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by Feng Hou and Garnett Picot

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The decline in the citizenship rate among recent immigrants to Canada: Update to 2021

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Abstract

This article examines the trends in citizenship rates among recent immigrants who have been in Canada for five to nine years, based on census data from 1991 to 2021. The citizenship rate among recent immigrants has decreased significantly, dropping from 75.4% in 1996 to 45.7% in 2021, a decline of 29.7 percentage points. Almost half of this decline occurred from 2016 to 2021, with approximately 40% of the most recent decrease possibly related to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. However, even after accounting for the pandemic effect, the citizenship rate declined at a faster rate from 2016 to 2021 than during any other five-year intercensal period since 1996. The decline in citizenship rates among recent immigrants from 1996 to 2021 was larger among those with lower levels of education, lower family income and lower official language skills. The decrease was also more substantial among recent immigrants from East Asia, Southeast Asia and West Asia than among their counterparts from the United States, Western Europe and Southern Europe. This article discusses possible explanations for these trends.

Keywords: immigrants, citizenship, naturalization, education, family income

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Introduction

Becoming a citizen by naturalization can bring benefits to both immigrants and receiving countries. For instance, obtaining citizenship grants immigrants the right to vote and allows them to have political influence. Additionally, it can enhance immigrants' economic opportunities (Bratsberg, Ragan & Nasir, 2002; Gathmann & Monscheuer, 2020; Hayfron, 2008). Acquiring citizenship is also an indication of immigrants' commitment to the receiving country and their willingness to adhere to the values and laws of their adopted society (Bloemraad, Korteweg & Yurdakul, 2008).

Over the past two decades, there have been significant changes in both the constraints and motivations for immigrants to acquire citizenship in Canada. Various policy and program changes may have affected naturalization (Parliament of Canada, 2014; 2017). From 2006 to 2016, the "knowledge of Canada" test was strengthened, language requirements increased, citizenship application fees rose and the physical presence requirements to be eligible for citizenship were changed from three of four years preceding application to four of six years. Some of these could have reduced the tendency for eligible immigrants to become citizens (Hou & Picot, 2021). In 2017, some of these changes were reversed. The residency requirement was restored to three of five years, and the upper age limit to meet the language and knowledge requirements was moved from 64 back to 54. The citizenship fee for minors was reduced in 2018. Other more global events also likely play a role. For example, significant economic development in some source countries, such as China and India, could encourage immigrants from these regions to maintain their source-country passports and reduce their motivation to become Canadian citizens.

This paper examines trends in citizenship acquisition in Canada from 1991 to 2021, updating an earlier paper by Hou and Picot (2019). The focus is on the citizenship (or naturalization) rate—the proportion of immigrants who acquire Canadian citizenship after they meet the residency requirement for citizenship. To assess recent trends, the results for immigrants in Canada for five to nine years at any given census are produced.

The earlier research found that the citizenship rate among recent immigrants declined significantly from 2001 to 2016 (Hou & Picot, 2019). This paper updates that analysis and assesses whether the downward trend continued, levelled off or was reversed by 2021. The earlier research also found that the decline was more significant among immigrant groups with lower family income levels, lower levels of education and poorer official language skills. This paper updates those subgroup analyses. The conclusion includes a discussion of possible causes for the decline.

Data and methods

This study uses data from the 1991, 1996, 2001, 2006, 2016 and 2021 long-form census questionnaires and the 2011 National Household Survey. The study sample is limited to landed immigrants aged 18 and older in a given census year. The data from the six censuses are used to compute citizenship rates among immigrants who recently met the residency requirements for citizenship during the five-year period prior to any given census. To do this, the analysis focuses on adult immigrants who arrived in Canada five to nine years before each census.¹ Until 2015, immigrants were required to reside in Canada for at least three years before they could become citizens during their fourth year of residence, at the earliest.² From 2015 to 2017, this residency requirement was increased to four years, and immigrants could

1. This assumes these immigrants mostly lived in Canada after immigration.

2. Except for immigrants who lived in Canada as non-permanent residents before becoming permanent residents.

become citizens only during their fifth year living in Canada, at the earliest. In 2017, the residency requirement was returned to three of five years. To keep the study populations consistent across censuses, the lower sample limit is defined as immigrants who have lived in Canada for at least five years. The upper sample limit is defined as immigrants who have lived in Canada for at least nine years. They would have been eligible for citizenship during the five-year intercensal period prior to any given census.

Focusing on immigrants who arrived in Canada five to nine years earlier (hereafter referred to as new or recent immigrants) provides a good indication of emerging trends. Most immigrants who become citizens do so by the time they have been in Canada for 9 years; relatively few immigrants become citizens after 10 or more years in Canada. For example, among immigrants who arrived in 1991 and remained in Canada, 82.6% became citizens by the 10th year after immigration.³ Only an additional 6.0% became citizens 15 years after immigration (Table 1). Similar results were observed for the latest cohort that data are available for. Among immigrants who arrived in 2006, 76.4% were Canadian citizens 10 years later, and an additional 6.2% became citizens 15 years after entry.

Table 1
Citizenship rate among immigrants aged 18 and older who met the minimum residency requirements, by landing year and years since landing

Landing year	Years since landing		
	5	10	15
	percent		
1986	58.3	79.5	85.3
1991	68.1	82.6	88.6
1996	65.2	85.6	90.9
2001	56.7	84.5	88.8
2006	44.4	76.4	82.6
2011	43.0	69.0	..
2016	21.7

.. not available for a specific reference period

Sources: Statistics Canada, 1991, 1996, 2001, 2006, 2016 and 2021 censuses of population, and 2011 National Household Survey.

Naturalization among immigrants is based on the question, “Of what country is this person a citizen?”, which appears in every census before the 2021 Census. The census questionnaire provides two answer options, “Canada, by birth” and “Canada, by naturalization,” as well as a write-in box: “Other country—specify.” The 2021 Census asks two questions: “Is this person a Canadian citizen?”⁴ and “Is this person a citizen of a country other than Canada?”⁵ The census questionnaire also explains that naturalization “refers to the process by which an immigrant is granted citizenship of Canada, under the *Citizenship Act*.” The citizenship rate is calculated as the percentage of immigrants who reported having Canadian citizenship by naturalization.

3. The results in Table 1 are based on quasi-longitudinal analysis using multiple censuses. For example, data for the 1991 landing cohort include those in the 1996 Census who were in Canada for five years, those in the 2001 Census who were in Canada for 10 years and those in the 2006 Census who were in Canada for 15 years. From 1991 to 1996, some immigrants in the 1991 entry cohort might have left Canada, so the population for 5, 10 and 15 years after immigration does not necessarily consist of the same immigrants.

4. In the 2021 Census, the choices for this question are “Yes, a Canadian citizen by birth,” “Yes, a Canadian citizen by naturalization,” and “No, not a Canadian citizen.”

5. The first question did not affect how people indicate whether they are a Canadian citizen by birth or by naturalization or not a Canadian citizen, but the second question resulted in an increase in the number of responses for people who hold both Canadian citizenship (by birth or by naturalization) and citizenship of a country other than Canada (Tuey & Maheux, 2022).

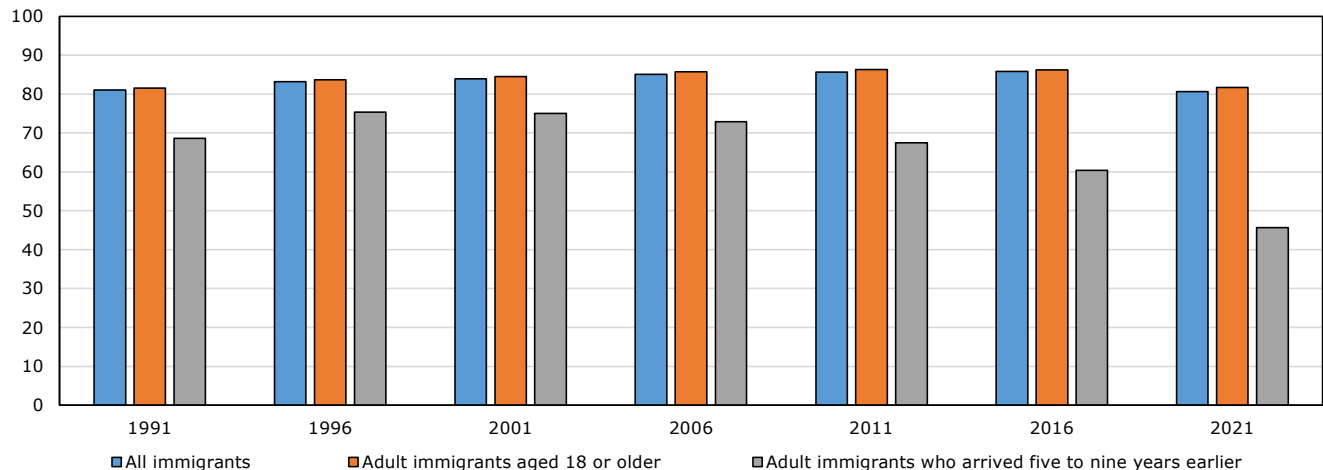
Results

The overall citizenship rate

Census data indicate that the overall citizenship rate—the share of all immigrants who met the residency requirements for citizenship and became Canadian citizens—rose slowly from 1991 to 2016, then declined for the first time in 2021. This trend holds for both adult immigrants aged 18 or older and all immigrants (Chart 1). For example, the citizenship rate among adult immigrants rose from 81.6% in 1991 to 86.3% in 2016, then declined to 81.7% in 2021. Despite the recent decline, Canada still has one of the highest immigrant citizenship rates in the Western world.⁶

However, these numbers do not fully reflect recent trends in citizenship take-up among immigrants. They include all eligible adult immigrants, no matter how long they have been in Canada. Many would have become citizens 20 or even 30 years prior to any given census, and their decisions would have been affected by factors that existed at that time. A more significant decline was observed among recent immigrants who arrived in Canada five to nine years before each census (therefore, recently meeting residency eligibility requirements). Their citizenship rate peaked at 75.4% in 1996 and declined to 45.7% by 2021 (Chart 1), falling by 29.7 percentage points over 25 years. Almost half (14.7 percentage points) of this overall decline occurred from 2016 to 2021.

Chart 1
Citizenship rates of immigrants who met the minimum residency requirements, 1991 to 2021
 percent



Note: The minimum residency requirements were three years from the time of the 1991 Census to the time of the 2011 National Household Survey, four years at the time of the 2016 Census and three years at the time of the 2021 Census.

Sources: Statistics Canada, 1991, 1996, 2001, 2006, 2016 and 2021 censuses of population, and 2011 National Household Survey.

6. According to an OECD (2023) report, during the late 2010s, Canada ranked third out of 28 OECD countries in the citizenship rate among settled immigrants aged 15 or older, with a rate of 90%. This ranked Canada just below Croatia (99%) and Lithuania (91%), but significantly ahead of Australia (81%), the United States (66%), France (62%), the United Kingdom (59%) and Germany (55%).

The possible effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the decline in citizenship rate among recent immigrants from 2016 to 2021

Some of the decline from 2016 to 2021 in the citizenship rate among recent immigrants was likely caused by work interruptions related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Processing and other issues slowed the approval of citizenship applications during the pandemic. For example, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (2022) reported that, “Due to interruptions in processing at the beginning of the pandemic, the grant inventory has grown from around 211,000 pre-pandemic to 459,000 as of January 31, 2022. Processing times have increased from 15 months pre-pandemic to 26 months.” These processing issues, and a lower number of ceremonies to prevent the spread of COVID-19, significantly reduced the number of naturalized citizens leading up to the 2021 Census. The number of newly naturalized citizens was 249,000 in 2019, then, during the pandemic, 110,000 in 2020 and 138,000 in 2021. It is unlikely that this large and rapid fall represented a decline in the number of permanent residents wishing to become citizens. In 2022, as restrictions related to COVID-19 were eased, the number of naturalized citizens increased to 374,000 (IRCC, nd). However, the census was conducted in May 2021 and would not have captured this catch-up.

The Longitudinal Immigration Database (IMDB), which contains information to estimate citizenship rates for recent immigrants from 2011 to 2020, can be used to indirectly assess the possible effect of the pandemic on the citizenship rate. In overlapping years, the trends observed in the IMDB and the census are similar, thus allowing comparisons between the two datasets.⁷

In the IMDB, which has annual data, the citizenship rate among recent adult immigrants declined by 5.9 percentage points from 2016 to 2019—the last year before COVID-19—on average about a 2 percentage point decrease per year. If the same pace of decrease had continued, assuming no interruptions related to COVID-19, the citizenship rate would have declined an additional 3 percentage points by mid-2021, when the census was completed. This suggests a total decline from 2016 to 2021 of around 9 percentage points, without restrictions related to COVID-19, rather than the observed 14.7 percentage points. Perhaps 40%⁸ of the decline observed in the census from 2016 to 2021 was associated with interruptions related to the pandemic. This is a very rough estimate, and some possibility of error is acknowledged.

However, the estimated 9 percentage point drop in the citizenship rate among recent immigrants, without restrictions related to COVID-19, from 2016 to 2021, was still greater than that observed during any five-year intercensal period since 1996.

The decline among recent immigrants with different characteristics

The fall in the citizenship rate from 1996 to 2021 varied considerably by family income, educational attainment, source region and language ability.

7. For instance, the decline in the citizenship rate among recent immigrants from 2011 to 2016 was 7.1 percentage points in the census and 6.5 percentage points in the IMDB.

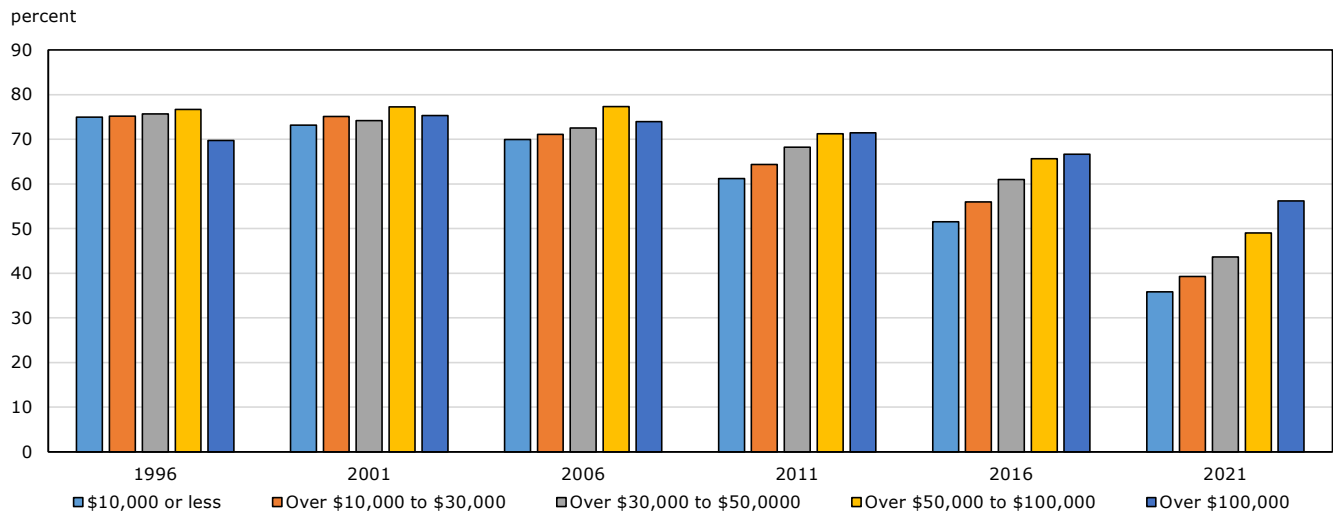
8. This is derived from $(14.7-9.0)/14.7$.

Differences by family income

Chart 2 shows the trend in citizenship rates by family income. Here, family income is adult-equivalent adjusted (AEA) to account for differences in family size and the economies of scale associated with larger families. Actual family income is almost always higher than AEA income.⁹

In 1996, recent immigrants with high AEA family incomes (over \$100,000) tended to have lower citizenship take-up than those with lower family income levels. However, since then, the citizenship rate has fallen more rapidly among lower-income individuals. From 1996 to 2021, the rate fell 13.5 percentage points among recent immigrants with AEA family incomes over \$100,000, compared with 35.9 percentage points among those with income of over \$10,000 to \$30,000 (Table 2). As a result, by 2021, high-income families were 1.4 times more likely to become citizens than lower-income families in the over-\$10,000-to-\$30,000 bracket.

Chart 2
Citizenship rates of recent immigrants, by family income (adult-equivalent adjusted), in 2015 constant dollars, 1996 to 2021



Sources: Statistics Canada, 1996, 2001, 2006, 2016 and 2021 censuses of population, and 2011 National Household Survey.

9. Adult adjusted family income is the total family income divided by the square root of the family size. For example, a family of four with an actual family income of \$100,000 has an AEA family income of \$50,000. All dollar amounts are in 2015 constant dollars.

Table 2

Citizenship rates among immigrants aged 18 and older who arrived in Canada five to nine years earlier, by family income, language, education and source region, 1991 to 2021

	1991	1996	2001	2006	2011	2016	2021	1996-to-2021 change percentage points
	percent							
Total	68.6	75.4	75.1	73.0	67.5	60.4	45.7	-29.7
Adult-equivalent family income (in 2015 constant dollars)								
\$10,000 or less	65.8	75.0	73.1	69.9	61.2	51.5	35.8	-39.2
Over \$10,000 to \$30,000	68.2	75.1	75.1	71.1	64.3	56.0	39.3	-35.9
Over \$30,000 to \$50,000	69.2	75.7	74.2	72.5	68.3	61.0	43.7	-32.0
Over \$50,000 to \$100,000	69.6	76.7	77.2	77.4	71.2	65.7	49.0	-27.7
Over \$100,000	66.2	69.7	75.3	74.0	71.5	66.7	56.2	-13.5
Language								
Neither English nor French	61.5	62.1	68.3	56.7	45.6	32.6	19.7	-42.4
Other mother tongue, speaks English or French	74.0	79.7	78.9	76.2	70.5	63.4	47.3	-32.4
English or French mother tongue	60.2	69.2	65.0	66.2	64.9	61.0	49.8	-19.4
Education								
Less than high school	64.7	69.4	71.4	63.4	59.8	46.9	30.4	-39.0
High school graduate	68.7	75.7	74.5	70.8	65.4	55.4	40.7	-34.9
Some postsecondary	72.1	78.9	75.9	73.8	67.3	60.8	46.1	-32.8
University degree	73.8	80.9	79.3	77.0	70.8	67.1	51.8	-29.1
Socioeconomic status								
Low income, high school or less education, mother tongue neither English nor French	69.2	73.9	75.0	69.1	63.3	51.4	35.1	-38.8
High income, postsecondary education, English or French mother tongue	60.5	68.0	65.3	68.0	66.4	64.8	54.9	-13.2
Immigrants not included in above groups	68.9	77.1	75.8	75.0	69.0	63.4	47.2	-29.9
Source region								
United States	31.0	38.4	41.7	41.8	44.9	40.5	31.0	-7.3
Central America	66.4	77.1	74.2	72.1	67.5	59.0	48.9	-28.2
Caribbean	64.7	72.2	64.1	66.5	67.7	58.2	47.3	-24.9
South America	71.6	73.8	68.5	70.0	73.8	72.5	55.8	-18.0
Northern Europe	54.4	53.9	45.0	49.2	48.1	45.2	34.6	-19.3
Western Europe	50.2	52.9	52.4	53.5	47.9	47.9	45.9	-7.0
Southern Europe	53.8	52.8	81.4	83.5	78.7	62.1	47.6	-5.1
Eastern Europe	84.6	84.3	83.6	84.2	78.6	71.7	55.4	-28.9
Africa	78.3	86.2	83.0	76.8	77.2	73.8	61.2	-25.0
South Asia	55.7	66.0	68.0	68.5	67.2	59.8	44.9	-21.2
Southeast Asia	79.2	81.9	79.0	74.8	70.3	61.3	41.2	-40.7
East Asia	80.4	82.9	80.9	73.7	57.0	44.8	24.9	-58.0
West Asia	79.7	86.6	84.1	82.1	74.6	69.7	57.3	-29.3
Oceania and other	56.9	53.9	50.1	55.7	60.7	49.0	39.1	-14.8
	number							
Sample size	64,787	123,636	137,708	138,024	163,270	214,067	236,878	...

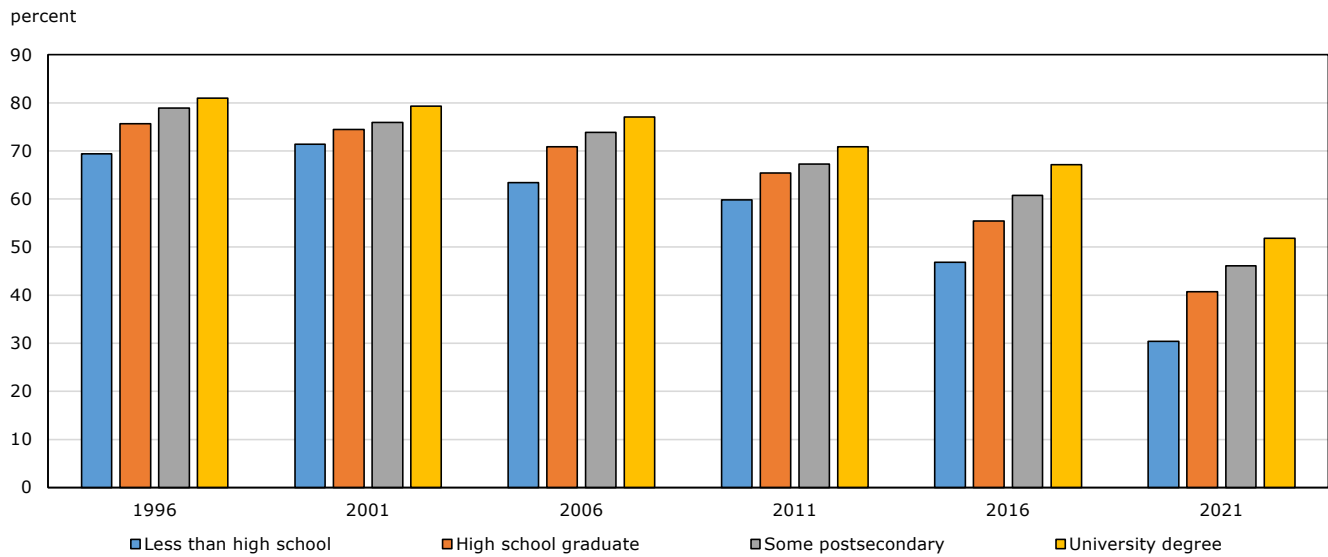
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Sources: Statistics Canada, 1991, 1996, 2001, 2006, 2016 and 2021 censuses of population, and 2011 National Household Survey.

Differences by educational level

From 1996 to 2021, the citizenship rate declined among all education groups, but more rapidly among recent immigrants with less education. Among those with a high school education or less, the rate fell by 39 percentage points to 30.4% in 2021. Among those with a university degree (bachelor’s degree or higher), the decline was 29 percentage points, from 80.9% to 51.8% (Chart 3).

Chart 3
Citizenship rates of recent immigrants, by education, 1996 to 2021

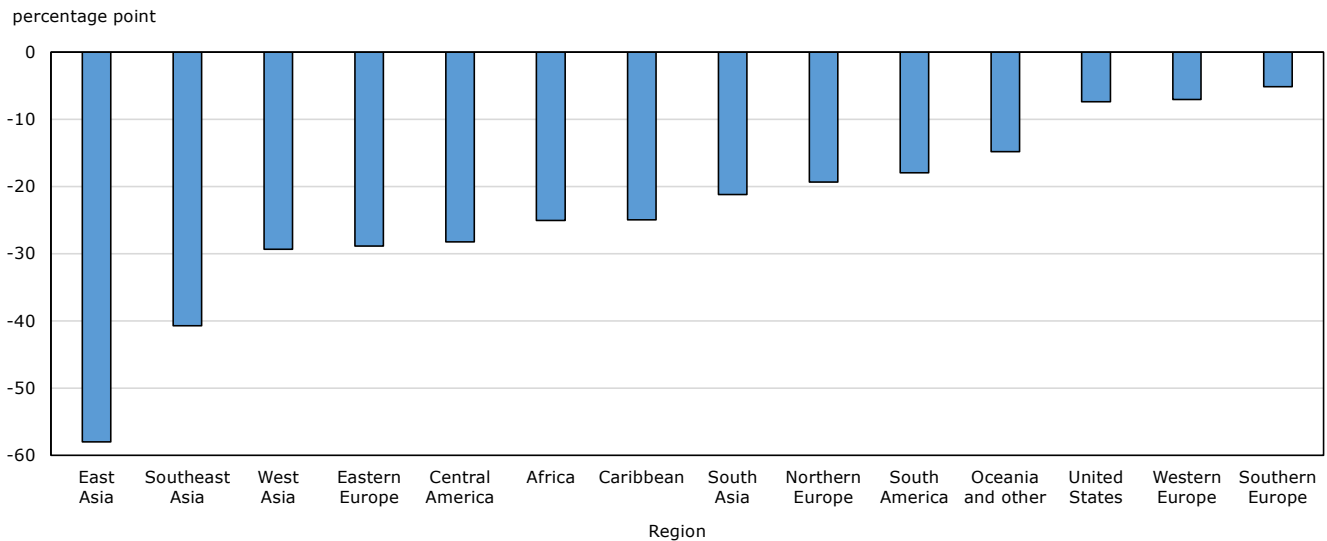


Sources: Statistics Canada, 1996, 2001, 2006, 2016 and 2021 censuses of population, and 2011 National Household Survey.

Differences by source region

Traditionally, recent immigrants from Western countries such as the United States, Europe, Australia and New Zealand had a much lower citizenship take-up rate than immigrants from Asia, Africa and Central and South America (Picot & Hou, 2011). For example, in 1996, recent immigrants from Western countries mentioned above had citizenship rates from 30% to 55%; those from the non-Western regions had rates from 65% to 80% (Table 2). Compared with their home country, the benefits of a Canadian citizenship and passport were much greater for many immigrants from non-Western nations than for their counterparts from regions such as the United States and Europe. However, following 1996, the decline was much greater among eligible recent immigrants from some non-Western regions, notably East Asia (mostly China) and Southeast Asia, than among those from the United States and Europe (Chart 4 and Table 2). Recently, immigrants from some non-Western nations more closely resembled those from developed nations in their tendency to acquire Canadian citizenship. In 2021, recent immigrants from East Asia had the lowest citizenship rate, at 25%, and those from Southeast Asia and South Asia had rates from 41% to 45%. This may be related to the increasing economic and international status of these regions, which may reduce the economic motivation of recent immigrants from these regions to acquire Canadian citizenship.

Chart 4
Percentage point decline in citizenship rates among recent immigrants, by source region, 1996 to 2021

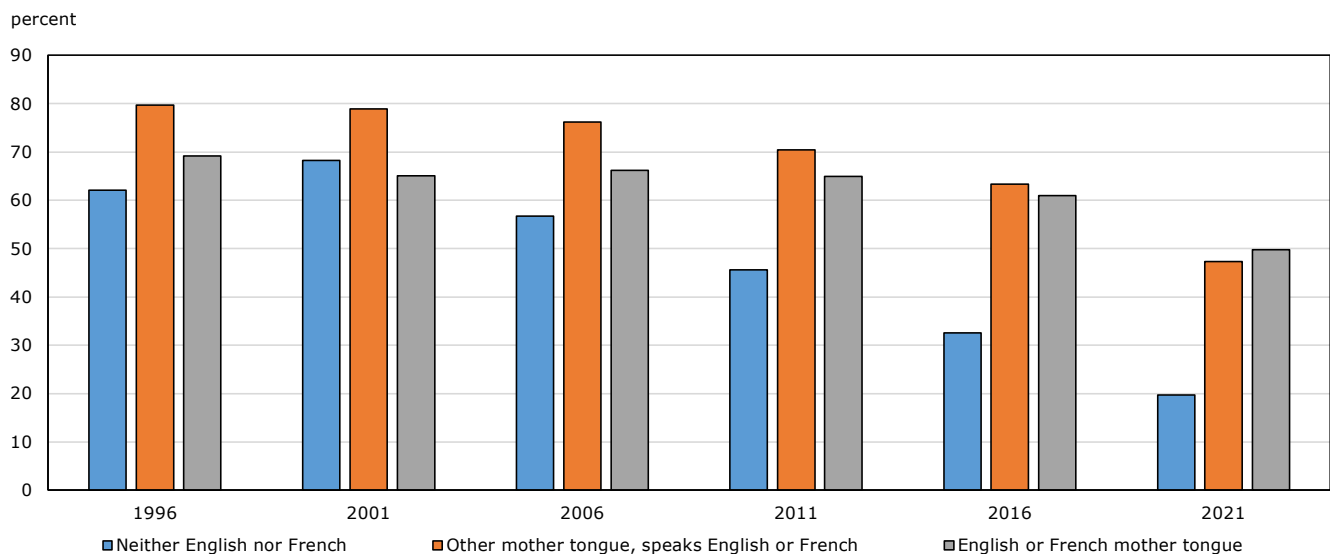


Sources: Statistics Canada, 1996, 2001, 2006, 2016 and 2021 censuses of population, and 2011 National Household Survey.

Differences by language spoken at landing

The citizenship rate decline was observed among all three language groups in Chart 5 but was particularly evident among those not speaking English or French at landing. This group of recent immigrants registered a 42 percentage point decline in the citizenship rate; one in five were citizens in 2021. The increased language requirements for citizenship may have played a role in this decline. Recent immigrants who spoke English or French at landing, but whose mother tongue was not an official language, registered a 32 percentage point decline in the citizenship rate. Conversely, those who had English or French as their mother tongue saw their citizenship rate decline by 19 percentage points from 1996 to 2021.

Chart 5
Citizenship rates of recent immigrants, by language, 1996 to 2021



Sources: Statistics Canada, 1996, 2001, 2006, 2016 and 2021 censuses of population, and 2011 National Household Survey.

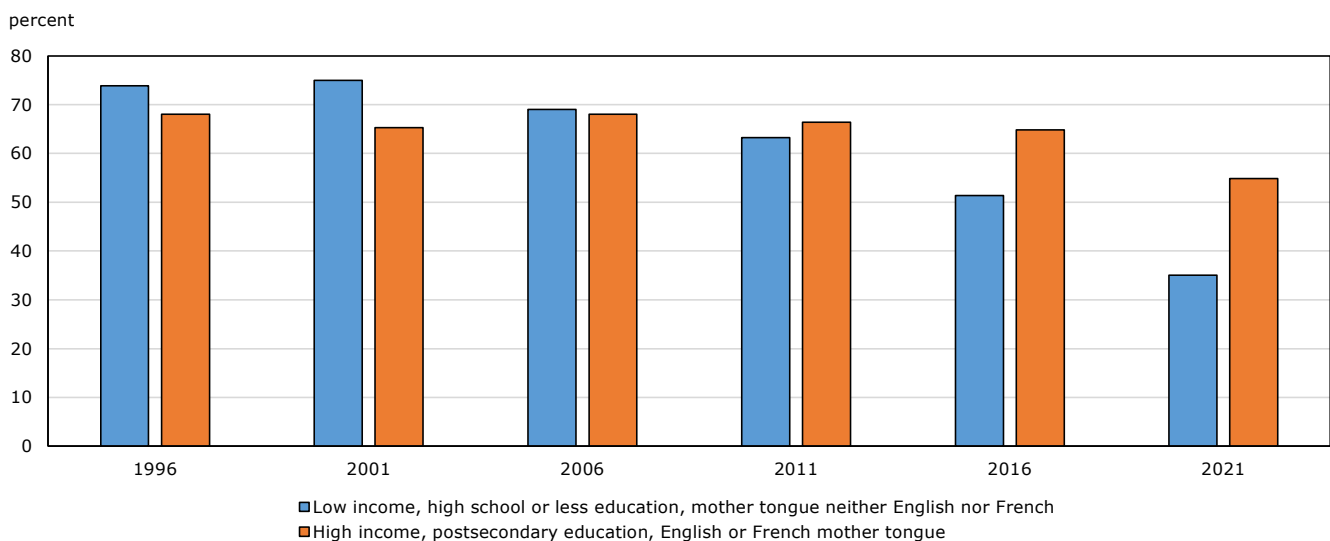
Changes in the citizenship rate for disadvantaged and more advantaged immigrant groups

The above analysis looks at changes in the citizenship rate among groups defined by one factor at a time. But many immigrants may have multiple characteristics associated with a low and more rapidly declining citizenship rate. Among immigrants with relatively low income, poor or non-existent English or French language skills and a low level of education, the decline in citizenship rate may have been accentuated. Conversely, among immigrants with very high income, good language skills and a high level of education, the tendency to become naturalized may have changed little.

To examine these possible patterns, three groups of recent immigrants were constructed. The disadvantaged group includes immigrants with an AEA family income of under \$50,000, whose mother tongue was neither English nor French and who had a high school education or less. The advantaged group consists of immigrants with an AEA income of over \$100,000, English or French as their mother tongue and a postsecondary education. The third (intermediate) group consists of all other immigrants who were not in the most disadvantaged and advantaged groups.

The results indicate that the citizenship rate dropped 39 percentage points from 1996 to 2021 for the disadvantaged group, 30 percentage points for the intermediate group and 13 percentage points for the advantaged group (Chart 6). Before 2006, the disadvantaged group was more likely to acquire Canadian citizenship. But the pattern was reversed after 2006, and, in 2021, the citizenship rate was 1.5 times higher among the advantaged group than among the disadvantaged. Among the disadvantaged group, three-quarters of recent immigrants became citizens in 1996, falling to 35% in 2021.

Chart 6
Citizenship rates of recent immigrants, by combination of family income, education and language, 1996 to 2021



Sources: Statistics Canada, 1996, 2001, 2006, 2016 and 2021 censuses of population, and 2011 National Household Survey.

Conclusion

This paper examines the citizenship rate trends among recent immigrants—those in Canada for five to nine years at any given census—from 1991 to 2021. The citizenship rate is the proportion of immigrants who acquire Canadian citizenship after they meet the residency requirement.

The citizenship rate among recent immigrants has been in decline since 1996, at first decreasing slowly until 2006, then more rapidly until 2021. The citizenship rate among recent immigrants fell from 75.4% in 1996 to 45.7% in 2021. Almost half of this decline occurred from 2016 to 2021, with approximately 40% of the most recent decrease possibly related to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Processing and ceremony issues slowed the approval of citizenship requests during the pandemic. However, even after accounting for such possibilities, the citizenship rate declined faster from 2016 to 2021 than during any other five-year period since 1996.

The decline in the citizenship rate among recent immigrants was larger among those with lower education levels, lower family income and poorer English or French language skills. Also, trends varied across source regions. Traditionally, immigrants from non-Western countries displayed a higher citizenship take-up rate than those from Western countries. This may be partly because, compared with their home country, the benefits of a Canadian citizenship and passport were much greater for immigrants from non-Western nations than for their counterparts from regions such as the United States and Europe. However, since 1996, the citizenship rate has declined more rapidly among eligible recent immigrants from some non-Western regions, notably East Asia (mostly China) and Southeast Asia. In 2021, recent immigrants from East Asia had the lowest citizenship rate, at 25%.

Assessing why the citizenship rate of recent immigrants has declined since 1996 is beyond the scope of this paper. At this point, the reasons are not well known. A research paper assessed some possibilities that were discussed in the literature (Hou & Picot, 2021). The paper noted that, from 2006 to 2016, a number of changes in government citizenship policy were enacted, including strengthening the “knowledge of Canada” requirement, requiring evidence of French or English language skills, increasing citizenship application fees, increasing the residency requirements and requiring immigrants to declare their intent to reside in Canada. The authors acknowledged that directly estimating the exact effect of these specific policy changes on the naturalization rate is difficult. Instead, they asked whether changes in the citizenship rate among specific immigrant groups defined by education, language skills and family income were consistent with the possible effects of various policy changes. They concluded that government policy changes introduced during the period from 2006 to 2016 were associated with the decline in the citizenship rate following 2006, and particularly since 2011. However, no single policy change was seen as the sole or primary explanation. Furthermore, government policy changes were not the only factors affecting the decline; other forces were at play because the decline was underway prior to 2006, when policy changes were first initiated. The authors concluded that events occurring internationally, such as rising economic success and nationalism in some source countries, also likely contributed to the decline.

In 2017, some of the policy changes were reversed. The residency requirement was restored to three of five years, and the upper age limit of individuals required to meet the language and knowledge requirements was moved from 64 back to 54. The citizenship fee for minors was reduced in 2018. Certainly not all the possible policy effects were reversed, including changes to citizenship fees for adults.¹⁰ However, despite the changes that were made, the citizenship rate of recent immigrants declined

10. In 2019, the Liberal government announced the development of a plan to eliminate citizenship fees for immigrants who have fulfilled the requirements (Chesoi & Kachulis, 2020). The plan has not been implemented yet. It is possible that some recent immigrants may postpone their citizenship application in anticipation of the policy change, and this could be another reason for the recent decline in the citizenship rate among recent immigrants.

at an ever-increasing rate from 2016 to 2021. As noted by Hou and Picot (2021), this suggests that there are other factors, in addition to changes in government citizenship policies, that affected the citizenship rate. The very rapid decline in citizenship rate among recent immigrants from East Asia suggests that international events may be playing a significant role.

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