

## Economic and Social Reports

# Understanding factors shaping household environmental practices and behaviours in Canada



by Allison Leanage, Samuel MacIsaac, Max Stick and Gordon Dewis

Release date: September 23, 2026



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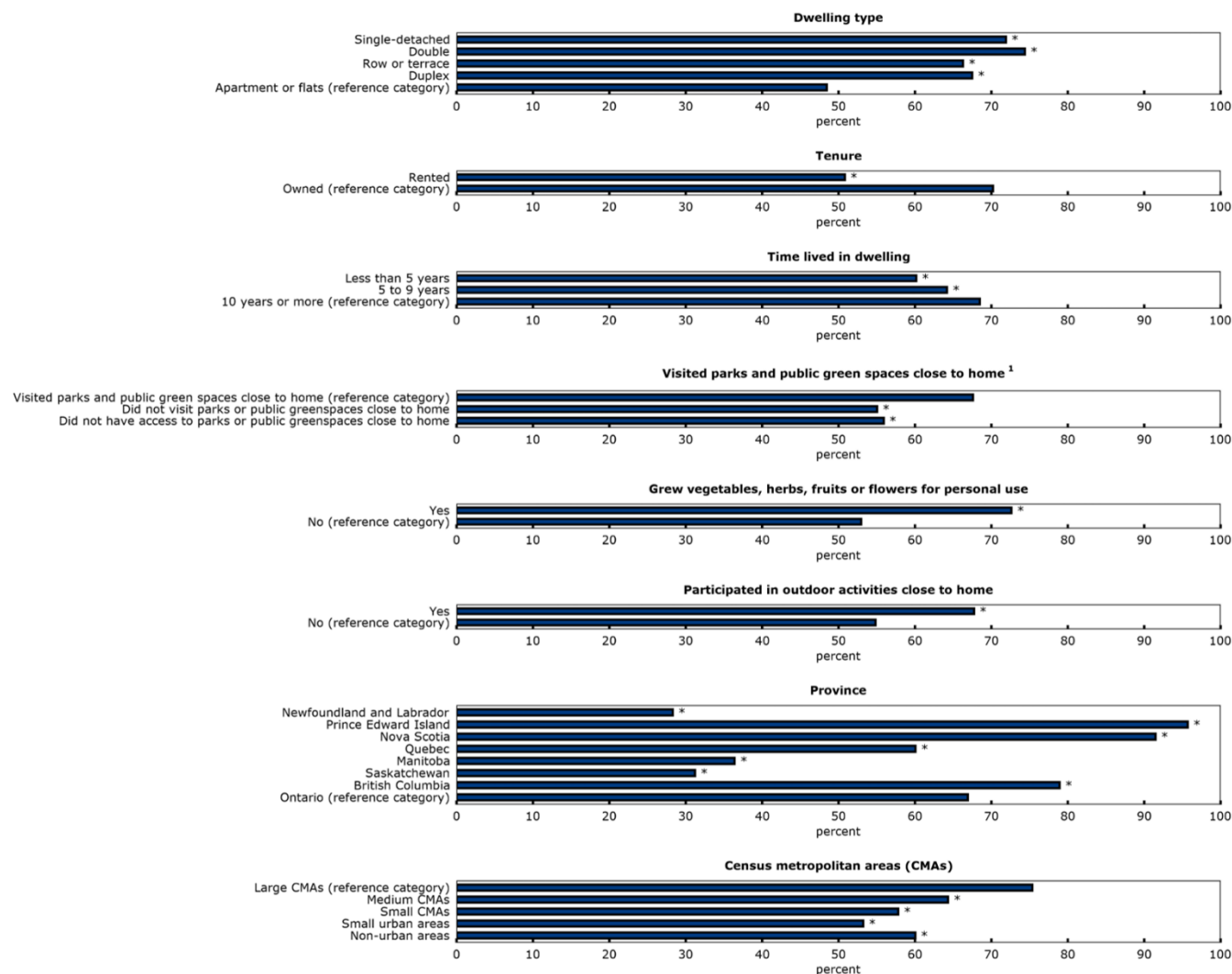
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25318/36280001202600900003-eng>

With Canada adopting the United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, reducing harm to the environment has been recognized as a key national priority (see Government of Canada [2023] and UN [n.d.] for more information on the Sustainable Development Goals). Previous research has shown that individuals with higher levels of education and income were more likely to engage in environmental practices and behaviours (Mustapha, 2013). Environmental practices and behaviours also vary by dwelling characteristics, such as housing type (e.g., detached dwellings may have greater environmental stewardship) and homeownership (Canuel et al., 2014; Huddart-Kennedy et al., 2009). However, few studies have examined how sociodemographic factors, dwelling characteristics and geographic context jointly shape environmental practices and interactions with nature in Canada.

Environmental behaviours may be influenced by intersecting social, housing and regional conditions; examining these factors together can provide a more comprehensive understanding of household environmental practices and behaviours. Using data from the 2021 Households and the Environment Survey, this study examines how kitchen waste composting and hazardous waste disposal vary among households. The study presents variations in these behaviours across sociodemographic, dwelling, interaction with nature and geographic characteristics (shown in charts). Multivariate analyses were also conducted to better isolate the relationships between behaviours and the various factors examined (these results are reported in the text, and the full data are available upon request).

## Dwelling and contextual factors were more strongly associated than sociodemographic characteristics with kitchen waste composting practices

Overall, about 65% of households reported composting kitchen waste (data not shown). Contrary to prior research (e.g., Mustapha, 2013), income- and education-related differences were limited and inconsistent in the adjusted models, suggesting that dwelling and contextual factors may play a more substantial role than sociodemographic characteristics alone in composting kitchen waste (see Chart 1).

**Chart 1****Participation in kitchen waste composting, by household characteristics (during the past 12 months)**\* significantly different from reference category ( $p < 0.05$ )

1. "Close to home" means within a 10-minute walk or drive.

Source: Statistics Canada, Households and the Environment Survey, 2021.

## Dwelling characteristics

Households in apartments and flats (49%) had the lowest composting rate (see Chart 1), outpaced by those in single-detached houses (72%), doubles (74%), row and terrace houses (66%), and duplexes (68%). The differences (from 11 to 23 percentage points) largely remained when adjusting for other characteristics. Households that had lived in the same residence for less than 10 years (60% to 64%) were less likely to compost than those that had lived there for 10 years or more (69%). However, those that had lived in their current residence for 10 years or more were only 2 percentage points more likely than those that had lived there for a shorter period to compost, once all other factors were accounted for. In terms of housing tenure, renter households were less likely to compost (51%) compared with owner households (70%). Yet, once other factors were accounted for, the difference was reduced; renter households were 4 percentage points more likely to compost than owner households.

## Households' interactions with nature

Households that interacted with nature and participated in activities related to greenspaces and the outdoors were also more likely to compost. Those that reported not residing near parks or public greenspaces, and those that had access to these areas but did not visit them, were less likely to compost (55% to 56%) than those that had access to parks or public green spaces and visited them (68%). Meanwhile, households that grew vegetables, herbs, fruits, flowers or plants for personal use or had participated in outdoor activities were more likely to compost (68% to 73%) than those that did not participate in either activity (53%). This pattern of difference remained once other factors were accounted for.

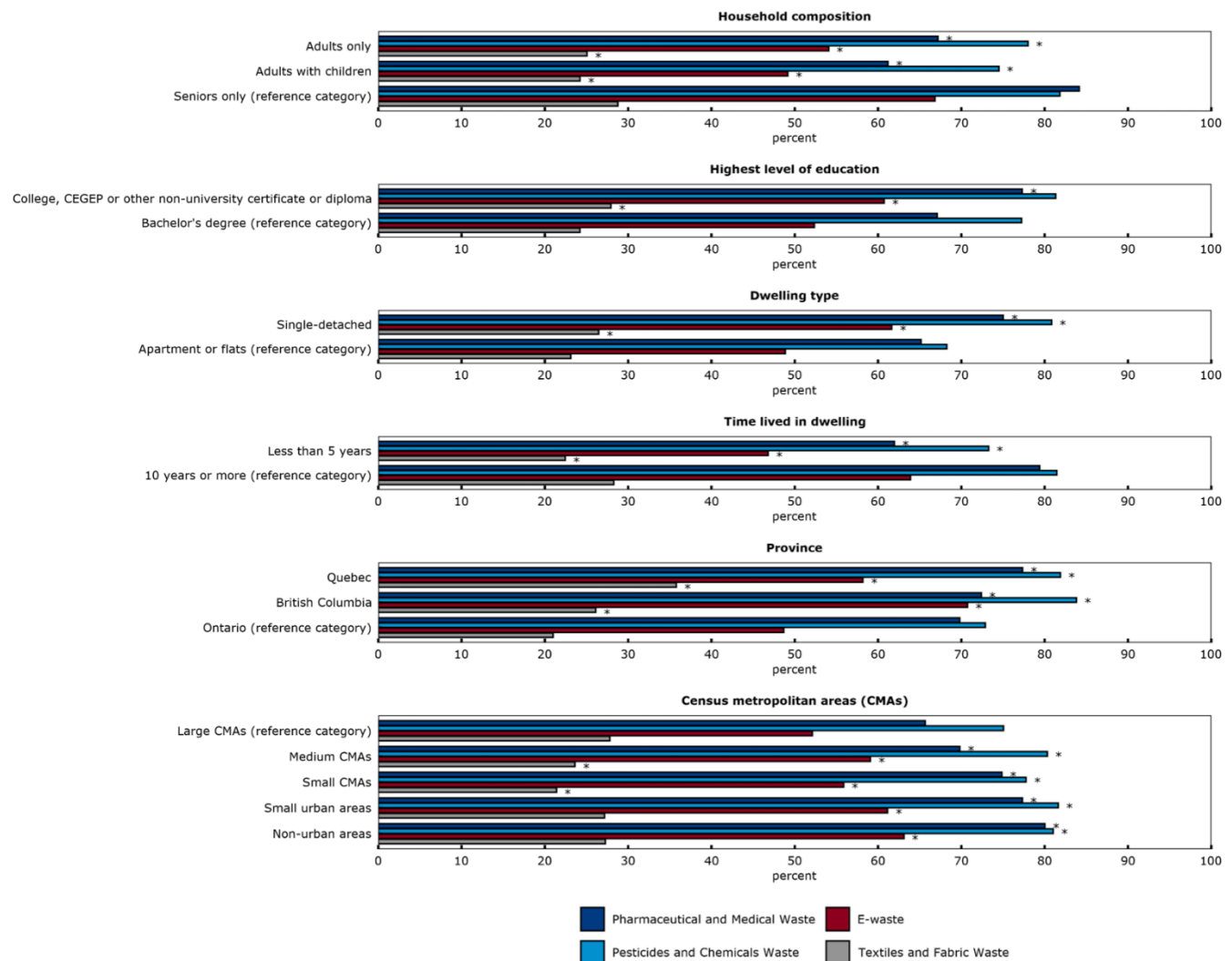
## Geographical variation

Composting rates were highest in Prince Edward Island (96%), Nova Scotia (91%) and British Columbia (79%). Compared with Ontario (67%), fewer households in Newfoundland and Labrador, Quebec, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan (28% to 60%) composted their kitchen waste. Compared with households in large census metropolitan areas (CMAs) (75%), households in all other population areas reported lower composting rates, ranging from 53% to 64%. Adjusted models showed a similar pattern of geographic differences.

## Controlled hazardous waste disposal was associated with selected sociodemographic, dwelling and geographic characteristics

About 80% of households had hazardous waste to dispose of over the past 12 months (43% had pharmaceutical or medical waste; 38% had pesticides, chemical waste or e-waste; and 59% had textiles or fabric waste; data not shown). While three in four households disposed of it in a controlled way, the use of controlled disposal methods varied across groups (see Chart 2).

**Chart 2**  
**Participation in controlled hazardous waste disposal practices and behaviours, by type of waste and household characteristics (during the past 12 months)**



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

**Notes:** Controlled disposal included returning items to a supplier or retailer or taking or sending them to a depot or drop-off centre. For medical sharps, additional controlled methods were included (e.g., using a medical sharps disposal program or returning items to a pharmacy or doctor). Households were asked whether they had any unwanted hazardous materials to dispose of in the past 12 months, including (a) pharmaceuticals and medical waste (including medical sharps and medicines), (b) pesticides and chemical waste (including paint or solvents, and engine oil or antifreeze), (c) electronic waste (e.g., computers, laptops, printers, televisions, audio-visual equipment, video-game consoles, cell phones and microwaves), and (d) textiles and fabric waste (including mattresses).

**Source:** Statistics Canada, Households and the Environment Survey, 2021.

## Sociodemographic characteristics

Households with adults<sup>1</sup> only and adults with children were less likely to dispose of hazardous waste in a controlled way (61% to 67% for pharmaceutical and medical waste, 75% to 78% for pesticides and chemical waste, 49% to 54% for e-waste, and 24% to 25% for textiles and fabric waste) compared with senior-only households (84%, 82%, 67% and 29%, respectively). These patterns remained after adjusting for all other characteristics.

Households whose highest level of educational attainment was a college, CEGEP or other non-university certificate or diploma were more likely to dispose of e-waste in a controlled manner (61%), compared with those with a bachelor's degree (52%) and were about 8 percentage points more likely to use this

1. Adults refer to those aged 18 to 64 years old and seniors are those aged 65 years and older.

method when accounting for all other factors. When accounting for other factors, those with a college, CEGEP or other non-university certificate or diploma were consistently more likely than those with a bachelor's degree to dispose of hazardous waste in a controlled way.

## Dwelling characteristics

Households in single-detached dwellings were more likely to dispose of hazardous waste in a controlled manner across all waste types (27% to 81%) compared with those in apartments and flats (23% to 68%). These differences remained after accounting for other covariates (except for textiles and fabric waste), with households in single-detached dwellings being 6 to 9 percentage points more likely to use controlled disposal methods compared with those in apartments and flats. Households that had lived in their current dwelling for less than 10 years (including those that had lived there for less than 5 years and for 5 to 9 years) were less likely to report controlled disposal across all hazardous waste types (62% for pharmaceutical and medical waste, 73% for pesticides and chemical waste, 47% for e-waste, and 22% for textiles and fabric waste) compared with those that had lived in their dwelling for 10 years or more (79%, 82%, 64% and 28%, respectively). However, after accounting for other factors, differences remained only for those that had lived in their dwelling for less than five years.

## Households' interaction with nature

Households that did not have access to a nearby park or public greenspace and those that had access but did not visit such spaces were less likely to report controlled disposal of pesticides and chemical waste (71% to 76%) compared with those that had visited a nearby park or public greenspace (80%, not shown in the chart). Adjusted models indicated a similar pattern of difference for pesticide and chemical controlled waste disposal.

## Geographical variation

Across the most populated provinces, households in British Columbia and Quebec were more likely to use controlled disposal methods (82% to 84% for pesticides and chemical waste, 58% to 71% for e-waste, and 26% to 36% for textiles and fabric waste) compared with Ontario (73%, 49% and 21%, respectively). Households outside large CMAs were more likely to use controlled disposal methods for pharmaceuticals and medical waste (70% to 80%), pesticides and chemical waste (80% to 82%, except for small CMAs), and e-waste (56% to 63%), compared with households in large CMAs (66%, 75% and 52%, respectively).

## Conclusion

By jointly examining sociodemographic, dwelling, interaction with nature, and geographic characteristics, this study demonstrates that different household and contextual factors shape different environmental practices and behaviours. Composting kitchen waste was most strongly associated with the residential context, with variations by dwelling type, length of residence, geographic setting and interaction with nature. Variation in controlled hazardous waste disposal was shown for selected groups, notably households with adults only and adults with children, those in single-detached dwellings, and those that had lived in their dwelling for less than five years.

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## Appendices

Appendices available upon request.

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