

Study: Long-term trends in unionization, 1981 to 2012

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Between 1981 and 2012, Canada's unionization rate — defined as the proportion of paid employees who are union members — declined from 38% to 30%. Most of the decline, however, took place in the 1980s and the 1990s.

The unionization rate among men declined from 42% to 29% over the period. Men of all ages were affected by the decline, especially those aged 25 to 44.

Among women, the unionization rate remained stable at around 30% over the period. However, this stability masked two offsetting trends: a decline among women aged less than 45, and an increase among those aged 45 to 64.

Unionization rates have long been characterized by regional variations, but declined in all provinces over the period. The largest decline between 1981 and 2012 took place in British Columbia, where the rate fell from 43% to 30%. Manitoba had the smallest decline, going from 38% to 35%.

Between 1981 and 1998, a portion but not the entire decline in unionization rates could be related to employment shifts from highly unionized to lower unionized industries and occupations.

Since 1999, the overall rate remained stable at 30%, despite ongoing changes in the employment mix and changes in the unionization rate within industries. For instance, the rate declined by four percentage points in goods-producing industries, but rose in some services-producing industries.

Note to readers

This article uses data on unionization from various surveys, including the 1981 Work History Survey, the 1984 Survey of Union Membership, the Labour Market Activity Survey from 1986 to 1990 and the Labour Force Survey from 1997 to 2012. The unionization rate is defined as the proportion of paid employees aged 17 to 64 who were union members.

This report also accompanies the release of a series of new CANSIM tables on union membership and coverage across several key characteristics, based on Labour Force Survey data. These tables provide data on both union membership and union coverage by a collective agreement for employees aged 15 and over for the period 1997 to 2012.

Available in CANSIM: tables 282-0220 to 282-0225.

Definitions, data sources and methods: survey numbers 3701, 3804, 3830 and 3853.

The article "*Long term trends in unionization*" in *Insights on Canadian Society* (75-006-X) is now available. From the *Browse by key resource* module of our website, choose *Publications*.

For more information, contact us (toll-free 1-800-263-1136; 514-283-8300; infostats@statcan.gc.ca).

To enquire about the concepts, methods or data quality of this release, contact Diane Galarneau (613-951-4626; diane.galarneau@statcan.gc.ca), Labour Statistics Division. For more information on *Insights on Canadian Society*, contact Sébastien LaRochelle-Côté (613-951-0803; sebastien.larochelle-cote@statcan.gc.ca), Labour Statistics Division.