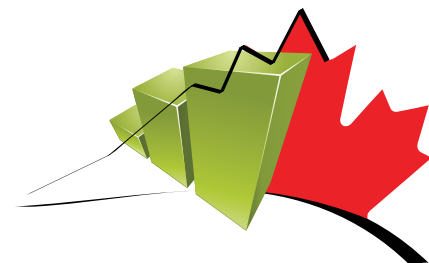


## Economic and Social Reports

# Self-reported loneliness among recent immigrants, long-term immigrants, and Canadian-born individuals



by Max Stick, Feng Hou, and Lisa Kaida

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# ***Self-reported loneliness among recent immigrants, long-term immigrants, and Canadian-born individuals***

*by Max Stick, Feng Hou, and Lisa Kaida*

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## **Abstract**

Many newcomers to Canada experience disruption to their social networks during migration and encounter barriers establishing new relationships and connections, leaving them vulnerable to social and emotional loneliness. This article uses the 2018 General Social Survey to compare self-reported loneliness between immigrants and the Canadian-born population.

## **Authors**

Max Stick works in the Social Analysis and Modelling Division, Analytical Studies and Modelling Branch, at Statistics Canada, and at McMaster University.

Feng Hou works in the Social Analysis and Modelling Division, Analytical Studies and Modelling Branch, at Statistics Canada.

Lisa Kaida works at McMaster University.

## Article

Self-perceived loneliness is an important indicator of well-being. It is the subjective perception of deficient social connections and relationships in quality or quantity (Hawkey and Cacioppo 2010; Holt-Lunstad et al. 2015). Loneliness is associated with stress, depression, anxiety, and has other mental health consequences. Loneliness is also associated with various physical ailments such as cardiovascular disease, high cholesterol levels, high blood pressure, and increased morbidity and mortality (Hawkey and Cacioppo 2010). As much social interaction revolves around the workplace, family gatherings, and community events, increased isolation and mandated physical distancing measures due to the COVID-19 pandemic potentially magnifies individuals' susceptibility to loneliness.

The conditions, characteristics, and circumstances precipitating feelings of loneliness vary across individuals. Some may live alone and have few social contacts, yet feel socially and emotionally content. Others may have broad social networks and socialize frequently, yet feel lonely (Hawkey and Cacioppo 2010; Holt-Lunstad et al. 2015). Social connections can be particularly hard to maintain in areas with long and cold winters, low population density, and limited or expensive transportation (Johnson et al. 2019).

Research suggests immigrants are one group that tend to report higher levels of loneliness (Wu and Penning 2015). Because of migration from one country to another, many experience social disruption and increased isolation. Immigrants, especially new immigrants, may experience unique stress in acculturating to Canadian society, including culture shock and difficulty finding employment (Wu and Penning 2015). They may also encounter language barriers, credential recognition challenges, and other disruptions that can lead to higher levels of self-reported loneliness. As many of these disruptions subside over time, self-reported loneliness may decrease with increasing years in Canada as immigrants re-build social networks and relationships.

While many indicators of loneliness exist, Statistics Canada's General Social Survey (2007, 2012, and 2018) uses the De Jong Gierveld-Tilburg Loneliness Scale. The scale is a reliable and widely used measure of loneliness, capturing both its social and emotional aspects. Emotional loneliness reflects a lack of intimate, close, personal connections, whereas social loneliness reflects feelings of inadequacy in one's broader social network (De Jong Gierveld and Van Tilburg 2006).

The six-item De Jong Gierveld-Tilburg Loneliness Scale consists of the following six statements: (a) I experience a general sense of emptiness; (b) There are plenty of people I can rely on when I have problems; (c) There are many people I can trust completely; (d) There are enough people I feel close to; (e) I miss having people around; and (f) I often feel rejected. Respondents are asked to indicate whether each statement describes their feelings, using the categories: 1 - yes, 2 - more or less, or 3 - no. In constructing the loneliness scale, responses (a), (e), and (f) are reverse-coded. The scale is created by taking the average of the six terms and has a high reliability (Cronbach coefficient Alpha 0.78). It ranges from 0, indicating "not lonely", to 3, indicating "very lonely".

Table 1 shows the average loneliness scores for recent immigrants (in Canada for 10 years or less), long-term immigrants (in Canada over 10 years), and the Canadian-born population aged 15 to 64 (individuals aged 65 and over were not included in the analysis because there were very few recent immigrant seniors among survey respondents). Recent immigrants reported an average loneliness score of 1.49, higher than that of the Canadian born (1.36). Long-term immigrants had an average loneliness score of 1.50, similar to recent immigrants and higher than the Canadian born. These overall differences between immigrants and the Canadian-born were statistically significant, and similar in magnitude to the differences between the Canadian-born with low (\$39,999 or less) and middle (\$40,000 to \$99,999) household incomes. Differences in self-reported loneliness by immigration status changed little when group differences in age, marital status, mother tongue, education, employment status, and family income were taken into account.

**Table 1**  
**Self-reported loneliness scores by immigration status among individuals aged 15 to 64, 2018**

	Recent immigrants		Long-term immigrants		Canadian born	
	mean	standard deviation	mean	standard deviation	mean	standard deviation
All	1.49 ***	0.58	1.50 ***	0.52	1.36	0.41
<b>Sex</b>						
Male	1.51 ***	0.60	1.49 ***	0.52	1.38	0.44
Female	1.47 ***	0.56	1.50 ***	0.52	1.35	0.39
<b>Age group</b>						
15 to 34	1.44 ***	0.68	1.42 ***	0.68	1.33	0.54
35 to 44	1.56 ***	0.48	1.54 ***	0.54	1.34	0.39
45 to 64	1.57 ***	0.49	1.51 ***	0.46	1.41	0.35
<b>Marital status</b>						
Married or common-law	1.53 ***	0.53	1.47 ***	0.49	1.32	0.37
Separated, divorced or widowed	1.80 ***	0.53	1.63 ***	0.44	1.52	0.36
Never married	1.40	0.67	1.52 ***	0.63	1.41	0.51
<b>Mother tongue</b>						
Others	1.49	0.57	1.50 *	0.52	1.44	0.50
English or French	1.50 ***	0.59	1.50 ***	0.52	1.36	0.41
<b>Education</b>						
High school diploma or less	1.40	0.69	1.46 ***	0.56	1.38	0.44
Some post-secondary education	1.52 ***	0.51	1.49 ***	0.47	1.37	0.40
Bachelor's degree or higher	1.53 ***	0.56	1.53 ***	0.52	1.32	0.39
<b>Employment status</b>						
Employed	1.50 ***	0.55	1.48 ***	0.50	1.35	0.40
Not employed	1.49 *	0.67	1.54 ***	0.58	1.43	0.43
<b>Household income (in 2017 dollars)</b>						
≤ \$39,999	1.59 **	0.68	1.56	0.55	1.51	0.47
\$40,000 to ≤ \$99,999	1.50 ***	0.54	1.49 ***	0.53	1.38	0.40
≥ \$100,000	1.34	0.46	1.47 ***	0.48	1.31	0.38

\* significantly different from the mean score of the Canadian-born at  $p < 0.05$

\*\* significantly different from the mean score of the Canadian-born at  $p < 0.01$

\*\*\* significantly different from the mean score of the Canadian-born at  $p < 0.001$

**Note:** The sample size is 624 for recent immigrants, 1,923 for long-term immigrants, and 10,660 for the Canadian-born.

**Source:** Statistics Canada, 2018 General Social Survey

The similar levels of self-reported loneliness between recent and long-term immigrants may suggest that feelings of loneliness do not necessarily decrease with increasing time in the destination country. However, with cross-sectional data, it is not possible to isolate changes associated with longer residence in the destination country from potential differences among immigrants who arrived in different time periods. A previous study argues that longer-term immigrants may become more accustomed to the cultural norms and customs in their destination-country but may also experience weakening ties with their country of origin, contributing to feelings of loneliness (Wu and Penning 2015).

Table 1 also shows that immigrants generally reported higher levels of loneliness than the Canadian born across various socioeconomic and demographic groups. Among both immigrants and the Canadian-born, mean loneliness scores generally increased with age. Individuals living in households with low household incomes reported higher levels of loneliness than their counterparts with higher incomes.

Individuals who were separated, divorced or widowed felt lonelier than individuals in a conjugal union or never married. Among immigrants, those with higher levels of education reported increased levels of loneliness, whereas the opposite was true for the Canadian-born.

In sum, both recent and long-term immigrants reported higher levels of loneliness than the Canadian-born. Moreover, loneliness did not appear to be alleviated by the length of stay in Canada. Considering the mental and physical health ramifications of loneliness, the finding that immigrants report higher levels of loneliness pre-COVID-19 justifies continued attention in the coming years as Canada recovers from the pandemic.

One limitation of this article is the lack of sufficient sample size to study loneliness among recent immigrant seniors. While seniors in general are more likely to report an elevated level of loneliness, recent immigrants who arrived at older ages may be particularly vulnerable because of their limited social network in Canada. One approach to overcome this data limitation is to pool together three cycles of General Social Survey (2007, 2012, and 2018) that collected the loneliness measure. With an augmented sample size, it is possible to examine self-reported loneliness among seniors by immigration status and factors that may help to alleviate loneliness among seniors.

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