


PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF IMMIGRATION

2023





Public perceptions of immigration vary widely and are subject to deep fluctuations. They are the topic of significant public opinion research in Canada and globally because of the importance of immigration. 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 contribute to the Canadian economy. Public perceptions influence the experiences and successes of immigrants, and their desire to stay and contribute to a thriving, prosperous community.

Over the last two decades, Canadian public opinion research has found that, in general, Canadians' views on immigration are quite positive. However, that positive assessment recently softened nationally due to increasing pessimism about the economy and the housing crisis coinciding with higher immigration. Research by Environics in the fall of 2023 revealed a notable rise in the belief that Canada has too much immigration, largely fueled by concerns that immigration might be exacerbating the housing crisis. This marks a significant change from just a year earlier in public support of immigration numbers.²

To better understand local opinions, the Immigration Partnership commissions research on public perceptions of immigration in Waterloo Region. Data was first gathered in January 2019³, before and in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic (January and June 2020⁴) and again in May-July 2023 through a mixed-method survey conducted by the University of Waterloo's Survey Research Centre.⁵ This report provides the highlights from that local data.

Survey Results

There is continued strong support in Waterloo Region for immigration and multiculturalism. The national softening of support for current levels of immigration have not been seen at this point in Waterloo Region.

While opinions about the impact of immigration in Waterloo Region tend to be fairly positive, less favourable perceptions are held by a significant minority of the population.

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 – Fall 2023: Canadian public opinion about immigration and refugees" (2023), <https://www.environicsinstitute.org/projects/project-details/public-opinion-about-immigration-refugees>.

³ Immigration Partnership, "Public Perceptions of Immigration in Waterloo Region" (May 2019), <https://www.immigrationwaterlooregion.ca/publicperceptions2019> (Note that the data in the May 2019 report was unweighted.)

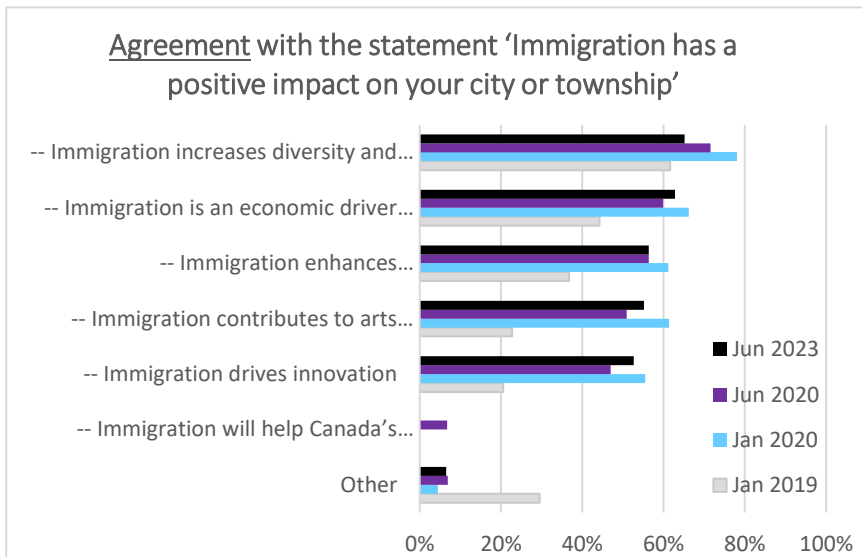
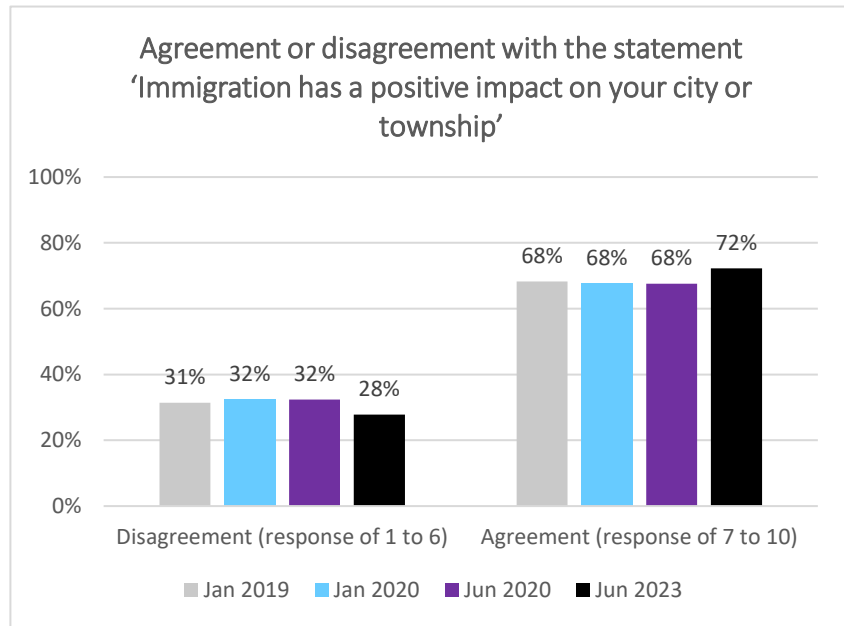
⁴ Immigration Partnership, "Public Perceptions of Immigration in Waterloo Region" (Sep 2020), <https://www.immigrationwaterlooregion.ca/publicperceptions2020>.

⁵ 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.

Positive Impact of Immigration

Nearly 3 out of 4 Waterloo Region residents (72%) felt that immigration has a positive impact on their community.⁶

This is slightly more than in the past (68% to 72%, +5 percentage points). This had previously stayed steady in all previous surveys.

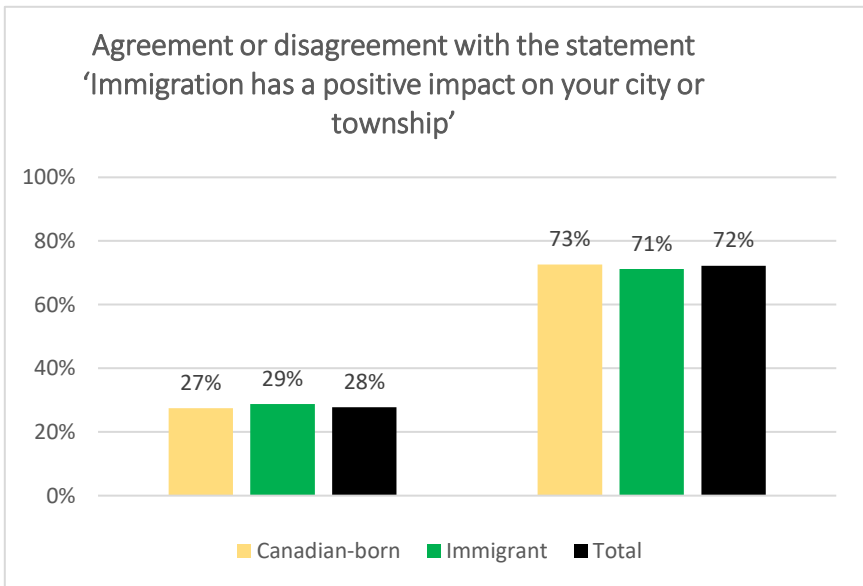
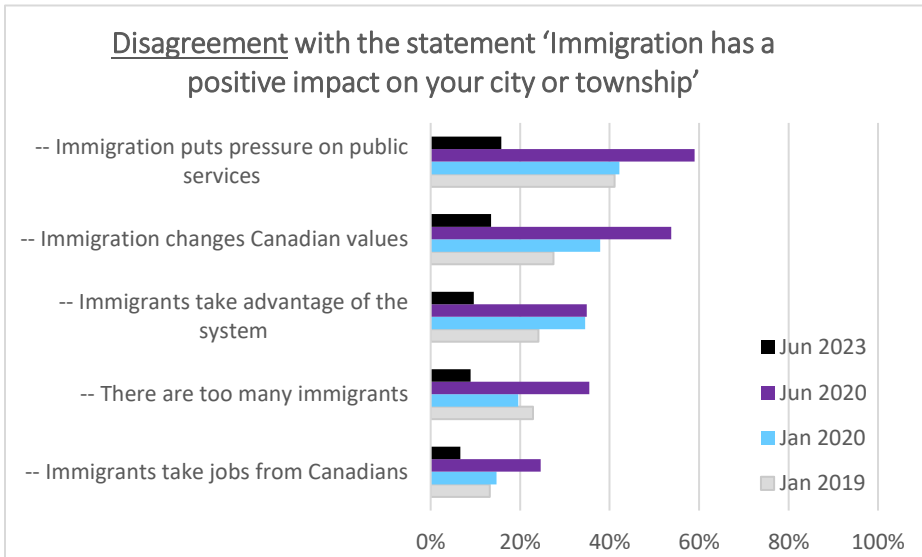


Respondents who agreed immigration has a positive impact most commonly said this is because immigration increases diversity and vibrancy of the community (65%), and it is an economic driver/fills jobs (63%). Compared to 2020, they were more likely to feel immigration drives innovation, contributes to arts & culture, and is an economic driver.

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

Positive Impact of Immigration

Among the quarter of respondents that disagreed that immigration had a positive impact, the most common reasons given were that immigration puts pressure on public services (16%) and that it changes Canadian values (14%). These responses were similar to previous years, but mentioned less frequently.



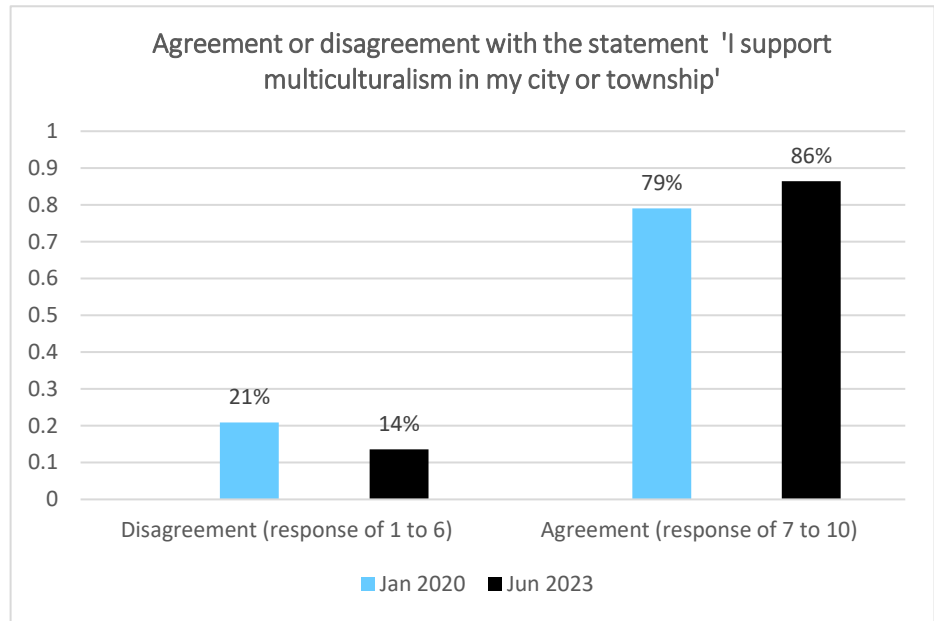
Canadian-born and immigrants respondents largely agree on this question - with almost three quarters of each feeling that immigration has a positive impact on their community (73% vs 71%).

Among those that disagreed Canadian-born individuals were more likely than immigrants to say that immigration puts pressure on public services (17% vs 11%).

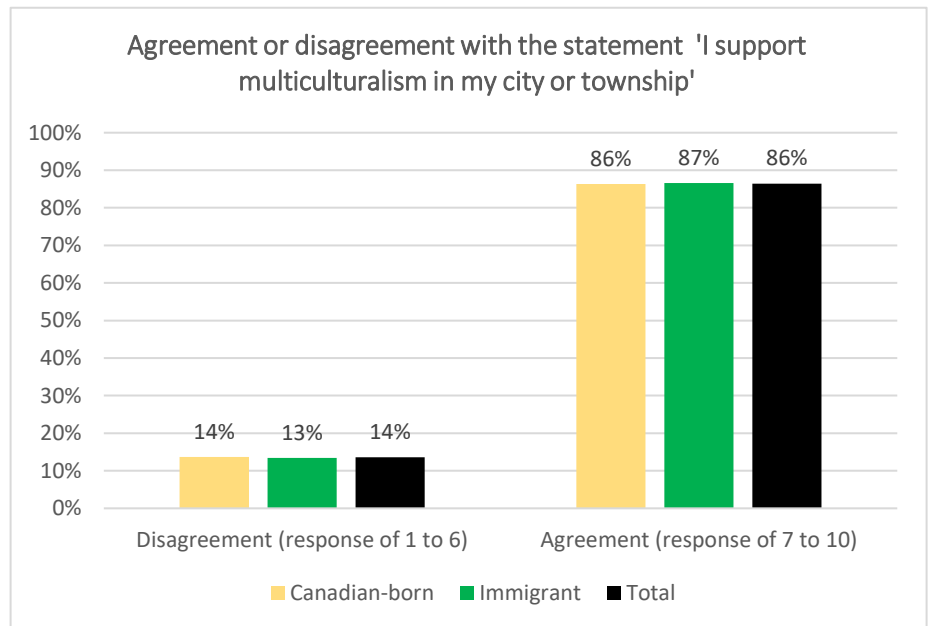
Support for Multiculturalism

Nearly 6 out of 7 Waterloo Region residents (86%) supported multiculturalism in their local community.

In 2023 there was an increase support among respondents for multiculturalism in their city or township (up from 79% to 86%). Most of the increase was among those who very strongly agreed.



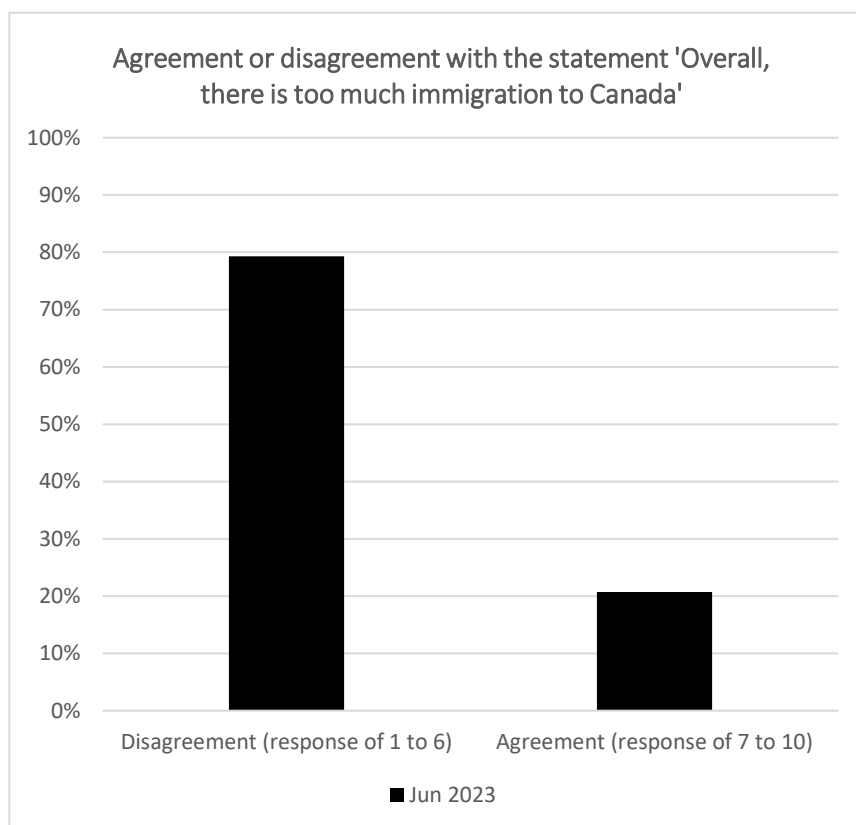
Canadian-born and immigrant respondents were equally likely to support multiculturalism in their community (86% vs 87%)



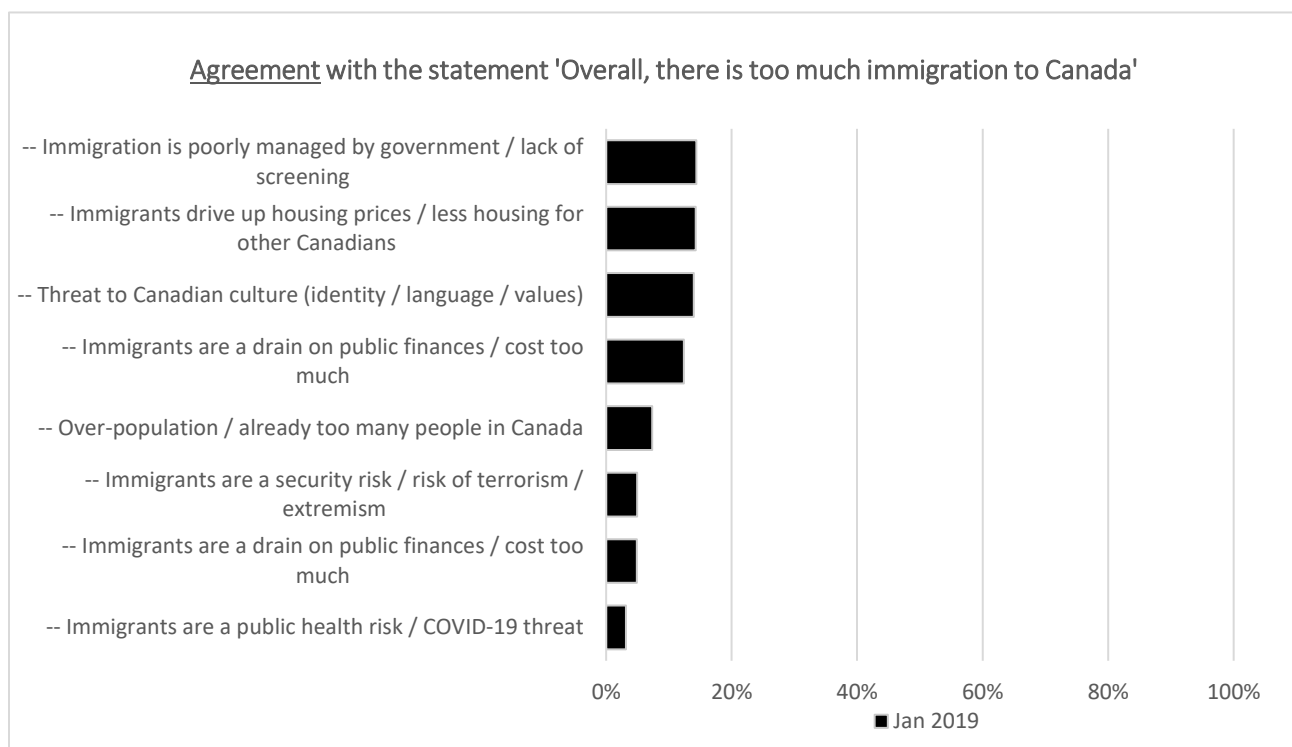
Immigration Levels

Most Waterloo Region survey respondents (79%) did not think there is too much immigration to Canada.

Environics' Focus Canada public opinion research has surveyed Canadians about this question for decades, showing broad support for immigration over that time. In 2023 there was a change: Compared to 2022 when only 27% of Canadians thought there was too much immigration, in late 2023 it increased to 44%. Reasons included concern about immigration contributing to Canada's housing crisis (significant increase), costing too much, and being bad for the economy.



Immigration Levels

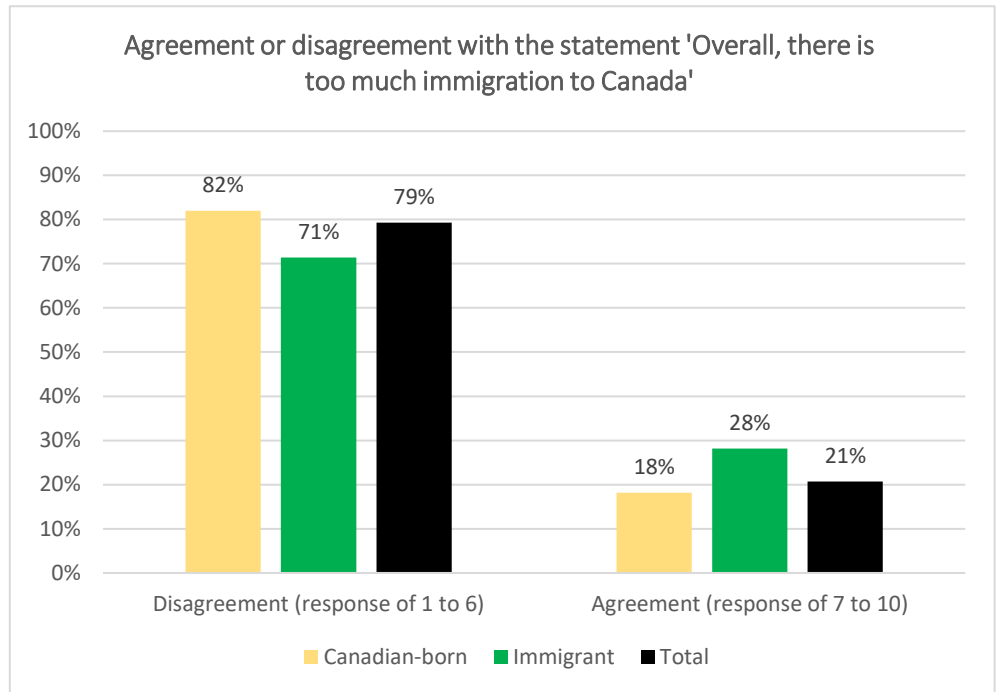


This national change was not evident in Waterloo Region in 2023,⁷ when only 1 in 5 respondents (21%) felt there is too much immigration. Reasons most commonly related to feeling immigration is poorly managed by the government, it drives up housing prices/means less housing for others, and it is a threat to Canadian culture.

⁷ The Environics 2023 survey was conducted in September 2023 - three months after the Waterloo Region data was collected. This time lag may have an impact on the different findings. See: https://www.environicsinstitute.org/docs/default-source/focus-canada-fall-2023/focus-canada-fall-2023---canadian-public-opinion-about-immigration-refugees---final-report.pdf?sfvrsn=75312743_2.

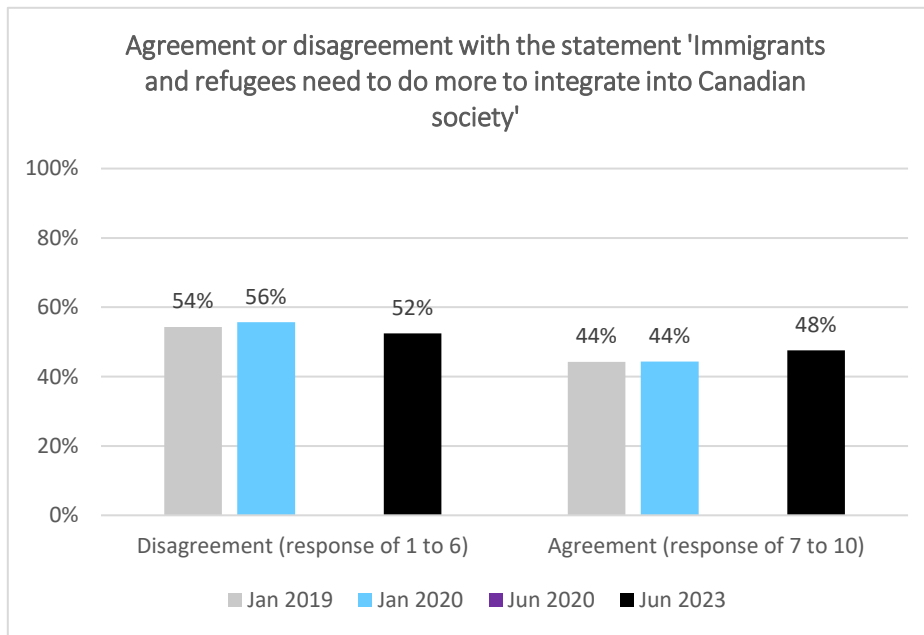
Immigration Levels

In Waterloo Region, immigrants were more likely than Canadian-born respondents to say there is too much immigration to Canada (28% vs 18%). When asked why, immigrant respondents were more likely to say immigrants are a threat to Canadian culture (19% vs. 12%), drive up housing prices/less housing for other Canadians (19% vs. 13%), or are a drain on public finances/cost too much (16% vs. 11%).⁸ The reasons for this were not explored in the survey.



⁸ Note that because a smaller number of immigrant respondents gave these reasons for this question, these findings should be interpreted with caution.

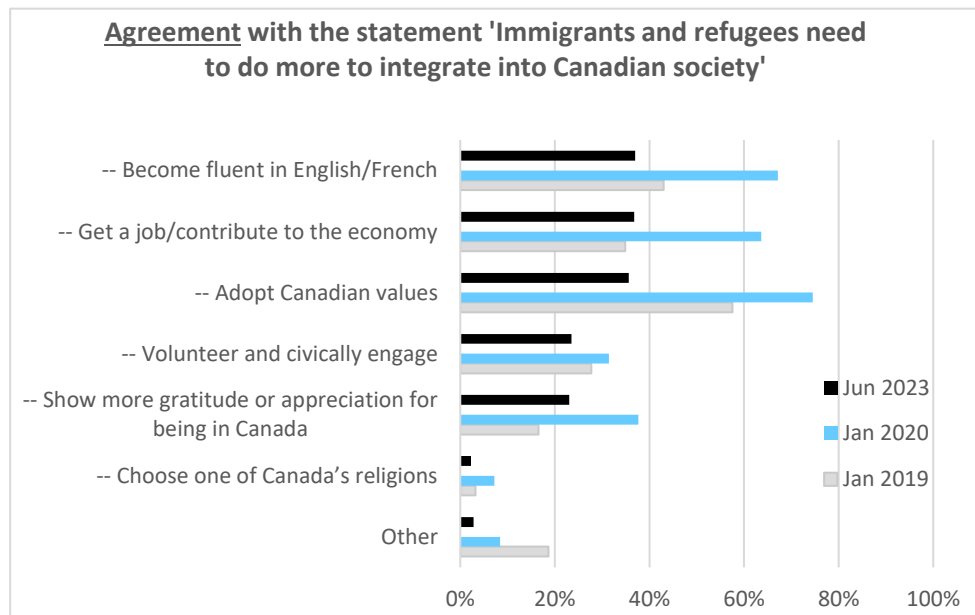
Immigrant Integration Efforts



Similar to previous surveys, among all respondents about half (48%) felt that immigrants and refugees need to do more to integrate into Canadian society.

This was the area with the most divergence between Canadian-born and immigrant perspectives. Immigrants were much more likely to agree with this statement (68% vs. 41% of Canadian-born respondents).

While responses were down across all categories, respondents were most likely to suggest immigrants should do more to become fluent in English/French (37%), get a job/contribute to the economy (37%), or adopt Canadian values (36%).



Conclusion

In 2023, Canada passed the 40 million population marker and welcomed a record number of immigrants. At the same time, Canadians grew more pessimistic about the state of the economy and the country overall. Against this backdrop, national research by the Environics Institute showed a significant increase in the belief that there is too much immigration to Canada (from 27% to 44%), dramatically reversing a decades long trend in public opinion. According to Environics, “For the first time, a growing number of Canadians are questioning how many immigrants are arriving, rather than who they are and where they are coming from.”⁹

This was not the case in Waterloo Region. Public opinion research commissioned by the Immigration Partnership through the University of Waterloo’s Survey Research Centre showed strong support for immigration levels: Only 21% of respondents felt there is too much immigration in Canada. Waterloo Region residents continue to report strong support for immigration overall and multiculturalism: 72% felt that immigration has a positive impact on their community and 86% support multiculturalism. There continues to be a strong segment of the population that feels immigrants can do more to integrate into Canadian society.

Despite strong local support for immigration, the research shows that upwards of 20-30% of the Waterloo Region population do not support immigration. With a regional population of 647,540 at the end of 2022 that equates to between 130,000 and 195,000 people who do not support immigration. This is a significant.

The research reveals that immigrants tend to take a more critical view of some of these topics, and that negative views are generally driven by perceptions related to government mismanagement of immigration, the impact of immigration on the housing crisis, strain on public services, and changes to Canadian values and culture.

Opinions and attitudes impact human interactions at home, at work, and in public – positively or negatively. For immigrants, these negative opinions can influence their experience of welcome, ability to settle, employment prospects, access to housing and services, and overall sense of belonging.

This data allows us to understand local public opinions and work in targeted ways to continue building support for immigration and community and economic development for all.

⁹ See: https://www.environicsinstitute.org/docs/default-source/focus-canada-fall-2023/focus-canada-fall-2023---canadian-public-opinion-about-immigration-refugees---final-report.pdf?sfvrsn=75312743_2

Appendix: Survey Methodology

The Waterloo Region Matters 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 June 2020 survey only used web-based methods.)

There were 500 completed surveys in 2023 – gathered between May 8 and July 3, 2023.

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.

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 (2023, unweighted)

Variable		Percentage (%)
Age	Young Adult (18-29)	14
	Mid age Adults	45
	Older Adults (55+)	42
Municipality	Waterloo	30
	Kitchener	41
	Cambridge	16
	Other	13
Education	College/university degree	71
	High school or lower	11
	Other (incl. some univ/college)	18

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 2023 questions are listed below.

2023 Survey Questions:

Preamble: The next set of 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) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (Strongly Agree)

Q.1b) Why did you give that rating? (Select all that apply)

- (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, please specify _____

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

Q.1c) Why did you give that rating? (Select all that apply)

- (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, please specify _____

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

Q.2) What is your level of agreement or disagreement with the statement ‘I support multiculturalism in my city or township’?
(Strongly Disagree) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (Strongly Agree)

Q.3a) What is your level of agreement or disagreement with the statement ‘Immigrants and refugees need to do more to integrate into Canadian society’?
(Strongly Disagree) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (Strongly Agree)

Q.3b) What do immigrants need to do more of?

- (1) Adopt Canadian values
- (2) Become fluent in English/French
- (3) Choose one of Canada’s religions
- (4) Get a job/contribute to the economy
- (5) Show more gratitude or appreciation for being in Canada
- (6) Volunteer and civically engage

*ASK Q.3b) if Q.3a) = 7 to 10.
OTHERWISE SKIP TO Q.4a)*

(7) Other, please specify_____

Q.4a) What is your level of agreement or disagreement with the statement 'Overall, there is too much immigration to Canada'?
(Strongly Disagree) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (Strongly Agree)

Q.4b) Why is there too much immigration to Canada? (Select all that apply)

- (1) Threat to Canadian culture (identity / language / values)
- (2) Immigrants are a drain on public finances / cost too much
- (3) Bad for economy / take jobs from other Canadians
- (4) Over-population / already too many people in Canada
- (5) Immigrants drive up housing prices / less housing for other Canadians
- (6) Immigration is poorly managed by government / lack of screening
- (7) Immigrants are a security risk / risk of terrorism / extremism
- (8) Immigrants are a public health risk / COVID-19 threat

ASK Q.4b) if Q.4a) = 7 to 10.



For more information contact:
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