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Abstract

This study examines socioeconomic correlates of loneliness among immigrants with disabilities, using data from the 2022 Canadian Survey on Disability. The findings show that the association between socioeconomic circumstances and severe loneliness differed between immigrants and Canadian-born persons with disabilities. Employment or school participation provided immigrants with disabilities less protection from severe loneliness than it did for Canadian born persons with disabilities. For both groups, food insecurity and core housing need were associated with a higher probability of severe loneliness; however, these associations were stronger for immigrants with disabilities. Immigrants with disabilities had a higher probability of severe loneliness than their Canadian-born counterparts, even in absence of food insecurity, core housing need and low income. Overall, the findings highlight the complex interplay between socioeconomic circumstances and emotional well being among immigrants with disabilities and point to the need for targeted supports that address the unique vulnerabilities of this population.

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Introduction

Loneliness is associated with various health conditions and is comparable to smoking and high blood pressure as a predictor of mortality (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015; Pantell et al., 2013). It occurs when an individual perceives their social relationships, either in terms of quantity or quality, to be inadequate for their needs (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). The experience of loneliness is not evenly distributed in the population and disproportionately affects certain social groups. For example, persons with disabilities have a greater risk of loneliness than persons without disabilities (Emerson et al., 2021), and immigrants have a greater risk of loneliness than Canadian-born people (Stick, Hou, & Kaida, 2021). Loneliness can also occur in the context of low levels of socioeconomic participation and socioeconomic deprivation (Barjaková, Garnero, & d’Hombres, 2023; Hawkley et al., 2008). Whether these socioeconomic circumstances contribute to differences in loneliness between social groups, such as immigrants and Canadian-born people, is an under-researched area.

Across countries, individuals with lower levels of employment and lower incomes have weaker social ties and higher levels of loneliness than their more advantaged counterparts (OECD, 2025). Barriers to socioeconomic participation (e.g., school attendance and employment) among Canadians with disabilities may increase their risk of loneliness. Many Canadians with disabilities experience exclusion in school and constraints on their chances of employment (Hébert et al., 2024; Schimmele, Jeon, & Arim, 2021). These barriers may be associated with the experience of loneliness because educational institutions and workplaces are environments that can provide social interaction and a sense of belonging (Hawkley et al., 2008). While previous studies show that unemployment is associated with higher levels of loneliness, the evidence on whether employment itself is associated with a lower risk of loneliness is inconsistent across demographic groups (Barjaková, Garnero, & d’Hombres, 2023).

In addition to socioeconomic participation, the present study focuses on indicators of socioeconomic deprivation that have received sparse attention in the literature on loneliness: food insecurity, core housing need and low-income status. Notably, food insecurity has been linked to lower levels of mental health (Jessiman-Perreault & McIntyre, 2017). In Canada, twice as many individuals from moderately and severely food-insecure households perceived their mental health to be either poor or fair than individuals from food-secure households during the early wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (Polsky & Gilmour, 2020). In Australia, individuals living in rented dwellings experienced larger declines in their mental health after disability onset than homeowners (Kavanagh et al., 2016). Living in unaffordable housing was also associated with lower levels of mental health among Australians with disabilities compared with those without disabilities.

This study examines how differences in experiences of loneliness between immigrants and Canadian-born persons with disabilities emerge in the context of socioeconomic participation (employment and school attendance) and socioeconomic deprivation (food insecurity, core housing need and low-income status), using data from the 2022 Canadian Survey on Disability (CSD).¹ Disability refers to a long-term condition that limits a person's daily activities or makes these activities more difficult.² In 2022, a smaller percentage of immigrants (22%) than Canadian-born persons (30%) aged 15 and over had a disability (Vergara & Hardy, 2024). However, the question of whether disability has different consequences for immigrants than Canadian-born people has remained largely unanswered, representing a major gap in knowledge.

Fewer immigrants with disabilities were employed or in school and more of them were in core housing need than Canadian-born persons with disabilities

Immigrants and Canadian-born persons with disabilities differed in terms of socioeconomic participation. A smaller percentage of immigrants with disabilities aged 15 years and over were employed and/or in school (44%) compared with their Canadian-born counterparts (48%) in 2022 (Table 1). A larger percentage of immigrants with disabilities were retired (40%) than Canadian-born persons with disabilities (35%). The percentage of immigrants with disabilities (16%) and Canadian-born persons with disabilities (16%) who were neither employed nor in school was similar.

Table 1
Socioeconomic characteristics of immigrants and Canadian-born persons with disabilities aged 15 and over, 2022

	Immigrants	Canadian-born
	percent (weighted)	
Socioeconomic participation		
Retired	39.7 *	35.2
Neither employed nor in school	15.9	16.4
Employed and/or in school	44.4 *	48.4
Socioeconomic deprivation		
Food insecurity	31.7	30.2
Core housing need	14.1 *	9.3
Low income	12.6	12.6

* significantly different from Canadian-born persons with disabilities ($p < 0.05$)

Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Survey on Disability (3251), 2022.

1. An immigrant refers to a foreign-born person granted the right to live in Canada permanently, and thus, this category excludes temporary foreign residents. A Canadian-born person refers to those who are Canadian citizens by birth.
2. The CSD uses the Disability Screening Questions (DSQ) to identify persons with disabilities. The DSQ assess intensity of difficulty with daily activities or functional tasks and the frequency of activity limitations to identify persons with disabilities. The DSQ assess 10 different disability types and the severity of disability. See Grondin (2016) for further details on the DSQ.

In 2022, about 14% of immigrants with disabilities had at least one core housing need,³ compared with 9% of Canadian-born persons with disabilities, a statistically significant difference. However, immigrants and Canadian-born persons with disabilities were similar in terms of the prevalence of food insecurity and low-income status. Almost 32% of immigrants with disabilities experienced food insecurity⁴ in the past 12 months and 13% were from a low-income household,⁵ which was similar to the estimates for Canadian-born persons with disabilities.

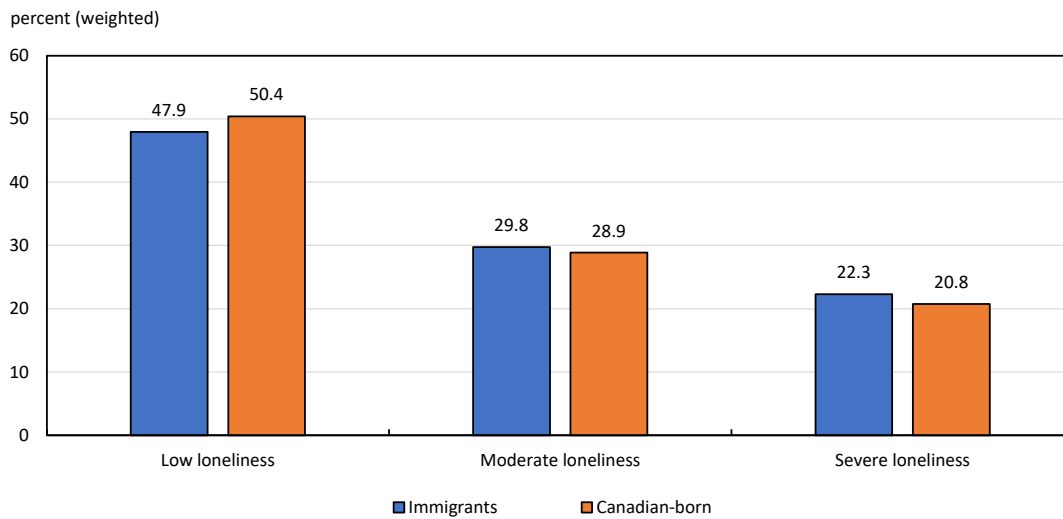
In addition, immigrants with disabilities were better educated than Canadian-born persons with disabilities. About 35% of immigrants with disabilities had a bachelor's degree or above, while 20% of Canadian-born persons with disabilities had this level of education (Appendix Table A).⁶

One in five immigrants with disabilities experienced a severe level of loneliness, on par with Canadian-born persons with disabilities

Overall, about 22% of immigrants with disabilities aged 15 years and over experienced a severe level of loneliness and 30% experienced a moderate level of loneliness in 2022, which was similar to percentages among Canadian-born persons with disabilities (Chart 1).⁷ The difference in the experience of severe loneliness between immigrant women with disabilities (23%) and Canadian-born women with disabilities (22%) was small and not statistically significant. Immigrant men with disabilities (21%) and Canadian-born men with disabilities (20%) also had similar levels of severe loneliness. Overall, there were no gender differences in severe loneliness among immigrants with disabilities or Canadian-born persons with disabilities.

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3. Core housing need refers to whether the respondent's dwelling was below one or more standards of adequate housing (dwelling needs major repairs), suitable housing (dwelling has insufficient bedrooms for its size and composition) and affordability (dwelling costs 30% or more of before-tax household income).
 4. Food insecurity, as measured with the six-item version of the U.S. Household Food Security Survey, refers to limited access to food because of financial constraints, and includes experiences of running out of food, eating unbalanced meals, reducing portion sizes, skipping meals or going hungry.
 5. Low-income refers to whether a respondent's after-tax income (adjusted for household size) was below 50% of the national median income.
 6. In the regression analysis, the estimates of differences in loneliness between immigrants with disabilities and Canadian-born persons with disabilities are adjusted for differences in sociodemographic and disability-related characteristics. As Appendix Table A shows, immigrants and Canadian-born persons with disabilities differ on the distribution of these characteristics, which previous studies have identified as risk factors for loneliness (Barjaková, Garneró, & d'Hombres, 2023).
 7. Loneliness was measured with a three-item version of the revised UCLA Loneliness Scale (Hughes et al., 2003). The scale includes questions on how often an individual felt a lack of companionship, felt left out and felt isolated from others. The scale codes responses to these questions as 1 (hardly ever), 2 (some of the time) and 3 (often), and index scores range from 3 to 9. There is no standardized cut-off for loneliness, but previous studies have used the top quintile of the distribution as a cut-off (Islam & Gilmour, 2023; Kirkland et al., 2023), which is a score of 7 or more in the 2022 CSD. This study focuses on severe levels of loneliness (scores of 7 to 9), but the tables also present the estimates for moderate (scores of 5 to 6) and low (scores of 3 to 4) loneliness.

Chart 1
Loneliness among immigrants and Canadian-born persons with disabilities aged 15 and over, 2022



Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Survey on Disability (3251), 2022.

The experience of severe loneliness was lower at older ages for both immigrants and Canadian-born persons with disabilities. Less than 13% of immigrants with disabilities aged 65 years and over experienced a severe level of loneliness, which was similar to Canadian-born persons with disabilities in this age group. However, among those aged 45 to 64 years, 28% of immigrants with disabilities experienced a severe level of loneliness, compared with 20% of their Canadian-born counterparts. About 27% of immigrants with disabilities aged 30 to 44 years and 36% of those aged 15 to 29 years experienced a severe level of loneliness, which was similar to Canadian-born persons with disabilities in these age groups.

While there were no significant differences in loneliness at the overall level, a deeper examination shows that the association between employment status, food insecurity, core housing need and low-income status and the probability of severe loneliness differs between immigrants with disabilities and Canadian-born persons with disabilities.

Being employed or in school provided immigrants with disabilities less protection from severe loneliness than their Canadian-born counterparts

Being employed and/or in school provided immigrants with disabilities less protection from severe loneliness than it did for Canadian-born persons with disabilities. A larger percentage of immigrants with disabilities who were employed and/or in school were predicted to experience a severe level of loneliness (31.3%) than Canadian-born persons who were employed and/or in school (20.1%) (Table 2).⁸

8. The statistical method and variables for the findings from the regression analysis presented in Tables 2 and 3 are described in the appendix.

Table 2
Loneliness among immigrants and Canadian-born persons with disabilities aged 15 years and over by socioeconomic participation, 2022

	Low loneliness			Moderate loneliness			Severe loneliness		
	Probability (%)	95% confidence interval		Probability (%)	95% confidence interval		Probability (%)	95% confidence interval	
		lower	upper		lower	upper		lower	upper
Immigrants × retired	46.9	40.8	52.9	31.5	24.9	38.1	21.6	15.9	27.4
Canadian-born × retired	48.6	45.6	51.6	31.1	27.8	34.3	20.4	17.8	22.9
Immigrants × neither employed nor in school	42.5	33.0	52.0	27.8	19.4	36.2	29.7 *	22.1	37.3
Canadian-born × neither employed nor in school	43.5 **	39.7	47.3	32.1	28.3	35.9	24.4 **	21.7	27.1
Immigrants × employed and/or in school	47.0	40.7	53.3	21.7 **	16.5	26.8	31.3 **	25.0	37.6
Canadian-born × employed and/or in school (ref.)	50.5	48.0	52.9	29.5	27.1	31.8	20.1	18.4	21.8

* significantly different from reference category ($p < 0.05$)

** significantly different from reference category ($p < 0.01$)

Note: The regression analysis accounted for differences in gender, age group, mother tongue, population group, population centre, living arrangements, educational attainment, low-income status, food insecurity, core housing need, housing tenure, disability type, disability severity and age at disability onset.

Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Survey on Disability (3251), 2022.

The difference in the probability of severe loneliness between immigrants with disabilities who were neither employed nor in school (29.7%) and Canadian-born persons with disabilities who were neither employed nor in school (24.4%) was not statistically significant. However, not being employed or in school increased the probability of severe loneliness, regardless of immigrant status. A larger percentage of immigrants and Canadian-born persons with disabilities who were neither employed nor in school experienced a severe level of loneliness than Canadian-born persons with disabilities who were employed and/or in school.

Among the retired population, a similar percentage of immigrants with disabilities (21.6%) and Canadian-born persons with disabilities (20.4%) experienced a severe level of loneliness. Being retired did not increase the probability of severe loneliness for either immigrants or Canadian-born persons with disabilities, when compared with Canadian-born persons with disabilities who were employed and/or in school.

Food insecurity and core housing need increased the probability of severe loneliness to a greater magnitude among immigrants with disabilities than Canadian-born persons with disabilities

Food insecurity was associated with an increased probability of severe loneliness among immigrants and Canadian-born persons with disabilities. In 2022, 34.4% of immigrants with disabilities who experienced food insecurity in the past 12 months were predicted to experience severe loneliness, after adjusting for socioeconomic participation and sociodemographic and disability-related characteristics (Table 3, Model 1). While food insecurity was also associated with a higher probability of severe loneliness among Canadian-born persons with disabilities, this association was less pronounced, with 26.6% experiencing a severe level of loneliness. Even within food-secure households, the probability of severe loneliness was higher among immigrants with disabilities (24.3%) than Canadian-born persons with disabilities (18.1%).

Being in core housing need was associated with a higher probability of severe loneliness among immigrants with disabilities. By contrast, being in core housing need did not increase the probability of severe loneliness among Canadian-born persons with disabilities. About 34.6% of immigrants with disabilities who were in core housing need experienced a severe level of loneliness, which was significantly higher compared with both Canadian-born persons with disabilities who were in core housing need (21.4%) and Canadian-born persons with disabilities who were not in core housing need (20.9%) (Table 3, Model 2). Even without core housing need, a higher percentage of immigrants with disabilities (27.0%) were predicted to experience a severe level of loneliness than their Canadian-born counterparts.

Higher loneliness among immigrants not in a low-income household

The difference in the probability of severe loneliness between immigrants (27.7%) and Canadian-born persons (22.5%) with disabilities from low-income households was not statistically significant (Table 3, Model 3). Neither immigrants nor Canadian-born persons with disabilities from low-income households had a significantly higher probability of experiencing severe loneliness than Canadian-born persons with disabilities who were not from a low-income household.⁹ However, a significantly larger percentage of immigrants with disabilities who were not from a low-income household experienced severe loneliness (28.7%) than Canadian-born persons with disabilities who were also not from a low-income household (20.9%).

Table 3
Loneliness among immigrants and Canadian-born persons with disabilities aged 15 years and over by food insecurity, core housing need and low-income status, 2022

	Low loneliness			Moderate loneliness			Severe loneliness		
	Probability (%)	95% confidence interval		Probability (%)	95% confidence interval		Probability (%)	95% confidence interval	
		lower	upper		lower	upper		lower	upper
Model 1 - Immigrant status × food insecurity									
Immigrants × food insecure	36.2 ***	29.3	43.1	29.4	21.0	29.9	34.4 ***	27.8	41.0
Canadian-born × food insecure	39.1 ***	36.4	41.8	34.3 **	31.6	37.0	26.6 ***	24.5	28.7
Immigrants × food secure	50.3	45.3	55.2	25.4	31.6	37.0	24.3 *	19.5	29.1
Canadian-born × food secure (ref.)	52.8	51.1	54.5	29.1	27.4	30.8	18.1	16.8	19.5
Model 2 - Immigrant status × core housing need									
Immigrants × in core need	44.7	34.8	54.6	20.7 *	12.9	28.5	34.6 **	26.1	43.1
Canadian-born × in core need	45.6	40.5	50.6	33.1	28.1	38.0	21.4	17.8	24.9
Immigrants × not in core need	46.2	41.6	50.8	26.8	22.6	31.0	27.0 *	22.4	31.6
Canadian-born × not in core need (ref.)	49.1	47.6	50.6	30.0	28.5	31.5	20.9	19.7	22.1
Model 3 - Immigrant status × low income									
Immigrants × in low income	42.4	32.7	52.2	29.9	21.1	38.7	27.7	19.3	36.0
Canadian-born × in low income	44.6 *	40.5	48.7	32.9	28.8	37.1	22.5	19.3	25.6
Immigrants × not in low income	46.2	41.7	50.7	25.1 *	21.1	29.2	28.7 **	24.2	33.2
Canadian-born × not in low income (ref.)	49.2	47.7	50.8	29.9	28.4	31.4	20.9	19.7	22.1

* significantly different from reference category (p < 0.05)

** significantly different from reference category (p < 0.01)

*** significantly different from reference category (p < 0.001)

Note: The regression models accounted for differences in gender, age group, mother tongue, population group, population centre, living arrangements, socioeconomic participation, educational attainment, disability type, disability severity and age at disability onset.

Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Survey on Disability (3251), 2022.

9. Small sample size among immigrants with disabilities who were in low income reduces the statistical power that is needed to detect a true difference compared with the reference group and can also lead to less precise estimates because of greater variability in the data.

Conclusion

Immigrant status shaped the role of socioeconomic participation and socioeconomic deprivation in the experience of loneliness, and the association between some of these indicators and severe loneliness was stronger for immigrants with disabilities than their Canadian-born counterparts.

Being employed and/or in school offered immigrants with disabilities less protection from severe loneliness than Canadian-born persons with disabilities. This finding raises questions about whether educational institutions and workplaces offer immigrants the same opportunities for social integration as Canadian-born persons. The CSD did not include a measure of social ties or sense of belonging, so it is unclear whether the greater level of loneliness among immigrants with disabilities was attributable to the quantity or quality of their social relationships. A further limitation is that small sample size prevented a disaggregation of the category of not employed or in school into unemployment, homemaking or other reasons for not being employed, which could affect the probability of loneliness.

Experiences of food insecurity and core housing need increased the experience of severe loneliness to a greater magnitude among immigrants with disabilities than among Canadian-born persons with disabilities. Even minimal exposure to these economic disadvantages can disproportionately affect immigrants with disabilities since these variables were measured at any level of food insecurity or core housing need. Further research is needed to examine whether gradients of economic deprivation (e.g., marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity) exacerbate this disparity.

Even when immigrants with disabilities lived in food-secure households, were not in core housing need or were not from a low-income household, their experience of severe loneliness was greater than among their Canadian-born counterparts.

Appendix: Statistical method

Multinomial regression analysis was used to examine whether the association between socioeconomic participation and loneliness differed between immigrants and Canadian-born persons with disabilities. Specifically, the analysis examined the interaction between immigrant status and a three-category variable of socioeconomic participation: employed and/or in school, neither employed nor in school, and retired. The regression analysis adjusted for differences in food insecurity, core housing need, low-income status, sociodemographic characteristics and disability-related characteristics. The sociodemographic and disability-related characteristics used in the model are described in Appendix Table A.

Three multinomial models were used to compare differences in loneliness based on experiences of food insecurity, core housing need and low-income status, focusing on the interaction between immigrant status and these indicators of economic deprivation. These models are adjusted for differences in socioeconomic participation, sociodemographic characteristics and disability-related characteristics.

Since the dependent variable has three categories, multinomial logistic regression was used, which was preferred over ordinal logistic regression. Ordinal logistic regression assumes that each independent variable has an unchangeable association with the odds of the dependent variable moving from one level to another, but this assumption is rarely met (Hilbe, 2009). The coefficients from the regressions were converted into predicted probabilities using the margins command in Stata 17 with the covariates set at their observed values. The contrast command was used to test whether the differences in severe loneliness between immigrants and Canadian-born persons with disabilities within each interacting category (e.g., immigrants who were food insecure versus Canadian-born persons who were food insecure) were statistically significant. Person-weights and bootstrap weights were used to obtain population-level estimates.

The analytical sample excluded respondents missing responses on the three-item loneliness scale. Supplementary analysis was conducted with multiple imputations for respondents missing one or two items on the loneliness scale to examine whether their exclusion biased the results. The estimates of loneliness from the regressions with imputed loneliness scores were similar to the estimates that used listwise deletion. The CSD did not ask respondents who were interviewed by proxy the questions on loneliness. After these exclusions, the analytical sample included 1,810 immigrants and 17,050 Canadian-born persons with disabilities aged 15 and over.

Appendix Table A
Sociodemographic and disability-related characteristics of immigrants and Canadian-born persons with disabilities aged 15 and over, 2022

	Immigrants	Canadian born
	percent (weighted)	
Gender		
Men	41.5	42.2
Women	58.5	57.8
Age group (years)		
15 to 29	7.9 *	17.5
30 to 44	16.2 *	20.6
45 to 64	37.6	34.7
65 and over	38.3 *	27.2
Mother tongue		
English or French	38.7 *	96.0
English or French and a non-official language	5.9 *	0.9
Non-official language	55.4 *	3.1
Population group		
White	43.5 *	89.2
South Asian	14.8 *	0.6
Chinese	8.3 *	0.5
Black	8.0 *	0.9
Filipino or Southeast Asian	7.7 *	0.5
Arab or West Asian	7.1 *	0.2
Latin American	5.1 *	0.2
Korean or Japanese	1.3 *	0.1
Other groups	4.0 *	7.9
Educational attainment		
High school diploma or less	35.6 *	44.9
Postsecondary credential below a bachelor's degree	29.6 *	34.8
Bachelor's degree or above	34.9 *	20.3
Housing tenure		
Renter	31.0	32.1
Living arrangements		
Living alone	7.1	6.9
Living with others	19.7	21.7
Living in a family household	73.2	71.4
Population centre¹		
Rural	7.2 *	20.1
Small centre (1,000 to 29,999 persons)	6.6 *	16.6
Medium centre (30,000 to 99,999 persons)	5.1 *	11.8
Large centre (100,000 persons or more)	81.0 *	51.5
Disability type		
Physical ²	30.7 *	34.2
Mental health-related or cognitive ³	55.6 *	40.7
Physical and mental health-related or cognitive	10.6 *	21.7
Unknown	3.1	3.4
Disability severity		
Mild or moderate	59.7	62.0
Severe or very severe	40.3	38.0
Age at disability onset		
0 to 24	28.8 *	49.2
25 to 44	25.7 *	20.6
45 to 64	29.7 *	21.0
65 and over	15.8 *	9.2

* significantly different from Canadian-born people (p < 0.05)

1. The census defines a population centre as a population of 1,000 persons or more and a population density of at least 400 persons per square kilometre. All other areas are rural.

2. Seeing, hearing, mobility, flexibility, dexterity and pain-related disabilities.

3. Cognitive disabilities include developmental, learning and memory disabilities.

Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Survey on Disability (3251), 2022.

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