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Differences in employment rates between immigrants with disabilities and Canadian-born persons with disabilities, 2022 to 2024

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Abstract

The present study examined differences in employment rates between immigrants with disabilities and Canadian-born persons with disabilities. Differences in employment rates were shaped by intersecting factors, particularly education and gender. Immigrant men with disabilities had a higher employment rate than Canadian-born men with disabilities, but this difference was concentrated among individuals who had not completed high school. Immigrant women with disabilities had a lower employment rate than Canadian-born women with disabilities; this difference was concentrated among those with a bachelor's degree or above. These patterns in employment remained even after accounting for differences in age, severity of disability and other sociodemographic characteristics associated with employment.

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Introduction

Employment is a key indicator of the economic well-being and social inclusion of persons with disabilities (McDiarmid, 2023). In Canada, there are large gaps in employment rates between persons with and without disabilities. The size of these gaps varies by sociodemographic characteristics such as gender, age group and educational attainment (Hardy & Vergara, 2025; Hébert et al., 2024). Understanding the association between disability and employment rates across different groups in the population provides information on where the largest disparities lie.

Most health conditions are not inherently work-limiting but often become so because of barriers in labour markets and workplaces (Pettinicchio & Maroto, 2024; Schimmele, Jeon, & Arim, 2025). Employment opportunities are particularly limited for persons with disabilities who have lower levels of education. About 45% of persons with disabilities aged 25 to 64 years who had a high school diploma or less were employed in 2022, compared with 79% of those who had a bachelor's degree or above (Hébert et al., 2024). Furthermore, disparities in employment rates between persons with and without disabilities were concentrated among individuals with less than a bachelor's degree and narrowed or disappeared at higher levels of education, according to a study jointly conducted by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada and Statistics Canada (Schimmele et al., 2025).

A larger percentage of immigrants with disabilities have a bachelor's degree or above than Canadian-born persons with disabilities (Schimmele et al., 2025). Whether this gives immigrants with disabilities an employment advantage is unknown. However, an earlier Canadian study showed that recent immigrants with chronic conditions were less likely to be employed or actively looking for employment than Canadian-born persons with chronic conditions, after accounting for differences in age, sex, educational attainment and province of residence (Beiser & Hou, 2014). Chronic conditions refer to various health issues (e.g., back problems, cancer, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, respiratory disorders, mood disorders) and are not equivalent to disability. Disability refers to a long-term condition that, in combination with a barrier, limits a person's daily activities or increases the difficulty of these activities (Grondin, 2016).

The present study examines differences in employment rates between immigrants with disabilities and Canadian-born persons with disabilities, using pooled data from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) (January 2022 to December 2024) and the supplementary Disability Labour Market Indicators.¹ The analysis focuses on persons aged 18 to 64 years and compares employment rates across levels of education. Considering that gender shapes differences in employment, the study examines the outcomes for men and women separately.² In addition to descriptive statistics, regression models are used to account for differences in severity of disability and sociodemographic characteristics that may be associated with gaps in employment rates between immigrants with disabilities and Canadian-born persons with disabilities.³

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1. Using pooled data from the LFS allowed for greater disaggregation of information, including greater precision of estimates, for immigrants with disabilities than is possible from other sources, including the Canadian Survey on Disability (CSD). The LFS and CSD both use the Disability Screening Questions (DSQ) to identify persons with disabilities. The DSQ assess the intensity of difficulty with daily activities or functional tasks and the frequency of activity limitations to identify persons with disabilities. See Grondin (2016) for further details.
 2. The analytical sample includes 840 immigrant men with disabilities, 5,420 Canadian-born men with disabilities, 1,180 immigrant women with disabilities and 7,070 Canadian-born women with disabilities. Numbers have been rounded in accordance with confidentiality rules.
 3. At each level of education, ordinary least squares regressions were used to estimate the mean percentage of persons who were employed, adjusting for differences in age, student status, racialized population group and severity of disability. See Table 1 for the description of these variables. The regression models also included a variable for survey year.

A far larger percentage of immigrants with disabilities had a bachelor's degree or above than Canadian-born persons with disabilities

In Canada, fewer persons with disabilities are able to access postsecondary education than persons without disabilities because of barriers in the education system (Parekh et al., 2025). However, immigrant selection processes and Canadian immigration policy favour well-educated and healthy immigrants (Picot, Hou, & Qiu, 2016; Vang et al., 2017). Notably, immigrants with disabilities have an older age at disability onset than Canadian-born persons with disabilities (Karpinski et al., 2026), presumably reflecting their good health at admission. This matters because it implies that immigrants with disabilities were less likely to have encountered barriers to postsecondary education than Canadian-born persons with disabilities. For these reasons, immigrants with disabilities are expected to have higher levels of education than their Canadian-born counterparts.

About 43% of immigrant men with disabilities aged 18 to 64 had a bachelor's degree or above from 2022 to 2024, while 16% of their Canadian-born counterparts had this level of education (Table 1). A smaller percentage of immigrant (29%) than Canadian-born (36%) men with disabilities had a postsecondary certificate or diploma, which includes trades and non-university credentials. About 9% of immigrant men with disabilities had not completed high school, compared with 15% of Canadian-born men with disabilities.

Table 1

Characteristics of immigrants with disabilities and Canadian-born persons with disabilities aged 18 to 64, 2022 to 2024

	Men						Women					
	Immigrants			Canadian-born persons			Immigrants			Canadian-born persons		
	percent	95% confidence interval		percent	95% confidence interval		percent	95% confidence interval		percent	95% confidence interval	
		lower	upper		lower	upper		lower	upper		lower	upper
Labour force status												
Employed	72.5 *	69.8	75.4	64.2	63.1	65.5	62.7 *	60.5	65.4	66.5	65.6	67.6
Unemployed	5.2	4.2	6.3	6.2	5.6	6.8	5.2	4.2	6.3	4.2	3.8	4.7
Not in labour force	22.3 *	19.4	24.9	29.6	28.4	30.6	32.1 *	29.6	34.1	29.3	28.2	30.1
Educational attainment												
Less than high school	8.8 *	7.2	10.6	14.6	13.7	15.5	9.7	8.2	11.4	8.8	8.1	9.4
High school diploma	15.9 *	13.9	18.0	24.8	23.7	25.8	15.5 *	13.7	17.3	20.0	19.1	20.9
Some postsecondary	3.5 *	2.5	4.5	7.8	7.2	8.6	4.2 *	3.2	5.4	7.2	6.6	7.8
Postsecondary certificate or diploma	28.8 *	25.4	31.4	36.4	35.2	37.4	28.8 *	26.8	31.1	38.1	37.0	39.2
Bachelor's degree or above	43.1 *	40.2	46.4	16.4	15.6	17.2	41.8 *	39.4	44.0	26.0	25.0	26.9
Student status												
Student	5.7	4.1	7.3	6.5	5.8	7.3	8.0	6.6	9.4	8.7	8.1	9.5
Non-student	94.3	92.7	95.9	93.5	92.7	94.2	92.0	90.6	93.4	91.3	90.5	91.9
Age group												
18 to 24	6.3 *	4.4	7.8	13.7	12.8	14.8	6.5 *	5.2	8.0	13.5	12.7	14.3
25 to 34	14.2 *	12.3	16.4	20.2	19.2	21.1	13.7 *	12.2	15.4	22.8	21.9	23.7
35 to 54	47.6 *	44.8	50.4	39.9	38.7	41.0	49.7 *	47.1	52.0	39.8	38.8	40.8
55 to 64	32.0 *	29.3	34.8	26.1	25.3	27.0	30.2 *	28.0	32.5	23.9	23.2	24.7
Racialized status												
Racialized	73.5 *	71.2	75.6	6.7	6.4	7.9	74.2 *	72.4	76.3	6.8	6.6	8.2
Not racialized and not Indigenous	26.5 *	24.4	28.8	92.9	92.1	93.6	25.6 *	23.7	27.6	85.8	91.8	93.4
Disability severity												
Mild	59.9 *	57.0	63.1	54.8	53.7	56.0	58.5 *	56.2	61.0	53.4	52.3	54.6
Moderate	19.2	17.0	21.3	18.2	17.3	19.1	18.5	16.5	20.3	19.5	18.6	20.4
Severe	12.2	10.1	14.5	14.1	13.3	14.9	13.2	11.4	15.1	14.2	13.5	14.9
Very severe	8.6 *	7.2	10.3	12.9	12.1	13.8	9.8 *	8.3	11.3	12.9	12.1	13.5

* significantly different from Canadian-born persons ($p < 0.05$)

Sources: Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey (3701) and Disability Labour Market Indicators, January 2022 to December 2024, pooled custom tabulation.

A larger percentage of immigrant women with disabilities (42%) than Canadian-born women with disabilities (26%) had a bachelor's degree or above. Conversely, a smaller percentage of immigrant women with disabilities (29%) than Canadian-born women with disabilities (38%) had a postsecondary certificate or diploma. The percentage of immigrant (10%) and Canadian-born (9%) women with disabilities who had not completed high school was similar.

More immigrants with disabilities were near retirement age than Canadian-born persons with disabilities, but fewer immigrants with disabilities had a very severe disability

In addition to education, differences in employment rates between immigrants with disabilities and Canadian-born persons with disabilities may be associated with differences in age and severity of disability. Previous research suggests that some persons with disabilities choose early retirement because of the age-related progression of disability, in conjunction with barriers in the workplace

(Schimmele, Jeon, & Arim, 2025). At younger ages, some persons with disabilities may still be in school and thus not in the labour force (Hardy & Vergara, 2025).

From 2022 to 2024, immigrants with disabilities had an older age profile than their Canadian-born counterparts (Table 1). A larger percentage of immigrants with disabilities were close to retirement age than Canadian-born persons with disabilities. About 32% of immigrant men with disabilities were aged 55 to 64 years, compared with 26% of their Canadian-born counterparts. About 30% of immigrant women with disabilities and 24% of Canadian-born women with disabilities were in this age group. Fewer immigrant men with disabilities were aged 18 to 24 years (6%) than their Canadian-born counterparts (14%). Similarly, fewer immigrant women with disabilities were aged 18 to 24 years (7%) than Canadian-born women with disabilities (14%).

However, the percentage of immigrant men with disabilities (6%) and immigrant women with disabilities (8%) who were students was small and similar to their Canadian-born counterparts.

Given the positive health selection of immigrants, they would be expected to have less severe disabilities than Canadian-born persons. This may further contribute to differences in employment rates. Severity of disability is associated with employment rates because it can affect work ability and preferences, job opportunities, educational attainment and barriers encountered in the workplace (Hardy & Vergara, 2025; Schimmele, Jeon, & Arim, 2021).

There was a difference in severity of disability between immigrants and Canadian-born persons.⁴ A smaller percentage of immigrant men with disabilities (9%) than Canadian-born men with disabilities (13%) had a very severe disability. Immigrant and Canadian-born men with disabilities were similar in terms of the shares with a moderate or severe disability. Most immigrant men with disabilities (60%) and Canadian-born men with disabilities (55%) had a mild disability. Immigrant women with disabilities were also less likely to have a very severe disability (10%) than Canadian-born women with disabilities (13%), while a larger percentage of immigrant women with disabilities (59%) than Canadian-born women with disabilities (53%) had a mild disability.

The difference in employment rates between immigrant and Canadian-born men with disabilities was concentrated among those who had not completed high school

Over 72% of immigrant men with disabilities aged 18 to 64 years were employed from 2022 to 2024, which was 8 percentage points higher than the share for Canadian-born men with disabilities, 64% of whom were employed (Table 1). The difference in the unemployment rate between immigrant and Canadian-born men with disabilities was small and not statistically significant. The lower employment rate among Canadian-born men with disabilities was therefore attributable to the higher percentage of them who were not in the labour force.⁵

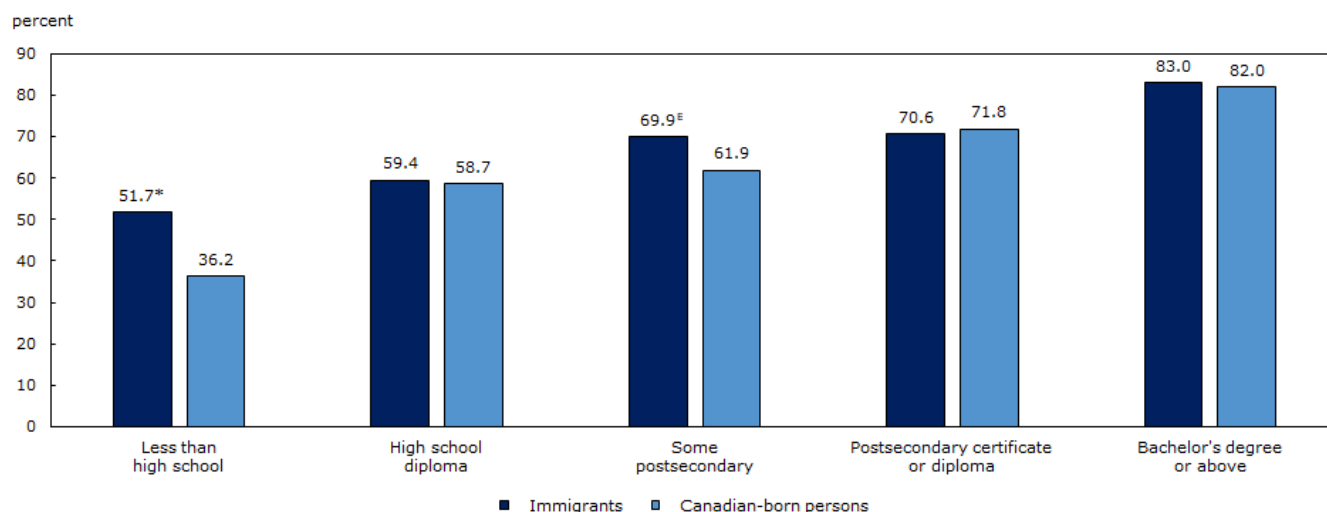
4. The Disability Screening Questions calculate severity of disability based on the intensity of difficulty with daily activities (no difficulty, some difficulty, a lot of difficulty, cannot do) and the frequency of activity limitations (never, rarely, sometimes, often, always) for each disability type a person has (Grondin, 2016). For example, a person with the maximum difficulty and frequency of activity limitations for a single disability would be classified as having a severe disability. Accordingly, to be classified as having a very severe disability requires having at least two disability types.

5. The category “not in the labour force” refers to persons who were neither employed nor unemployed, including those who were unable to work, were unavailable for work, had not looked for work in the past four weeks or had no job to start within the next four weeks (Statistics Canada, 2025).

These overall differences in employment rates may reflect the differences in educational attainment discussed above. Hence, it is essential to compare differences in employment rates between immigrants and Canadian-born persons with the same levels of education. This is presented below.

The difference in employment rates between immigrant and Canadian-born men with disabilities was concentrated among those who had not completed high school (Chart 1). Among individuals who did not have at least a high school diploma or equivalency, 52% of immigrant men with disabilities were employed from 2022 to 2024, which was 16 percentage points higher than the share for their Canadian-born counterparts, 36% of whom were employed.

Chart 1
Differences in employment rates between immigrant and Canadian-born men with disabilities aged 18 to 64 years by educational attainment, 2022 to 2024



[‡] use with caution

* significantly different from Canadian-born men with disabilities at same level of education ($p < 0.05$)

Note: See Table 1 for the 95% confidence intervals.

Sources: Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey (3701) and Disability Labour Market Indicators, January 2022 to December 2024, pooled custom tabulation.

Employment rates were similar between immigrant and Canadian-born men with disabilities with a high school diploma or higher levels of education. Among those who had a high school diploma, 59% of immigrant and Canadian-born men with disabilities were employed. For both immigrant and Canadian-born men with disabilities, employment rates increased with each successive level of education. For example, 71% of immigrant men with disabilities who had a postsecondary certificate or diploma and 83% of those who had a bachelor's degree or above were employed—similar to the shares for Canadian-born men with disabilities with corresponding levels of education.

For each level of education, differences in employment rates between immigrants with disabilities and Canadian-born persons with disabilities were re-estimated in regression models that accounted for differences in age group, student status, racialized status and severity of disability (Table 2).⁶ The adjusted estimates were mostly similar to the observed estimates presented in Chart 1, with one exception. A statistically significant difference in employment rates emerged among those who had a high school diploma in the adjusted estimates. For this level of education, a larger percentage of immigrant men with disabilities would have been employed (68%) than Canadian-born men with

6. Labour market conditions differed markedly in 2022 from 2023 and 2024, with the lowest unemployment rate on record. For a robustness test, the regressions were rerun with the 2022 data excluded from the analysis. There were no changes to the statistically significant differences in employment rates when the data were limited to 2023 and 2024.

disabilities (57%) if these groups had had the same distribution in terms of age group, student status, racialized status and severity of disability.

Table 2
Differences in employment rates between immigrants with disabilities and Canadian-born persons with disabilities aged 18 to 64 by educational attainment and gender, 2022 to 2024

	Less than high school		High school diploma		Some postsecondary		Postsecondary certificate or diploma		Bachelor's degree or above	
	observed	adjusted	observed	adjusted	observed	adjusted	observed	adjusted	observed	adjusted
percent										
Men with disabilities										
Immigrants	51.7 *	51.9 *	59.4	68.4 *	69.9 ^E	68.0	70.6	72.8	83.0	84.2
Canadian-born persons (ref.)	36.2	36.4	58.7	57.0	61.9	62.4	71.8	71.4	82.0	81.2
Women with disabilities										
Immigrants	28.9	26.7	48.9	54.5	63.0 ^E	75.2	67.0	66.7	72.8 *	75.2 *
Canadian-born persons (ref.)	32.9	33.5	55.6	54.2	63.5	60.9	70.7	70.7	81.0	79.8

E use with caution

* significantly different from reference category with the same level of education (p < 0.05)

Note: Adjusted estimates are based on regression models that account for age group, student status, racialized status, severity of disability and survey year.

Sources: Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey (3701) and Disability Labour Market Indicators, January 2022 to December 2024, pooled custom tabulation.

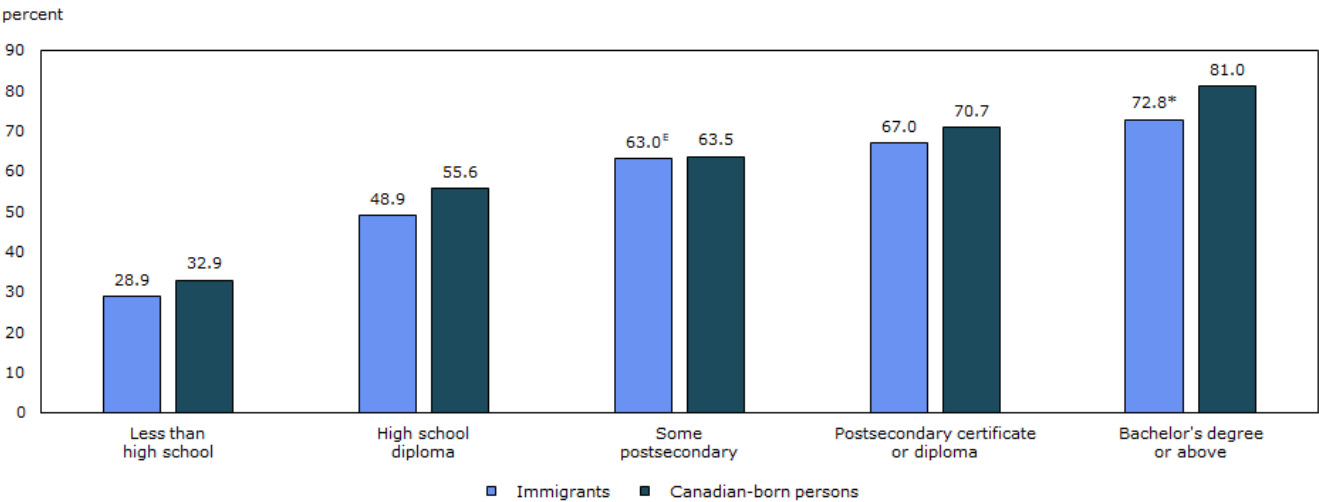
Employment was lower among immigrant women with disabilities with a bachelor’s degree than their Canadian-born counterparts

From 2022 to 2024, about 63% of immigrant women with disabilities aged 18 to 64 years were employed, while 67% of Canadian-born women with disabilities of the same age were employed (Table 1).

About 73% of immigrant women with disabilities who had a bachelor’s degree or above were employed (Chart 2). This was 8 percentage points lower than the percentage for their Canadian-born counterparts, 81% of whom were employed. This employment gap between immigrant and Canadian-born women with disabilities remained statistically significant, although it narrowed, after adjusting for age group, student status, racialized status and severity of disability (Table 2).

Not having a high school diploma was associated with very low employment rates for both immigrant and Canadian-born women with disabilities. About 29% of immigrant women with disabilities and 33% of Canadian-born women with disabilities who had not completed high school were employed from 2022 to 2024. For this level of education, the difference in employment rates between immigrant and Canadian-born women with disabilities was small and not statistically significant in both the observed and adjusted estimates.

Chart 2
Differences in employment rates between immigrant and Canadian-born women with disabilities aged 18 to 64 years by educational attainment, 2022 to 2024



[†] use with caution
* significantly different from Canadian-born women with disabilities at same level of education ($p < 0.05$)
Note: See Table 1 for the 95% confidence intervals.
Sources: Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey (3701) and Disability Labour Market Indicators, January 2022 to December 2024, pooled custom tabulation.

Differences in employment rates between immigrant and Canadian-born women with disabilities at all other levels of education below a bachelor's degree were also small and not statistically significant. About 49% of immigrant women with disabilities who had a high school diploma, 63% of those with some postsecondary education and 67% of those with a postsecondary certificate or diploma were employed. These shares were similar to the estimates for their Canadian-born counterparts.

In the adjusted estimates, a larger percentage of immigrant women with disabilities who had some postsecondary education were employed (75%) than their Canadian-born counterparts (61%), although this difference was marginally significant ($p < 0.08$).

Conclusion

The present study showed that differences in employment rates between immigrants with disabilities and Canadian-born persons with disabilities were shaped by intersecting factors, particularly educational attainment and gender, which contribute to distinct patterns. These employment patterns were independent of differences in age group, severity of disability and other characteristics known to be associated with employment rates among persons with disabilities.

Immigrant men with disabilities had a higher employment rate than their Canadian-born counterparts, but this difference was concentrated among those who had not completed high school. A smaller percentage of immigrant men with disabilities than Canadian-born men with disabilities were not high school graduates. At this level of education, a larger percentage of immigrant men with disabilities than Canadian-born men with disabilities were employed.

A different pattern between employment rates and education was observed between immigrant and Canadian-born women with disabilities. Immigrant women with disabilities had a lower employment rate than their Canadian-born counterparts, a difference that was concentrated among those with a bachelor's

degree or above. While a larger percentage of immigrant women with disabilities than Canadian-born women with disabilities had a bachelor's degree or above, a comparatively smaller percentage of immigrant women with disabilities with this level of education were employed.

Future research could continue to examine whether these gaps in employment rates between immigrants with disabilities and Canadian-born persons with disabilities are attributable to differences in disability type and age at disability onset, immigration admission class (e.g., economic immigrants versus refugees) and duration of residence in Canada. Moreover, some of the differences in employment observed above may reflect other economic disparities between immigrants with disabilities and Canadian-born persons with disabilities. For example, some immigrants with disabilities may not be able to opt for early retirement because of financial constraints (e.g., less wealth than their Canadian-born counterparts), while others may have to discontinue employment because of family responsibilities. Besides these factors, it is also important to further investigate the reasons for the distinct pattern of employment for immigrant men and women with disabilities who have a bachelor's degree and above.

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