

Aiming high: Educational aspirations of visible minority immigrant youth

by Alison Taylor and Harvey Krahn

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Acquiring a postsecondary education has become increasingly important as young people seek to make educational and labour market choices that allow them to participate fully in the knowledge economy. Studies of the postsecondary attainment of young adults are informative, but it is also useful to examine the educational aspirations of teenagers. Such studies profile the value placed on different types of formal education by youth as well as perceived opportunities for upward occupational mobility.

Differences in aspirations across groups of youth and reasons for such differences are also important to consider. For example, given widespread concerns about the educational disadvantages faced by particular groups of visible minority immigrant youth, we might expect their educational aspirations to be lower than those of other Canadian teens. In fact, the opposite is true. Recent findings indicate that the educational goals of these young people are even higher than average: in 2000, some 79% of them hoped to go to university, compared with 57% of their Canadian-born non-visible minority counterparts.

Using data from the 2000 Youth in Transition Survey (YITS), this article explores the educational aspirations of 15-year-old visible minority immigrant students and compares them with those of Canadian-born youth who are not part of a visible minority group. It then identifies the most important factors that explain the large ethnocultural differences in university aspirations.

A snapshot of educational aspirations

Previous research has identified a range of socio-demographic, social psychological and school performance factors that can influence the educational aspirations of young people. Some studies focusing on visible minority and/or immigrant youth have emphasized the extent to which aspirations can be undermined by lower than average family incomes, systemic discrimination and barriers associated with having a first language other than English or French.¹

Other studies have highlighted the personal, family or community characteristics that promote high postsecondary aspirations such as higher than average parents' education levels, high parental



aspirations for their children, and "social capital" provided by ethnic communities.²

In 2000, just over 6 in 10 (61%) Canadian 15-year-olds reported that they planned on attaining one or more university degrees. A similar proportion (64%) of parents hoped their teenager would acquire one or more degrees. The completion of college or CEGEP featured as the main educational goal for 16% of

teens and 26% of parents, while only 6% of students and 3% of parents felt that high school or less was sufficient. Few students (6%) and parents (7%) mentioned a trade/vocational or apprenticeship qualification as the end goal.

Visible minority immigrant students have higher educational aspirations than others

In general, educational goals tend to be influenced by many characteristics. For example, among 15-year-olds, girls were generally more likely than boys to expect to get a postsecondary education. As well, students from larger urban centres (those with populations of 100,000 or over) were more likely than youth from smaller communities to set these goals for themselves.³ Regionally, students in Quebec were less likely to plan a university education than those in other provinces and regions. This is due to structural differences in the Quebec education system, which result in more students aiming for a college or CEGEP education.

Yet, regardless of other characteristics (gender, family structure, region, community size, and first language), visible minority immigrant students were still considerably more likely to have university aspirations than Canadian-born non-visible minority students. Among girls, for example, 84% of visible minority immigrant students compared with 63% of their Canadian-born non-visible minority counterparts planned on attending university. The corresponding proportions among boys were 75% and 51%, respectively.

The difference between the university aspirations of the two groups held across all five regions, with visible minority immigrant students having higher goals throughout the country. And although nearly two-thirds of visible minority immigrant students had a first language other than English or French, their university ambitions exceeded those of others. Within this "other language" group, 81% of visible minority immigrant

GST What you should know about this study

This article uses data from the 2000 Youth in Transition Survey (YITS) of 15-year-olds. YITS data were linked with testing scores for mathematics, science and reading from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) as well as with additional information collected from school administrators in over 1,000 schools and from parental interviews. Response rates were around 90% for schools, students and parents. Over 26,000 teenagers were interviewed, representing more than 348,000 15-year-olds across the 10 provinces, excluding those attending school on Indian reserves, those in special-needs schools, and those being home-schooled.

The educational aspirations of 15-year-olds were measured by asking "What is the highest level of education that you would like to get?" Possible responses ranged from "less than high school" to "more than one university degree." Parental aspirations were measured by asking: "What is the highest level of education that you hope [child's name] will get?" Parents were offered the same response categories.

This article focuses on differences between visible minority immigrant students¹ (first- or second-generation immigrants)² and those who were Canadian-born and not a member of a visible minority group. The majority of both first- and second-generation immigrant youth were members of a visible minority group (66% and 52%, respectively). Visible minority immigrant youth accounted for 12% of YITS participants while 75% were Canadian-born non-visible minority students. Aboriginal respondents were included in the Canadian-born non-visible minority category.

One in 10 (11%) YITS respondents were non-visible minority immigrants or members of visible minority groups but not first- or second-generation immigrants. While this "mixed" category is not shown in the table or charts in this paper, it is combined with Canadian-born non-visible minority students (as the reference category) in the logistic regression analysis. A small number (2%) of YITS participants could not be classified because of missing data.

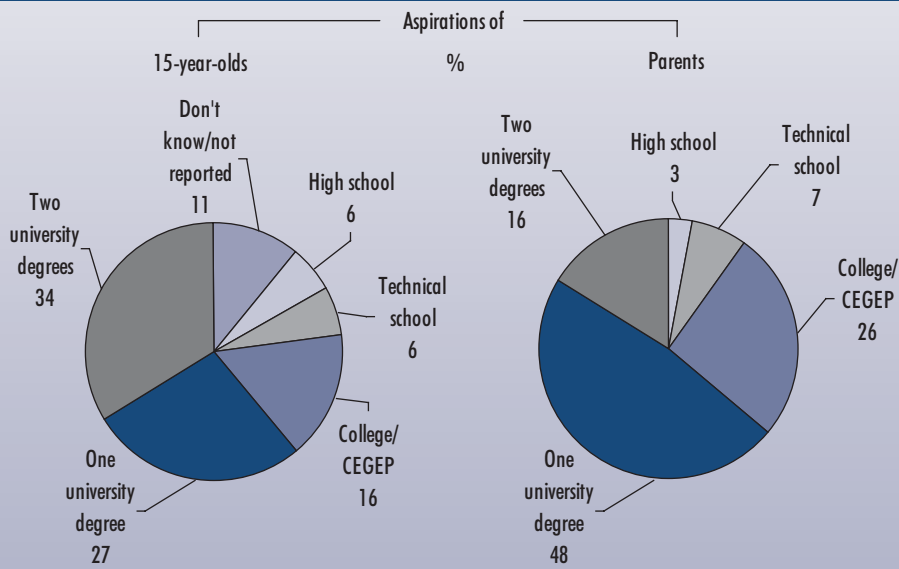
1. Visible minorities in this article are defined based on the *Employment Equity Act* definition as persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour and include Chinese, South Asian, Black, Filipino, Latin American, Southeast Asian, Arab, West Asian, Japanese, Korean, other visible minorities and multiple visible minorities.
2. First-generation immigrant youths are 15-year-olds born abroad. Second generation refers to Canadian-born 15-year-olds who have at least one immigrant parent.

youth, compared with 73% of their Canadian-born non-visible minority counterparts, held on to the goal of a university education.

Nearly 4 in 10 visible minority students have university educated parents

While visible minority immigrant students have, on average, more highly educated parents, these students are also overrepresented in lower-income

Three in five 15-year-olds hope to obtain at least one university degree; parents have similar hopes for their children



Source: Statistics Canada, Youth in Transition Survey 2000.

households. For example, 35% of visible minority immigrant teenagers come from households where at least one parent has a university degree, compared with 21% of Canadian-born non-visible minority students. At the same time, 59% of visible minority immigrant students lived in households with a total annual income of less than \$60,000, compared with 46% of Canadian-born non-visible minority youth.

Despite these differences, the “visible minority immigrant” effect is apparent, regardless of the education or income level of parents. In fact, among families where neither parent has a university degree, 75% of visible minority immigrant students aspired to a university education compared with only 51% of Canadian-born non-visible minority teens. Similarly, three-quarters of visible minority immigrant youth in families with household incomes below \$30,000 aspired to a university education compared with less than half of Canadian-born non-visible minority youth in similar circumstances.

Nearly four in five visible minority immigrant youth want a university degree

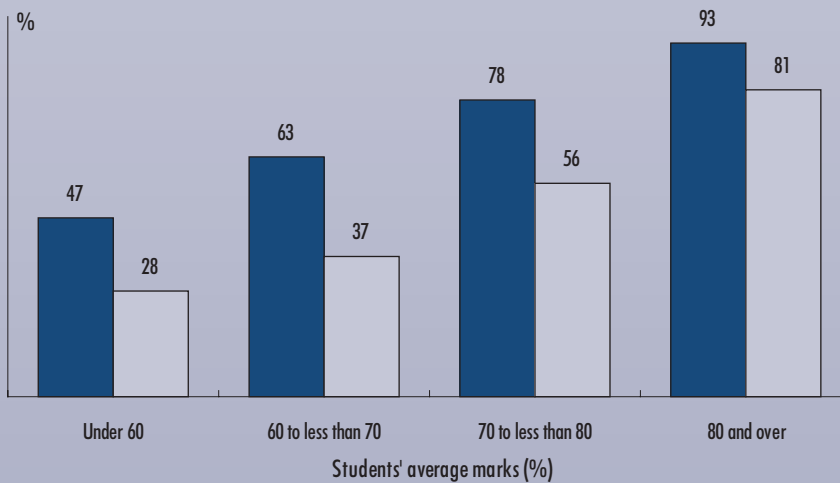
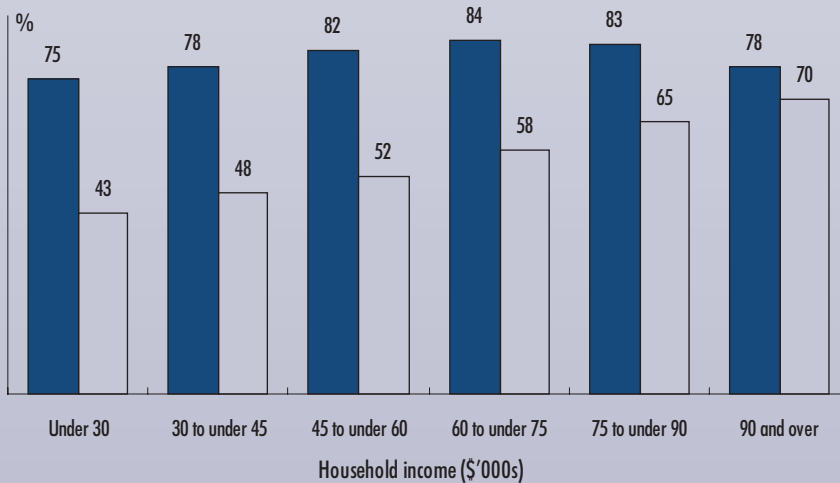
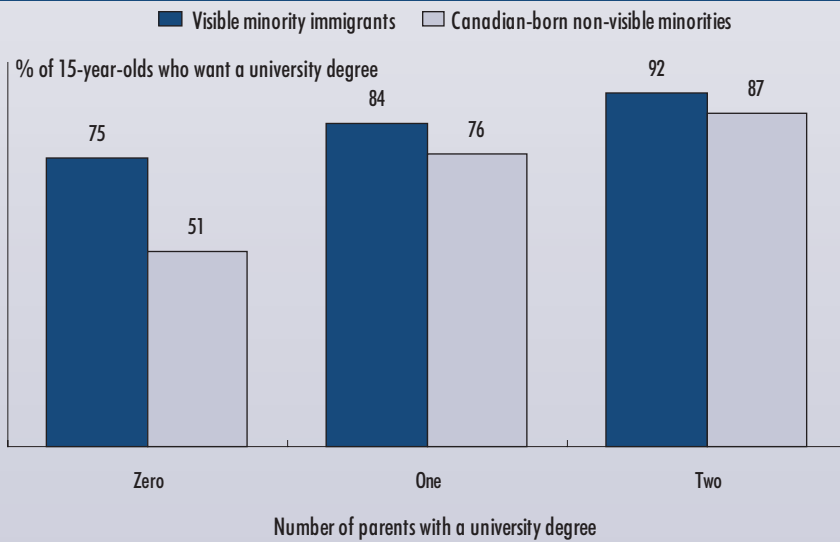
	% of 15-year-olds who would like to get a university degree	
	Visible minority immigrants	Canadian-born non-visible minority youth
Total	79	57
Sex		
Female	84	63
Male	75	51
Family structure		
Single parent	79	54
Mixed/other	74	49
Nuclear family	80	59
Region		
Atlantic	93	65
Quebec	70	49
Ontario	82	60
Prairies	80	58
British Columbia	79	59
Community size		
Under 15,000	79	53
15,000 to under 100,000	80	54
100,000 to under 1,000,000	81	64
More than 1,000,000	77	71
Language first learned		
English/French	77	57
Other	81	73

Source: Statistics Canada, Youth in Transition Survey, 2000.

Parents' hopes for their children strongly affect university aspirations

To isolate the effect of visible minority immigrant status as well as other selected characteristics on university aspirations, several logistic regression models were developed. These models describe the net effect of each variable on a 15-year-old's hopes of getting a university education, after accounting for the effects of all other predictors. For example, after factoring out the impact of gender, family structure, region, community size, parents' education, household income, overall grades, university preparation courses, and language first learned, the predicted probability that visible minority immigrant students would have university aspirations fell from the original 79% to 66%.

To further explain ethnocultural differences in educational aspirations, indices of parents' school



Source: Statistics Canada, Youth in Transition Survey, 2000.

involvement, parents' supervision of the student, the student's school engagement, and the student's friends' school engagement were added to the model. Including these factors further reduced the predicted probability of visible minority immigrant students having university aspirations to 59%.

Examining the net effects of the range of other predictor variables, it appears that parents' aspirations for their child, parents' education, and overall grades have very strong positive effects on university aspirations: all produce predicted probabilities of 69% or higher. Students' school engagement, their friends' school engagement, university preparation courses and household income have moderately strong effects: the predicted probabilities range from 62% to 66%. In contrast, family structure, language first learned, parents' school involvement, and parents' supervision of their teenager had little effect on the postsecondary aspirations of Canadian 15-year-olds.

Summary

The educational aspirations of 15-year-old Canadians are very high, while those of visible minority immigrant youth are even higher. A consistent visible minority immigrant effect is observed even after accounting for a variety of socio-demographic and school performance variables. Further, disadvantages related to community size, parents' education, household income and grades appear to have less dampening effect on the educational aspirations of visible minority immigrants than on those of Canadian-born non-visible minority youth.

The logistic regression analysis shows that higher parental education and aspirations for their children, and higher grades and school engagement of visible minority immigrant youth explain a substantial amount, but certainly not all, of the visible minority immigrant effect on university aspirations. The

educational values promoted within visible minority immigrant families appear to leave a mark on young people in these families and may assist them in dealing with some of the barriers they might face within the education system.



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1. See for example, Beiser, M., A. Shik and M. Curyk. 1999. *New Canadian children and youth study: Literature review*. <http://ceris.metropolis.net> (accessed July 26, 2005); Dei, G., J. Mazucca, E. Mclsaac and J. Zine. 1997. *Reconstructing 'Drop-out': A Critical Ethnography of the Dynamics of Black Students' Disengagement from School*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press; Watt, D. and H. Roessingh. 2001. "The dynamics of ESL dropout: Plus ça change..." *The Canadian Modern Language Review* 58, 2: 203-222.
 2. See for example, Statistics Canada. 2003. *Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada: Process, Progress and prospects* (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 89-611-XIE). Anisef, P., P. Axelrod, E. Baichman-Anisef, C. James and A. Turritin. 2000. *Opportunity and Uncertainty: Life Course Experiences of the Class of '73*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press; Boyd, M. 2000. "Ethnicity and immigrant offspring." In *Perspectives on Ethnicity in Canada*. M. Kalbach and W. Kalbach (eds.). Toronto, ON: Harcourt.
 3. For evidence on higher postsecondary attainment see, for example, Bowlby, J. and K. McMullen. 2002. *At a Crossroads: First Results for the 18- to 20-year-old Cohort of the Youth in Transition Survey* (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 81-591-XIE); and Andres, L. and D. Looker. 2001. "Rurality and capital: Educational expectations and attainments of rural, urban/rural, and metropolitan youth." *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* 31, 2: 1-46.