

## Canadian Agriculture at a Glance

# Female and young farm operators represent a new era of Canadian farmers

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# Female and young farm operators represent a new era of Canadian farmers

by **Matthew Shumsky** and **Allison Nelson**

The next generation of Canadian farm operators is emerging and they are altering the perception of the conventional farmer.

This release takes data from the 2016 Census of Agriculture (CEAG) and links it with data from the 2016 Census of Population to provide a socioeconomic profile of who is running Canada's farms. What it revealed is the rise of a new generation that has adaptive, educated female farm operators coupled with resourceful and progressive young farm operators (those under 40 years of age) working increasingly complex and automated agricultural operations.

Over the past 20 years, the proportion of female farm operators has increased. In 1996, females represented 25.3% of farm operators. By 2016, that proportion has risen to 28.7%, accounting for 77,830 female farm operators.

## Female farm operators adapt to new challenges

Faced with modernizing farming practices, female farm operators are placing greater emphasis on educational attainment. For example, in 2016, this group was nearly two times as likely than they were 20 years earlier to report having earned a university-level education as their highest level of educational attainment.

As well, young female farm operators, in particular, are focusing their education directly on agricultural practices. In 2016, about 20% of young female farm operators reported taking agriculture-related studies compared with about 1 in every 12 female farm operator 40 years and older.

## Farmers finding new ways into the business

With the cost of land being a major factor in farming, many female farm operators opt for the practice of borrowing farm land<sup>1</sup> to reduce some of the financial risk. This can take the form of renting land from other operators or by leasing land through the government.

Female farm operators, on average, borrow more land than male farm operators. In 2016, farms operated exclusively by females that reported renting or leasing land borrowed on average, 1,051 acres. This compared with 818 acres by farms operated exclusively by males.

Additionally, for female-operated farms, this borrowed land represented, on average, 71.3% of their total farm land. In turn, farms operated exclusively by males borrowed just over half of their total farm land (Table 1).

### Key facts

#### The female farm operator in 2016:

- Average age of 54.5
- Median age of 55.0
- 10.3% were immigrants
- Average total income of \$43,216
- Median total income of \$32,363
- Top three mother tongue (excluding English and French):
  - ▶ German: 38.8%
  - ▶ Dutch: 19.7%
  - ▶ Punjabi: 5.3%
- Top three place of birth (excluding Canada):
  - ▶ Netherlands: 17.2%
  - ▶ United Kingdom: 15.5%
  - ▶ United States: 14.6%

More details on female farm operators can be found in the [2016 Agriculture–Population Linkage Data](#).

1. Borrowed farm land includes area rented and area leased from governments.

**Table 1**  
**Distribution of borrowed farm land by farms operated exclusively by female or male farm operators in Canada, 2016**

Farm operation	Borrowed farm land	
	Average acres	Average percentage
Farms operated exclusively by females	1,051	71.3
Farms operated exclusively by males	818	50.6

Source: Statistics Canada, Agriculture–Population Linkage Data, 2016.

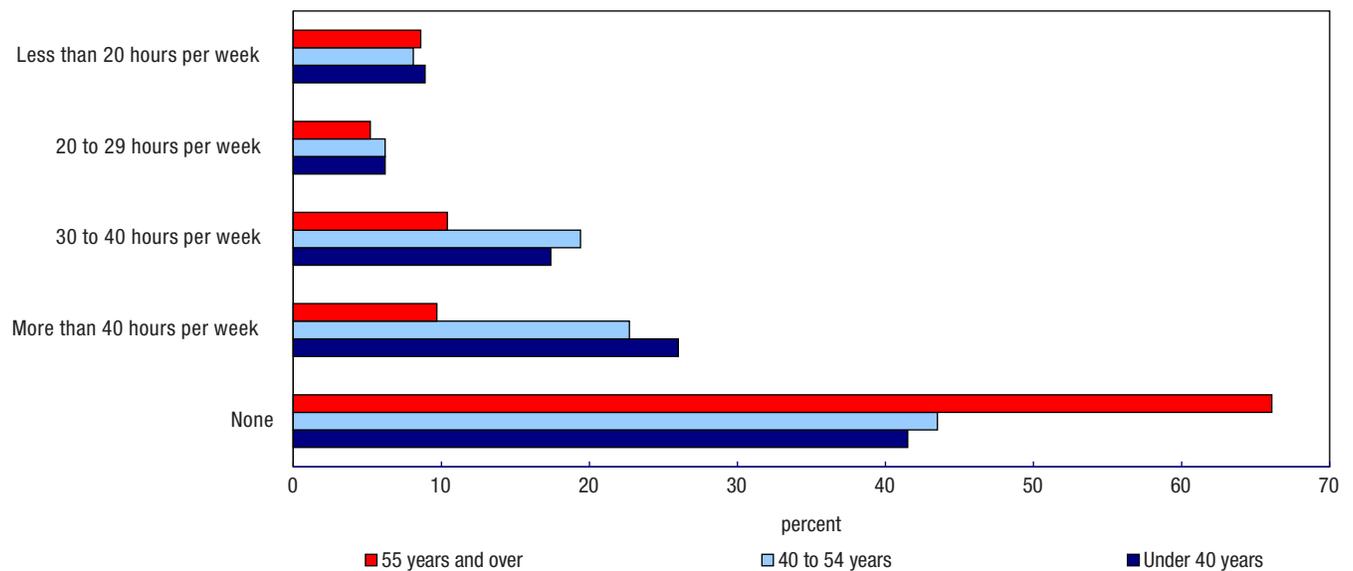
## Young farm operators diversify their revenue streams through off-farm work

Instead of solely relying on income generated from agricultural operations, young farm operators are also tapping into alternate revenue-producing opportunities. Off-farm jobs can serve to diversify income streams, while also helping farm operators reduce financial exposure.

In 2016, 58.5% of farm operators under 40 years of age reported working off the farm. By contrast, one-third of farm operators 55 years and over worked off the farm (Chart 1).

**Chart 1**  
**Distribution of off-farm work by farm operators by age group, Canada, 2016**

Off-farm work



Source: Statistics Canada, Agriculture–Population Linkage Data, 2016.

## Young farm operators use off-farm income to mitigate financial risks

For young and potentially new farm operators, off-farm work can help reduce financial uncertainty when starting out by providing additional income. Higher proportions of young female farm operators report off-farm work than males overall. In 1996, just under half (48.9%) of young female farm operators reported working off farm. By 2016, that figure has climbed to 58.2% among young female farm operators.

In 2016, young female farm operators who worked off the farm, most frequently reported being employed in:

- Management occupations (22.0%);
- Business, finance and administration occupations (20.9%);
- Occupations in education, law and social community government services (13.3%); or
- Health occupations (12.9%).

Young male farm operators face the same financial barriers as females do when breaking into the farm industry. Like females, a growing proportion of young male farm operators are reporting off-farm work. In 1996, 52.1% of young male farm operators reported working off the farm. By 2016, that percentage had risen to 58.7%.

In 2016, young male farm operators who worked off the farm, most frequently reported being employed in:

- Management occupations (34.4%);
- Trades, transport and equipment operators and related occupations (26.3%)
- Natural resources, agriculture and related production occupations (14.2%); or
- Natural and applied sciences and related occupations (6.7%).

## Young farm operators have become more urban as they look to benefit from off-farm work opportunities

With a higher proportion of young farm operators using off-farm income, there has been an increase in the percentage of young farm operators living in urban areas. Living in urban areas can be better for seeking employment opportunities, as these areas often have more businesses and employment opportunities compared with rural areas.

The proportion of young farmer operators residing in urban areas more than doubled over the past 20 years, rising from 7.3% in 1996 to 16.0% in 2016.

## Young farm operators emphasize educational attainment as they explore off-farm work

The level of reported off-farm work by young farm operators is substantially higher than that of the older segment of farm operators. As a result, young farm operators tend to embrace educational attainment to improve their employability for off-farm work opportunities.

### Key facts

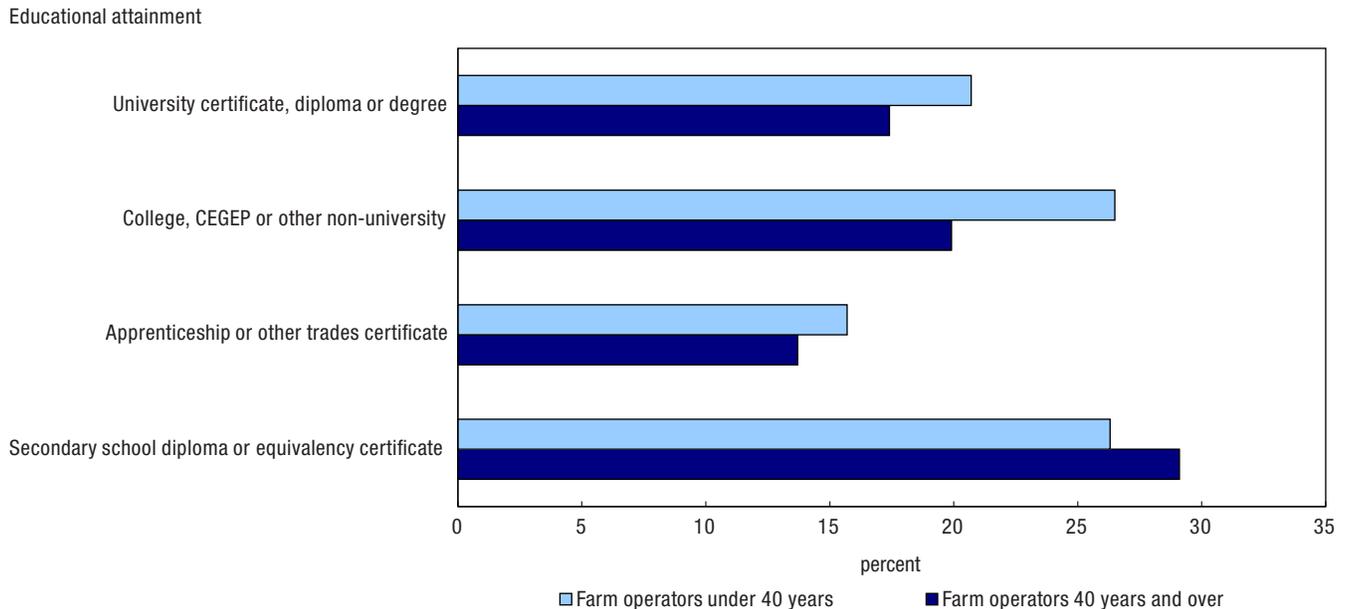
#### The young farm operator in 2016:

- Males comprise 72.7%
- Females comprise 27.3%
- Average age of 32.4
- Median age of 33.0
- 5.0% were immigrants
- Average total income of \$48,841
- Median total income of \$39,563
- Top three mother tongue (excluding English and French):
  - ▶ German: 55.0%
  - ▶ Dutch: 18.0%
  - ▶ Punjabi: 7.0%
- Top three place of birth (excluding Canada):
  - ▶ Netherlands: 24.7%
  - ▶ United States: 11.9%
  - ▶ Mexico: 9.9%

More details on young farm operators can be found in the [2016 Agriculture–Population Linkage Data](#).

When comparing reported highest level of educational attainment between farm operators under 40 and those 40 and over, young farm operators reported higher levels of educational attainment for apprenticeship or other trades certificate (15.7%), college, CEGEP or other non-university (26.5%) and university certificate, diploma or degree (20.7%) in 2016 (Chart 2).

**Chart 2**  
**Highest level of educational attainment of farm operators by age group, Canada, 2016**



Source: Statistics Canada, Agriculture–Population Linkage Data, 2016.

## Conclusion

In summation, the rise of the next generation of Canadian farm operators has coincided with the evolution of increasingly automated and complex agricultural operations. The rise of adaptive and educated female farm operators in synergy with progressive and resourceful young farm operators is changing the perception of the typical farmer.

Young female farm operators are adapting to modern farm practices by focusing their increasing educational attainments on agricultural-related studies.

While large, consolidated agricultural operations are becoming increasingly capital-intensive, female farm operators are adjusting the ways they acquire farm land; whether it be by renting land or by leasing land through the government.

Since there are many financial risks to beginning farms, young farm operators are minimizing financial volatilities by supplementing their incomes with off-farm work. And to help seize those off-farm work opportunities, increasing proportions of young farm operators are residing in urbanized areas where greater concentrations of commerce and businesses are found.