

Study: Youth and education in Canada

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Younger Canadians generally have a higher level of education than their counterparts across Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, and they are more likely than previous generations to have completed a postsecondary education.

In 2019, an all-time high of 73% of Canadians aged 25 to 34 had earned a postsecondary qualification, compared with 59% in 2000. However, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted many students' education. Over half of students who participated in a crowdsourcing survey conducted at the beginning of the pandemic reporting that their courses or work placements were postponed or cancelled, and almost all students reporting that the classes that continued had moved online.

These findings are from [Chapter 3: Youth and education in Canada](#) of *Portrait of Youth in Canada: Data Report*, a publication that provides a comprehensive overview of Canadian youth. In the next few months, *Portrait of Youth in Canada* will continue to focus on themes like social engagement and well-being, the environment, and Indigenous youth.

This third chapter also examines educational attainment, literacy and numeracy, student debt, and earning trajectories by level of education for Canadian youth.

Young Canadians are highly educated and compare favourably to their counterparts in other OECD countries

Young Canadians generally have a higher level of education than their counterparts across OECD countries, with 63% of young Canadians aged 25 to 34 attaining a college or university education compared with the OECD average of 45%. This is mainly due to a higher proportion of young Canadians attaining a college education—24% compared with the OECD average of 8%.

Higher proportions of young women have a university degree as their highest level of education compared with young men, and the highest level of education varies by population group

Younger Canadians are more likely than previous generations to have completed a postsecondary education, with some variations by sex. The proportion of young women aged 25 to 34 with a university degree as their highest level of education is 44%, compared with 33% for young men and 24% for older women aged 55 to 64.

Young women aged 25 to 34 are also more likely to have a master's degree or doctorate as their highest level of education (13%), compared with older women aged 55 to 64 (8%) or men in both age groups (9%). In the early 2000s, young women and men were about equally likely to have achieved this level of education.

Education levels also vary across population groups. South Asian and Chinese young adults who are not immigrants have the highest attainment of a bachelor's degree or higher, at 58% and 68%, respectively. In contrast, Black youth (27%) and youth who are not a visible minority (23%) are significantly less likely than other groups to have obtained a university degree.

Young Canadians have high levels of literacy and numeracy

Canadian 15-year-olds are among the highest performers in the world in reading and math, faring well compared to the OECD average. Specifically, Canada had the third-highest proportion of students at the highest reading proficiency level (15%) among all OECD countries. Also, the proportion of Canadian students who did not meet the minimum proficiency in reading (14%), was well below the OECD average of 23% (and lower than the rates for the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia).



In mathematics, 16% of Canadian students did not reach the minimum proficiency, compared with 24% across OECD countries. The proportion of high-performing students in math in Canada was 15%, above the OECD average of 11%.

Among all age groups, young adults between 25 and 34 have the highest levels of literacy and numeracy, slightly ahead of the 35-to-44 age group.

Higher educational attainment is associated with higher levels of employment and earnings, and the cumulative earnings are far greater than average student debt

Employment rates for Canadians aged 25 to 34 who have a postsecondary education have been constant since 2000, remaining higher than employment rates for young Canadians with a high school or trade education or those with less than high school education.

Young Canadians with postsecondary education also have higher average annual earnings. For example, university graduates aged 25 to 34 earned an average of \$18,868 more per year than similarly aged high school graduates. However, the earnings premium for a university education is higher among older workers; for example, those aged 55 to 64 earned an average of \$52,782 more per year than high school graduates in that age group.

Spending time in school rather than in the labour market, and acquiring debt to do so, is an investment that appears to pay off for most graduates. For example, [one recent study](#) has shown that median cumulative earnings differences over a 15-year period was \$568,748 higher for bachelor's degree holders than for high school graduates for men and \$472,270 higher for women.

For most graduates, these cumulative earnings will be far greater than the amount of debt accumulated to fund postsecondary education. In 2018, 54% of graduates aged 15 to 30 graduated with student debt, and the average debt owed at graduation was \$23,000. The level of debt has remained relatively stable since 2000 for college graduates and bachelor's degree holders, but it has gradually increased for master's and professional degree holders.

COVID-19 disrupted postsecondary education for students in 2020 and may affect the earnings prospects of youth graduating during the pandemic

From April to May 2020, Statistics Canada conducted online crowdsourcing data collection with over 100,000 postsecondary students to better understand how the pandemic was affecting them. Of these participants, 57% reported that their courses or work placements were delayed, postponed or cancelled.

Almost all participants reported that their courses had moved online, with 2% reporting that courses had not and 6% reporting that they were working on a thesis or work placement and were not taking classes. This was not an easy shift for all students. Of the participants, 7% reported being unable to complete some or all of these courses.

COVID-19 may have also affected the earnings prospects for youth graduating during the pandemic. The youth unemployment rate nearly tripled after the lockdowns and remained high for several months. [A recent study](#) suggested that if youth unemployment remained close to these historic highs, youth who graduated from university, college or high school in 2020 could lose \$25,000 or more over the next five years compared with their counterparts who graduated in a more typical year.

The chapter entitled "[Chapter 3: Youth and education in Canada](#)" is now available in the online issue of *Portrait of Youth in Canada: Data Report* ([42280001](#)).

The infographic "[Portrait of youth in Canada: Education](#)" is now available as part of the series *Statistics Canada — Infographics* ([11-627-M](#)).

For more information, or to enquire about the concepts, methods or data quality of this release, contact us (toll-free 1-800-263-1136; 514-283-8300; STATCAN.infostats-infostats.STATCAN@canada.ca) or Media Relations (613-951-4636; STATCAN.mediahotline-ligneinfomedias.STATCAN@canada.ca).