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Fear of COVID-19 related stigmatization

by Darcy Hango

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Fear of COVID-19 related stigmatization

By **Darcy Hango**

This article provides disaggregated data to better understand the impact of COVID-19 on specific groups. Visit the [Gender, Diversity and Inclusion Statistics Hub](#) for more analysis, including disaggregated data on labour, public safety, health and more.



As governments begin to relax protective health measures and open up more businesses and recreational facilities, the number of direct interactions with others will likely increase for most people. As society loosens restrictions and social contacts increase, many Canadians will likely feel relieved to get back to a more “normal” life. However, many others may be more fearful, for a number of reasons, including fear of being stigmatized because of being judged as putting others at risk.

Outbreaks of infectious diseases can be associated with a great deal of fear of contracting the disease in the general public¹ which, in turn, can lead to feelings of anxiety and mistrust within the general public. There are several reasons why some people may experience fear in the context of a pandemic. For example, recent evidence suggests that some health care workers in Italy have experienced some social stigma over fears that they had been in contact with the disease.² Additionally, media reports suggest that Chinese and other Asian people in Canada (and around the world) have been victims of stigma since the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak³.

This article examines which groups of people feel more afraid of being the target of unwanted behaviours because of perceived exposure risk to COVID-19. It also examines specific reasons people have given for thinking they may be targeted, including not wearing a mask, being a healthcare worker (including working in seniors’ residences, nursing homes or other long-term care residences), having a place of employment associated with a risk of COVID-19, having health conditions other than COVID-19 that may cause coughing or sneezing, having another type of health condition, being elderly, and because of one’s racial identity. The data comes from a new panel data source, the Canadian Perspectives Survey Series, which is surveying the same group of Canadians on a regular basis to see how they are doing in the context of the pandemic.

Not wearing a mask, racial identity, and health conditions with COVID-19-like symptoms are the most common reasons reported for fear of being stigmatized

In early June, 20% of Canadians reported that they feared, once their federal, provincial, territorial or municipal governments relax the protective health measures put in place to fight COVID-19, being the target of unwanted or intimidating acts or behaviours because they may be judged as putting others at risk of contracting COVID-19.

Respondents were also asked to provide the reasons why they feared being stigmatized.⁴ Among the 20% who were in that situation, half said that the reason they feared being targeted was because they do not wear a mask all the time (Chart 1). A recent report indicated that about one third of Canadians did not intend to wear a mask

1. Person et al. (2004).

2. Ramaci et al. (2020).

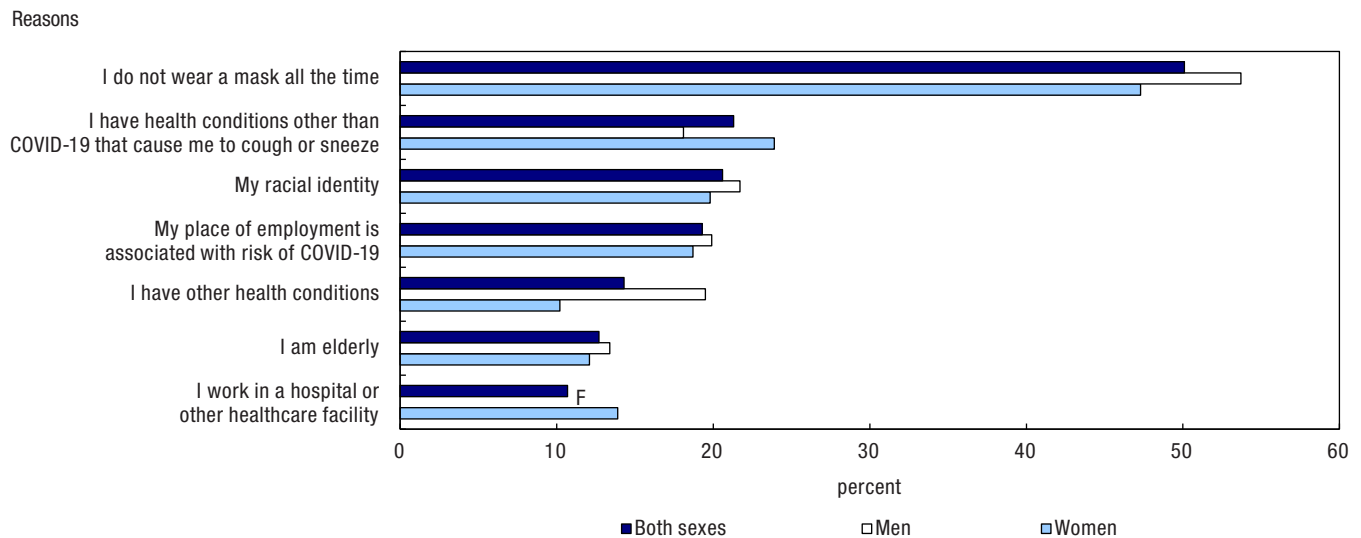
3. Aguilera, (2020).

4. Respondents could identify more than one reason for why they feared being the target of unwanted or intimidating acts.

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in public spaces where physical distancing is difficult, and that this proportion was higher for some categories of people, including men, younger people, and Canadian-born individuals.⁵ At the time of this release, however, many jurisdictions across Canada have introduced directives to make wearing a mask mandatory in all indoor public places.

Chart 1
Reasons provided by those who feared being stigmatized as governments relax protective measures, June 2020



F Too unreliable to be published

Source: Canadian Perspectives Survey Series, June 2020.

The two next most frequently given reasons provided by those who feared being targeted were having health conditions with physical symptoms similar to COVID-19 symptoms, and racial identity. Just over 1 in 5 of those who feared being targeted said that it was because of a health condition other than COVID-19 that causes them to cough or sneeze (e.g. seasonal allergies), while about 1 in 5 reported that they feared being targeted because of their racial identity.⁶

The results also show that there was some concern among Canadians because their workplace may be associated with a higher risk of COVID-19. For example, almost 20% of respondents, other than those who worked in a healthcare facility, said that they feared being targeted because their place of employment was associated with a higher risk of COVID-19.⁷ Additionally, just over 1 in 10 stated that they feared being targeted because they were working in hospitals, or other healthcare facilities such as nursing homes or other long term care residences.

Respondents were also able to select being elderly as a reason for feeling fearful. Of those who feared being stigmatized, 13% said it was because they were elderly.⁸ Older Canadians are more likely to have health conditions and are generally more vulnerable and have experienced more adverse effects from COVID-19. In all cases, rates were similar for both men and women.

5. See Statistics Canada (2020a).

6. These data do not provide information on specific population groups designated as visible minorities or racialized groups.

7. Many job categories involve a high degree of interactions with other people. A previous report found that of those who mainly worked at a location outside the home, 30% came in contact with at least 16 non-household members over the past week. This compared with 4% among those who mostly worked from home, 3% among those who were not working and 2% among those who were absent from work (Statistics Canada, 2020b).

8. No response category was available for other age groups.

Some groups of Canadians are more likely to fear being stigmatized

Of the 20% of Canadians who reported that they feared being targeted during the loosening of restrictions, certain population groups reported higher rates of fear than others. Canadians under age 55 reported greater fear of being stigmatized during the loosening of restrictions, while those older than age 55 reported less fear (Table 1). Results by age were similar for both men and women, except that the fear of being stigmatized was highest among young women age 15 to 34, at 32% (vs. 19% for young men).

Table 1
Proportion of respondents who feared being stigmatized as governments relax protective health measures, by various sociodemographic characteristics and sex, June 2020

	Total	Men	Women
Sex		percent	
Men (ref.)	17.9
Women	21.4
Age			
15 to 34	25.2	18.9	31.6 [†]
35 to 44	23.2	21.1	25.2
45 to 54 (ref.)	23.3	23.9	22.8
55 to 64	12.9*	14.1*	11.7*
65 and over	11.4*	12.0*	11.0*
Since the beginning of COVID-19 restrictions is your household income enough to meet your household's needs			
Enough/more than enough (ref.)	17.8	14.0	21.3 [†]
Not enough	28.3*	33.2*	22.1
Highest level of education			
Less than high school (ref.)	27.9	21.0	34.0
High school/some post-secondary education	19.4	18.8	19.8
Post-secondary degree, diploma or certificate, non-university	16.5*	14.3	19.0*
Post-secondary degree, diploma or certificate, university	19.6	20.1	19.1*
Immigrant Status			
Canadian-born individuals	16.7*	14.6*	18.9*
Immigrants (ref.)	28.5	28.5	28.5
Rural/Urban status			
Urban (ref.)	21.0	19.1	22.9
Rural	12.3*	10.8*	13.7*

... not applicable

* significantly different from reference category (ref.) (p < 0.05)

[†] significant difference (p < 0.05) between men and women

Source: Canadian Perspectives Survey Series, June 2020.

At 29%, immigrants were almost twice as likely as the Canadian born (17%) to report that they were afraid of being the target of unwanted behaviours. Earlier work during the beginning of the pandemic lockdown found that immigrants were also more likely to be concerned about both the health and social impacts of the pandemic.⁹

Other groups that reported a higher fear of unwanted or intimidating acts included adults who lived in urban areas. Specifically, 21% of the urban population reported that they were afraid of being stigmatized, compared with 12% of those living in rural areas. These results were the same for both men and women. At least in part, this result could be related to the fact that immigrants tend to be more concentrated in urban areas. Those who stated that their household income was not enough to meet their household needs in the context of the pandemic also expressed more concern, although these results were only significant for men. Additionally, there were differences across levels of education, but only for women: women without a high school diploma were more likely to report fear than women who had a post-secondary degree or diploma.

9. LaRochelle-Côté and Uppal (2020).

Many immigrants fear being stigmatized because of their racial identity

Given the large gap in fear of being stigmatized between the immigrant population and the Canadian born population, it is important to examine this fear in more detail. For the entire group of people who stated that they feared unwanted or intimidating acts, over 20% said it was because of their racial identity. Table 2 shows that this fear was disproportionately felt among immigrants. For example, among those who were afraid of being the target of unwanted behaviours, immigrants were significantly more likely (42%) than the Canadian born population (9%) to report that they feared being stigmatized because of their racial identity.

Table 2
Reasons provided by those who feared being the target of unwanted or intimidating acts or behaviours as governments relax protective measures, by immigration status, June 2020

Reasons	Total	percent	
		Canadian born	Immigrants
I fear being the target of unwanted attention because of my racial identity	20.6	8.7	41.7*
I work in a hospital or other healthcare facility	10.7	12.8	7.1
My place of employment is associated with risk of COVID-19	19.3	17.7	22.0
I have health conditions other than COVID-19 that causes me to cough or sneeze	19.3	23.5	17.5
I have other health conditions	14.3	12.8	F
I am elderly	12.7	12.9	12.2
I do not wear a mask all the time	50.1	59.6	33.4*

* significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between immigrants and the Canadian born

F Too unreliable to be published

Source: Canadian Perspectives Survey Series, June 2020.

The higher rate seen among immigrants is likely related to the fact that a significant proportion of immigrants in Canada – particularly recent immigrants – belong to a group designated as a visible minority. A recent report based on crowdsourcing data showed that the proportion of participants who were part of population groups designated as a visible minority were more likely to perceive an increase in the frequency of harassment or attacks based on race, ethnicity or skin colour since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (18%, vs. 6% for the other participants). This percentage was even higher among participants who identified as Chinese (30%), Korean (27%), and Southeast Asian (19%).¹⁰

Other results from Table 2 show that immigrants were as likely as Canadian-born individuals to perceive that they could be the target of unwanted acts because of their place of employment or because they work in a hospital or another health care facility, even though they are significantly more likely than the Canadian-born population to work in certain occupations that put them at risk of contracting the disease, such as nurse aides, orderlies or patient service associates.¹¹ Similarly, immigrants were as likely as the Canadian-born population to report health reasons or being elderly as reasons for fear of being targeted.

By contrast, immigrants were significantly less fearful than Canadian-born individuals of being the target of unwanted attention for not following safety protocols, such as wearing a face mask. This is consistent with another report that found that immigrants were more likely than the Canadian-born population to report that they will be wearing a mask in public spaces as safety measures related to COVID-19 are relaxed.¹²

10. Heidinger and Cotter (2020).

11. Turcotte and Savage (2020).

12. Statistics Canada (2020a).

Statistics Canada continues to release information about the situation of various population subgroups in the context of the pandemic. Recent reports have examined perceptions of safety among groups designated as visible minorities, as well as the economic impact of the pandemic on population groups designated as visible minorities. Over the next few weeks, Statistics Canada will continue to provide additional information on issues that pertain to specific groups of Canadians.

Data sources and methodology

To obtain up-to-date information on how Canadians are feeling about recovery efforts because of the COVID-19 pandemic, Statistics Canada developed a new web panel survey: the Canadian Perspectives Survey Series (CPSS). From June 15 to June 21, over 4,000 respondents from all 10 provinces participated in the third wave of the CPSS. Because the CPSS targets a subsample of the Labour Force Survey (LFS) sample, a number of variables (age, sex, highest level of education, place of birth) were drawn from the LFS data. All of the differences presented in this release between the population subgroups are significant at the 5% level ($p < 0.05$). Bootstrap weights were used for significance tests.

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