



Immigrants and Employment in Waterloo Region

2023 Immigrant Survey Results



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Waterloo Region is set to grow to 1,000,000 people in the coming decades. Of the 300,000 new residents to be welcomed in that time, more than half will be immigrants from around the world. As we grow into the future; it is important to build a community where everyone can thrive. Strong employment outcomes are critical to the wellbeing of immigrants and others, the local economy and community development.

This snapshot explores the responses of 1,676 Waterloo Region immigrants through to the 2023 Waterloo Region Immigrant Survey¹ and other relevant data. The Waterloo Region Immigration Partnership prepared this snapshot as a tool to help governments, funders, business leaders and non-profit organizations understand the employment experiences of immigrants and develop and invest in policies and programs that respond to their needs.

Immigrants are diverse and offer significant contributions to their workplaces and community


Immigrants come to Canada from around the world, bringing diverse experience and cultural understanding. The vast majority of immigrants that responded to the survey (91%) spoke more than one language, and nearly half (46%) spoke 3 or more languages. English was the most common language with 9 out of 10 (91%) speaking English at least fairly well. A 2023 report by Statistics Canada² found that 46% of the population feels cultural differences enrich their workplace. Immigrants were more likely to believe this (54% vs 43% of Canadian born individuals).

Immigrants tend to be highly educated. In the 2021 census the proportion of immigrants with a Bachelor's degree continued to increase and was higher than the Canadian-born population.³ In the

¹ The Immigrant Survey heard from 1,676 participants in June 2023. Percentages in red in the table below are based on a smaller number of individual respondents (less than 25) and should be interpreted with caution. Percentages based on fewer than 5 individuals were suppressed to protect participants' privacy. See the last page of this snapshot for more information about the 2023 Immigrant Survey.

² Statistics Canada. 2023. *Participation in Canadian society through sport and work*, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/231010/dq231010b-eng.htm>. The Survey Series on People and their Communities was collected from May 5 to July 25, 2023.

³ Region of Waterloo Public Health and Paramedic Services and Waterloo Region Immigration Partnership. 2024. *Waterloo Region Immigration Profile*, https://www.immigrationwaterlooregion.ca/en/resources/Surveys/Immigration_Profile_Report_June-



2023 Immigrant Survey, 75% of respondents had a bachelor's degree or above, and 34% had a Masters or PhD.⁴

Four per cent of Immigrant Survey respondents were business owners.

Employment is a key reason immigrants come to Waterloo Region

One quarter (24%) of Immigrant Survey respondents shared that they came to Waterloo Region for a job, while another 7% came because they were looking for a healthy local economy, and 17% said Waterloo Region was more affordable than other communities.

Other factors that attracted immigrants to the region were having family or friends here (33%), post-secondary education (32%), the cultural, faith or language groups in the community (6%), and community services or supports (3%).

From a retention perspective, one quarter of respondents (26%) definitely wanted to stay in this community, and another third (36%) said they might stay. Only 6% did not plan on staying.

Income and cost of living is a key concern

Employment is a key driver of income, and it is not a surprise that when asked about the biggest challenges they or their family had experienced in the past year, nearly two-thirds of survey participants (59%) said it was cost of living or money problems.

Only one third (33%) said their income was enough for themselves and their family. Forty per cent said their income wasn't quite enough and a quarter (27%) said their income was not sufficient for

2024_accessible-Aug-8.pdf. "Recent immigrants in Waterloo Region have a higher level of educational attainment than established immigrants and Canadian-born individuals. Specifically, 65% of recent immigrants hold a post-secondary certificate, diploma, or degree, compared to 58% among established immigrants and 53% among Canadian-born individuals."

⁴ Due to the survey methodology, the Immigrant Survey isn't a statistically representative sample, though it does reflect the perspectives of a wide variety of recent and long-term immigrants in this community.

themselves and their family. The proportion whose income was insufficient increased dramatically from 45% in the 2021 survey to 67% in 2023.⁵

Income insufficiency impacts housing affordability, which was a key concern: 42% of survey respondents did not have housing that was affordable and suitable.

Employment in skills-aligned roles is a foundation of successful integration

Among Immigrant Survey respondents, 66% were employed, with the majority in full-time work. Approximately a quarter (26%) were unemployed but looking for work.

Among employed survey participants, just over half (51%) said their job was at the same level as their skills and experience - the other half were underemployed.

Finding work was tied with finding affordable housing as the second most common challenge for immigrants (49% of respondents).

Compared to all survey respondents, those in a job commensurate with their skills and experience were more likely to have a positive experience across numerous areas: They were slightly more likely to be quite satisfied with their life (51% vs 42%), to have had a positive settling experience (80% vs 74%), and to be planning to stay permanently in Waterloo Region (69% vs 62%).

Survey participants shared that they want community leaders to:

“Simplify the process of obtaining a license for doctors or allow newly arrived doctors to take care of at least newcomers. For newcomers, this issue is very sad and acute.”

From Immigrant Survey participants:


“Help / create conditions for migrants to start their own business. This will create new jobs and improve the economy in the region.”

“Provide employment/make education process affordable so newcomers can update their qualifications and work in their field”

“Treat others as you would like to be treated.”

“Successful integration is a collective effort that involves the participation of the entire community.”

⁵ Most of this increase in insufficient incomes was in those for whom their income was “definitely not enough” (12% in 2021 to 27% in 2023) though there was also an increase in those for whom their income was “not quite enough” (33% in 2021 to 40% in 2023).



They were also less likely to have a negative experience across multiple areas: They were slightly less likely to be relatively isolated (19% vs 26%), to not feel at home in Waterloo Region (15% vs 20%), and to be in housing that wasn't affordable or suitable (34% vs 42%). They were much less likely to say their income was not sufficient for themselves or their family (46% vs 67%).⁶

Survey respondents who were appropriately employed were more likely to be economic category immigrants (37% vs 23%), and less likely to be international students (9% vs 20%). They were more likely to have immigrated at least 10 years ago (31% vs 21%), and less likely to have immigrated within the past year (17% vs 31%).

A recent study by Statistics Canada⁷ looked at individuals' education level and current occupation and found that, "in 2021, the overeducation rate of recent immigrants was more than double that of young Canadian-born workers". It also noted that this disparity in the education–occupation match between recent immigrants and young Canadian-born workers had grown over the last two decades and was larger in 2021 than 20 years earlier.


Discrimination negatively impacts immigrants at work

Discrimination and decisions made based on biases can negatively impact many groups in the workplace, from hiring, to promotion or general work culture.

One quarter (24%) of Immigrant Survey respondents experienced discrimination. Those who experienced discrimination reported that the workplace was the most common setting for discrimination. Just over half (52%) experienced discrimination at their job (from supervisors, co-workers or clients) or when applying for a job or promotion (with an even split in responses to each setting).

⁶ Respondents that were in a job that was NOT commensurate with their skills or experience were (compared to all survey respondents): slightly less likely to be quite satisfied with their life as a whole (36% vs 42%), slightly more likely to be relatively isolated (32% vs 26%), slightly less likely to have had a positive experience settling in this community (69% vs 74%), and more likely to have an income that was not sufficient for their needs (80% vs 67%).

⁷ Schimmele, C., & Hou, F. (2024, May 22). *Trends in education–occupation mismatch among recent immigrants with a bachelor's degree or higher, 2001 to 2021*. Statistics Canada. <https://doi.org/10.25318/36280001202400500002-eng>.



Statistics Canada's Survey on People and Their Communities⁸ found that while approximately 85% of Canadians feel cultural differences are respected in the workplace, racialized groups were less likely than non-racialized Canadians to feel this (81% vs 86%). Black (74%), Korean (74%) and Chinese (81%) individuals were least likely to feel that diversity was valued in their workplace.

Immigrants are satisfied with services that help them access jobs

Immigrant Survey respondents were asked about the types of services they accessed and their experience with those services. Three-quarters of respondents accessed employment and/or skills training services (72%). Among those, two-thirds (67%) rated these services positively (excellent, very good or good) and the other third rated them more negatively (as "acceptable" or "poor"). The ratings for small business/entrepreneurial supports were similar.


The Immigrant Survey asked participants about their service experiences across 16 service domains. Employment/skills-training was among the service areas respondents were least satisfied with. They were only less satisfied with housing services, French language services, and health services.

Ultimately, employment services need to be effective in helping newcomers find jobs. In the 2021 Immigrant Survey, participants were asked if employment services were useful in helping them find employment. There was a lot of overlap between how useful survey respondents said services were in helping them find work and their satisfaction with the services. Survey participants were less likely to be satisfied with employment services if they were not able to find a job. Of those who accessed employment and/or skills-training services who said they were helpful in finding a job, the majority (89%) rated the services positively. However, for those who said the services were not helpful in finding a job, only half (45%) rated the services positively.

Immigrant integration increases over time

The Immigrant Survey provides insight as to how situations and experiences change for immigrants over time following their arrival. Analysis of responses provided by refugees in Waterloo Region

⁸ Statistics Canada, 2023. "Participation in Canadian society through sport and work", <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/231010/dq231010b-eng.htm>. The Survey Series on People and their Communities (SSPC) was collected from May 5 to July 25, 2023.



specifically showed , differences among those who had been in Canada for less than 5 years and those here for more than 5 years.⁹ Although fleeing one’s home country in conflict and settling in a new country is challenging, survey analysis showed that the longer refugees live in the Region, the more fully they integrate and contribute back to the community.

Over time, refugees settle and feel less isolated (dropping from 29% to 18% feeling very isolated). They are more able to find affordable housing (in the first five years, 53% were in unaffordable or unsuitable housing compared to 38% after five years). They were increasingly able to find employment that was commensurate with their skills and experience (28% were initially in appropriate employment - rising to 63%). Over time, they were also able to earn sufficient income for themselves and their families (with the proportion of those whose income wasn’t sufficient dropping from 89% to 68%).

Finding suitable employment is among the top priorities of immigrants in Waterloo Region

Immigrant Survey respondents shared perspectives on the changes would help immigrants reach their full potential in Waterloo Region. The most common responses related to affordable housing (68%) and employment:

- 👉 Better programs for immigrants to find work (43%)
- 👉 More opportunities to help improve English skills (23%)
- 👉 Educate employers on the value and ways of hiring, retaining and promoting immigrants (21%)
- 👉 A central place for both employers to find immigrant workers and for workers to find employment (18%)

⁹ Waterloo Region Immigration Partnership, 2024. “*Refugee Settlement Patterns*,” https://www.immigrationwaterlooregion.ca/en/resources/Events-and-Initiatives/IS2023---Snapshots/DOCS_ADMIN-4695574-v2-IS2023_Refugee_Settlement_Patterns_snapshot_jun2024.pdf.

Survey respondents – both recent and those who have lived in this community for many years – shared that they want community leaders to strengthen employment opportunities.¹⁰ They recommended that community leaders:

- 👉 Provide economic opportunities through job creation, training, financial support, and business loans
- 👉 Address the lack of job opportunities for international students, emphasizing the financial challenges they face
- 👉 Focus on providing more flexible employment opportunities
- 👉 Improve the foreign credential recognition process and simplify licensing for professionals like doctors
- 👉 Create initiatives for finding suitable jobs that cover housing expenses and basic living costs
- 👉 Enhance salaries for skilled immigrants, reducing reliance on entry-level positions
- 👉 Organize informational sessions and employment fairs, facilitating connections between immigrants and potential employers
- 👉 Offer skills training programs paid by the government
- 👉 Provide comprehensive support for finding work
- 👉 Encourage employers to hire immigrants without requiring Canadian experience
- 👉 Support community-led grassroots organizations that can help newcomers
- 👉 Collaborate with local businesses to create job opportunities and support entrepreneurship among immigrants

Survey participants shared that they want community leaders to:

“Help newcomers to find affordable housing and assist them with employment services, provide support so that they can open up small business to contribute to the economy and create jobs”

“Helping new immigrants to find a new job to settle down. Because when they get a job, they will be able to build their network, that's when they start to feel like this community is their home.”

“Educate employers to welcome newcomers and value their skills without asking them if they have a Canadian work experience or credentials.”

“Providing suitable jobs so that we can pay the rent for housing and the necessary expenses for living. And paying decent living wages that cover the high prices.”

“Don't be afraid to hire people who don't have very good English skills”

¹⁰ The survey asked immigrants: “What is the most important thing community leaders should do to improve the welcoming, integration and wellbeing of immigrants in Waterloo Region?” Out of the 553 responses, 209 were about employment.

Data Sources and Limitations

The data for this snapshot comes primarily from the Immigration Partnership's 2023 Immigrant Survey. This biannual, multilingual survey is for immigrants who live, work and/or study in Waterloo Region. It covers immigrant experiences on a range of topics impacting their ability to reach their full potential and contribute to a thriving, prosperous community for everyone. The survey was most recently conducted in June 2023 with 1,676 participants.

In 2023, the majority of participants filled out the survey online. Participants reflected the whole range of immigrants living in Waterloo Region. Two thirds (67%) had been in Canada for 5 years or less, while the rest had been here for longer. More than half were permanently in Canada (57%) and 39% were here on a temporary permit. About a quarter of survey respondents (23%) categorized themselves as economic-category immigrants (e.g. Federal Skilled Worker Program, Provincial Nominee Program, Canadian Experience Class, and dependants of economic applicants) and 5% as temporary work visa holders. Almost all (93%) were living in urban areas of Cambridge, Kitchener and Waterloo, with 3% in the rural townships. Participants answered the survey in 11 languages and had 75 first languages. English was the first language of 14% of participants, 77% spoke English well or very well and 9% spoke English poorly or not at all. A full 76% of respondents identified as racialized; 59% were female and 40% male; 3% identified as LGBTQ+; 6% were living with a disability or chronic illness. Respondents, like immigrants overall, were highly educated: 75% had a bachelor's degree or above. Almost two thirds (63%) were working (full/part time/casual/self-employed) and 26% were unemployed and looking for work.

Survey responses were disaggregated along many demographic lines and analysed to uncover the varying experiences of different groups of immigrants. This profile highlights insights related to employment. Because of the small numbers for some subgroups or questions, the findings should be interpreted with caution. Additional information can be found at www.immigrationwaterlooregion.ca/immigrantsurvey.

The Waterloo Region Immigration Partnership is a collaboration of over 100 community service, business, municipal, post-secondary and ethno-cultural organizations, and residents working together to create the conditions for immigrants to succeed and help build a welcoming, dynamic community.



Building community through immigration

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