Nepal, and a combined 0.2% in Bhutan and the Maldives.

A smaller yet notable proportion (9%) of South Asians were born outside Canada in places other than South Asia. Place-of-birth diversity is particularly pronounced within this group. Among these individuals, 26% were born in other parts of Asia, notably the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan. Together, these three countries accounted for 50% of the South Asian population born in Asia, other than South Asia.

Additionally, 25% of the South Asian population born outside Canada in places other than South Asia were born in Africa—primarily in East African countries such as Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda. Together, these three countries represented 70% of the birthplaces of African-born South Asians in 2021.

Moreover, 19% of the South Asian populations born outside Canada in places other than South Asia reported birthplaces in the Caribbean, and Central and South America. Among these, Guyana, and Trinidad and Tobago were the most common birthplaces, together accounting for 95% of the total in these regions. Guyanese South Asian immigrants formed the largest South Asian population in Canada born outside South Asia, with a population of 26,770.

In addition, 13% of the South Asian populations born outside Canada in places other than South Asia were born in Europe, with 71% of them reporting the United Kingdom as their birthplace. Additionally, 9% of South Asians born outside Canada and South Asia were born in Oceania, with 91% of them reporting Fiji as their birthplace. Lastly, 9% of the South Asian populations born outside Canada in places other than South Asia were born in the United States of America.

6. Reported birthplace counts for 2001 and 2021 are based on a minimum threshold of 40 respondents. Birthplaces with fewer than 40 respondents were excluded.

Table 1
South Asian populations by place of birth, Canada, 2021

Place of birth	Count
All places of birth	2,571,400
Canada	737,760
Southern Asia	1,614,540
India	1,139,065
Pakistan	235,420
Sri Lanka	139,130
Bangladesh	77,325
Nepal	19,715
Bhutan	3,840
Maldives	45
Other regions	219,100
Other parts of Asia	56,900
United Arab Emirates	14,605
Saudi Arabia	9,255
Afghanistan	4,665
Africa	54,705
Tanzania	15,700
Kenya	15,190
Uganda	7,620
Caribbean, and Central and South America	41,215
Guyana	26,770
Trinidad and Tobago	12,510
Europe	28,130
United Kingdom	19,930
Oceania	19,180
Fiji	17,535
United States of America	18,975

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Ethnic or cultural origin

More than 145 different ethnic or cultural origins were reported by the South Asian populations in Canada in the 2021 Census

Ethnic or cultural origin refers to the ethnic or cultural origins of a person's ancestors. These ancestors may have origins that refer to different countries or other origins that may not refer to different countries.

In the 2021 Census, South Asian populations in Canada reported more than 145 different ethnic or cultural origins, either as their only origin or in combination with other origins. For the South Asian populations, the ethnic or cultural origins reported were most often directly associated with their places of birth, but sometimes reflected other ethnic or cultural groups associated with their birthplaces.

The most frequent ethnic or cultural origins reported by South Asians born in India were Indian (66%) and Punjabi (15%), either as their only origin or in combination with other origins. The most common ethnic or cultural origin reported by South Asians born in Pakistan was Pakistani (74%). Among those born in Sri Lanka, the most reported origins were Sri Lankan (57%) and Tamil (37%). South Asians born in Bangladesh mainly reported Bangladeshi (67%) or Bengali (19%) origins.

Just over half (51%) of South Asians born in places outside Canada other than South Asia reported Indian as their only origin or in combination with other origins. Some origins were specific to certain regions. For example, 20% of South Asians born in the Caribbean, and Central and South America reported Guyanese origins; 22% of those born in Africa reported various Southern and East African origins (such as Mauritian or Kenyan); and 12% of those born in Europe reported various British Isles origins (such as British or English). Among South Asians born in Oceania, 41% reported Fijian or Indo-Fijian origins.

The main ethnic and cultural origins of South Asians born in Canada varied depending on the place of birth of their parents. The main origins among those whose parents were both born in India were Indian (59%) and Punjabi (20%). Among those whose parents were both born in Pakistan, the main origin was Pakistani (74%). And, among those whose parents were both born in Sri Lanka, the main origins were Sri Lankan (51%) and Tamil (41%).

Among the overall South Asian population, the majority (82%) reported a single ethnic or cultural origin[7] in the 2021 Census, while 18% had multiple ethnic origins.[8] Reporting multiple ethnic origins was more common for South Asians born in Europe (28%), Canada (25%), Africa (24%) and the United States of America (23%) than for South Asians born in South Asia (14%). The proportion with multiple ethnic origins was particularly high for Canadian-born South Asians whose parents were also born in Canada (49%) or whose parents were born in two different places (46%). In comparison, 36% of the overall population of Canada reported multiple ethnic or cultural origins.

Place of birth of parents

South Asians born in Canada come from diverse backgrounds, with 44% having both parents born in India

Place of birth of parent refers to the geographic location where the father, mother or parent of a person was born. Analyzing the place of birth of parents among the South Asian populations provides deeper insights into historical migration patterns and generational patterns.

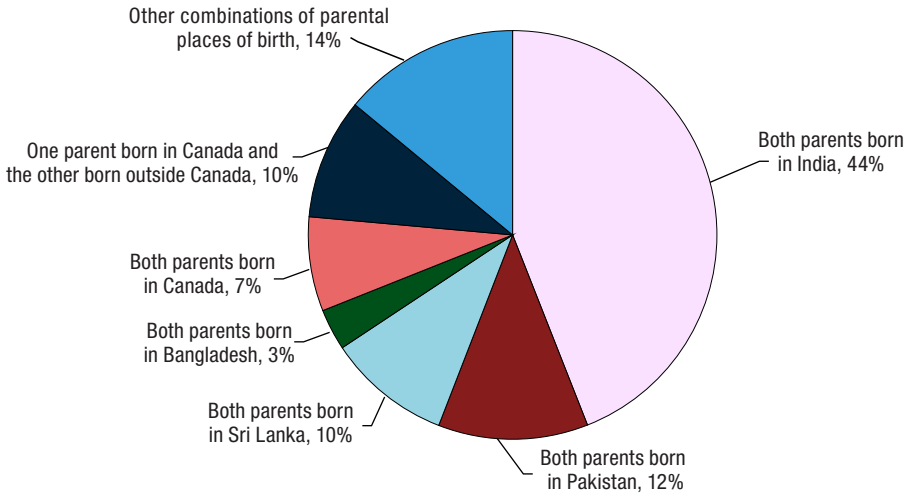
Nearly all South Asians who were born in South Asia have ties to this region, with 99% reporting that both parents were also born there. Among South Asians born in the Caribbean, and Central and South America, the majority (95%) had both parents born in these regions. In terms of their ethnic or cultural origins, nearly half (46%) of these individuals reported ethnic origins such as Guyanese, Trinidadian and Tobagonian, Indo-Caribbean, Indo-Guyanese, or West Indian (either alone or in combination with other origins).

South Asians born in Oceania had similar trends, with the majority (82%) having both parents also born in Oceania; 40% of individuals from this group reported Fijian or Indo-Fijian ethnic origins (either alone or in combination with other origins). Meanwhile, South Asians born in Africa showed distinct patterns by place of birth of parents: just over half (55%) had both parents born in Africa, whereas 27% had both parents born in South Asia and an additional 16% had one parent born in Africa and the other in South Asia. Among South Asians born in Europe (71%) and the United States of America (80%), the majority reported that both parents were born in South Asia.

Among the Canadian-born South Asian population (the second and third or more generations), the largest group was made up of those whose parents were both born in India (44%), followed by those whose parents were both born in Pakistan (12%), Sri Lanka (10%) and Bangladesh (3%) (Chart 2). Additionally, 7% belonged to the third generation or more, with both parents born in Canada. The remainder (24%) had varied combinations of parental birthplaces: 10% had one parent born in Canada and the other outside Canada, while 5% had both parents born in regions such as Oceania, the Caribbean and Africa (combined). Others had different combinations, such as one parent born in South Asia and the other in a non-South Asian region.

7. A single ethnic or cultural origin response occurs when a person provides only one origin.
8. A multiple ethnic or cultural origin response occurs when a person provides two or more origins.

Chart 2
Place of birth of parents of the Canadian-born South Asians, Canada, 2021



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Population growth by place of birth, 2001 to 2021

Among all places of birth, South Asians born in Nepal had the highest population growth from 2001 to 2021

The population growth rate is the percentage change in population size over time. Analyzing these rates for South Asian populations reflects changing patterns of migration, the flow of immigrants, their settlement and the demographic shifts that have shaped these populations. The rates are also influenced in part by Canadian immigration policies and events in source countries.

The overall size of the South Asian population in Canada grew by 181% from 2001 to 2021. However, the numbers of those born in the Caribbean, and Central and South America, (-8%), and Oceania (-10%) saw a decline during this period. This trend may reflect a reduction in immigration from these regions and broader demographic changes within these populations, partly driven by aging and natural population decline.

While small in numbers, South Asians born in Nepal had the highest growth, with an almost 23-fold increase (+2,166%), followed by American-born South Asians (+466%). Meanwhile, from 2001 to 2021, population size nearly quadrupled for those born in India (+272%) and Bangladesh (+267%), tripled for those born in Pakistan (+201%), and less than doubled for those born in Sri Lanka (+55%). Additionally, population size more than doubled for Canadian-born South Asians (+180%), nearly doubled for European-born South Asians (+99%), more than doubled for those born in other parts of Asia outside the South Asian subcontinent (+154%), and increased slightly for those born in Africa (+9%).

Gender distribution

South Asian men outnumbered South Asian women in Canada in 2021

Of the 2.57 million South Asians in Canada in 2021, 51% were men and 49% were women. South Asian non-permanent residents, as measured in the Census of Population, may have contributed to this gender gap, accounting for 11% of the South Asian populations in 2021. Within this group, 60% were men and 40% were women, whereas men and women were evenly split among South Asian permanent residents.

According to the 2021 Census, non-permanent residents are individuals from another country (including their accompanied family members) with a usual place of residence in Canada who have a work or study permit or who have claimed refugee status (asylum claimant, protected persons and related groups).

Period of immigration

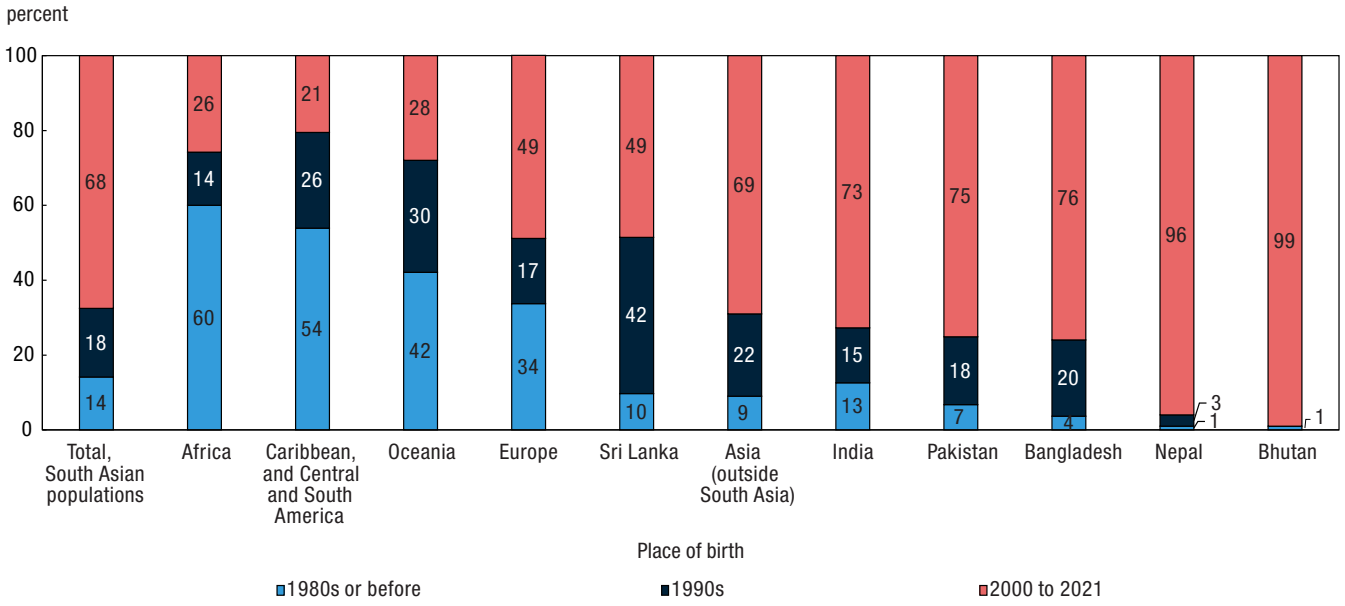
A larger share of South Asian immigrants born outside South Asia arrived in the 1990s or earlier, while the majority of those born in South Asia immigrated more recently, from the 2000s onward

The period of immigration refers to the time when an individual first obtained landed immigrant or permanent resident status in Canada. Overall, among South Asian immigrants living in Canada in 2021, one-third (32%) immigrated before 2000, while the remaining 68% arrived in 2000 or later. Distinct patterns are seen within the South Asian populations when analyzed by place of birth (Chart 3).

Around three-quarters of some South Asian immigrants were earlier cohorts, arriving in Canada primarily in the 1990s or earlier: those born in Africa (74%); the Caribbean, and Central and South America (80%); and Oceania (72%). Sri Lankan-born and European-born South Asian immigrants were almost evenly split in terms of the period of immigration, with 51% arriving in the 1990s or earlier and 49% in the 2000s or later. For South Asians born in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, around 75% immigrated in the 2000s or later, compared with 95% or more among those born in Nepal (96%) and Bhutan (99%).

For American-born South Asians, 88% immigrated from 2000 to 2021, while 69% of those born in parts of Asia other than South Asia arrived during the same period. The findings highlight the different immigration timelines of South Asian populations in Canada as of 2021.

Chart 3
Period of immigration of South Asian immigrants, by selected place of birth, Canada, 2021



Notes: Data for 2021 include only the first five months of 2021. Data exclude non-permanent residents and non-immigrants, for whom the concept of period of immigration does not apply.
Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Admission categories of South Asian immigrants

South Asian populations born in Africa, Europe and the United States of America were more likely to come as economic immigrants, compared with those born elsewhere

In Canada, immigrants are selected according to three broad objectives: to enhance and promote economic development, to reunite families, and to fulfill the country's international obligations and uphold its humanitarian tradition. Changes to immigration policies and programs, along with global events, have played a key role in shaping immigration trends to Canada, including immigration trends related to the South Asian populations.

According to the *Dictionary, Census of Population, 2021*, admission category refers to the name of the immigration program or group of programs under which an immigrant was first granted the right to live in Canada permanently by immigration authorities. This classification allows for further understanding immigrants' socioeconomic outcomes. In the 2021 Census of Population, data on admission category are available for immigrants who were admitted to Canada from January 1, 1980, to May 11, 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2021a). There are three main categories: economic immigrants, immigrants sponsored by family and refugees.[9]

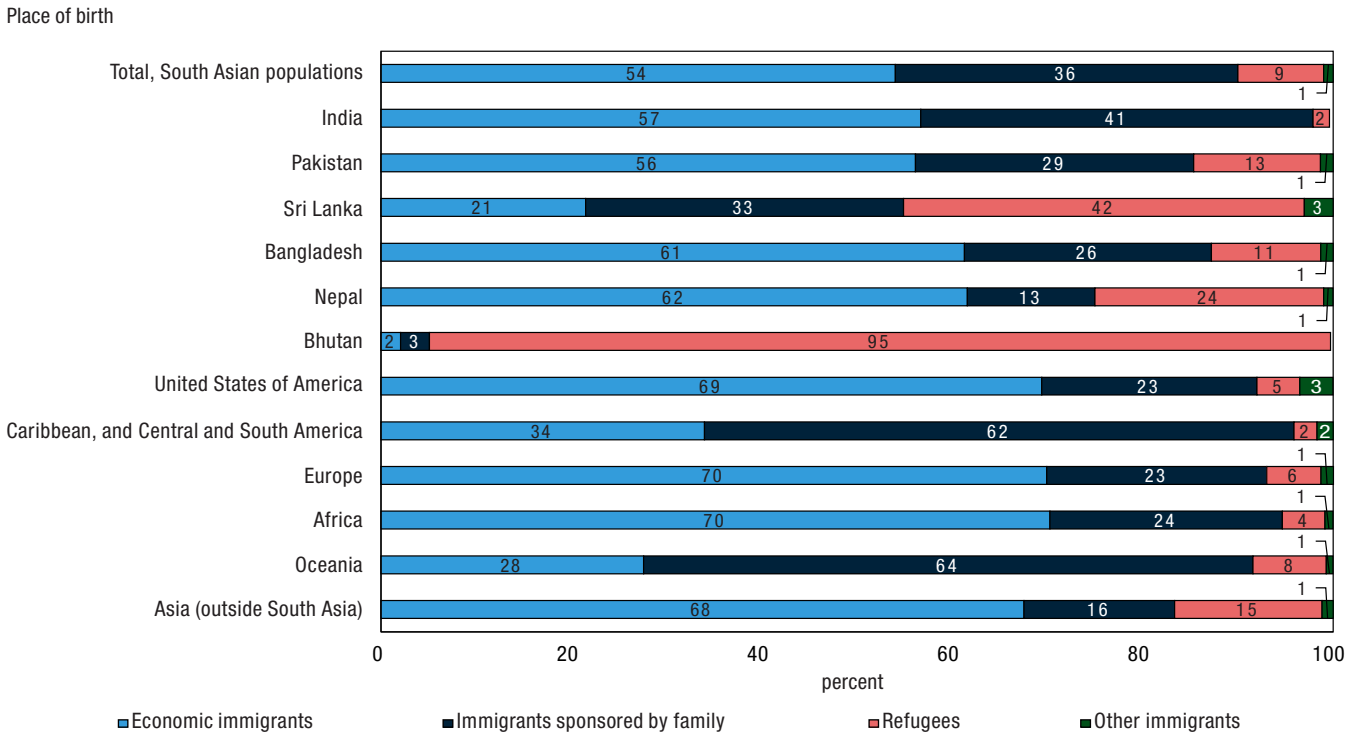
According to the 2021 Census, a majority (54%) of South Asians who immigrated from 1980 to 2021[10] were economic immigrants, while 36% were immigrants sponsored by family, and 9% were refugees (Chart 4).

For immigrants born in the United States of America, Europe, Africa, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Asia (outside South Asia), the percentage admitted under the economic category ranged from 56% for those born in Pakistan to 70% for those born in Africa or Europe. The proportions of economic immigrants were lower (all from 20% to 35%) for those born in Sri Lanka; the Caribbean, and Central and South America; and Oceania.

Certain countries or regions—such as Bhutan; Sri Lanka; Oceania; and the Caribbean, and Central and South America—have higher proportions of family class immigrants or of individuals admitted to Canada as refugees. Specifically, three-quarters of South Asians born in Sri Lanka were refugees (42%) or immigrants sponsored by family (33%). Among those born in Bhutan, 95% were refugees. Two-thirds of South Asians born in the Caribbean, and Central and South America (62%) and Oceania (64%) were immigrants sponsored by family.

9. Economic immigrants are chosen for their level of education and other forms of human capital, such as age, official language proficiency, Canadian work experience or skill transferability factors (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2025). Family-sponsored immigrants, who are part of the family class or family reunification programs, obtain permanent residency through sponsorship by Canadian citizens or permanent residents, including relatives such as spouses, partners, parents or children. According to the *Dictionary, Census of Population, 2021*, refugees include people who had a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality or membership in a particular social group or for political opinions (Geneva Convention refugees), as well as people who had been seriously and personally affected by civil war or armed conflict or had suffered a massive violation of human rights. Refugees include resettled refugees and protected persons who have been granted permanent resident status (Statistics Canada, 2021a).
10. Data on admission category are not available in the census for immigrants before 1980.

Chart 4
Admission categories of South Asian immigrants to Canada (1980 to 2021), by selected place of birth, 2021



Notes: Data for 2021 include only the first five months of 2021. Data exclude non-permanent residents, non-immigrants and immigrants admitted before 1980, for whom the concept of admission category does not apply.
Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

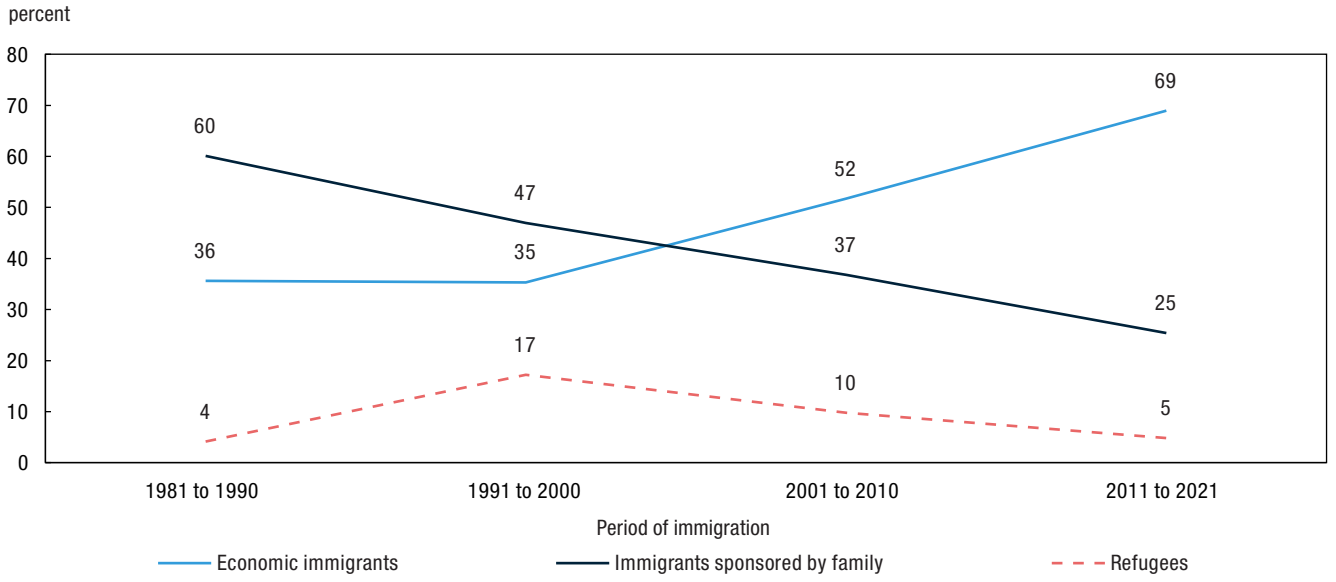
Since the 1990s, fewer South Asian immigrants have immigrated through family sponsorship, while more have come through economic programs

In the past, a higher proportion of South Asian immigrants entered Canada as family-sponsored immigrants, compared with those who arrived as economic immigrants. However, the share of family-class immigrants decreased over time in favour of economic immigrants. According to the 2021 Census, the family-sponsored category made up the largest proportion of those who immigrated from 1981 to 1990 (60%). In contrast, economic immigrants made up the largest proportions among more recent immigrant cohorts; nearly 7 in 10 South Asian immigrants who arrived from 2011 to 2021 (69%) were economic immigrants (Chart 5).[11] Again, these trends are influenced by changes in Canadian immigration policies and programs over time.

Overall, 1 in 10 South Asian immigrants (10%, or 126,140 individuals) was admitted to Canada as a refugee. The largest refugee cohorts were those who immigrated during the 1990s, when close to one in five South Asian immigrants (17%) were refugees at the time.

11. Figures in the chart are based on individuals present during the 2021 Census (May 2 to 8, 2021). The percentages for admission categories in the 2021 Census do not account for the attrition within the earlier cohorts.

Chart 5
Changing trends in South Asian immigration: More economic immigrants, less family sponsorship



Notes: Data for 2021 include only the first five months of 2021. Data exclude non-permanent residents, non-immigrants and immigrants admitted before 1980, for whom the concept of admission category does not apply.
Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

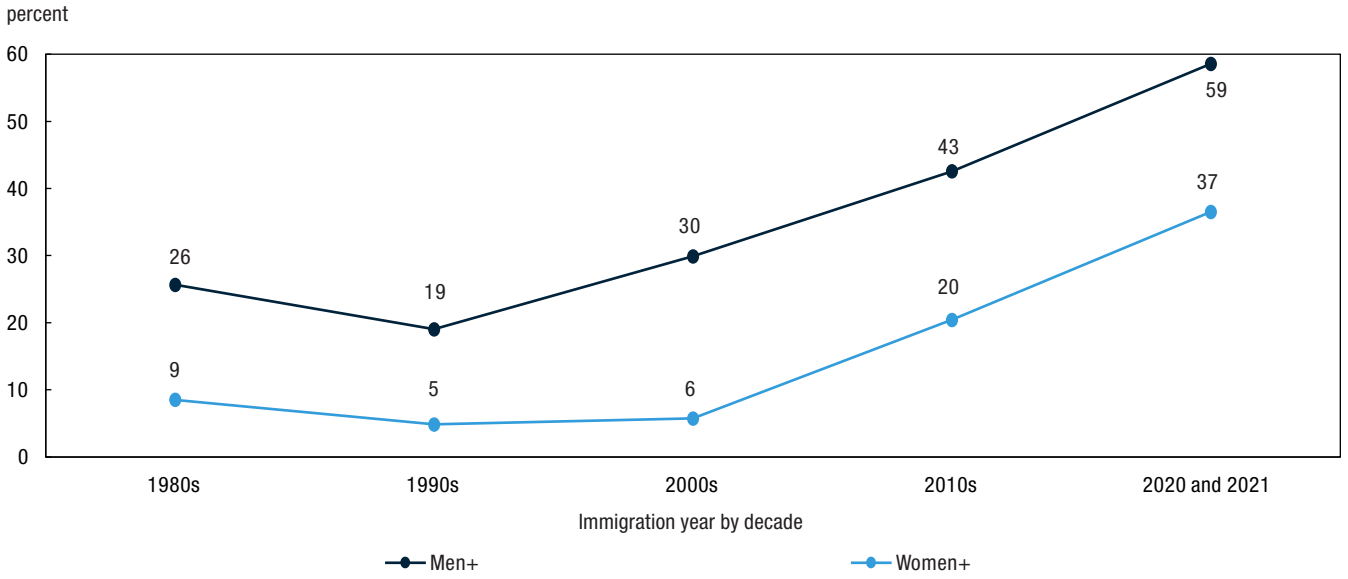
Among more recent immigrants, an increasing share of South Asian men and women have immigrated as principal applicants under the economic category

Economic immigrants, a broad category within the admission category classification of immigrants, can be divided into two groups: principal applicants and secondary (dependant) applicants. Principal applicants are the main individuals applying for immigration based on their qualifications, skills, work experience and ability to contribute to the economy of the destination country. Dependant applicants are family members of the principal applicants, such as spouses and children.

Although an increasing proportion of high-skilled South Asian women have come to Canada through economic programs as principal applicants (Rajan, 2024), South Asian women have historically been less likely than men to be economic principal applicants (Chart 6). For instance, among the 1980s immigrant cohort, economic principal applicants represented 30% of South Asian immigrant men and 6% of South Asian immigrant women. A similar gap is evident among other cohorts who immigrated in the 1990s or later.

Overall, women were less likely than men to be economic principal applicants, regardless of their place of birth (this has likely been historically true for all immigrants). While the proportions in Chart 6 vary by place of birth, the overall gender patterns remain largely the same over time.

Chart 6
Trends in South Asian immigration: Economic principal applicants as a share of total immigrants



Notes: Data for 2021 include only the first five months of 2021. Data exclude non-permanent residents, non-immigrants and immigrants admitted before 1980, for whom the concept of admission category does not apply. The category "Women+" includes women, girls and some non-binary people, and the category "Men+" includes men, boys and some non-binary people.
Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

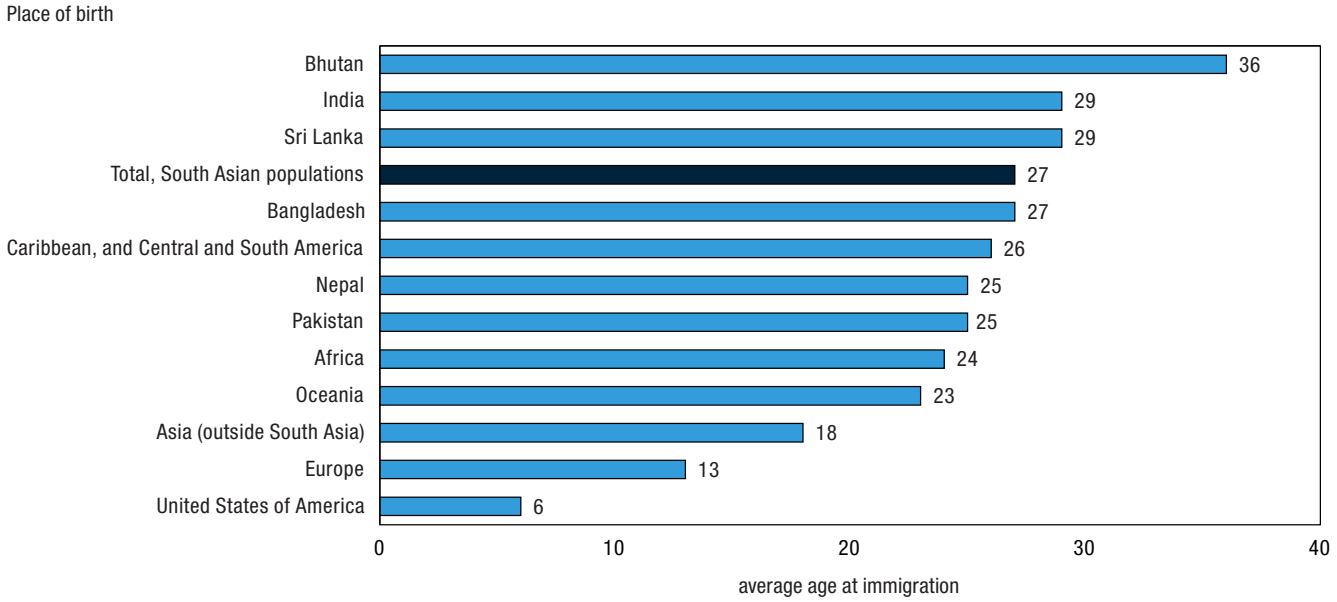
Average age at immigration

Most South Asian immigrants came to Canada in their mid to late 20s, whereas those born in the United States of America, Europe and other parts of Asia (outside South Asia) tended to immigrate as children aged 18 or younger

Age at immigration can have implications for the immigrants and the host country. Immigrating at a younger age can lead to better socioeconomic integration, especially for those who have the opportunity to go through the Canadian education system (Karpinski et al., 2024). The South Asian immigrant population demonstrates a varied average age at immigration when accounting for place of birth.

According to the 2021 Census, average age at immigration for South Asian immigrants was 27. However, this average varied notably across South Asian populations based on their place of birth (Chart 7). Individuals born in Bhutan tended to immigrate at a comparatively older age, with an average age at immigration of 36, while those born in the United States of America, Europe and Asia (outside South Asia) immigrated as children (18 or younger). Average age at immigration was 29 for individuals born in India, 27 for those born in Bangladesh, and 25 for those born in Pakistan and Nepal.

Chart 7
Average age at immigration of South Asian immigrants, by place of birth, Canada, 2021



Notes: Data for 2021 include only the first five months of 2021. Data exclude non-permanent residents and non-immigrants, for whom the concept of age at immigration does not apply.
Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Age structure

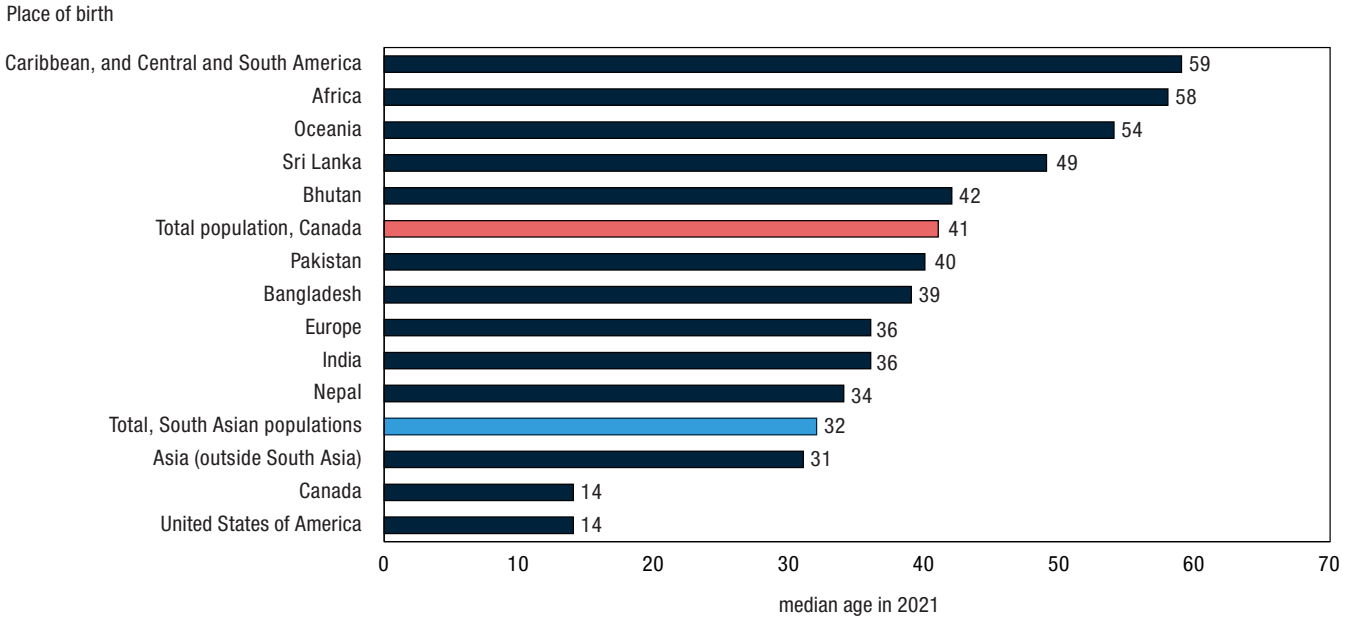
Median age varied across South Asian populations depending on their place of birth, ranging from 14 for those born in Canada to 59 for those born in the Caribbean, and Central and South America

South Asian populations in Canada were relatively younger than the general population, reflecting a blend of young Canadian-born individuals and younger and older immigrants. In 2021, the median age of South Asians was 32,[12] nine years younger than the median age of 41 for the general population in Canada. In terms of percentages, 47% of South Asians were aged 25 to 54, while 18% were 55 or older, compared with 40% and 32%, respectively, for the general population.

Differences in age were evident within South Asian populations in Canada, according to their place of birth (Chart 8). Long-term immigrants had higher median ages, with median ages of 49 or older for those born in Sri Lanka; Oceania; Africa; and the Caribbean, and Central and South America. Pakistani-born South Asians had a median age of 40, followed by those born in Bangladesh (39). Those born in India (36 years), Europe (36 years) and Nepal (34 years) had younger median ages. South Asians born in Canada and the United States of America had the lowest median ages, at 14. These differences in median age in 2021 highlight the diversity within the South Asian population in terms of age structure and life stage.

12. The median age is the age “x” that divides the population into two equal groups: one containing individuals older than “x,” and the other, those younger than “x.”

Chart 8
Overall median age of South Asians, by place of birth, Canada, 2021



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Household type and size

Various factors influence the arrangement of a household, including cultural traditions, support systems, religious beliefs and economic considerations. This section explores two key dimensions of household arrangements: the household type and the average household size among South Asian populations in Canada.[13]

Household type

Some South Asian populations were more likely than the general population to live in couple families with children or multigenerational households, with variations depending on place of birth

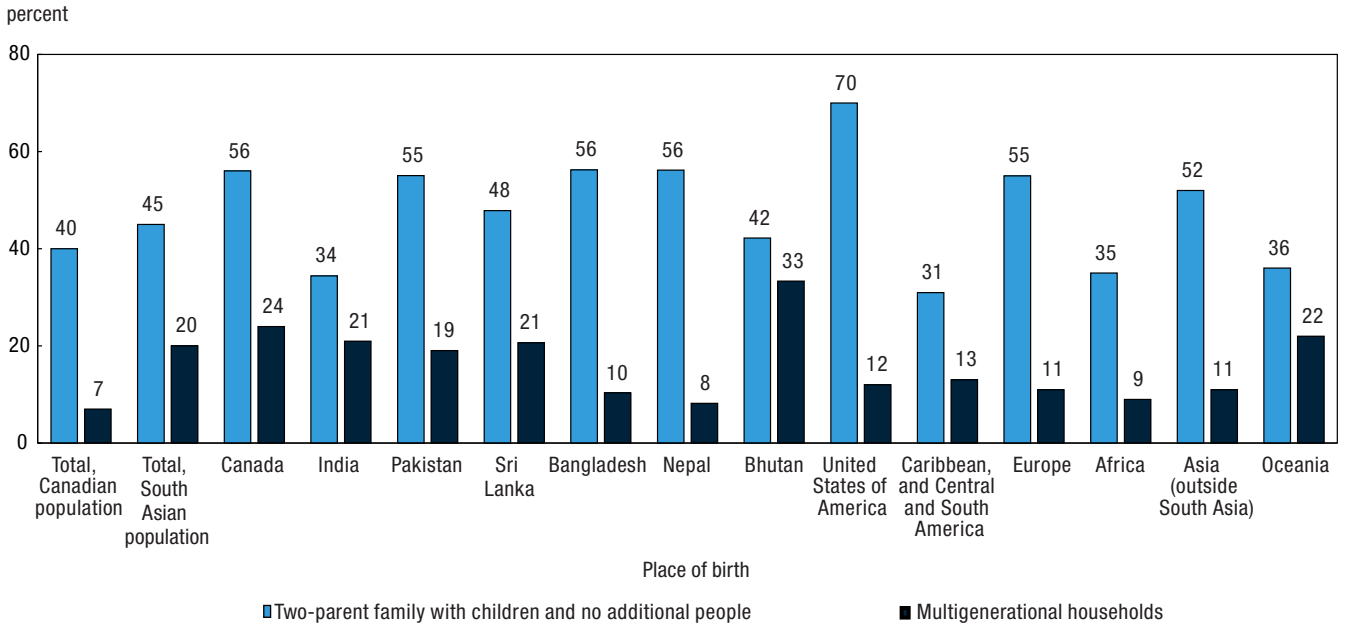
Among all South Asians, the most common household type in 2021 was two-parent families[14] with children and no additional members. This arrangement accounted for 45% of the total South Asian population in Canada, compared with 40% of the general population (Chart 9). The proportion living in this household type varied by place of birth within the South Asian population. It was higher for those born in Sri Lanka, other parts of Asia (outside South Asia), Pakistan, Europe, Bangladesh and Nepal, ranging from 48% to 56%, and was even higher for South Asians born in the United States of America, at 70%. However, the percentage was lower, varying from 31% to 42%, among individuals born in the Caribbean, and Central and South America; India; Africa; Oceania; and Bhutan.

Multigenerational households were also common among certain South Asian populations. These households include at least three generations of the same family—for example, grandparents, parents and children—living together. In 2021, one in five South Asians (20%) lived in a multigenerational household, compared with 7% of the general population in Canada (Chart 9). This proportion varied across different South Asian populations. For instance, smaller proportions were observed among South Asians born in Nepal (8%) or Africa (9%), followed

13. According to the *Dictionary, Census of Population, 2021*, household type refers to the differentiation of households based on whether they are census family households or non-census-family households. Census family households are those that contain at least one census family. Non-census-family households are either one person living alone or a group of two or more people who live together but do not constitute a census family (Statistics Canada, 2021a). Household size refers to the number of people in a private household (Statistics Canada, 2021a).
14. Statistics Canada includes same-gender couples in its definitions of couple families and two-parent families. The census distinguishes between different types of couple families, including same-gender couples (cisgender), different-gender couples (cisgender), and transgender or non-binary couples. This means that same-gender couples—whether married or living common law—are recognized within the broader category of two-parent families (Statistics Canada, 2022c).

closely by those born in Bangladesh (10%), Europe (11%) or Asia (outside South Asia) (11%). Conversely, South Asians born in Bhutan (33%) and those born in Canada (24%) were more likely than other groups to reside in multigenerational households.

Chart 9
Selected household types among South Asian populations, by place of birth, Canada, 2021



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

In addition to the household types presented in Chart 9, other types of households were notable among certain South Asian populations. For example, 15% of South Asians born in India lived with unrelated roommates in two-or-more-person non-census-family households.[15] Economic considerations and support systems may be relevant factors influencing these proportions. The share was 6% or less among other South Asians.

Meanwhile, among South Asians born in Africa, 25% were in couple families without children and 12% lived alone. Similarly, 23% of South Asians born in the Caribbean, and Central and South America were in couple families without children, while 13% lived alone. Overall, the proportion of the total South Asian population living in couple families without children was 8%.

Household size

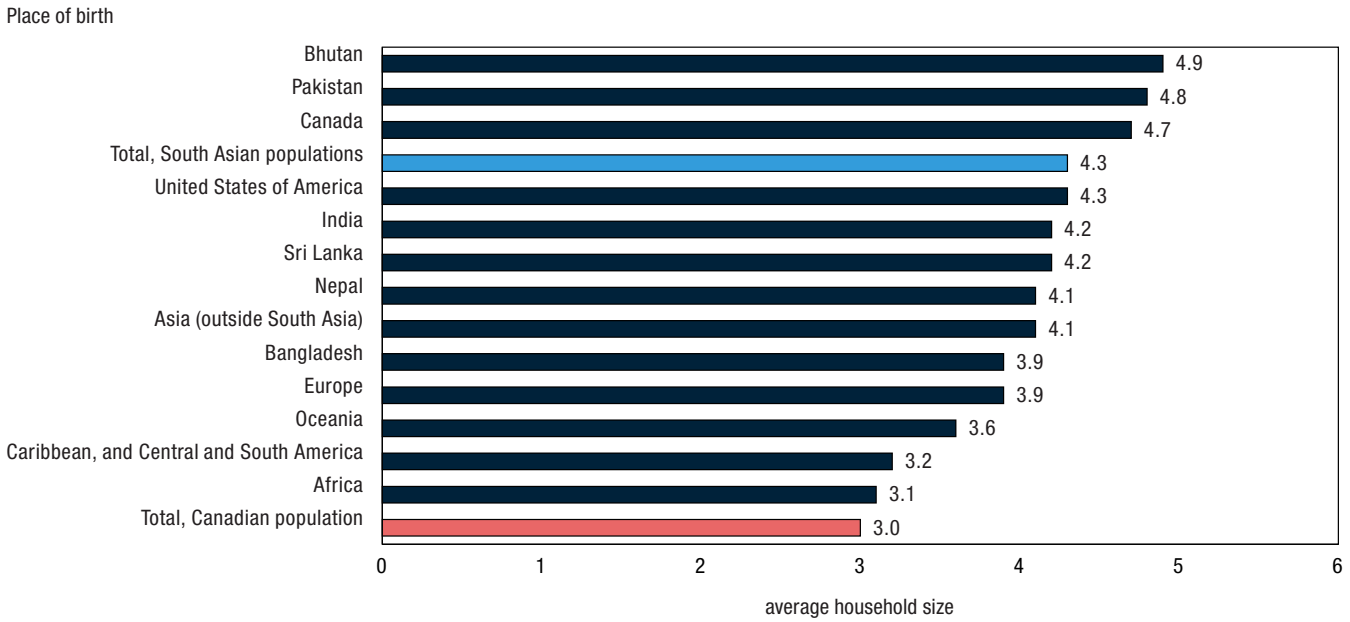
In Canada, South Asian populations had larger average household sizes compared with the overall population

Household size refers to the number of individuals in a private household (Statistics Canada, 2021a).[16] For South Asian populations, examining household size is particularly significant, as it provides insight into family structures and living arrangements. According to the 2021 Census, South Asian individuals lived in families with household sizes larger than the national average. In 2021, the average household size across Canada was 3.0 people per household, whereas this figure was 4.3 for the South Asian population overall.

15. According to the *Dictionary, Census of Population, 2021*, two-or-more-person non-census-family households include households of two or more people, none of whom belong to a census family (Statistics Canada, 2021a).
16. In this section, the term "households" does not necessarily refer to South Asian households; rather, the data are reported at the individual level.

Household size varied depending on place of birth, as shown in Chart 10. The largest average household sizes in 2021 were found among South Asians born in Bhutan (4.9 people), Pakistan (4.8) and Canada (4.7). In contrast, South Asians born in Africa (3.1) and the Caribbean, and Central and South America (3.2) had the smallest household sizes.

Chart 10
Average household size among South Asian populations, by selected place of birth, Canada, 2021



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Mother tongue

South Asian populations reported 118 mother tongues in 2021

Mother tongue refers to the first language learned at home in childhood and still understood by the person at the time the data were collected (Statistics Canada, 2021a).

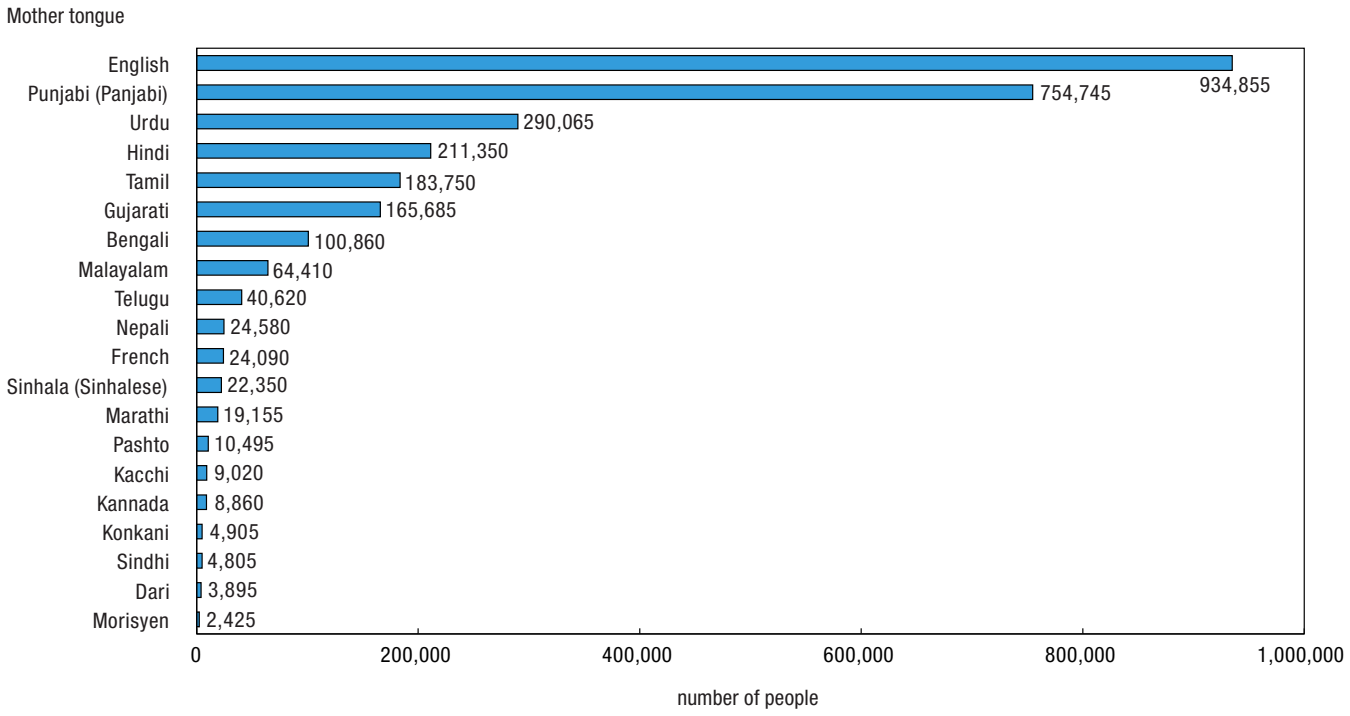
In 2021, a total of 456 mother tongues were reported by all Canadians. For the South Asian populations, a total of 118 languages learned in childhood and still understood were reported (alone or in combination with other languages).[17] Most South Asians (88%) reported only one mother tongue, while 12% reported multiple mother tongues, meaning they learned two or more languages at the same time in their childhood. Among South Asians born in Canada (second generation and third generation or more), a larger proportion (14%) reported multiple mother tongues. These proportions are three or more times the average for the total population in Canada (4%). Chart 11 presents the 20 mother tongues (including both single and multiple responses) most frequently reported by the overall South Asian population.

South Asian mother tongues varied depending on the place of birth.[18] Indian-born South Asians reported a variety of mother tongues, alone or with another language—48% reported Punjabi, 22% English, 15% Hindi and 11% Gujarati. Pakistani-born South Asians predominantly reported Urdu (78%), English (22%) and Punjabi (8%) as their mother tongues. Among Sri Lankan-born South Asians, 75% reported Tamil as their mother tongue, 18% reported English and 15% reported Sinhala (Sinhalese). Bangladeshi-born South Asians mainly reported Bengali (90%) and English (19%) as their mother tongues. Among South Asians born in Nepal, 89% reported Nepali as their mother tongue, while 13% reported English.

17. The reported figure excludes languages with fewer than 40 responses.
18. These percentages are based on total responses (single and multiple responses combined) and will not add up to 100%.

For the South Asian population born outside Canada in places other than South Asia, English (60%) was the most commonly reported mother tongue, followed by Gujarati (9%), Urdu (8%), Hindi (8%), Punjabi (7%) and several other languages with lower percentages. South Asians born in Canada primarily reported English (63%) and Punjabi (24%) as their mother tongues, along with several other languages, such as Urdu, Tamil and Gujarati, each with shares below 10%.

Chart 11
Top 20 mother tongues among South Asians in Canada, 2021



Note: The mother tongues cited include single and multiple responses.
Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Religion

South Asian populations in Canada report many religious affiliations

The census collects information on people's religious affiliation, regardless of whether they practise that religion. According to the *Dictionary, Census of Population, 2021*, religion refers to a person's self-identification as having a connection or an affiliation with any religious denomination, group, body, or other religiously defined community or system of belief.

Rooted across multiple continents, South Asian populations in Canada exhibit a rich diversity of religions, with Sikhism (30%), Hinduism (30%) and Islam (23%) being the most commonly reported among the overall South Asian population in 2021, followed by a smaller proportion reporting Christianity (10%). Less than 1 in 10 (6%) reported no religion or secular perspectives (Chart 12).

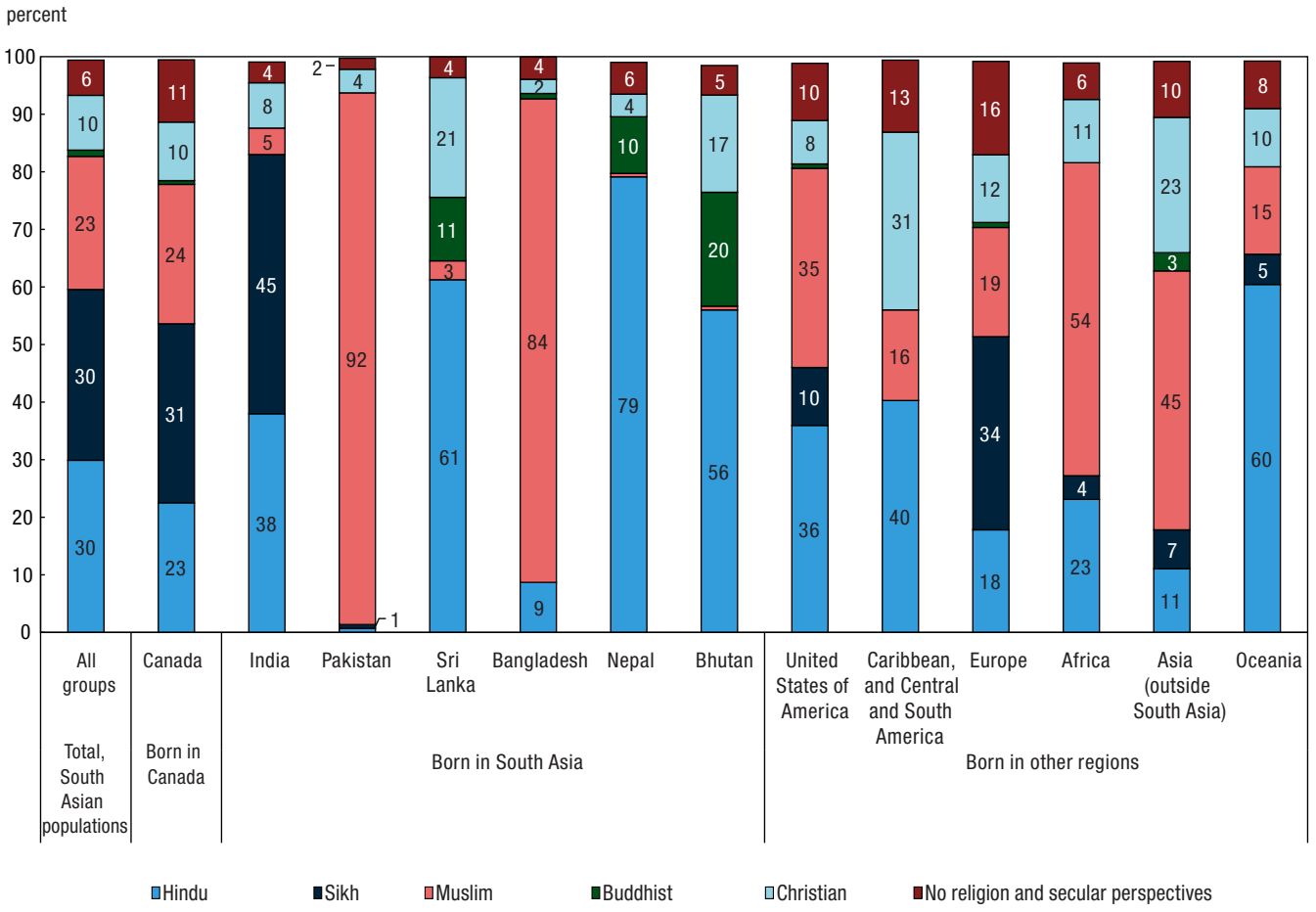
The main religions among South Asians in Canada varied based on their places of birth and did not always reflect the religious composition of these places. Among those born in India, 45% reported Sikhism as their religion in 2021, whereas Hinduism was reported by most Sri Lankan-born (61%) and Bhutanese-born (56%) South Asians. Among those born in Pakistan (92% Muslim) or Bangladesh (84% Muslim), the dominant religion tended to align closely with the primary religion practised in these countries (Sawe, 2018; Hackett et al., 2025).

Among South Asians born outside Canada in places other than South Asia, less than 1 in 10 were Sikh (8%), except for South Asians born in Europe (34%). The majority of African-born South Asians were Muslim (54%), while the majority of those born in Oceania were Hindu (60%). For other places of birth, not one single religion was reported by the majority of South Asians born outside Canada (other than South Asia).

Among the Canadian-born South Asian population, nearly 9 in 10 (89%) reported a religious affiliation: 31% identified as Sikh, followed by Muslim (24%) and Hindu (23%). Second-generation South Asians in Canada reported religious affiliations similar to those of their immigrant parents. For example, Sikhism was the predominant religion among Canadian-born children of Indian immigrants (59%). Canadian-born children of Pakistani and Bangladeshi parents were mainly Muslim (95% and 87%, respectively), while the Canadian-born children of Sri Lankan individuals were mainly Hindu (69%). Among second-generation South Asians, 9% reported no religion or secular perspectives.

South Asians in the third generation or more were much more likely to report no religion or secular perspectives (36%) or to identify as Christian (21%). They were also much less likely to identify as Hindu (8%).

Chart 12
Religious composition of South Asian populations, by selected place of birth, Canada, 2021



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Usual place of residence

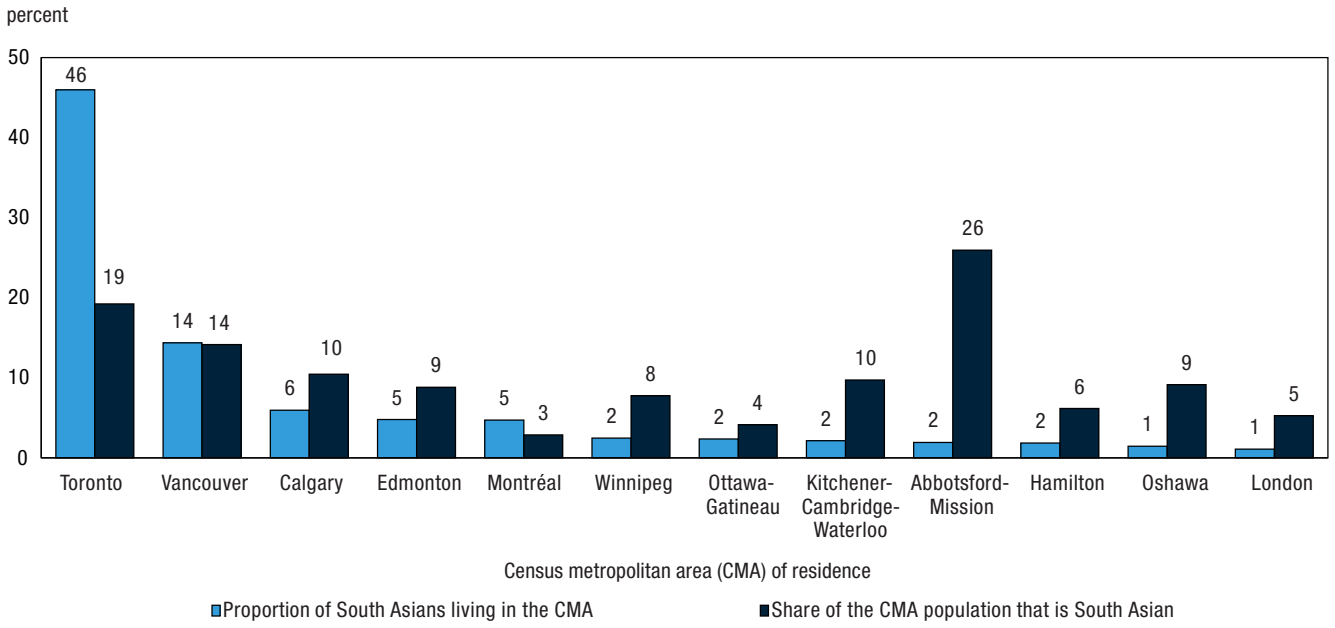
The vast majority (96%) of South Asian populations in Canada resided in urban areas

Similar to other racialized groups, South Asians are largely an urban population, with 96% living in a census metropolitan area (CMA) in 2021 (Chart 13). This trend has remained largely unchanged since the 1996 Census.

In 2021, over 4 in 10 South Asians (46%) resided in the Toronto CMA, specifically in the Toronto (15%), Brampton (13%) and Mississauga (7%) census subdivisions (CSDs). One in seven (14%) lived in the Vancouver CMA, particularly in the Surrey (8%) and Vancouver (2%) CSDs. Additionally, 16% had a usual place of residence in the Calgary (6%), Edmonton (5%) and Montréal (5%) CMAs, while 2% or less lived in each of the Winnipeg (2%), Ottawa–Gatineau (2%), Abbotsford–Mission (2%), Hamilton (2%), Oshawa (1%) and London (1%) CMAs.

South Asians make up a larger proportion of the total population in smaller CMAs or cities, compared with larger ones. For instance, while 2% of all South Asians in Canada resided in the Abbotsford–Mission CMA, they accounted for 26% of this CMA's population. Similarly, South Asians accounted for more than half (52%) of Brampton's population, 38% of Surrey's and 25% of Mississauga's.

Chart 13
South Asians' usual place of residence and population share, by selected census metropolitan area, Canada, 2021



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Educational attainment

Highest certificate, diploma or degree

Nearly 6 in 10 South Asians in Canada held a bachelor's degree or higher in 2021, marking an increase from 2006[19]

The highest certificate, diploma or degree represents the highest level of education an individual has completed. Among South Asians, the most commonly reported level of educational attainment was a bachelor's degree or higher.

In 2021, 58% of South Asians aged 25 to 54 held a bachelor's degree or higher, an increase from 2006 (39%) and higher than the 32% observed among the non-racialized, non-Indigenous population[20] in the same age group (Chart 14). This trend was consistent across most birthplace groups (66% for Bangladeshi-born, 63% for Indian-born and 61% for Pakistani-born individuals), though smaller proportions were noted among those born in Sri Lanka (29%) and Bhutan (8%).

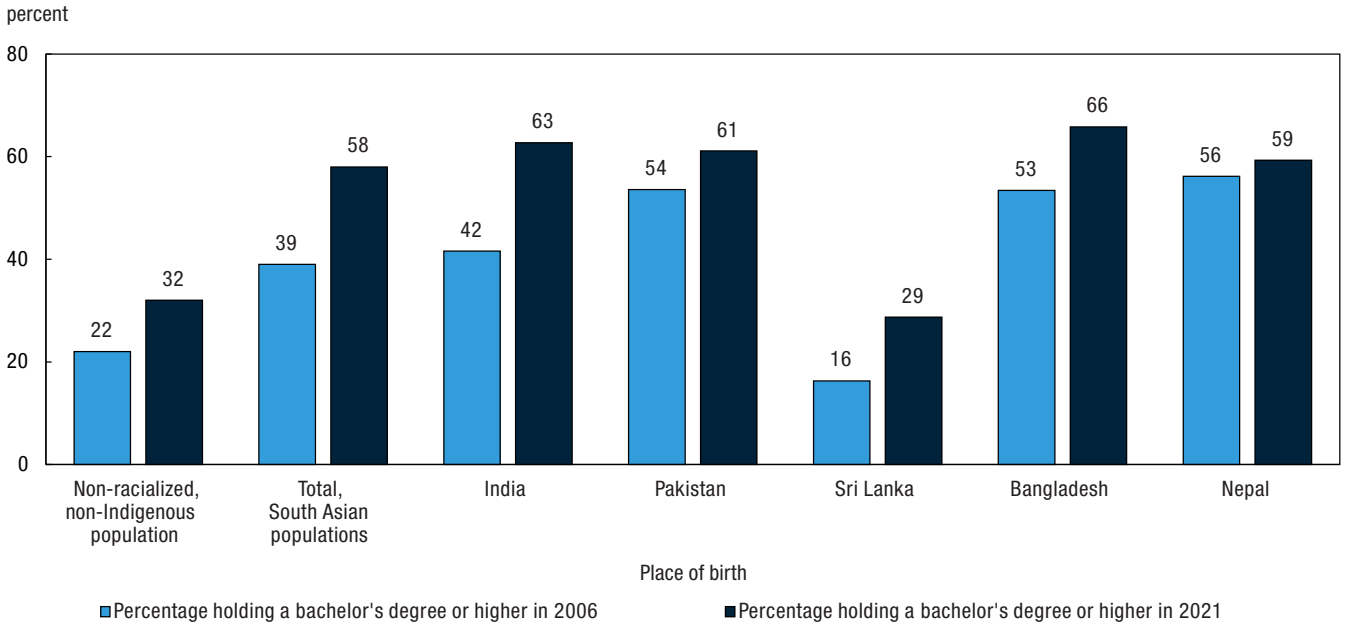
A similar pattern was evident among South Asians born outside Canada in places other than South Asia, with the attainment of a bachelor's degree or higher in 2021 ranging from 58% for those born in Africa to 73% for those born in the United States of America. However, lower proportions were observed among individuals born in Oceania (14%) and the Caribbean, and Central and South America (26%).

19. The questions on education in the 2006 Census were modified in a way that affected responses. Data from the 2001 Census and earlier are not comparable with census data from 2006 to 2021.
20. Throughout the paper, the term "non-racialized, non-Indigenous population" refers to individuals who are neither part of a racialized group nor Indigenous. In some instances, this population group is used as a reference point instead of the general Canadian population to provide a more precise reflection of the socioeconomic differences affecting South Asian populations.

Since 2006, the percentage of university degree holders has increased across most South Asian populations, with varying rates of growth based on birthplace. Notably, individuals born in India had the highest increase, from 42% in 2006 to 63% in 2021. In contrast, people born in Pakistan and Bangladesh had a slower pace of growth, while those born in Sri Lanka exhibited a comparable rate of increase.

For further context on whether degrees were obtained in Canada or abroad, please refer to the "Location of study" section. This distinction is particularly relevant when considering employment and income outcomes, as credentials acquired outside Canada may require recognition processes or may impact job opportunities.

Chart 14
South Asian populations aged 25 to 54 with a bachelor's degree or higher, by selected place of birth, Canada, 2006 and 2021

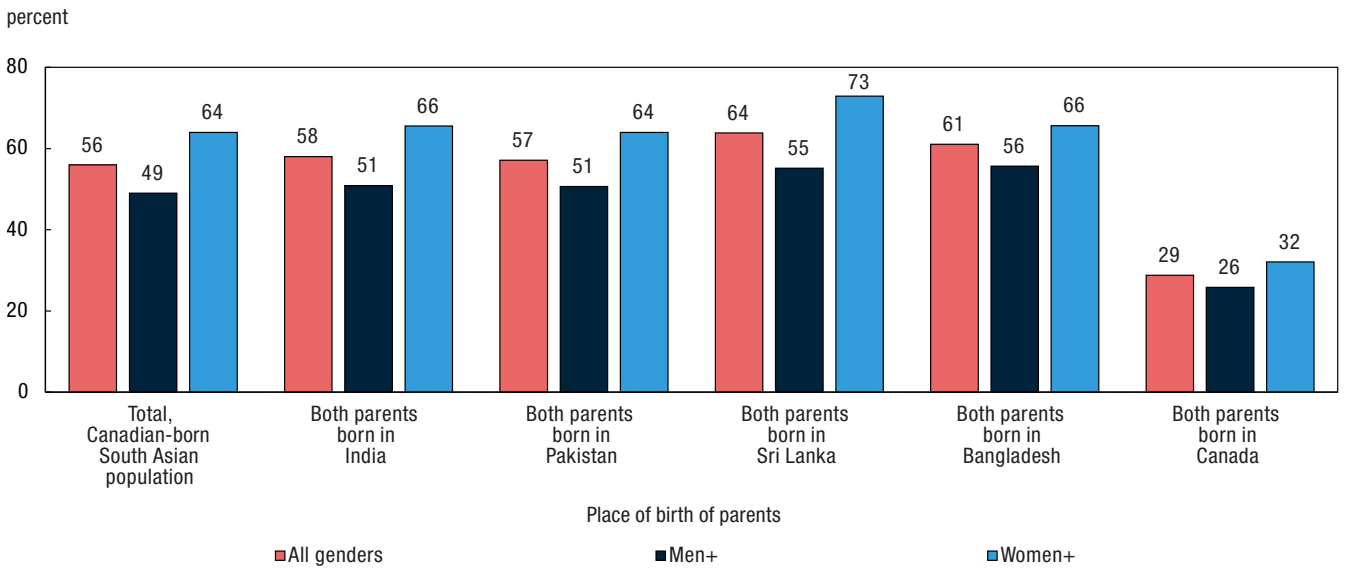


Sources: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2006 and 2021.

Among Canadian-born South Asians aged 25 to 54, over half (56%) held a bachelor's degree or higher in 2021. Gender differences in educational attainment were notable among South Asian populations born in Canada, with women aged 25 to 54 being more likely than men to have completed a university degree, with a 15-percentage point advantage (64% for women, 49% for men). This gap was five times larger than that observed for the overall South Asian population in Canada in 2021, where 60% of women and 57% of men in the same age group had completed a university degree.

In addition to overall gender differences, variations were observed based on parents' place of birth. In 2021, Canadian-born South Asians aged 25 to 54 with Sri Lankan-born parents reported the highest rate of university attainment, with 64% earning a bachelor's degree or higher (Chart 15). This trend was even more pronounced among women, at 73%. Notably, this educational level stands in contrast to the lower proportion of university degree holders among South Asians born in Sri Lanka (29%). Among Canadian-born South Asians, the proportion holding a university degree was lower for those of the third generation or more (29%), compared with those of other generations.

Chart 15
Canadian-born South Asians aged 25 to 54 with a bachelor's degree or higher, by gender and selected place of birth of parents, Canada, 2021



Note: The category "Women+" includes women, girls and some non-binary people, and the category "Men+" includes men, boys and some non-binary people.
Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Location of study

South Asians born in Sri Lanka and outside South Asia were more likely than those born in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh to have obtained their educational credentials in Canada

In the Census of Population, location of study refers to the location of the institution from which a person obtained their highest certificate, diploma or degree. Analysis of location of study is essential for understanding challenges related to credential recognition, professional integration and the socioeconomic contributions of South Asians in Canada.

In 2021, over half (56%) of all South Asians aged 25 to 54 with postsecondary qualifications had obtained them from institutions outside Canada. The proportion of individuals whose highest certificate, diploma or degree was obtained outside Canada varied by place of birth within South Asian populations: 72% for those born in India, 71% for those born in Nepal, and 58% each for those born in Bangladesh and Pakistan. This percentage was lower for Sri Lankan-born individuals, as the majority (67%) earned their educational credentials from a Canadian institution. Furthermore, most South Asians born in regions other than South Asia (65%) attained their highest level of education—be it a certificate, diploma or degree—from a Canadian institution.

A small group of immigrants (7,640) aged 15 and older had previously been international students with study permits (only) before becoming landed immigrants. Among this group, 71% had obtained their educational credentials from a Canadian institution in 2021—a proportion higher than the 34% observed for the overall South Asian immigrant population.

Labour market and income outcomes

This section examines various labour market and income indicators, including employment and unemployment rates, occupations, family income levels, and poverty rates, for the South Asian populations in Canada, categorized by place of birth and, to some extent, by gender. Significant variations are evident across all indicators for different South Asian populations. These variations can be attributed to a range of factors, including period of immigration; admission category; and other dimensions such as gender, mother tongue, education level and location of study.

Employment rate

Employment rates varied from 47% to 89% among South Asian populations in Canada based on place of birth and gender

The employment rate refers to the number of individuals aged 25 to 54 who were employed during the census reference week (May 2 to 8, 2021), expressed as a percentage of the total population in that age group. Analyzing the employment rate of South Asian populations in Canada provides valuable insight into their economic well-being and employment conditions.

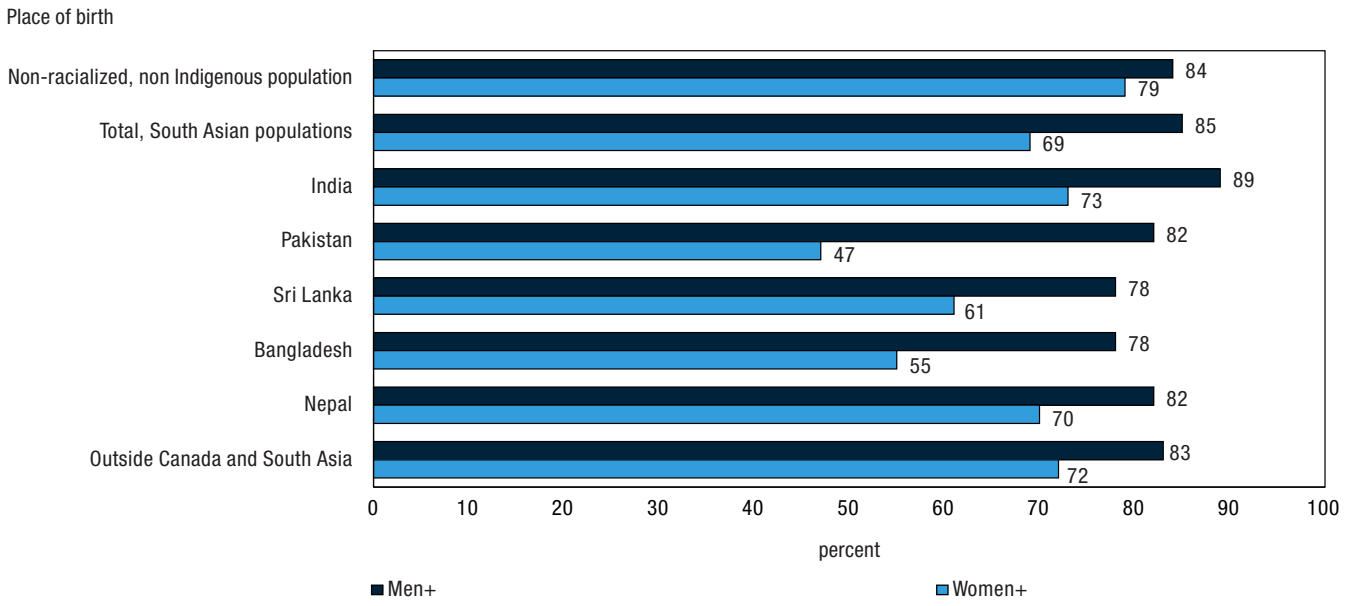
According to the 2021 Census, the overall employment rate of the South Asian populations in Canada aged 25 to 54[21] was 77% during the census reference week,[22] compared with 81% for the non-racialized, non-Indigenous population in the same age group (Chart 16).

South Asian women aged 25 to 54 were less likely to be employed than their male counterparts in 2021 (69% and 85%, respectively). This represents a gender employment gap three times larger than the gap observed between men and women aged 25 to 54 in the non-racialized, non-Indigenous population (84% for men, 79% for women). The difference was even more pronounced among those born in Pakistan (82% for men, 47% for women), Bangladesh (78% for men, 55% for women) and Sri Lanka (78% for men, 61% for women).

Among South Asians born outside Canada in non-South Asian regions, employment rates showed less variation, and the gender employment gap was narrower (72% for women, 83% for men), compared with South Asians born in South Asia.

The overall gender gap in employment within the South Asian population aged 25 to 54 in Canada has narrowed over time, decreasing from a 19 percentage point difference in 2001 (84% for men, 65% for women) to a 16 percentage point difference in 2021 (85% for men, 69% for women).

Chart 16
Employment rate of South Asians aged 25 to 54, by gender and selected place of birth, Canada, 2021



Note: The category "Women+" includes women, girls and some non-binary people, and the category "Men+" includes men, boys and some non-binary people.
Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

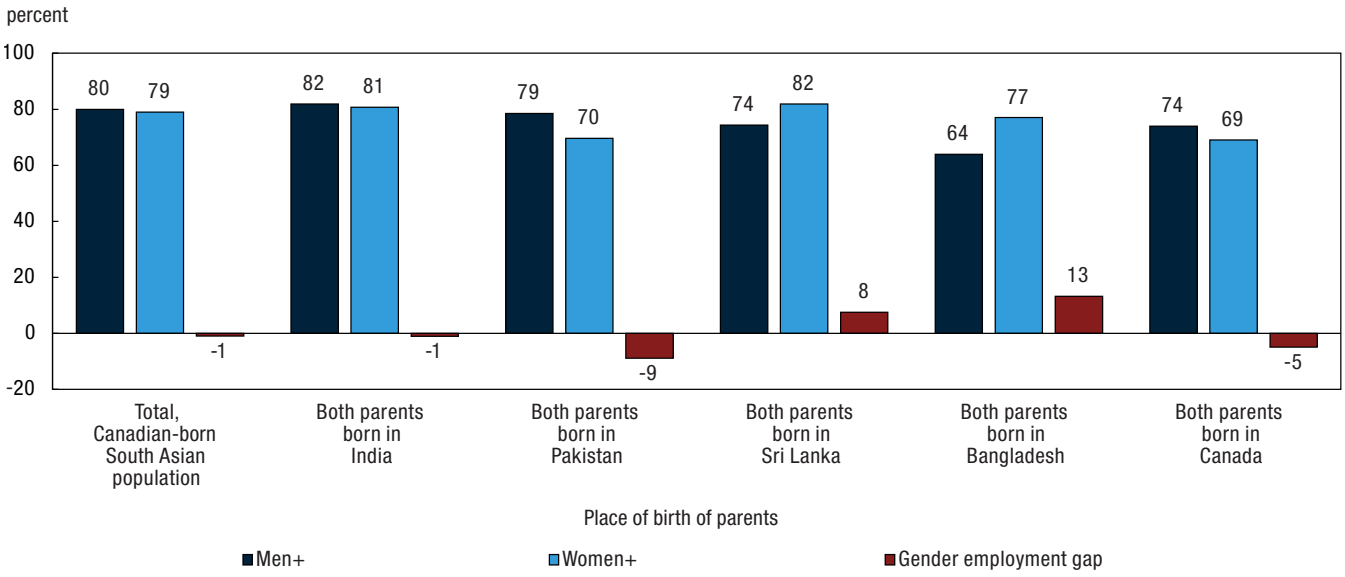
21. Because of significant variation in median ages across different South Asian populations, the labour market section focuses solely on the core working-age population, defined as individuals aged 25 to 54 in 2021.
22. May 2 to 8, 2021.

Among South Asians born in Canada who were 25 to 54 years old in 2021, employment rates were nearly equal for men (80%) and women (79%), with moderate variations across groups by place of birth of parents (Chart 17). Notably, second-generation South Asian men with Bangladeshi-born parents had the lowest employment rate in this age group, at 64%, while men with Indian-born parents and women with Sri Lankan-born parents had the highest employment rates in the 25 to 54 age group, at 82%.

Gender gaps in employment rates were more evident among second-generation South Asians with Pakistani-born parents, reflecting a difference of 9 percentage points (79% for men, 70% for women). Interestingly, an inverted gender gap emerged among those with parents born in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, where women had higher employment rates (77% and 82%, respectively) compared with men (64% and 74%, respectively).

More recent data from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) indicate that in the three months ending in June 2025, the employment rate for South Asians aged 25 to 54 was 82%, nearly matching the 83% observed for the total population in this age group. South Asian men (89%) were more likely to be employed than South Asian women (75%), resulting in a gender gap twice as large as that observed in the overall population (87% for men, 80% for women) (Statistics Canada, 2025d).

Chart 17
Employment rate of Canadian-born South Asians aged 25 to 54, by gender and selected place of birth of parents, Canada, 2021



Note: The category "Women+" includes women, girls and some non-binary people, and the category "Men+" includes men, boys and some non-binary people.
Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Unemployment rate

Unemployment rates varied across South Asian populations based on place of birth and gender

In the 2021 Census, the unemployment rate refers to the number of unemployed people expressed as a percentage of the labour force during the reference week (May 2 to 8, 2021).

In 2021, the overall unemployment rate for the South Asian population in Canada aged 25 to 54 years was 9%. Among this group, women (12%) experienced higher unemployment rates than men (7%). Unemployment rates varied significantly among South Asian populations, particularly based on gender and place of birth. For instance, women in this age group who were born in Pakistan (21%), Bangladesh (20%), Nepal (17%) and Sri Lanka (15%) faced notably higher rates of unemployment.

Among South Asian men aged 25 to 54, those born in Bangladesh (12%) had the highest unemployment rate in 2021, followed by those born in Nepal (11%) and Sri Lanka (11%), compared with South Asian men overall (7%).

Unemployment rates among Canadian-born South Asians aged 25 to 54 varied based on the places of birth of their parents. Men with Bangladeshi-born parents had the highest rate, at 19%, while women with Pakistani-born parents faced the highest rate, at 13%. For other groups, unemployment rates ranged from 7% to 14%, with an overall rate of 9% across both genders.

More recent data from the LFS show that the unemployment rate for South Asian workers aged 25 to 54 rose from 6.8% in June 2024 to 7.8% in June 2025. Meanwhile, the overall unemployment rate for Canada's total population in the same age group increased from 5.2% to 5.7% (Statistics Canada, 2025d).

Occupation

South Asians' occupations varied based on their place of birth

Occupation refers to the type of work performed in a job, encompassing the tasks undertaken to fulfill its duties. In this portrait, data for occupation include people aged 25 to 54 who have worked for pay or in self-employment at any time from January 2020 to May 2021.[23] Examining occupational data of South Asian populations in Canada sheds light on their roles in the labour market and on their economic integration and professional contributions.

The occupational landscape of South Asians in Canada has evolved over time and varies by place of birth. South Asian immigrants who arrived in the early 20th century were primarily employed in the lumber industry, working as labourers and mill owners. From 1960 to 1985, career opportunities expanded to include skilled trades and professional occupations, with South Asian women increasingly participating in a wider range of industries and sectors during this period (Buchignani, 2023).

While the census collects information on over 500 occupations, this analysis focuses on occupations that are either more prevalent among South Asians, compared with the general population, or more frequent within the South Asian populations. In 2021, South Asians aged 25 to 54 were as likely as the general Canadian population to work in health professions or business and finance roles. However, as depicted in charts 18 to 22, they were more likely to be employed as computing professionals; salespersons, cashiers, food support workers and customer service representatives; or truck, bus, taxi and delivery drivers.

The data presented in this section pertain specifically to individuals aged 25 to 54, and the occupations analyzed are based on the 2021 National Occupational Classification (NOC).

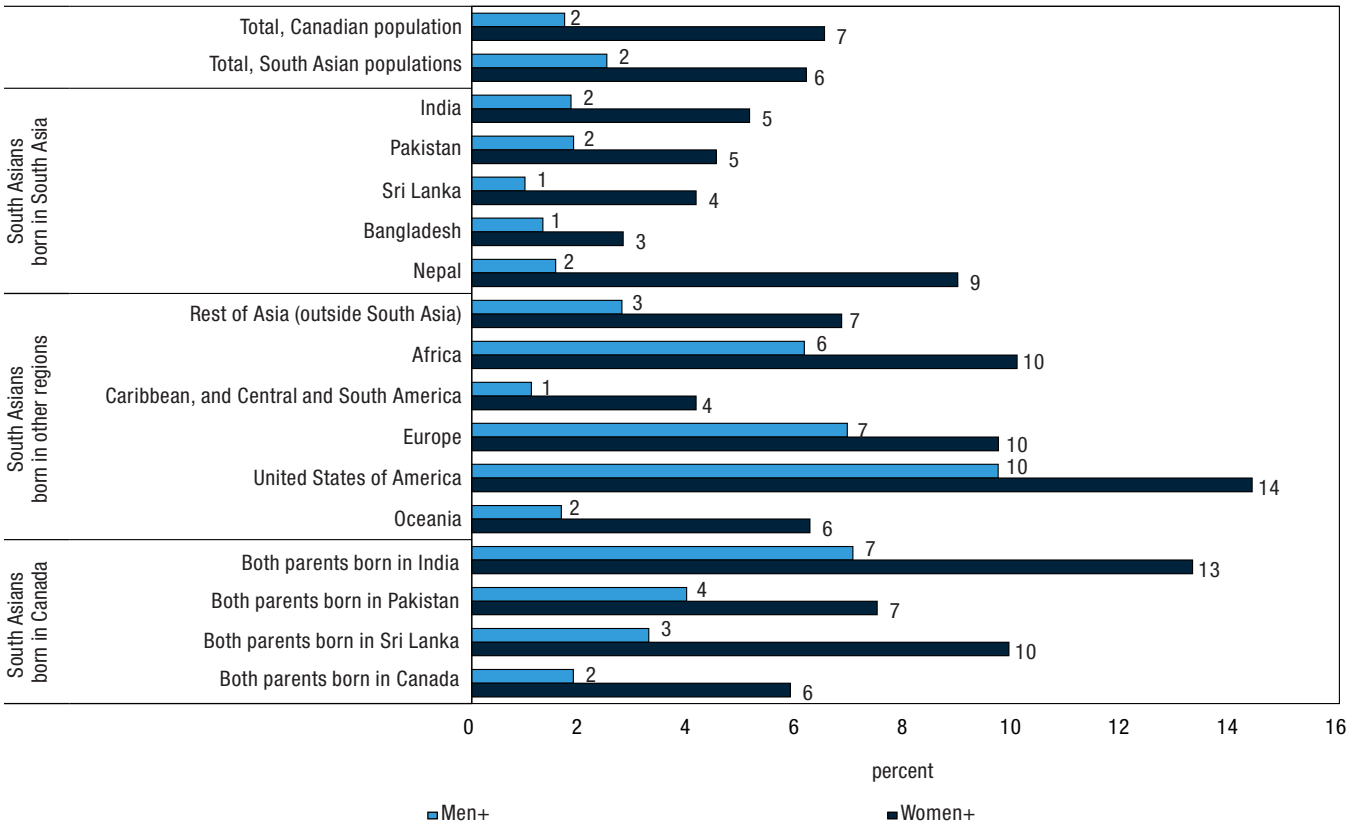
Health occupations

Working as health professionals was three times more prevalent among South Asian women (6%) than men (2%), a trend also observed for the overall Canadian population (7% for women, 2% for men) (Chart 18). Differences based on place of birth were evident. South Asian women born in Nepal (9%) were more likely than other South Asian populations born in South Asia to hold such occupations, mainly working as registered nurses and registered psychiatric nurses. Also, about 11% worked as nurse aides, orderlies and patient service associates (NOC 33102), while for most other South Asian populations, this percentage was 6% or less. Canadian-born South Asian women whose parents were both born in India were even more likely to be health professionals (13%), primarily physicians, veterinarians, or registered nurses and registered psychiatric nurses. About 10% of South Asian women born in Europe or Africa and 14% of South Asian women born in the United States of America were also health professionals.

While these occupations were less common among men, 10% of South Asian men born in the United States of America, along with approximately 6% of those born in Africa, Europe and Canada with both parents born in India, held such jobs—at a rate comparable to that of women in the total population.

23. The occupation data usually relate to the individual's job held during the week of May 2 to May 8, 2021. However, if the person did not work during that week but had worked at some time since January 1, 2020, the information relates to the job held the longest during that period. People with two or more jobs were to report the information for the job at which they worked the most hours.

Chart 18
Proportion of South Asian populations aged 25 to 54 with an occupation employed as health professionals, by selected place of birth and place of birth of parents, Canada, 2021

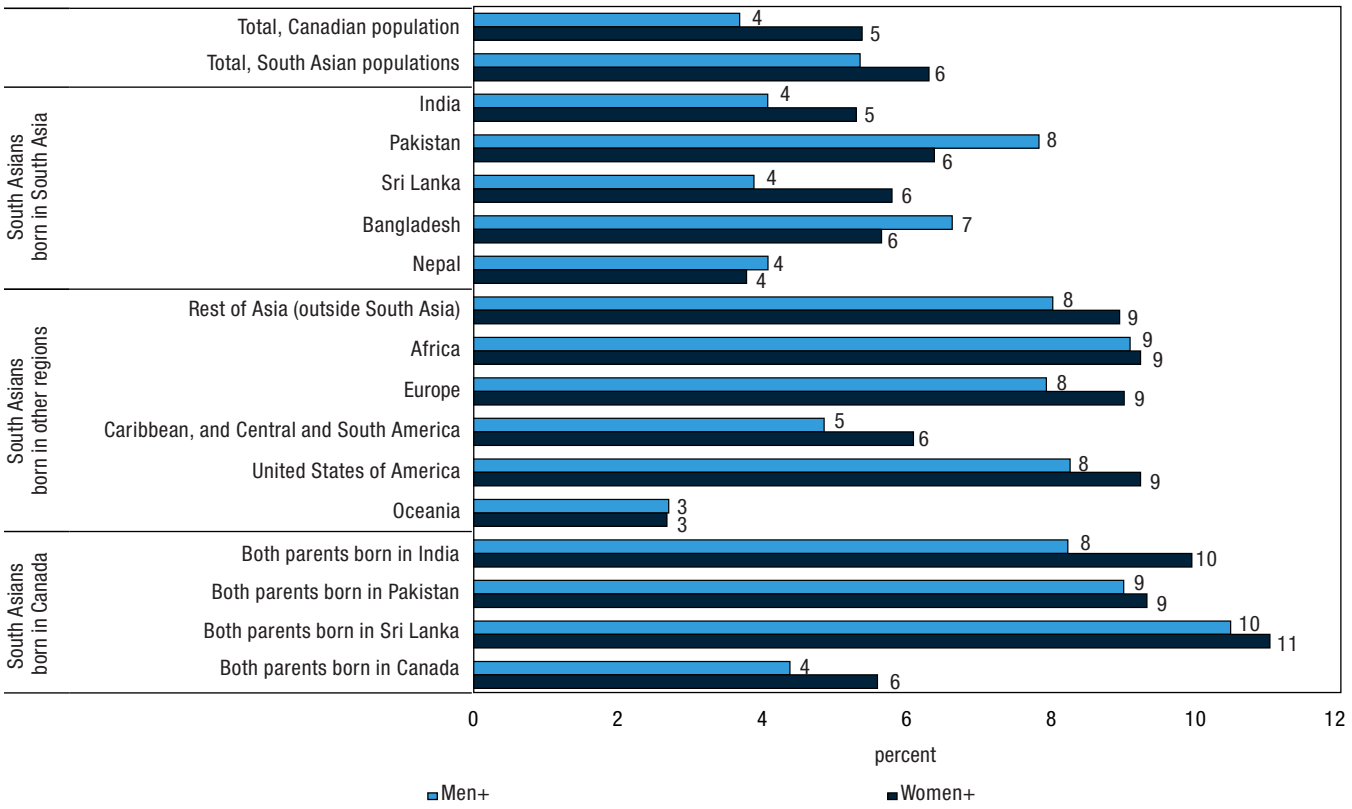


Notes: The category "Women+" includes women, girls and some non-binary people, and the category "Men+" includes men, boys and some non-binary people. Health professionals were defined using code 31 of the 2021 National Occupational Classification. This chart includes people who were employed during the census year (2021) or the previous year (2020).
Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Business and finance occupations

In 2021, 6% of South Asians aged 25 to 54 worked as business and finance professionals, and this is comparable with the overall Canadian population in this age group (5%) (Chart 19). They mostly worked as auditors, accountants and investment professionals. However, when looking at South Asians born in Africa, Europe or the United States of America, this figure was around 9%, with a mix of professional occupations in finance and in business (mainly as human resources and business service professionals). Moreover, second-generation South Asians were more likely than the overall South Asian population to work as business and finance professionals, specifically those born to Sri Lankan-born parents (11% for women, 10% for men) and second-generation South Asians with parents born in India (10% for women, 8% for men), with occupations similar to those of first-generation South Asians born outside South Asia.

Chart 19
Proportion of South Asian populations aged 25 to 54 with an occupation employed as business and finance professionals, by selected place of birth and place of birth of parents, Canada, 2021

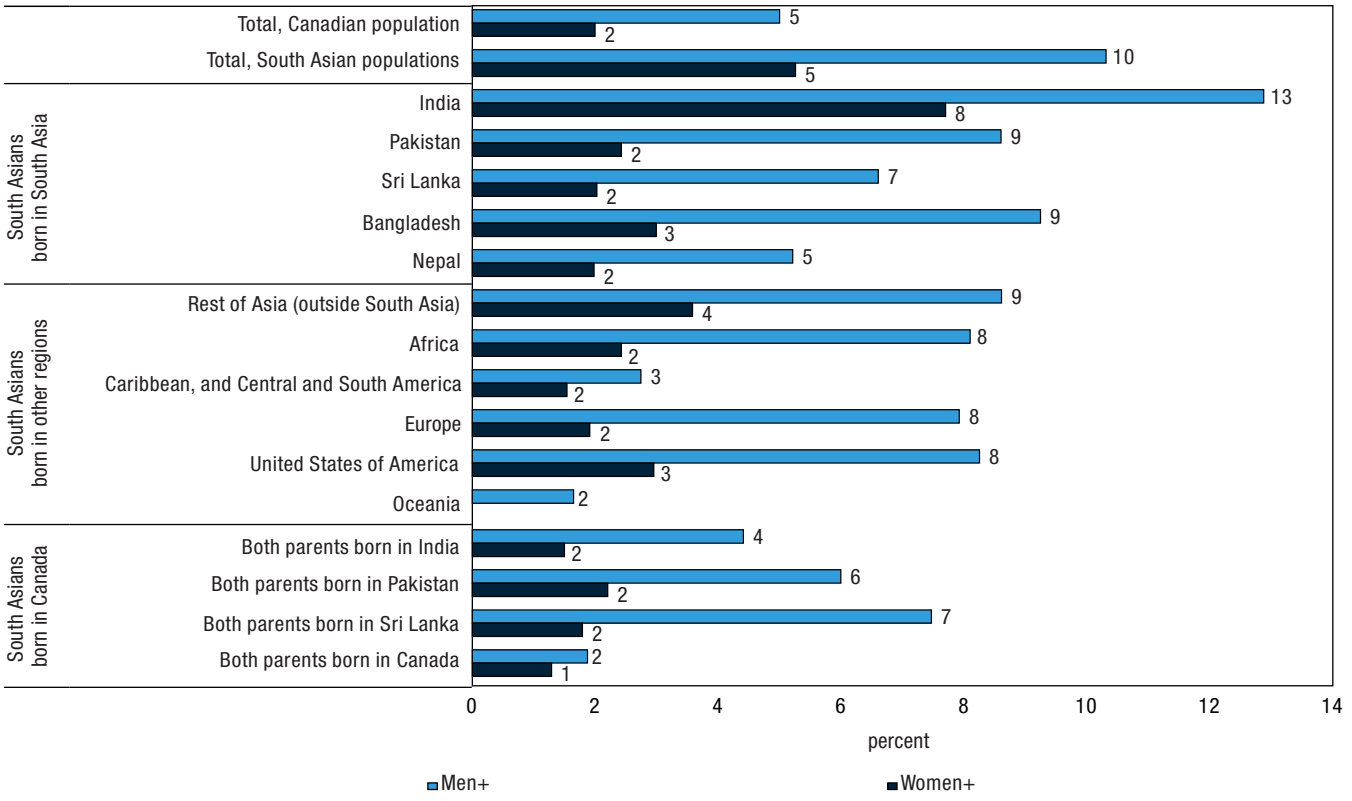


Notes: The category "Women+" includes women, girls and some non-binary people, and the category "Men+" includes men, boys and some non-binary people. Business and finance professionals were defined using code 11 of the 2021 National Occupational Classification. This chart includes people who were employed during the census year (2021) or the previous year (2020).
Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Computing occupations

Computing occupations were more prevalent among South Asians aged 25 to 54 (10% for men, 5% for women) than among the overall Canadian population in this age group (5% for men, 2% for women) (Chart 20). South Asians born in India stood out with 13% of men and 8% of women working as computing professionals. These professions were less prevalent among South Asians born in Canada, much like in the overall population. Computing professions included, for the most part, information systems specialists, software engineers and designers, and software developers and programmers.

Chart 20
Proportion of South Asian populations aged 25 to 54 with an occupation employed as computing professionals, by selected place of birth and place of birth of parents, Canada, 2021

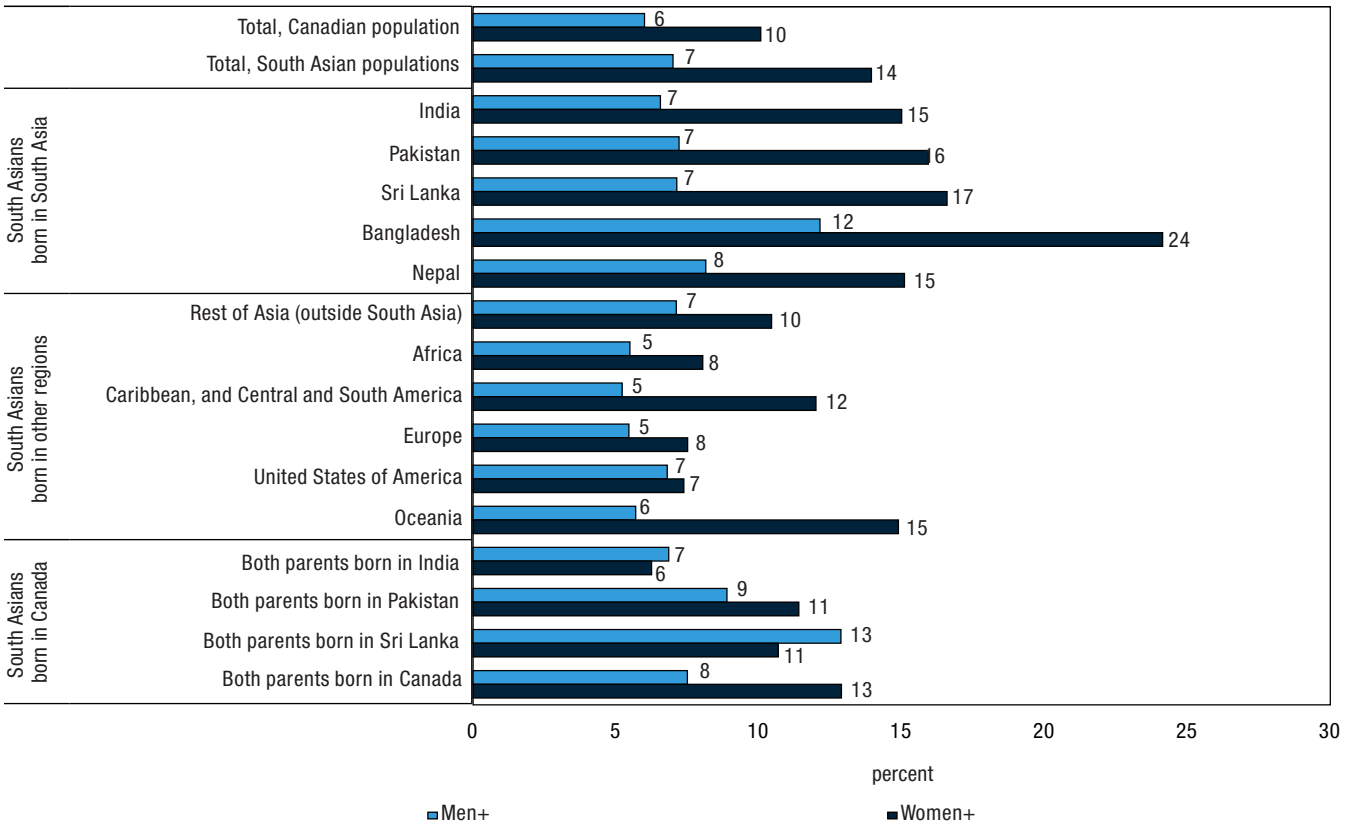


Notes: The category "Women+" includes women, girls and some non-binary people, and the category "Men+" includes men, boys and some non-binary people. Computing professionals were defined using codes 2122 and 2123 of the 2021 National Occupational Classification. This chart includes people who were employed during the census year (2021) or the previous year (2020).
Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Salespersons, cashiers, food support workers and customer service representatives

South Asian women (14%) were twice as likely as men (7%) to work as salespersons, cashiers, food support workers or customer service representatives (Chart 21). This gap is more pronounced than that of the total Canadian population (10% for women, 6% for men). The proportion of South Asian women working in these occupations varied across groups based on their place of birth, ranging from 15% for those born in India to 24% for those born in Bangladesh. Among South Asian men, the highest percentage was observed among those born in Bangladesh (12%).

Chart 21
Proportion of South Asian populations aged 25 to 54 with an occupation employed as salespersons, cashiers, food support workers or customer service representatives, by selected place of birth and place of birth of parents, Canada, 2021

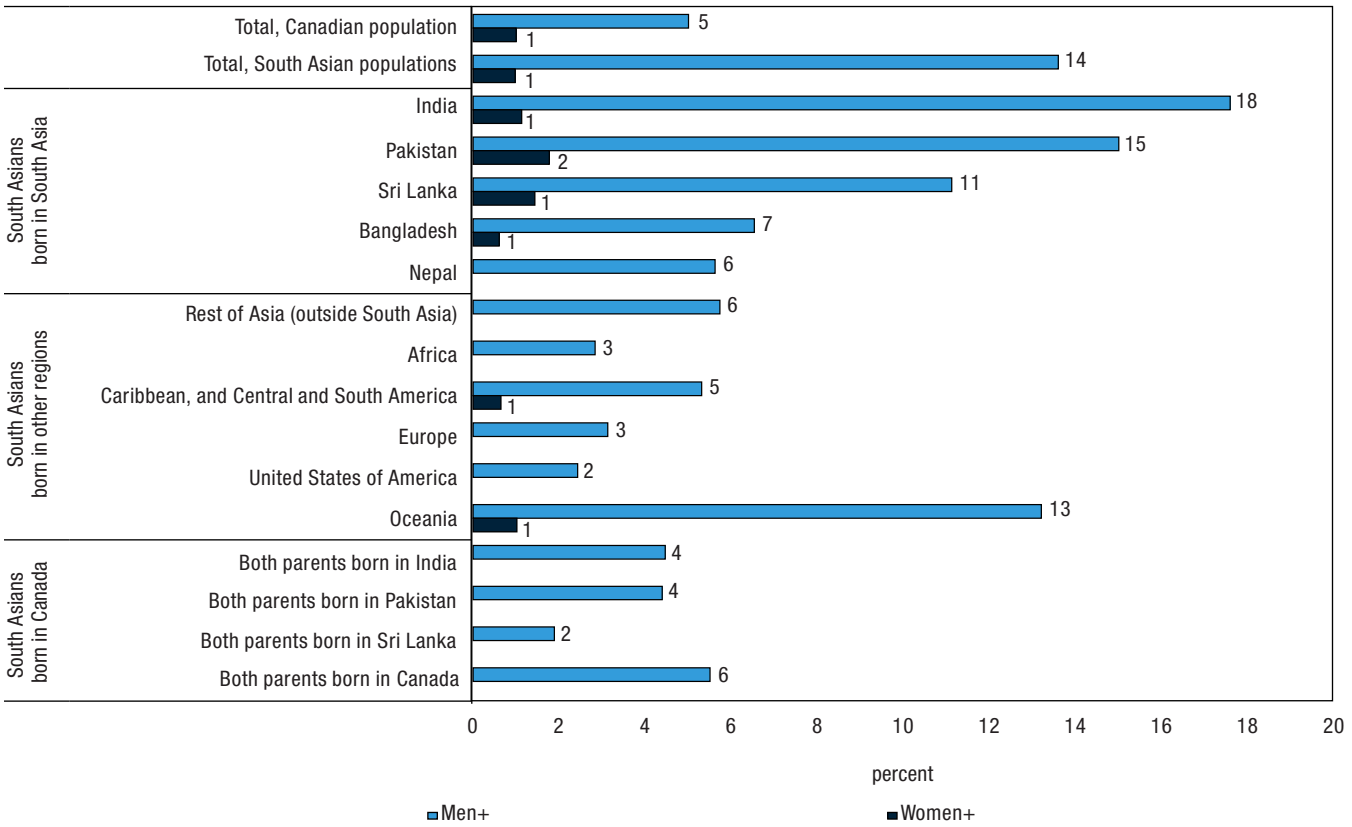


Notes: The category "Women+" includes women, girls and some non-binary people, and the category "Men+" includes men, boys and some non-binary people. Salespersons, cashiers, food support workers and customer service representatives were defined using codes 6410, 6440, 6510 and 6520 of the 2021 National Occupational Classification. This chart includes people who were employed during the census year (2021) and the previous year (2020).
Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Truck, bus, taxi and delivery drivers

A notable proportion of South Asian men aged 25 to 54 (14%) worked as truck, bus, taxi and delivery drivers, compared with 5% of men in the total population (Chart 22). These occupations were more common among those born in India (18%), Pakistan (15%) and Oceania (13%). For most groups born outside Canada in places other than South Asia, this figure was 6% or less. Similarly, among Canadian-born South Asians, 6% or fewer held such jobs.

Chart 22
Proportion of South Asian populations aged 25 to 54 with an occupation employed as truck, bus, taxi and delivery drivers, by selected place of birth and place of birth of parents, Canada, 2021



Notes: The category "Women+" includes women, girls and some non-binary people, and the category "Men+" includes men, boys and some non-binary people. Truck, bus, taxi and delivery drivers were defined using codes 73300, 73301, 75200 and 75201 of the 2021 National Occupational Classification. This chart includes people who were employed during the census year (2021) and the previous year (2020).
Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Beyond the occupations mentioned earlier, others stood out as significant among specific populations. Among South Asian women aged 25 to 54, approximately 9% of those born in Nepal, 6% of those born in Bangladesh, 5% of those born in Pakistan and 2% of the total population of South Asian women in this age group worked as early childhood educators and assistants (NOC 42202). Additionally, around 10% of South Asian women born in the United States of America held professional occupations in education services (NOC 412). For Canadian-born South Asian women, the percentage was 8%, while it was 7% for those born in Europe and 6% for those born in Africa. In comparison, 4% of the overall population of South Asian women aged 25 to 54 had professional occupations in education services.

Overqualification

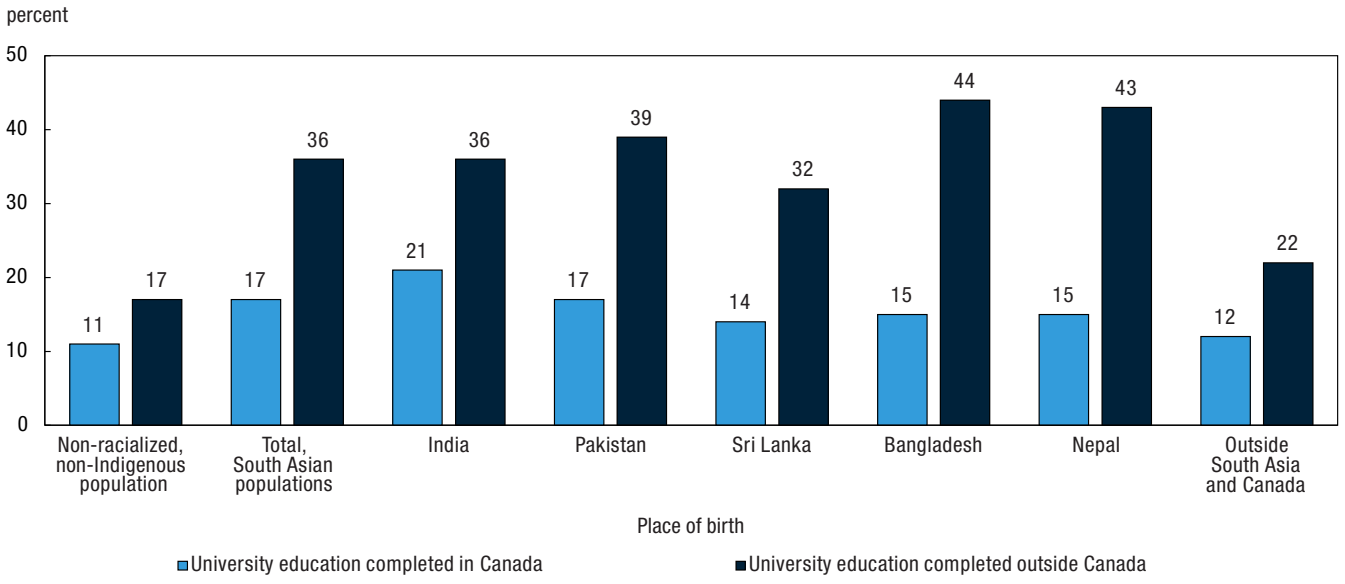
Nearly one-third of South Asians in Canada held credentials that exceeded the requirements of their employment, particularly among those born in Bangladesh and Nepal

Based on Statistics Canada's definition of overqualification—where individuals with a university degree (bachelor's or higher) are employed in occupations requiring no more than a high school education—a significant proportion of South Asians in Canada were found to be overqualified for their current employment roles.

According to the 2021 Census, 29% of South Asians aged 25 to 54 were overqualified for their job, compared with 12% of the non-racialized, non-Indigenous population. In other words, these individuals were over twice as likely to have a bachelor's degree or higher but work in jobs requiring only a high school diploma or less. Such underemployment was more notable among South Asian non-permanent residents: about 40% of those with a bachelor's degree or higher worked in jobs requiring qualifications below their educational level.

When examining differences based on whether their credentials were obtained in or outside Canada (see Chart 23), 44% of Bangladeshi-born South Asians aged 25 to 54 with university degrees earned outside Canada were employed in positions requiring only a high school diploma or less. In comparison, this figure was 15% among their counterparts who obtained their degrees in Canada. Similar trends were observed among those born in Nepal (43%), Pakistan (39%), India (36%) and Sri Lanka (32%) who completed their bachelor's degrees or higher outside Canada, as they were more likely to be employed in such positions than their counterparts who completed their university degree in Canada.

Chart 23
Overqualification rate of South Asians aged 25 to 54, by location of study and selected place of birth, Canada, 2021



Note: People with a bachelor's degree or higher who, during the census year (2021) or the previous year (2020), held a position typically requiring a high school diploma or equivalency certificate or less are considered overqualified.
Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Income

Median after-tax economic family income varied from $42,000 to $61,000 across South Asian populations based on their place of birth

The concept of adjusted after-tax income of economic family is used to measure income in this portrait. For this income concept, a person's income is measured as the after-tax income of their economic family (individuals who are related to each other and live in the same household), adjusted for the number of people in the economic family. The adjustment for family size is because of economies of scale. For example, two people living together would typically have lower expenses for housing than two people living separately. The adjustment for family size is done by dividing the after-tax income of the economic family by the square root of the number of people in the economic family. This adjustment allows income to be analyzed in a comparable way between population groups with different family sizes.

In 2020, the median adjusted after-tax family income for the overall South Asian population[24] was approximately $51,000, compared with $54,000 for the non-racialized, non-Indigenous population. However, the median income varied among South Asian populations based on place of birth. Those born in Europe and Africa earned higher median after-tax incomes, each at $61,000. In contrast, individuals born in South Asia had lower median incomes, ranging from $42,000 for those born in Bangladesh to $50,000 for those born in India and Sri Lanka (Chart 24).

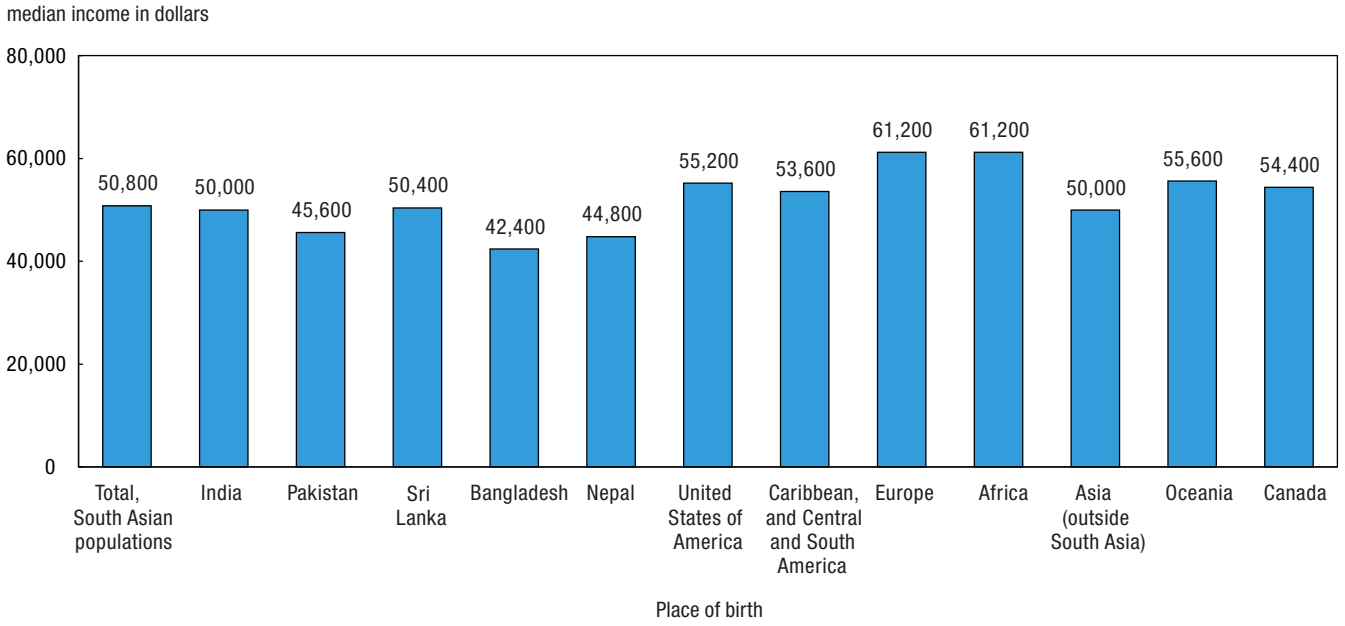
24. In this section, family means economic family. The term "economic family" refers to a group of two or more individuals who live in the same dwelling and are related to each other by blood, marriage, common-law union, adoption or a foster relationship. By definition, all persons who are members of a census family are also members of an economic family. The concept of the economic family is broader. For example, two co-resident census families who are related are considered one economic family, co-resident siblings not part of a census family are considered one economic family, and nieces or nephews living with aunts or uncles are also considered one economic family. The data on economic family in this section do not refer to a South Asian economic family; rather, the data are reported at the individual level.

Among Canadian-born South Asians, the median income was $54,000, which is just as high as that of the non-racialized, non-Indigenous population. However, their income levels differed depending on the place of birth of their parents. Those whose parents were both born in Canada (third generation or more) had the highest median income, at $65,000, followed by individuals whose parents were both born in India, with a median income of $56,000. Income levels varied further, ranging from $41,000 for those whose parents were both born in Bangladesh to $49,000 for those whose parents were both born in Sri Lanka.

To provide more context on the income situation, the number of earners in a family provides supplementary insights. Among individuals aged 25 to 54, South Asians (78%) were more likely to live in families with two or more earners, compared with the overall population (69%). This proportion varied among South Asian populations, depending on place of birth: 82% for Nepal; 81% for India; 78% for Canada; 74% for Sri Lanka; 73% for Europe; 69% for Bangladesh; 69% for Pakistan; 59% for Africa; and 55% for the Caribbean, and Central and South America.

Using more recent data, the Canadian Income Survey (CIS) shows that the median annual income (in 2023 constant dollars) of South Asians aged 15 and older declined from $39,000 in 2020 to $36,000 in 2023. Similarly, the median total income of the non-racialized, non-Indigenous population fell from $47,800 in 2020 to $47,100 in 2023, leading to a widening income gap between the two groups—from 18% in 2020 to 24% in 2023 (Statistics Canada, 2025c).

Chart 24
Median after-tax family income of South Asian populations, adjusted for family size, by selected place of birth, Canada, 2020



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Poverty (low-income status)

Among those aged 25 to 54, South Asians born in South Asia were more likely to live in poverty than those born outside South Asia

The poverty rate is the proportion or percentage of units whose income falls below a specified poverty line, based on the low-income line (LIL). A person's low-income status is determined by comparing their economic family income with the appropriate LIL, based on the Market Basket Measure (MBM).[25] According to the MBM, a family is in poverty if, given its size and region of residence, it does not have enough income to buy a set of goods and services considered to represent a modest, basic standard of living (Statistics Canada, 2022b). In other words, "persons in low income" (those in poverty) refers to individuals who belong to low-income families, including those living alone with income below the LIL (Statistics Canada, 2016). For the 2021 Census, the reference period for poverty data is the 2020 calendar year.

25. Statistics Canada, 2021a.

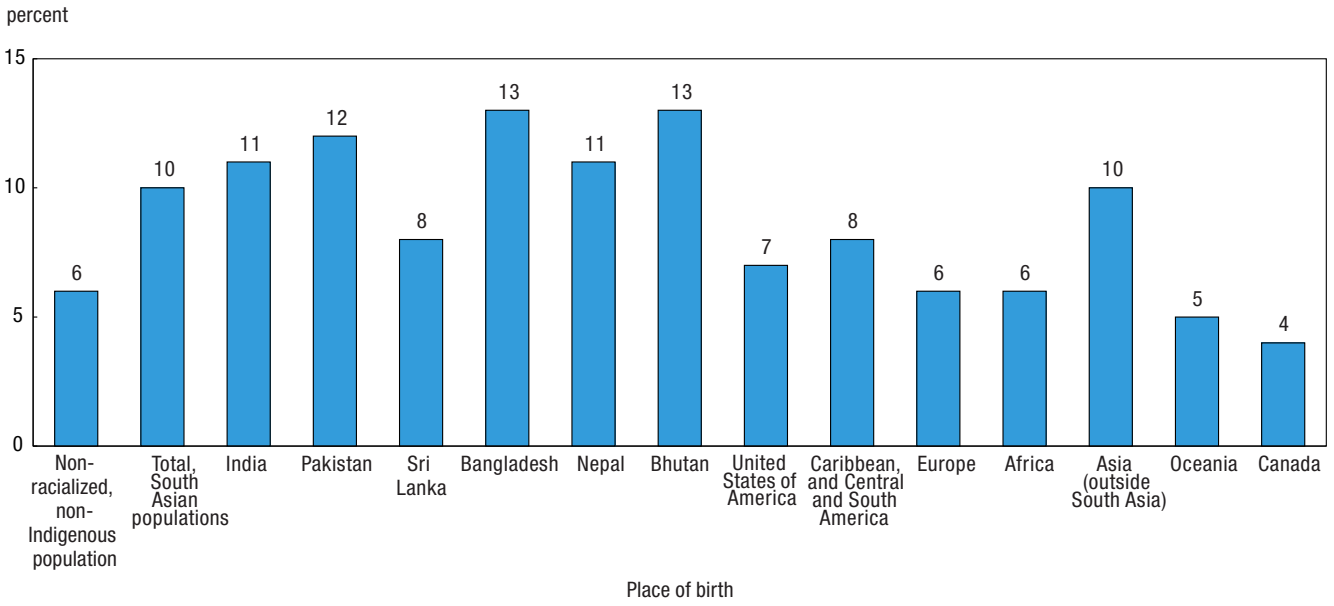
According to 2021 Census data, 10% of South Asians aged 25 to 54 lived in poverty, including those in low-income families or living alone. This rate was higher than that of the non-racialized, non-Indigenous population in the same age group (6%) (Chart 25).

Differences in poverty rates were evident when accounting for place of birth within the South Asian populations. Overall, South Asians aged 25 to 54 born in South Asia experienced a higher rate of poverty (11%) than their counterparts born in Canada (4%) or in non-South Asian regions outside Canada (8%).

More specifically, South Asians aged 25 to 54 born in Bangladesh (13%) and Bhutan (13%) experienced higher poverty rates, followed by those born in Pakistan (12%), compared with any other South Asian populations. Also, the poverty rate was relatively higher for those born in Asia (outside South Asia) (10%), compared with those born in Africa (6%), Europe (6%) and Oceania (5%).

Using more recent data from the 2022 CIS, South Asian populations had a poverty rate of 11.5% in 2022 compared to 7.0% in 2021. Overall, the national poverty rate was 9.9% in 2022, rising from 7.4% in 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2024a).

Chart 25
Poverty rate of South Asians aged 25 to 54 based on 2020 economic family income, by selected place of birth, Canada, 2021



Note: The poverty rate is the percentage of people who live in poverty based on the 2018-base Market Basket Measure.
Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Spotlight on South Asian youth aged 15 to 24 in Canada

In 2021, there were 411,455 South Asian youth aged 15 to 24 in Canada. South Asian youth represented 16% of the total South Asian population in Canada and nearly 10% of all Canadian youth, who numbered 4,181,060 in 2021.

Among South Asian youth in Canada, there was a higher proportion of young men (55%) than young women (45%). The difference in gender composition seems to be related to migratory patterns. About 30% of South Asian youth were non-permanent residents in 2021, most of whom were likely international students, with some also holding work permits. Among these non-permanent residents, 61% were men, while 39% were women.

Over half of South Asian youth (58%, or 237,155 individuals) were born outside Canada, with the largest numbers coming from India (163,180), Pakistan (28,890), Bangladesh (9,420), Sri Lanka (6,535) and Nepal (3,360). The remaining 42% were born in Canada, with over 93% being of the second generation.

In 2020, nearly two-thirds (64%) of South Asian youth had some employment income, slightly less than the overall youth population in Canada (68%). Among them, 62% (164,740 individuals) worked part time or for part of the year, compared with 67% for the overall population aged 15 to 24.[1] In 2020, South Asian youth earned a median of $10,700 working part time and $32,000 working full time. In comparison, the total youth population had a slightly lower median income for part-time work, at $9,500, but a slightly higher median income for full-time work, at $33,200. According to Canada's official poverty measure, the Market Basket Measure, the poverty rate among South Asian youth was 21%, compared with 12% for the overall youth population in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2024c).

According to data from the Labour Force Survey, the employment rate among South Asians aged 15 to 24 was 56% in June 2025, with a gender gap of 6 percentage points (58% for men, 52% for women).

Highlight box on multiracial South Asians

People who were both South Asian and members of another racialized group were excluded from the demographic and socioeconomic sections of this paper because the total population reporting as South Asian and another racialized group cannot be identified in a comparable way across census cycles. Also, this is consistent with the methodology used in the rest of the portrait series.

Nevertheless, this highlight box provides details on South Asians who were also members of another racialized group, i.e., multiracial South Asians. Throughout this section, statistics for people who, for example, reported as South Asian and Black, include people who belonged to additional groups.

In 2021, about 83,300 individuals in Canada reported as South Asian and at least one other racialized group in the census. This group was diverse and included people from a wide variety of backgrounds. They were predominantly young adults, with a median age of 25.

Including overlaps involving three or more racialized groups, 32% of multiracial South Asians in Canada identified as Black, 19% as Chinese, 14% as Southeast Asian, 12% as Filipino, 12% as West Asian, 11% as Latin American, 9% as Arab, 3% as Korean and 3% as Japanese. Additionally, 14% reported as South Asian along with a write-in response of another racialized group, without identifying as any other racialized group. The write-in responses for this population were mainly associated with the Caribbean, and Central and South America (e.g., West Indian, Caribbean or Guyanese) or Oceania (e.g., Fijian).

Overall, 57% of multiracial South Asians were born in Canada (including those who provided write-in responses). The remaining 43% were born outside Canada: 10% in South Asia and 33% in other places outside South Asia—mostly the Caribbean, South and Central America (13%); the rest of Asia (11%); or Africa (5%).

26. Full-time employment refers to working 30 hours or more per week; part-time employment refers to working less than 30 hours per week.

Parental places of birth of multiracial South Asians varied considerably. About one-quarter either had both parents born in the Caribbean, and Central and South America (19%) or one parent born in Canada and the other in the Caribbean, and Central and South America (6%). This was also the case for 46% of multiracial South Asians who reported as South Asian along with only a write-in response, 42% of the those who reported as South Asian and Black, 45% of those who reported as South Asian and Latin American, and 26% of those who reported as South Asian and Chinese. The main countries of birth were Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, and Jamaica.

For those who reported as West Asian in addition to South Asian, about 41% had one or both parents born in West Central Asia or the Middle East (mainly Afghanistan and Iran). Among South Asians who also reported as Southeast Asian, 44% had one or both parents born in Southeast Asia (mainly Vietnam and the Philippines). Meanwhile, two-third (64%) of South Asians who also reported as Filipino had one or both parents born in Southeast Asia (mainly the Philippines). The parental birthplaces of multiracial South Asians were more varied among those who reported as South Asian and Arab, South Asian and Korean, or South Asian and Japanese, although they made up smaller proportions of the overall multiracial South Asian population.

Conclusion

South Asian populations in Canada are diverse, multifaceted, and shaped by a varied and rich immigration history over many years. This portrait draws primarily on data from the 2021 Census and provides an in-depth analysis of distinct groups within the broader South Asian population, categorized by their place of birth or the place of birth of their parents, to offer a nuanced perspective of their demographic characteristics and socioeconomic outcomes.

The South Asian populations in Canada can be broadly divided into three groups. The majority—about 6 in 10—were born in South Asia. South Asians originating from regions outside South Asia and Canada made up a smaller group, around 1 in 10, while those born in Canada made up a significant portion—roughly 3 in 10.

Among South Asians born in South Asia, the largest group was born in India, followed by Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, with smaller numbers born in Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives. Their immigration to Canada largely took place after 2000, although for those born in Sri Lanka, it occurred primarily in the 1990s or earlier. Most South Asians born in South Asia immigrated through economic programs, while South Asians from Sri Lanka and Bhutan were more likely to have immigrated as refugees (since 1980). The most commonly reported ethnic or cultural origins were tied to their birthplace, such as Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, Bangladeshi or Nepali. They reported diverse religious affiliations, with some groups immigrating to Canada from religious minorities in their place of birth. They exhibited linguistic diversity, reporting several mother tongues. Although educational attainment was generally high in terms of the proportions of those holding a bachelor's degree or higher in 2021, it was lower for those born in Sri Lanka and Bhutan. Despite these relatively high educational attainment rates, some challenges, such as unemployment, overqualification and poverty, existed for South Asians born in South Asia, according to the 2021 Census data examined in this portrait.

South Asian immigrants born outside South Asia also formed a distinct population. They were born in diverse regions, such as Africa (mainly in Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda); Oceania (primarily Fiji); Europe (mostly the United Kingdom); the Caribbean, and Central and South America (such as Guyana, and Trinidad and Tobago); and the United States of America. Their ethnic or cultural backgrounds were also diverse. Some reported non-South Asian ethnic or cultural origins, such as Guyanese or Fijian, and were more likely to report multiple ethnic origins. They were also more likely to report English as their mother tongue (alone or in combination with other languages), compared with South Asians born in South Asia. South Asians born outside Canada in non-South Asian regions mostly consisted of older populations, particularly those from Africa; Oceania; and the Caribbean, and Central and South America. Their immigration waves peaked before the 2000s, largely immigrating to Canada through economic or family-sponsorship programs. Their educational attainment is somewhat comparable to that of South Asians born in South Asia, but they tended to have better labour market outcomes (in terms of their occupations, higher employment and lower unemployment rates), along with relatively smaller gender gaps.

South Asians born in Canada represented nearly 3 in 10 people in the total South Asian population, with the largest groups having both parents born in South Asia, mainly in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. Canadian-born South Asians were more likely to report multiple mother tongues, ethnic origins and diverse religious affiliations, compared with South Asians born outside Canada. Those belonging to the third generation or more (both parents born in Canada) were also more likely to report no religion or secular perspectives. Over half of Canadian-born South Asians held bachelor's degrees or higher, with women more likely to have completed a university degree than their male counterparts. South Asian men and women who were born in Canada had similar employment rates. Their median income (adjusted after-tax economic family income) was similar to that of the non-racialized, non-Indigenous population, while their poverty rate was slightly lower than that of the non-racialized, non-Indigenous population.

Across the three groups discussed in this portrait, differences in population size, age, household structure, religious affiliation, education levels and labour market characteristics highlight the diversity within the South Asian population. Rather than a monolithic group, this population represents a mosaic of cultures and backgrounds, spanning multiple continents. Recognizing these differences allows for deeper insight into the unique experiences of South Asians in Canada.

Further research on South Asian populations is needed to build on the findings of this portrait and to better understand their diverse experiences and challenges. Some examples include the situation of older South Asians, the social inclusion and discrimination reported by South Asians, and the experiences of multiracial South Asians. Additionally, limited data exist on South Asians who arrived in Canada for work or study who later obtained citizenship or left permanently. Examining these data could provide insights into settlement and integration challenges, as well as the factors influencing decisions. Employment conditions among South Asian populations varied, potentially influenced by access to language training and upskilling, especially among immigrant women. Further analysis could examine how gender affects household caregiving and earning dynamics across various household structures observed among different South Asian populations and places of birth. Additionally, the labour market situation of younger South Asians who may have delayed their entry into the workforce because of extended schooling could be explored.

Data sources

This analysis was conducted principally using data from the 2021 Census of Population. Data from earlier years of the Census of Population (1996 to 2016) long-form questionnaire and the 2011 National Household Survey were also used. Data on the population groups and other sociodemographic variables are collected through the long-form census questionnaire and refer to individuals in private households in occupied private dwellings.

In 2021 and 2016, a sample of 25% of Canadian households received the long-form census questionnaire. In 2011, 33% received the voluntary National Household Survey, and in 2006 and 2001, 20% received the long-form census questionnaire.

The long-form census questionnaire covers the population in private households (that is, excludes those in collective dwellings, such as nursing homes, rooming houses, military bases or prisons). The target population of the portrait when using census data was the population in private households in occupied private dwellings, meaning the portrait also excluded people who were living outside Canada on government, military or diplomatic postings.

The long-form census questionnaire includes Canadian citizens (by birth and naturalization), permanent residents, and non-permanent residents and their families living with them in Canada. Non-permanent residents are people who hold a work or student permit or who have claimed refugee status (asylum claimants, protected persons and related groups).

Foreign residents, such as representatives of a foreign government assigned to an embassy, high commission or other diplomatic mission in Canada, as well as residents of another country who are visiting Canada temporarily, are not covered by the census.

Another data source included in this portrait is the Labour Force Survey (LFS), which is conducted monthly. Its reference week for information on employment and unemployment is usually the week with the 15th day of the month. It covers a sample of people aged 15 years and older whose usual place of residence is in Canada. It excludes people living on reserves, full-time members of the regular Armed Forces and individuals living in institutions (including inmates of penal institutions and patients in hospitals and nursing homes) (Statistics Canada, 2025b).

The Canadian Income Survey (CIS) was also used as an additional data source. The CIS is a cross-sectional survey designed to provide a detailed portrait of Canadians' income, sources of earnings and household financial characteristics, including those of racialized populations. Conducted annually from January to June following the reference year, it covers individuals aged 15 and older whose usual residence is in Canada. The CIS helps assess economic disparities across demographic groups by integrating data from the LFS and tax records, including tax slips, beginning with the 2021 reference year (Statistics Canada, 2025a).

Concepts and definitions

The definitions of all concepts used in this portrait can be found in the *Dictionary, Census of Population, 2021* – Complete A to Z index (Statistics Canada, 2021a).

Adjusted after-tax income of economic family for all people: Adjusted after-tax income refers to after-tax income of the economic family that is adjusted for economies of scale. The concept of adjusted after-tax income of economic family is used to measure income in this portrait series. In this income concept, a person's income is measured as the after-tax income of their economic family (people who are related to each other and live in the same household), adjusted for the number of people in the economic family. The adjustment for family size is because of economies of scale: for example, two people living together would typically have lower expenses for things such as housing than two people living separately. The adjustment for family size is done by dividing the after-tax income of the economic family by the square root of the number of people in the economic family. This adjustment allows income to be analyzed in a comparable way between population groups with different family sizes.

Admission category of immigrant: This concept refers to the name of the immigration program or group of programs under which an immigrant has been granted for the first time the right to live in Canada permanently by immigration authorities. In the 2021 Census of Population, data on admission category are available for immigrants who were admitted to Canada between January 1, 1980, and May 11, 2021. Data on admission categories were obtained from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada's administrative records (Statistics Canada, 2021a).

The three broad categories of this variable are economic immigrants, immigrants sponsored by family and refugees.

The "Economic immigrants" category includes immigrants who have been selected for their ability to contribute to Canada's economy through their ability to meet labour market needs, own and manage or build a business, make a substantial investment, create their own employment, or meet specific provincial or territorial labour market needs.

The "Immigrants sponsored by family category" includes immigrants who were sponsored by a Canadian citizen or permanent resident and were granted permanent resident status based on their relationship either as the spouse, partner, parent, grandparent, child or other relative of the sponsor. The terms "family class" or "family reunification" are sometimes used in this portrait to refer to this category.

The "Refugees" category includes immigrants who were granted permanent resident status based on a well-founded fear of returning to their home country. This includes people who had a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or for political opinion (Geneva Convention refugees) as well as persons who had been seriously and personally affected by civil war or armed conflict or had suffered a massive violation of human rights. Some refuges were in Canada when they applied for refugee protection for themselves and their family members (either with them in Canada or abroad). Others were abroad and were referred for resettlement to Canada by the United Nations Refugee Agency, another designated referral organization or private sponsors. Refugees include resettled refugees and protected persons who have been granted permanent resident status.

Age at immigration: This concept refers to the age at which an immigrant first obtained landed immigrant or permanent resident status.

Applicant type: Applicant type refers to whether an immigrant was identified as the principal applicant, the spouse or the dependant on their application for permanent residence. "Principal applicants" include immigrants who were identified as the principal applicant on their application for permanent residence, while "secondary applicants" include immigrants who were identified as the married spouse, the common-law or conjugal partner or the dependant of the principal applicant on their application for permanent residence.

Canadian-born individuals: In this portrait, this term refers to people born in Canada, irrespective of their immigrant status. Some non-immigrants were born outside Canada (for example, children of Canadian citizens who were living abroad or travelling when their child was born), and a small number of immigrants were born in Canada (for example, children of foreign diplomatic personnel).

Educational attainment: This term refers to the highest level of education an individual has completed. In the census, "highest certificate, diploma or degree" is the classification used to measure the broader concept. The variable is derived from the educational qualification questions, which asked respondents to report all certificates, diplomas and degrees. This variable is reported for individuals aged 15 years and older living in private households.

Employment rate: The employment rate for a particular group (age, sex, marital status, geographic area, etc.) is the number of persons in that group who were employed during a given reference week, expressed as a percentage of the total population in that group. In the 2021 Census, the reference week was May 2 to May 8. The concept of employment is applicable to the population aged 15 years and over. The employed population includes people who did any paid work as an employee or self-employed person; did unpaid work contributing directly to the operation of a farm, business or professional practice owned and operated by a related member of the same household; or had a job but were not at work due to factors such as their own illness or disability, personal or family responsibilities, vacation or a labour dispute.

Ethnic or cultural origin: This concept refers to the ethnic or cultural origins of a person's ancestors. Ancestors may have Indigenous origins, origins that refer to different countries or other origins that may not refer to different countries.

Gender: Gender refers to an individual's personal and social identity as a man, woman or non-binary person (a person who is not exclusively a man or a woman). In this portrait, the concept of gender was used wherever available (2021), while "sex at birth" was used wherever this information was unavailable. Non-binary people are distributed into the other two gender categories and are denoted by the "+" symbol. The category "Men+" includes men, boys and some non-binary people, and the category "Women+" includes women, girls and some non-binary people.

Generation status: A person's generation status refers to whether the person or the person's parents were born in Canada. It identifies individuals as first generation, second generation, or third generation or more. The term "first generation" includes individuals who are born outside Canada. The term "second generation" includes individuals who were born in Canada and had at least one parent born outside Canada. The term "third generation or more" includes individuals who were born in Canada and whose parents were also born in Canada.

Household size: Household size refers to the number of people in a private household.

Household type: Household type refers to the differentiation of households based on whether they are census family households or non-census-family households. Census family households are those that contain at least one census family. Non-census-family households are either one person living alone or a group of two or more people who live together but do not constitute a census family. Census family households may be differentiated based on the presence of additional people (that is, people not in a census family).

Multigenerational households include all households with at least one person who is both the grandparent of a person in the household and the parent of another person in the same household. They also include all households with at least one person who is both the child of a person in the household and the grandchild of another person in the same household. In previous censuses (2011 and 2016), multigenerational households were defined using only the former criterion.

Immigrant status: Immigrant status refers to whether the person is a non-immigrant, an immigrant or a non-permanent resident.

Immigrant refers to a person who is, or who has ever been, a landed immigrant or permanent resident. In the 2021 Census of Population, "immigrant" includes immigrants who were admitted to Canada on or before May 11, 2021.

A non-permanent resident is a person from another country with a usual place of residence in Canada and who has a work or study permit or who has claimed refugee status (asylum, protected person and related group). Family members living with a work or study permit holder are also included, unless these family members are already Canadian citizens, landed immigrants or permanent residents.

Mother tongue: Mother tongue refers to the first language learned at home in childhood and still understood by the person at the time the data were collected. If the person no longer understands the first language learned, the mother tongue is the second language learned. For a person who learned more than one language at the same time in early childhood, the mother tongue is the language this person spoke most often at home before starting school. The person has more than one mother tongue only if they learned these languages at the same time and still understands them. For a child who has not yet learned to speak, the mother tongue is the language spoken most often to this child at home. A child who has not yet learned to speak has more than one mother tongue only if these languages are spoken to them equally often so that the child learns these languages at the same time.

Occupation: Occupation, based on the 2021 National Occupational Classification (NOC), Version 1.0, refers to the kind of work performed in a job, a job being all the tasks carried out by a particular worker to complete their duties. An occupation is a set of jobs that are sufficiently similar in the work performed. The following occupations were defined using NOC codes: computing professionals (NOC 2122 and 2123); business and finance professionals (NOC 11); health professionals (NOC 31); truck, bus, taxi and delivery drivers (NOC 73300, 73301, 75200 and 75201); salespersons, cashiers, food support workers and customer service representatives (NOC 6410, 6440, 6510 and 6520).

Overqualification: This includes people with a bachelor's degree or higher who, during the census year (2021) or the year before (2020), held a position typically requiring a high school diploma or equivalency certificate or less (training, education, experience and responsibilities levels 4 and 5).

Period of immigration: This concept refers to the period when the immigrant first obtained their landed immigrant or permanent resident status.

Place of birth: This concept refers to the name of the geographic location where the person was born. The geographic location is specified according to geographic boundaries current at the time of data collection, not the geographic boundaries at the time of birth. The geographic location refers to the name of the country in which the person was born, based on the Standard Classification of Countries and Areas of Interest 2019 (Statistics Canada, 2020b).

Place of birth of parent: This concept refers to the name of the geographic location where the father, mother or parent of the person was born. The geographic location is specified according to geographic boundaries current at the time of data collection, not the geographic boundaries at the time of birth. In the 2021 Census of Population, the geographic location refers to the name of the country or area of interest in which the father, mother or parent of the person was born.

Poverty (low-income status): The poverty rate is the proportion or percentage of units whose income falls below a specified poverty line, based on the low-income line (LIL). A person's low-income status is determined by comparing their economic family income to the appropriate LIL, based on the Market Basket Measure (MBM) (Statistics Canada, 2021a). According to the MBM, a family is in poverty if, given its size and region of residence, it does not have enough income to buy a set of goods and services considered to represent a modest, basic standard of living (Statistics Canada, 2022b). In other words, "persons in low income" (people in poverty) refers to individuals who belong to low-income families, including those living alone with an income below the LIL (Statistics Canada, 2016). For the 2021 Census, the reference period for poverty data is the 2020 calendar year.

The LIL represents the estimated costs of a specific basket of essential goods and services—food, clothing, footwear, transportation, shelter and other necessities—for a reference family of two adults and two children. These thresholds vary across regions and are adjusted for price changes. To account for different family sizes, an equivalence factor—equal to the square root of the economic family size—is applied. Additionally, for households that own a mortgage-free dwelling, disposable income is adjusted to reflect typical savings compared with renters or homeowners with mortgages. The MBM is updated annually to reflect price changes and establishes thresholds based on costs across different geographic areas. For the 2021 Census, the reference period for poverty data is the 2020 calendar year.

Pre-admission experience: Pre-admission experience refers to the category under which an immigrant was authorized to enter Canada for temporary residence purposes before admission as a landed immigrant or permanent resident. In the 2021 Census of Population, data on pre-admission experience are available for immigrants who were admitted to Canada between January 1, 1980, and May 11, 2021. This portrait uses the "Study permit" category based on this variable. This category includes immigrants who had a study permit before admission as a landed immigrant or permanent resident. A study permit is a document issued by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada that authorizes a person to study at an educational institution in Canada for the duration of the program of study.

Racialized populations: The concept of racialized populations is measured with the "visible minority" variable in the census. This information has been collected by Statistics Canada since the 1996 Census of Population to implement the *Employment Equity Act*. The term "visible minority" refers to whether a person belongs to one of the visible minority groups defined by the *Employment Equity Act*. The act defines visible minorities as "persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour." The categories of the visible minority variable that constitute racialized populations are "South Asian," "Chinese," "Black," "Filipino," "Latin American," "Arab," "Southeast Asian," "West Asian," "Korean," "Japanese," "Multiple visible minorities" and "Visible minority not identified elsewhere." The non-racialized, non-Indigenous population in this paper is measured with the category "Not a visible minority" of the same variable. In this analysis, the racialized populations exclude Indigenous respondents. For more information about the derivation of the racialized populations, consult the *Visible Minority and Population Group Reference Guide, Census of Population, 2021* (Statistics Canada, 2022d).

Religion: Religion refers to a person's self-identified connection to or affiliation with any religious denomination, group, body, or other religiously defined community or system of belief. Religion is not limited to formal membership in a religious organization or group. For infants or children, religion refers to the specific religious group or denomination in which they are being raised, if any. Individuals without a religious connection or affiliation can self-identify as an atheist, agnostic or a humanist, or can provide another applicable response. The census collects information on religious affiliation every 10 years, regardless of whether respondents practise that religion.

Unemployment rate: The unemployment rate for a particular group (age, sex, marital status, geographic area, etc.) is the number of persons in that group who were unemployed during a given reference week, expressed as a percentage of the labour force in that group. In the 2021 Census, the reference week was May 2 to May 8. The concept of unemployment is applicable to the population aged 15 years and over. The unemployed population includes persons who during the reference week were without work but had looked for work in the past four weeks ending with the reference week and were available for work; were on temporary layoff due to business conditions and were available for work; or were without work, had a job to start within four weeks from the reference week and were available for work. The labour force refers to people who were either employed or unemployed.

Youth: This term refers to individuals aged 15 to 24 years.

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