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Internationally educated health care professionals in Canada: Sociodemographic characteristics and occupational distribution

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Labour shortages in health care professions have become a pressing issue across many Canadian jurisdictions and were especially exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. To help address these shortages, federal, provincial and territorial governments have implemented measures to facilitate the entry of skilled immigrants with health care qualifications into their respective professions (ESDC, 2022; World Education Services, 2023), among other government actions to strengthen the health workforce. However, comprehensive data on the numbers, sociodemographic characteristics and labour market outcomes of internationally educated health care professionals (IEHPs) remain scarce.

This article provides estimates of the number of IEHPs in Canada based on 2021 Census data, shedding light on their distribution across provinces and territories. It further examines the sociodemographic characteristics of IEHPs and explores their occupational distribution across major fields of study. This article serves as a snapshot of a comprehensive report, which will be released later, offering detailed descriptive and multivariate analyses of the labour market outcomes of IEHPs.

In this article, IEHPs were defined as landed immigrants who held a postsecondary certificate, diploma or degree from outside Canada in a health field of study¹ and who reported it as their highest certificate, diploma or degree. Temporary residents and Canadian-born people who received their highest certificate, diploma or degree in health in a foreign country were excluded.

The number and characteristics of internationally educated health care professionals in Canada

There were an estimated 259,695 IEHPs aged 18 to 64 residing in Canada in 2021, accounting for 13% of all Canadians in the same age group with postsecondary education in a health field (excluding temporary residents). Nearly half of IEHPs resided in Ontario (116,310), followed by British Columbia (45,235), Alberta (42,035) and Quebec (30,595). The Atlantic region and the three territories had the lowest numbers of IEHPs, ranging from 475 in Prince Edward Island and 605 in the three territories to 3,195 in Nova Scotia (Table 1).

1. Health fields of study in this article include the following four-digit codes of the [Classification of Instructional Programs \(CIP\) Canada 2021](#): 31.05, 42.28, 51.00 to 51.99, 60.01, and 60.07 to 61.99.

The majority of IEHPs—about 7 in 10—were women, and two-thirds of IEHPs were younger than 50 years. About half of IEHPs immigrated to Canada between the ages of 25 to 34. Nearly one-third of all IEHPs had recently arrived in Canada (between 2016 and 2021).

The demographic characteristics of IEHPs varied by province. For instance, there were fewer women among IEHPs in Newfoundland and Labrador (61%) and New Brunswick (63%) compared with other provinces and territories. About half of IEHPs in Prince Edward Island, Manitoba and Saskatchewan were younger than 40 years, compared with 31% in New Brunswick and 32% in British Columbia. Prince Edward Island (65%) and Nova Scotia (52%) had higher proportions of recently arrived IEHPs than other provinces and territories.

Most IEHPs (98%) could speak at least one of Canada's official languages, with the majority reporting another mother tongue, but proficiency in English (65%). As expected, the language profile of IEHPs in Quebec differed substantially from other jurisdictions, with a higher proportion reporting French as their mother tongue (22%) than in other provinces and territories. Manitoba (77%), Ontario (72%) and Saskatchewan (72%) had the highest proportions of IEHPs whose mother tongue was a non-official language but who could speak English.

In terms of the educational profile of IEHPs, over one-third had a bachelor's degree, and about one-fifth had a degree in medicine, dentistry or optometry. About one-quarter of IEHPs held a postsecondary credential below a bachelor's degree² as their highest level of education. Across jurisdictions, higher proportions of IEHPs in Newfoundland and Labrador, Ontario, and New Brunswick had a degree in medicine, dentistry or optometry compared with the proportion of all IEHPs in Canada.

The majority of IEHPs received their education in Asia (63%), while 11% studied in an English-speaking Western country. IEHPs who studied in Asia accounted for the majority of IEHPs in Manitoba (75%) and Saskatchewan (73%). The proportion of IEHPs who studied in an English-speaking Western country was highest in New Brunswick (21%), while the proportion of IEHPs who studied in French-speaking European countries was highest in Quebec (13%).

About one-third of IEHPs in Canada studied nursing. Those who trained to be physicians (15%) came next, followed by those who studied in the fields of pharmacy (8%) and dentistry (8%). Of note, over half of IEHPs in Prince Edward Island studied nursing (53%), while Newfoundland and Labrador had the highest proportion of IEHPs who were trained to be physicians (30%), and Ontario had the highest proportions of IEHPs who studied dentistry (10%) or pharmacy (9%).

Employment status and occupational distribution of internationally educated health care professionals

About 76% of IEHPs aged 18 to 64 were employed, compared with 80% of Canadian-educated health care professionals³ (CEHPs), as observed in the 2021 Census. The employment rate of IEHPs varied by field of study. Among the four major fields of study, the employment rate was highest among those who studied nursing (80%) and lowest among those who studied dentistry (72%) (table available in the forthcoming report).

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2. This level of education includes college and other non-university certificates or diplomas, or university certificates below the bachelor's degree level.
 3. Includes Canadian-born and immigrant individuals whose highest degree or diploma was received in Canada. Temporary residents were excluded.

Among employed IEHPs, 58% worked in health occupations.⁴ The proportion of employed IEHPs working in health occupations differed across fields of study. The highest proportion of IEHPs who were working in health occupations studied nursing (69%), followed by those who were trained to be physicians (67%) (Chart 1). Across the other major fields of study, 63% of IEHPs who studied pharmacy and 60% who studied dentistry were employed in health occupations (data not shown in Chart 1). Relative to CEHPs, the gap in the proportion working in health occupations was largest among those trained to be physicians (67% of IEHPs versus 95% of CEHPs), followed by those trained in pharmacy (63% of IEHPs versus 86% of CEHPs). Among individuals trained in nursing, 69% of IEHPs were employed in health occupations, compared with 87% of CEHPs.

The highest proportion of IEHPs employed in health occupations was found in Newfoundland and Labrador (74%), followed by Nova Scotia (68%) and Saskatchewan (67%). Over half of IEHPs in the remaining provinces and just under half of IEHPs residing in the three territories (46%) were employed in health occupations (Chart 1).

Among the employed IEHPs who studied nursing, the top five occupations were registered nurses and registered psychiatric nurses (34%); nurse aides, orderlies and patient service associates (21%); licensed practical nurses (8%); light duty cleaners (2%); and social and community service workers (2%) (table not presented). Across jurisdictions, the highest proportions of IEHPs who studied nursing and were employed in health occupations were found in Prince Edward Island (86%), Saskatchewan (80%) and Nova Scotia (79%) (Chart 1).

Among employed IEHPs who were trained to be physicians, the top five occupations were general practitioners and family physicians (28%); specialists in clinical and laboratory medicine (13%); nurse aides, orderlies and patient service associates (4%); registered nurses and registered psychiatric nurses (4%); and medical sonographers (3%) (table not presented). The highest proportions of these IEHPs who were employed in health occupations were found in Newfoundland and Labrador (97%), Nova Scotia (87%), and Saskatchewan (80%) (Chart 1).

Across other major fields of study, the top five occupations for IEHPs who studied pharmacy were pharmacists (46%), pharmacy technical assistants and pharmacy assistants (9%), pharmacy technicians (5%), retail and wholesale trade managers (4%), and retail salespersons and visual merchandisers (2%) (table not presented).

The most frequent occupations for IEHPs who studied dentistry were dentists (25%), dental assistants and dental laboratory assistants (13%), dental hygienists and dental therapists (7%), dental technologists and technicians (7%), and receptionists (2%) (table not presented).

In conclusion, IEHPs are a very diverse group based on their field of study, region of education, highest level of education, period of arrival in Canada and official language proficiency. About 58% of employed IEHPs in Canada worked in health occupations in 2021, and the proportion working in health occupations varied depending on their field of study. However, a considerable share of IEHPs who trained to become nurses, physicians, pharmacists and dentists (the four most common fields) and who worked in a health occupation did not work in their respective field. Given the large number of IEHPs residing in Canada, these findings suggest that they could potentially contribute to addressing labour shortages in Canada's health workforce.

4. Health occupations in this article include the following five-digit codes of the [National Occupational Classification 2021](#): 30010 to 31102, 31110 to 32103, 32109 to 32129, 33100 to 33109, and 44101.

Table 1
Estimated population of internationally educated health care professionals aged 18 to 64 and their distribution by selected sociodemographic characteristics, Canada and provinces and territories, 2021

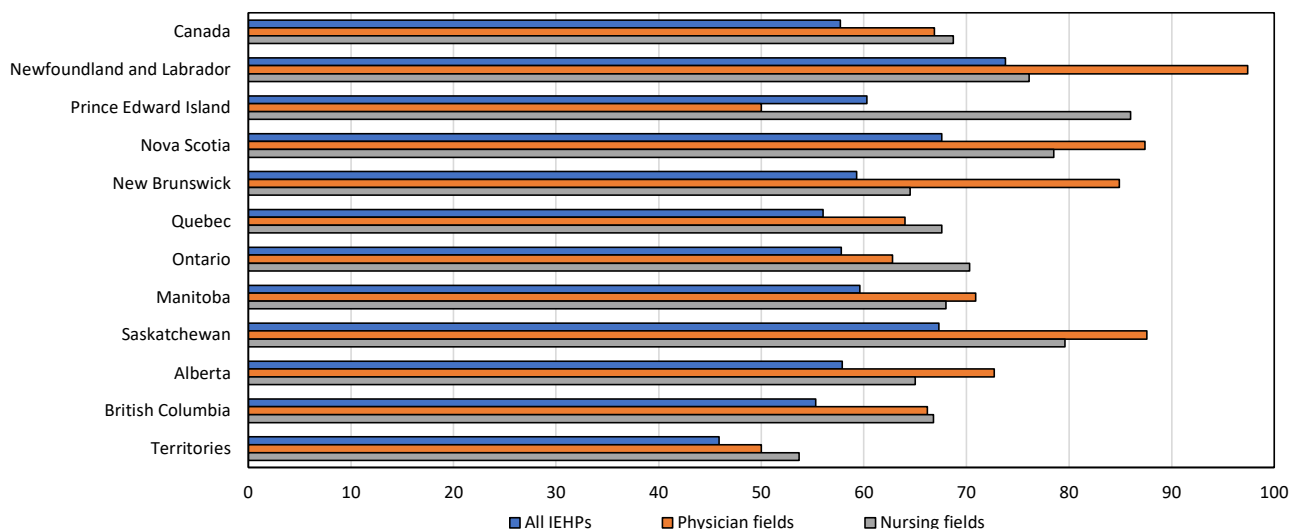
| | Canada | Newfoundland and Labrador | Prince Edward Island | Nova Scotia | New Brunswick | Quebec | Ontario | Manitoba | Saskatchewan | Alberta | British Columbia | Territories |
|---|---------|---------------------------|----------------------|-------------|---------------|--------|---------|----------|--------------|---------|------------------|-------------|
| Estimated population | 259 695 | 770 | 475 | 3 195 | 1 520 | 30 595 | 116 310 | 11 680 | 7 280 | 42 035 | 45 235 | 605 |
| | percent | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Gender | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Male+ | 28.8 | 39.0 | 34.0 | 33.3 | 36.7 | 30.6 | 28.6 | 29.8 | 32.3 | 27.7 | 27.5 | 27.9 |
| Female+ | 71.2 | 61.0 | 66.0 | 66.7 | 63.3 | 69.4 | 71.4 | 70.2 | 67.7 | 72.3 | 72.5 | 72.1 |
| Current age | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 18 to 29 years | 6.1 | 5.9 | 2.1 | 7.1 | 4.9 | 4.0 | 6.9 | 5.2 | 6.5 | 6.1 | 5.8 | 5.0 |
| 30 to 39 years | 31.1 | 34.0 | 47.9 | 40.1 | 26.0 | 32.8 | 28.8 | 44.5 | 42.5 | 35.0 | 25.9 | 38.8 |
| 40 to 49 years | 29.3 | 28.1 | 19.8 | 22.9 | 30.3 | 32.9 | 28.1 | 27.6 | 26.6 | 32.8 | 28.0 | 25.6 |
| 50 years or older | 33.5 | 32.0 | 30.2 | 29.9 | 38.8 | 30.3 | 36.2 | 22.7 | 24.5 | 26.0 | 40.3 | 30.6 |
| Age at immigration | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 24 years or younger | 15.4 | 15.5 | 5.3 | 10.5 | 11.5 | 9.4 | 17.7 | 13.1 | 12.2 | 13.5 | 16.7 | 12.5 |
| 25 to 34 years | 49.9 | 44.5 | 52.1 | 52.8 | 37.2 | 51.5 | 49.0 | 54.8 | 52.1 | 52.6 | 47.3 | 55.0 |
| 35 to 44 years | 26.8 | 29.0 | 26.6 | 26.7 | 33.9 | 30.7 | 25.6 | 25.3 | 27.2 | 26.9 | 27.2 | 24.2 |
| 45 years or older | 8.0 | 11.0 | 16.0 | 10.0 | 17.4 | 8.3 | 7.7 | 6.8 | 8.6 | 7.0 | 8.8 | 8.3 |
| Period of immigration | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2016 to 2021 | 32.1 | 41.9 | 64.6 | 51.6 | 43.0 | 38.2 | 29.2 | 38.3 | 37.4 | 36.0 | 27.0 | 39.7 |
| 2010 to 2015 | 24.2 | 24.5 | 14.6 | 18.3 | 23.0 | 23.6 | 21.6 | 33.0 | 39.2 | 29.7 | 21.9 | 21.5 |
| 2000 to 2009 | 26.2 | 19.4 | 12.5 | 17.8 | 21.0 | 26.0 | 28.4 | 20.8 | 16.8 | 22.8 | 28.0 | 24.8 |
| Before 2000 | 17.5 | 14.2 | 8.3 | 12.3 | 13.1 | 12.3 | 20.8 | 7.9 | 6.6 | 11.5 | 23.2 | 14.0 |
| Language | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| English mother tongue | 22.4 | 34.9 | 28.4 | 30.3 | 32.8 | 10.9 | 22.7 | 20.1 | 26.0 | 26.6 | 24.1 | 27.5 |
| French mother tongue | 3.3 | 1.3 | 0.0 | 1.4 | 6.6 | 21.9 | 0.9 | 0.5 | 0.3 | 0.6 | 0.6 | 2.5 |
| Other mother tongue, speaks English | 65.1 | 61.2 | 65.3 | 65.4 | 50.2 | 17.3 | 72.3 | 77.3 | 71.9 | 70.2 | 70.8 | 65.8 |
| Other mother tongue, speaks French | 2.3 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 2.0 | 18.8 | 0.1 | 0.0 | 0.1 | 0.1 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Other mother tongue, speaks English and French | 5.3 | 2.6 | 2.1 | 2.0 | 7.2 | 29.9 | 2.5 | 1.2 | 0.8 | 1.6 | 1.3 | 2.5 |
| Other mother tongue, does not speak English or French | 1.6 | 0.0 | 4.2 | 0.9 | 1.3 | 1.2 | 1.4 | 0.9 | 0.9 | 0.9 | 3.1 | 1.7 |
| Educational level | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Postsecondary below bachelor's degree | 24.7 | 20.0 | 24.0 | 21.4 | 30.6 | 31.2 | 22.9 | 22.6 | 22.0 | 23.7 | 26.8 | 35.8 |
| Bachelor's degree | 37.6 | 29.7 | 43.8 | 39.6 | 27.6 | 31.4 | 34.8 | 52.2 | 45.1 | 44.6 | 37.7 | 42.5 |
| Graduate degree, not doctor of medicine | 17.2 | 15.5 | 21.9 | 17.2 | 17.8 | 18.5 | 18.6 | 11.7 | 14.2 | 14.3 | 17.3 | 11.7 |
| Degree in medicine, dentistry or optometry | 20.5 | 34.8 | 10.4 | 21.8 | 24.0 | 18.9 | 23.8 | 13.5 | 18.7 | 17.4 | 18.2 | 10.0 |
| Region of education | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| English-speaking Western countries | 11.3 | 16.7 | 11.7 | 15.9 | 21.3 | 4.1 | 12.4 | 5.7 | 7.3 | 10.0 | 15.9 | 6.6 |
| French-speaking European countries | 1.9 | 1.3 | 0.0 | 0.6 | 4.3 | 12.7 | 0.4 | 0.2 | 0.0 | 0.3 | 0.8 | 5.8 |
| Other European countries | 8.7 | 5.1 | 7.4 | 10.3 | 10.8 | 10.9 | 9.6 | 6.5 | 5.4 | 6.3 | 8.3 | 11.6 |
| Caribbean and Central and South America | 5.7 | 7.1 | 2.1 | 4.2 | 5.6 | 14.2 | 5.6 | 2.8 | 2.4 | 3.9 | 3.1 | 3.3 |
| Africa | 9.7 | 17.3 | 7.4 | 10.6 | 15.1 | 22.8 | 7.4 | 9.6 | 12.1 | 11.1 | 4.7 | 4.1 |
| Asia | 62.7 | 52.6 | 71.3 | 58.4 | 43.0 | 35.4 | 64.6 | 75.3 | 72.8 | 68.3 | 67.2 | 68.6 |
| Field of study | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Physicians (medicine and medical field) | 15.2 | 30.3 | 7.7 | 18.4 | 20.1 | 14.3 | 17.2 | 10.1 | 15.8 | 13.3 | 13.1 | 6.6 |
| Nursing | 33.0 | 32.9 | 52.7 | 42.2 | 31.7 | 32.3 | 28.1 | 47.1 | 45.5 | 39.0 | 33.7 | 46.7 |
| Pharmacy | 8.3 | 3.9 | 8.8 | 5.2 | 6.3 | 6.5 | 9.9 | 8.5 | 6.9 | 8.3 | 5.8 | 6.6 |
| Dentistry | 7.8 | 5.2 | 4.4 | 5.2 | 6.9 | 7.5 | 9.1 | 5.4 | 4.5 | 6.1 | 8.1 | 4.9 |
| Other health fields | 35.7 | 27.7 | 26.4 | 29.1 | 35.0 | 39.5 | 35.7 | 28.9 | 27.2 | 33.3 | 39.3 | 35.2 |

Notes: Male+ includes men and some non-binary individuals, and female+ includes women and some non-binary individuals.

Source: Statistics Canada, 2021 Census of Population.

Chart 1

Percent of internationally educated healthcare professionals (IEHPs) aged 18 to 64 employed in health occupations, all IEHPs and physician and nursing fields of study, Canada and the provinces and territories, 2021



Source: Statistics Canada, 2021 Census of Population.

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