



Public Perceptions of Immigration in Waterloo Region (2020)

Public perceptions of immigration vary widely around the world and are subject to deep fluctuations. They are also the topic of significant public opinion research in Canada and globally because of the importance of immigration in our modern, global world. Immigrants¹ have helped to build up communities across Canada for generations. Immigrants add richness to the social and cultural life of communities like Waterloo Region, and there is a pressing economic imperative for immigration to fuel labour force growth due to aging populations and low fertility rates in Canada. Public perceptions influence behaviours in community, impact the experiences of immigrants and their desire to stay and contribute to a thriving, prosperous community.

Over the last two decades, a wide variety of Canadian public opinion research has found that, in general, Canadians' views on immigration remain quite positive. There is, however, a significant minority of the population that is much less accepting of immigrants and the value they add to Canadian society.²

To better understand local opinions, the Immigration Partnership commissioned research on public perceptions of immigration in Waterloo Region. Data was gathered in January 2019³ and a year later in January 2020 through a mixed-method survey conducted by the University of Waterloo's Survey Research Centre.⁴ When the COVID-19 pandemic closed international borders we commissioned follow-up research in June 2020 to understand public sentiment.

Survey Results

Results show similar trends in Waterloo Region as have been seen in Canada-wide surveys on public perceptions of immigration. Furthermore, public perceptions in Waterloo Region did not change dramatically between 2019 and early 2020, or in the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Opinions about the impact of immigration in Waterloo Region tend to be fairly positive, but less favourable perceptions are held by a significant minority of the population. Respondents were quite supportive of multiculturalism and tended to strongly disagree with any suggestion that religious symbols should not be allowed in public settings. However, opinions were more mixed about whether immigrants need to do more to integrate into Canadian society.

¹ We use the term "immigrants" to include people who were born outside of Canada and now live in Waterloo Region, including permanent residents, temporary residents, foreign nationals and Canadian citizens.

² Environics Institute, "Focus Canada – Spring 2019: Canadian public opinion about immigration and refugees" (2019), <https://www.environicsinstitute.org/docs/default-source/project-documents/focus-canada-spring-2019/environics-institute---focus-canada-spring-2019-survey-on-immigration-and-refugees---final-report.pdf>

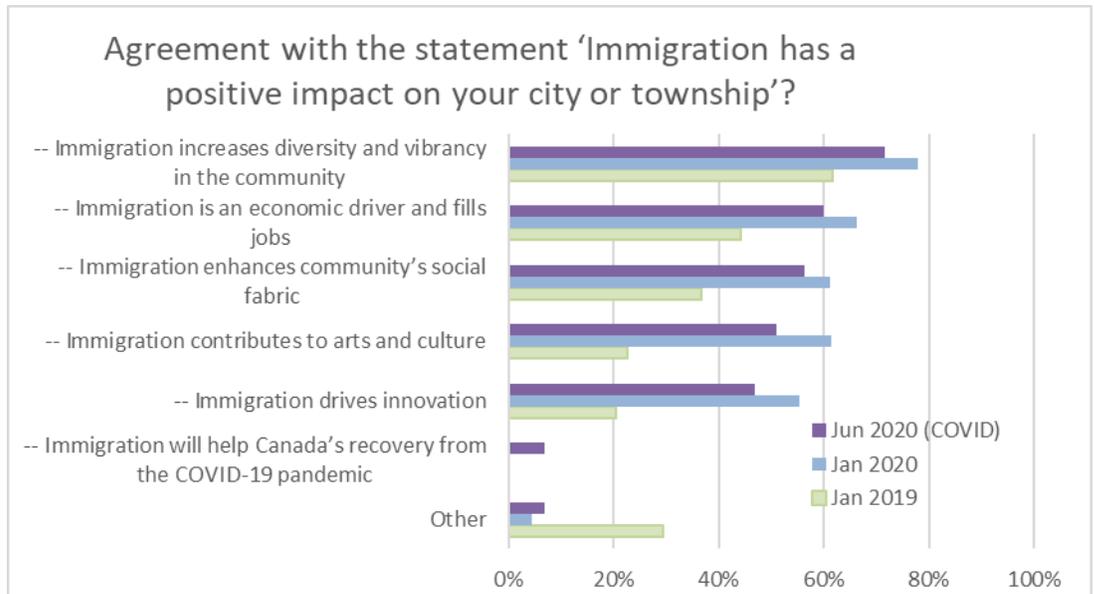
³ Immigration Partnership, "Public Perceptions of Immigration in Waterloo Region" (May 2019), <https://www.immigrationwaterlooregion.ca/publicperceptions2019>

⁴ See: <https://uwaterloo.ca/survey-research-centre>. All data in this report has been weighted by the University of Waterloo's Survey Research Centre in order to be more representative of the population by region, age and education level. 2020 data cannot be directly compared to the previously published data from 2019 as the 2019 published data was unweighted.

In both January and June 2020, 68 per cent of Waterloo Region survey respondents agreed⁵ that immigration has a positive impact on their city or township; 32 per cent disagreed.

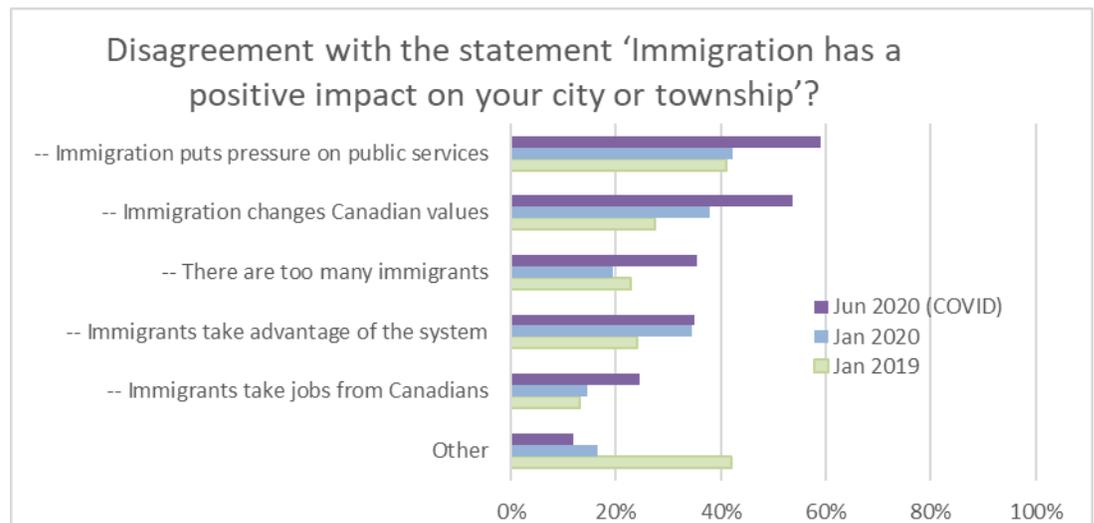
This is similar to the results in 2019 when 68% agreed and 31% disagreed.⁶

Respondents that agreed that immigration has a positive impact noted how immigration increases diversity and vibrancy of the community, is an economic driver among other reasons.



Those who disagreed mentioned reasons such as pressure on public services, changing Canadian values among other reasons.

The ranking of these reasons in 2020 is similar to results from a year earlier.



When considering the January 2020 results by age, geographic region and education, some differences in perceptions among population groups can be seen. Younger individuals (age 18-24) were more likely to agree that immigration has a positive impact (87 per cent) compared to other age groups (65 per cent). Individuals living in cities in Waterloo Region were also more likely to agree (70 per cent) compared to the rural townships (53 per cent). Finally, individuals with higher education were more likely to agree that immigration has a positive impact (73 per cent among those with a university, college or trade school education) compared to those with grade school or high school (62 per cent).

⁵ Agreement for these survey questions was considered to be a response of 7 to 10 on a ten-point scale whereas disagreement was considered to be a response of 1-6.

⁶ Percentages may not add up to 100 because of rounding and/or a small number of respondents that responded "Don't know".

Among survey respondents, 79 per cent said that they supported multiculturalism in their city or township; 21 per cent disagreed.

- Those that said they supported multiculturalism gave the following reasons:
 - They are proud of Canada's multicultural policy as world leading (65%)
 - Multiculturalism is an inherent part of Canadian identity (65%)
 - Multiculturalism contributes to a diverse community that attracts new people (63%)
 - Multiculturalism increases quality of life and vibrancy in the community (59%)
 - Multiculturalism fuels economic growth and competitiveness (55%)
 - Other (6%)

When asked about the efforts of immigrant to integrate, 44 per cent of survey respondents agreed that immigrants need to do more to integrate into Canadian society; 56 per cent disagreed.

This is similar to the previous year's findings when 45% agreed and 53% disagreed.

- Those who agreed thought that immigrants need to:
 - Adopt Canadian values (75%)
 - Become fluent in English/French (67%)
 - Choose one of Canada's religions (7%)
 - Get a job/contribute to the economy (64%)
 - Show more gratitude or appreciation for being in Canada (38%)
 - Volunteer and civically engage (31%)
 - Other (8%)

The ranking of these reasons in 2020 is similar to the survey results from a year earlier except that those that agreed in 2020 were more likely to feel that immigrants need to show more gratitude or appreciation for being in Canada.⁷

Survey respondents were asked about minority religious symbols. There was significant disagreement with the statement that 'People should not be allowed to wear minority religious symbols such as a hijab (Islamic headscarf) or turban (Sikh head covering) in public spaces.' Eighty-eight per cent of survey respondents disagreed and 12 per cent agreed.

The majority of respondents (58%) expressed the strongest possible disagreement with this statement.

- Those who agreed thought:
 - Minority religious symbols are anti-Canadian (25%)
 - Minority religious symbols threaten Canadian identity (27%)
 - Feel threatened by religious minorities (12%)
 - Have negative feelings towards some religions (24%)
 - Don't like religion influencing public life (37%)
 - Have negative feelings towards people from other countries (1%)
 - Other (18%)

⁷ It is not possible to compare reason percentages between years since "other" responses dropped from 19% to 8%.

Conclusions

The results of this survey are consistent with the findings of national surveys on public support for immigration in Canada. It is important to periodically measure public perceptions of immigration at the local level and the reasons behind those perceptions to understand local public opinions, and foster support for immigration at a local level through public education and messaging for the success of future economic growth and community development.

It is notable that public perceptions about immigration in Waterloo Region stayed relatively steady between early 2019, early 2020 and mid-2020. In particular, when there were hints of possible rising anti-immigrant sentiment as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, early travel-related cases and Canada closing its borders to all international travellers – this negative immigration sentiment was not seen in a significant way in Waterloo Region in the early period of the pandemic.

Most survey respondents (68 per cent) agreed that immigration has a positive impact on their city or township, but a significant 32 per cent of respondents disagreed with this statement. As of the end of 2019, Waterloo Region's population was 617,870,⁸ so this 32 per cent represents 197,718 residents who do not see a positive impact of immigration in their communities. This percentage is particularly concerning when we consider that Canada is a country that has been built on immigration and benefitted greatly from it. The top three concerns expressed by respondents who did not agree that immigration has a positive impact on their community are related to perceptions around immigration putting pressure on public services (42-59 per cent), immigrants changing Canadian values (38-54 per cent) and immigrants taking advantage of the system (35 per cent).

As relates to immigration and the economy, of the respondents who did not think immigration has a positive impact on their community 25 per cent felt that immigrants take jobs from Canadians. Among those that viewed immigration positively, only 7 per cent felt that immigration will help Canada's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, close to half of respondents (44 per cent) felt that immigrants need to do more to integrate into Canadian society. When asked why they responded that way, respondents said that immigrants need to do more to adopt Canadian values (75 per cent), become fluent in English or French (67 per cent) and contribute to the economy (64 per cent).

There was strong consensus was when asked about bans on wearing religious symbols (such as a hijab or turban): Nine out of ten respondents did not think these items should be banned in public spaces.

As in 2019, the questions asked in this survey contained positive and negative statements around immigration to provide respondents an opportunity to consider immigration from different perspectives and freely express support or concern around immigration in Waterloo Region. As in 2019, the results are mixed, whereby statements focused on community action tend towards more positive responses and questions focused on immigrant action tend towards less positive response.

⁸ See: <https://www.regionofwaterloo.ca/en/regional-government/population.aspx>

Appendix

The Waterloo Region Matters Survey, previously known as the Waterloo Regional Area Survey, was conducted by the University of Waterloo Survey Research Centre. The questions about public perceptions in this report are a part of that multi-topic survey, commissioned by the Immigration Partnership. We are grateful to the Survey Research Centre for the expert administration of the Waterloo Region Matters mixed-mode survey.

Survey methodology: Random-digit dialed (RDD) telephone (both landline and cellphone) and web surveys of previously randomly selected individuals. RDD sampling of households within the Waterloo Region population and random selection within the household are used in initial recruitment by the SRC. This approach more accurately represents the Waterloo Region compared to non-probability sampling methods, such as recruiting members from web panel firms. The sample used for the web component of the Waterloo Region Matters Survey was originally recruited using RDD. The January 2020 survey used both telephone and web surveys whereas the June 2020 survey only used web-based methods.

In order for survey results to be representative of the population, all data was weighted by geography, age and education level. Having a random selection of respondents and weighted data that are representative of the population are important aspects of data relevance and utility. Unless otherwise noted, all figures shared in this report are weighted data.

Timing: The January 2020 survey was in field January 29 to February 24, 2020. The June 2020 survey was gathered between May 14 and June 2, 2020.

Study population: Adult residents, age 18 and over, within the Waterloo Region, including Kitchener, Waterloo, Cambridge and the four townships.

Table 1: Demographics of survey participants (January 2020, unweighted)

Variable		Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	43
	Female	57
	Other	<1
Age	Young Adult (18-24)	7
	Mid age Adults	70
	Older Adults (65+)	23
Municipality	Waterloo	22
	Kitchener	43
	Cambridge	22
	Other	13
Employment Status	Employed (full or part time)	59
	Retired/student/homemaker	32
	Unemployed/other	9
Household Income	<\$20,000	7
	Between \$20,000-\$50,000	18
	\$50,000-\$80,000	23
	Over \$80,000	53
Education	College/university degree	74
	High school or lower	22
	Other	5

Sample size: The January 2020 wave had 542 completed surveys, whereas the June 2020 wave included 317 completed surveys.

Question selection: Questions were selected based on similar questions posed in Canada-wide surveys by national polling institutes. Questions kept the same wording as in previous years to maintain comparability when possible. Both positively and negatively framed questions were selected to provide a balance of options and avenues for respondents to express their views. Ratings at 7 and above were considered in agreement with the statement and

ratings 6 and below were considered in disagreement. The January 2020 questions are listed below. The June 2020 wave only included Q1 below.

Questions:

Preamble: The next few questions are about immigration and multiculturalism within Waterloo Region.

For each of the following statements, please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement using a scale from 1 to 10 where 1 means “strongly disagree” and 10 means “strongly agree”.

Q.1a) What is your level of agreement or disagreement with the statement ‘Immigration has a positive impact on your city or township’?

Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

ASK Q.1b) if Q.1a) = 1 to 6. OTHERWISE SKIP TO INSTRUCTION ABOVE Q.1c)

Q.1b) Why did you give that rating? **(NOTE TO PROGRAMMER: Include list of answer options on web survey version.)**

- (1) Immigration changes Canadian values
 - (2) Immigration puts pressure on public services
 - (3) Immigrants take advantage of the system
 - (4) Immigrants take jobs from Canadians
 - (5) There are too many immigrants
 - (6) Other
- ...The June 2020 survey also included the option “Immigration will help Canada’s recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic”

ASK Q.1c) if Q.1a) = 7 to 10. OTHERWISE SKIP TO Q.2a)

Q.1c) Why did you give that rating? **(NOTE TO PROGRAMMER: Include list of answer options on web survey version.)**

- (1) Immigration contributes to arts and culture
- (2) Immigration drives innovation
- (3) Immigration is an economic driver and fills jobs
- (4) Immigration enhances community’s social fabric
- (5) Immigration increases diversity and vibrancy in the community
- (6) Other

Q.2a) What is your level of agreement or disagreement with the statement ‘I support multiculturalism in my city or township’?

Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

ASK Q.2b) if Q.2a) = 7 to 10. OTHERWISE SKIP TO Q.3a)

Q.2b) Why did you give that rating? **(NOTE TO PROGRAMMER: Include list of answer options on web survey version.)**

- (1) You are proud of Canada’s multicultural policy as world leading
- (2) Multiculturalism is an inherent part of Canadian identity
- (3) Multiculturalism contributes to a diverse community that attracts new people
- (4) Multiculturalism fuels economic growth and competitiveness
- (5) Multiculturalism increases quality of life and vibrancy in the community
- 6) Other

