



Focus Canada – Spring 2019

Canadian public opinion about immigration and refugees

As part of its Focus Canada public opinion research program (launched in 1976), the Environics Institute updated its research on Canadian attitudes about immigration and refugees. This survey is based on telephone interviews conducted (via landline and cellphones) with 2,000 Canadians between April 1 and 10, 2019. A sample of this size drawn from the population produces results accurate to within plus or minus 2.2 percentage points in 19 out of 20 samples.

Executive summary

In recent years Canada has developed an international reputation for being a country that welcomes people from other countries, and this has increasingly become part of the country's own self-image. In the past year, however, this openness is being challenged by a continuing flow of asylum seekers arriving at the Canadian border from the USA and increasingly heated political rhetoric with a federal election now only months away. Some commentators have suggested that the public may now be turning less receptive to newcomers, who continue to arrive at a pace of 300,000 plus a year. The Environics Institute conducted a national public opinion survey in April 2019 to identify if and how Canadian attitudes about immigration and refugees have changed over the past six months, as part of its ongoing Focus Canada research program.

Overall, Canadians' views about immigrants and refugees have held remarkably steady since last fall, and in a few cases have become more positive. As before, there is no public consensus on the presence and impact of immigrants and refugees, with significant segments of the population holding opposing views. But as has been the case most of the past two decades, positive sentiments outweigh negative ones on such questions as the overall level of immigration, its positive impact on the economy, its low impact on crime rates, and the impact on the country as a whole. Opinions are more evenly divided when it comes to concerns about too many immigrants not adopting the right values and some refugees not being legitimate; but in these cases the balance of opinion has held steady if not improved slightly in the past six months.

The survey reveals that Canadians' overall level of satisfaction with the direction of their country has dipped significantly since last fall, and is now at its lowest point in more than a decade. But this appears to be mostly due to rising concerns about the economy, the environment and poor government leadership, which top the list of issues seen as the country's most pressing problem. By comparison, immigration and refugee concerns remain well down the list.

As on past surveys, attitudes about immigration and refugees differ across the population. Positive sentiments are most prevalent among younger Canadians, immigrants, and people with a university education. Negative views are most evident in Alberta, among Canadians ages 60 and older, and those without a high school diploma. The largest divergence is along partisan political lines, primarily between supporters of the federal Liberal Party who are the most pro-immigrant/refugee, in sharp contrast with those who would vote for the federal Conservative Party or Peoples Party. Notably, however, this gap has not widened over the past six months, and on some questions Conservative voters have become less negative.

What most Canadians across the country *do* agree on is that – whether the presence of immigrants and refugees is considered to be a good thing or not – their country is a welcoming place. Eight in ten say that local public agencies and populations welcome both immigrants and refugees who arrive in their communities.

General context – Issues of public concern

Canadians' overall satisfaction with the direction of their country has dipped sharply over the past six months, but this appears to be fueled primarily by rising concerns about the economy, environment and poor government leadership, rather than issues related to immigration and refugees.

Satisfaction with the direction of the country. Canadians' confidence in the general direction of the country has declined noticeably over the past six months. Just 45 percent of those surveyed say they are satisfied with the way things are going in our country today, compared with 47 percent who are dissatisfied. The proportion who are satisfied has dropped 13 percentage points since October 2018, and is now at its lowest level since 2005.

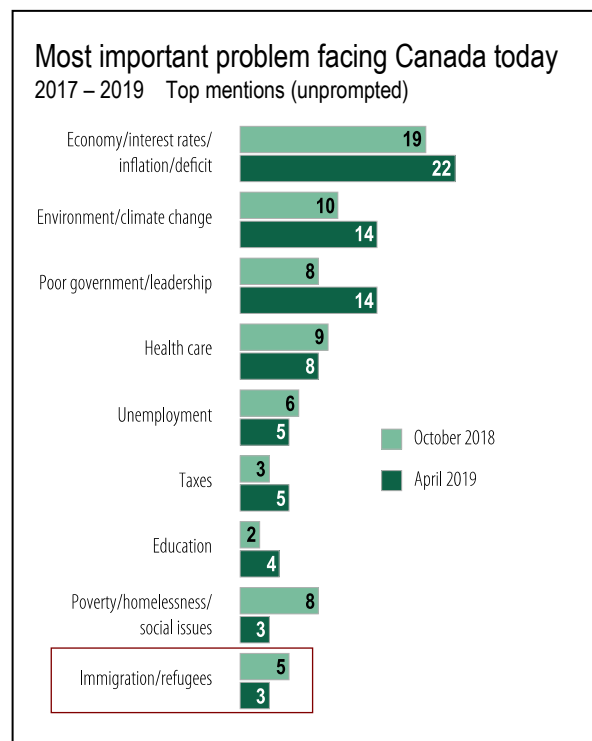
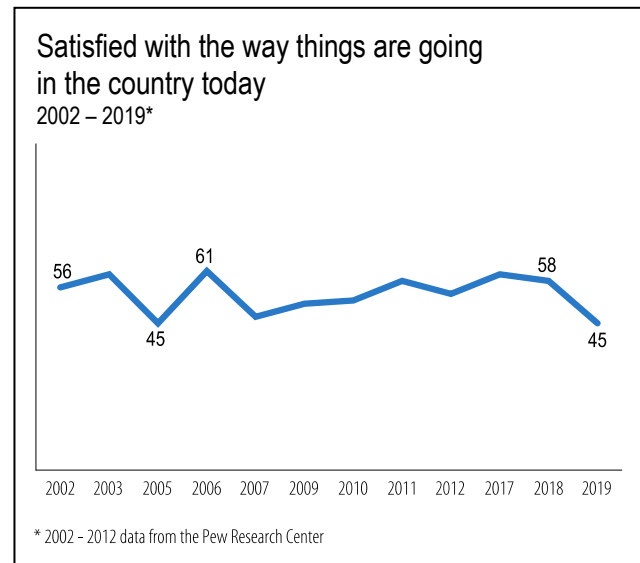
This loss of confidence has taken place across the country, but most significantly in Ontario (down 18 points), Alberta (down 17), and British Columbia (down 15). Satisfaction continues to be most widespread in Quebec (58%, down 6 points) and lowest in Alberta (33%). This downward trend is also evident across other segments of the population, but a positive view of the country's direction remains higher among Canadians 18 to 29 years of age (65%), immigrants (55%), and those with higher levels of education and income.

As before, opinions are sharply polarized along the partisan divide, but satisfaction with the country's direction has declined since last October across the political spectrum, and most noticeably among Conservative supporters (now at 26% satisfied, down 18), followed by Liberal supporters (69%, down 12). The gap between Liberal and Conservative party supporters now stands at 43 percentage points (up from 37 in October 2018).

Most important issue facing Canada today. What issues might be driving this loss of confidence in the direction of Canada? This can be answered in part by asking the public to identify the single most important issue facing the country today (asked unprompted, with only one response accepted).

As in past surveys, Canadians identify a broad range of issues as most important, none of which is mentioned by more than one in five. Economic concerns (including interest rates, inflation and deficits) continue to top the list (22%, up 3 points since last fall). Also rising in salience are environment/climate change (14%, up 5) and poor government leadership (14%, up 6), providing evidence of what may be driving declining confidence in the country's direction.

Other issues identified include health care, unemployment, taxes, education, and poverty and homelessness; in each case mentioned by no more than five percent of Canadians.



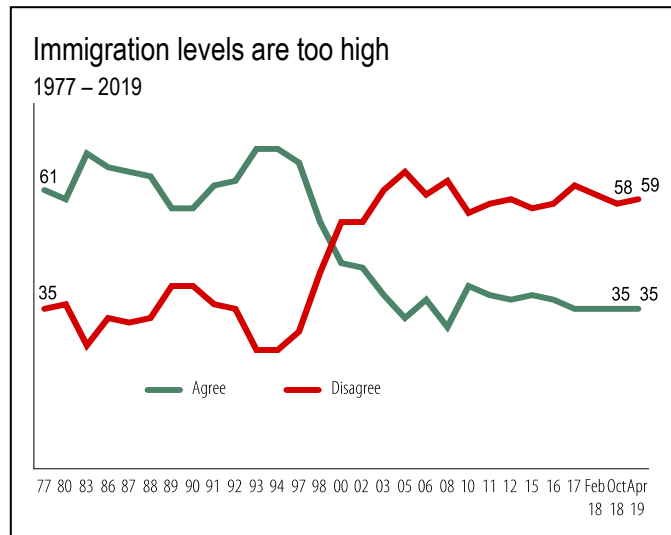
Notably, only three percent (3%) of Canadians identify immigration or refugees as the most important issue facing the country today, down from five percent last October. This issue is of low salience across the country, and most apt to be mentioned in Montreal (7%) and among supporters of the Peoples Party of Canada (6%, but down from 19% last fall). It is identified as the top issue by few (3%) Conservative Party supporters, who are most likely to focus on poor government leadership (25%).

Immigration and its impact on Canada

Canadians' opinions about the impact of immigration continue to be more positive than negative, with notably little change over the past six months. Three-quarters continue to believe immigration is good for the economy and most reject the notion that immigration levels are too high and that immigrants cause crime.

Agree-Disagree: "Overall, there is too much immigration in Canada." Over the past decade a clear majority of Canadians have rejected the notion that their country is accepting too many immigrants, and this perspective continues to hold.

Six in ten (59%) continue to disagree with this negative statement (up 1 percentage point from October 2018), compared with just over one third (35%, unchanged) who agree there is too much immigration (unchanged). The remainder (6%) have no clear opinion either way (down 1).

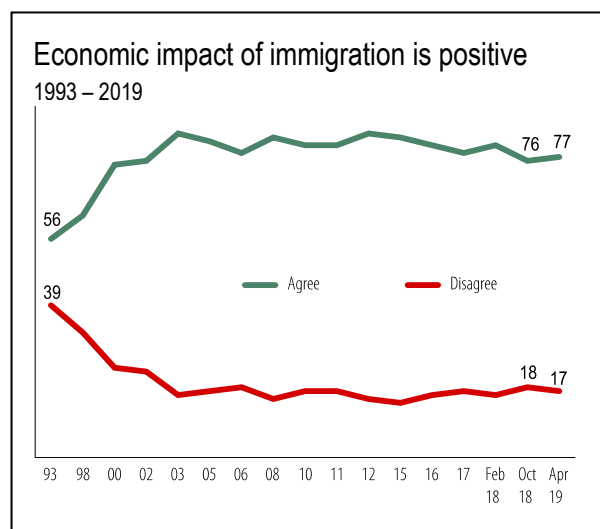


Across the country, rejection of immigration levels being too high has strengthened in Atlantic Canada (64%, up 7 points), while agreement with the statement has climbed among Canadians in the lowest income brackets (51%, up 11 points) and among those who support the Peoples Party of Canada (60%, up 13).

As before, a positive view of immigration levels is most widespread in Atlantic Canada and B.C. (64% in each reject the statement), among Canadians 18 to 29 (66%), those with a university degree (72%), and supporters of the Federal Liberal Party (75%) and Green Party (74%). Half (49%) of Federal Conservative Party supporters say current immigration levels are too high, but this is marginally lower than six months ago (down 3).

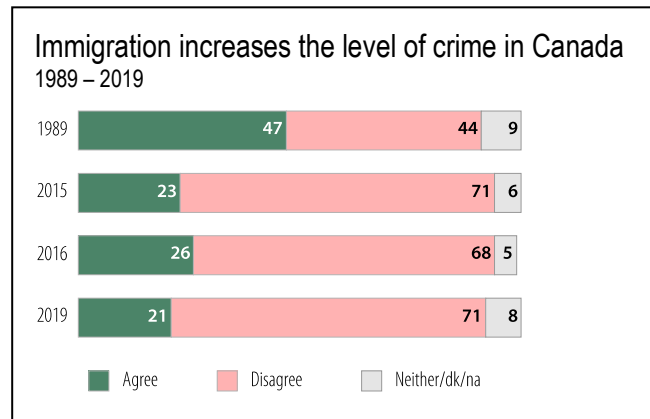
Opinions are also a function of income security: the view that there is too much immigration to Canada is least evident among Canadians who report their income is adequate and they can save from it (27%), and almost doubles among those who say their incomes are not enough and in some cases are struggling (50%).

Agree-Disagree: "Overall, immigration has a positive impact on the economy of Canada." Canadians' level of comfort with immigration is grounded in part on the belief that it is good for the country's economy, and this perspective has held steady over the past six months. More than three in four (77%) continue to share this sentiment (up 1 point since October 2018, reversing a four point decrease over the previous period). Just over one in six (17%), down 1) disagrees with this statement.



Belief in immigration as an economic driver remains the majority view across the country, and is strongest in Ontario (79%, up 1), while least so in Alberta (70%, up 6, and reversing a previous downward trend). Positive views about the impact of immigration continues to be most widespread among younger Canadians, those with higher levels of education and income, and supporters of the Federal Liberal Party (89%), NDP (86%) and Green Party (84%), while least so among Canadians with no more than a high school diploma (67%, up 1), and those who support the Federal Conservative Party (66%, up 1) or Peoples Party of Canada (60%, down 16).

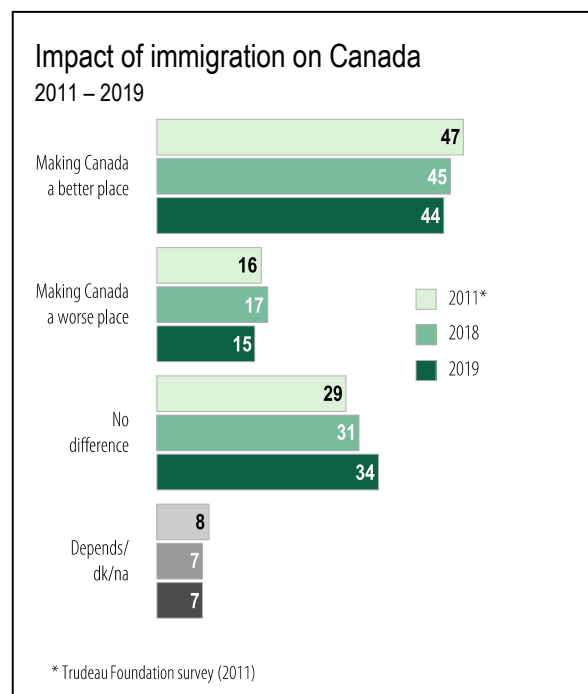
“Immigration increases the level of crime in Canada.” Just over one in five (21%) Canadians now agrees with this statement about immigration increasing crime levels, down five percentage points since Fall 2016 and at its lowest level going back to 1989. Seven in ten (71%) disagree (up 3), while another eight percent have no clear opinion either way.



Belief in a link between immigration and higher crime rates has declined across most of the population but most significantly in Ontario (21%, down 10 points since 2016, reversing an upward trend). Agreement with the statement continues to be higher in Alberta (34%, down 3), Conservative Party supporters (33%) and those who support the Peoples Party (35%).

Overall impact of immigrants on Canada. There is no public consensus on the overall impact that immigration has on the country, but the balance of opinion continues to be positive. Canadians are three times as likely to say that immigration is making the country a better place (45%) than a worse one (15%), essentially unchanged from last fall and from an earlier survey conducted in 2011. One-third (34%) maintain that immigration has made no real difference either way, while few (7%) are unable to offer an opinion on this question.

As with other attitudes about immigration covered in this survey, a positive view about the impact of immigration is most widespread among younger Canadians (49%), those with higher levels of education and income, first generation Canadians (56%), and Federal Liberal Party supporters (64%).

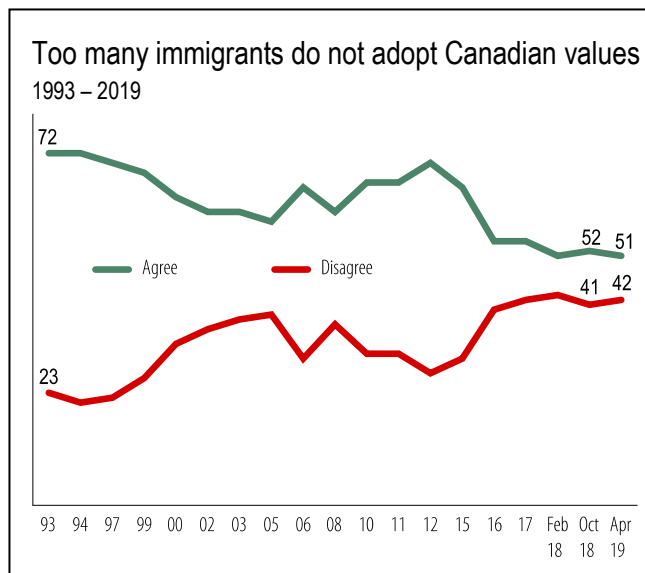


Those most apt to say that immigrants make the country worse include Albertans (26%, down 4 points since October 2018) and supporters of the Federal Conservative Party (26%, down 5) and Peoples Party (33%, down 1), but in all cases less so than six months ago.

Integration of immigrants into society

Canadians remain divided on whether too many immigrants are not adopting the right values, but at the same time are more likely than not to acknowledge they work harder than people born in this country. Regardless of what people think of immigrants, most agree they are made to feel welcome in Canada.

Agree-Disagree: “There are too many immigrants coming into this country who are not adopting Canadian values.” A concern for many Canadians is that some immigrants are not sufficiently integrating or fitting into society once they arrive. The proportion holding this view continues to be remarkably stable. A bare majority (51%) agree with this statement about too many immigrants not adopting Canadian values (down 1 point since last October), compared with four in ten (42%, up 1) who disagree. Views on this question have changed very little since 2016, and such concerns about integration remain lower than for most of the past 25 years.

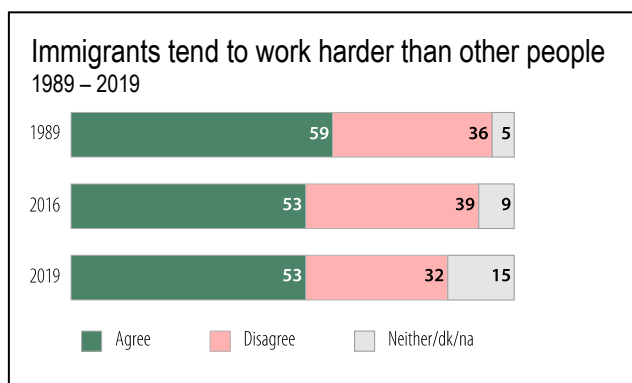


Over the past six months, agreement with the statement about too many immigrants not adopting the right values has declined in Atlantic Canada (to 41%, down 10 points), as well in Manitoba and Saskatchewan (46%, down 9, reversing a previous upward trend). Albertans (55%) continue to be among the most likely to share this concern, but *strong agreement* has dropped by five points since last October. Quebecers (56%) are also more apt than other Canadians to say too many immigrants aren't adopting Canadian values, but disagreement is up slightly than six months ago (38%, up 3).

Public attitudes about integration and values is closely linked to age cohort, and the gap has widened noticeably over the past six months. A declining proportion of Canadians ages 18 to 29 agree that too many immigrants are not adopting the right values (35%, down 12 points since last October), compared with six in ten (59%, down 1) among those 60 and over. Finally, views on this question remain strongly polarized across federal political party support, but with relatively little change since last October: Conservative supporters (71%) are twice as likely as Liberal (35%) supporters to agree with the statement (and almost three times as likely to *strongly agree*). Agreement is also strong among those who would vote for the Bloc Quebecois (67%) or the Peoples Party (68%), and much lower among those endorsing the NDP (38%) or Green Party (39%).

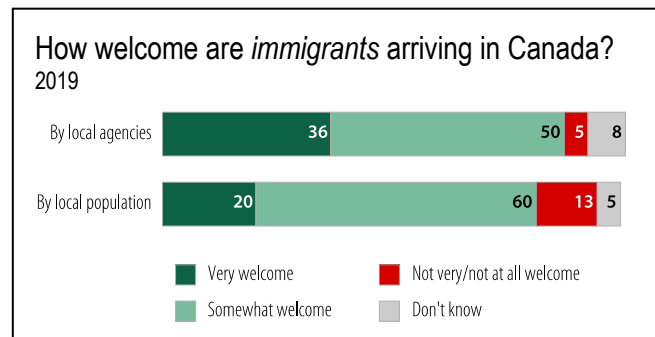
“Immigrants tend to work harder than people born in Canada.” Another concern sometimes voiced about immigrants is that they rely on generous government support programs and less likely to embrace the work ethic of native-born citizens. Canadians are more likely than not to believe the exact opposite.

Just over half (53%) agree with the statement that immigrants tend to work *harder* than people born in Canada, unchanged from Fall 2016. A declining minority (32%, down 7 points) disagree, while an increasing proportion now have no clear opinion (15%, up 6).



Immigrants as harder working is the majority view across most of the population, and most noticeably in Atlantic Canada (61%) and Toronto (62%), among first generation Canadians (68%), and Liberal Party supporters (61%). Even where this opinion is least apt to be shared it remains the plurality view, as in Quebec (47% agree versus 38% disagree) and among Conservative Party supporters (47%, versus 41%). Since 2016, *disagreement* with the statement about immigrants working harder has declined across almost all groups, but especially among Canadians east of Alberta and among those 18 to 29 years of age.

How welcomed are immigrants arriving in Canada? There are clear divides among Canadians in how they view the presence and impact of immigrants in their country, but there is broad agreement that newcomers are made to feel welcome when they arrive. More than eight in ten say that when immigrants come to Canada they are made to feel very (36%) or somewhat (50%) welcome by public agencies in their local municipality, and almost as many believe they are made very (20%) or somewhat (60%) welcome by the local population.

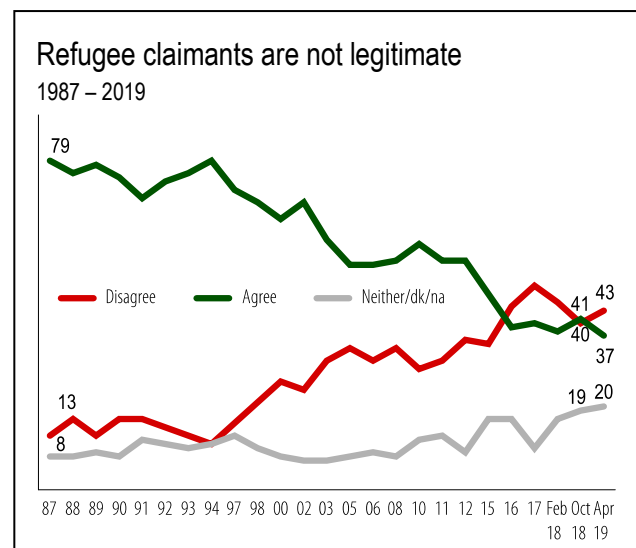


Opinions about the extent to which immigrants are welcomed by local agencies and citizens are similarly widespread across the country, with little variation by region, demographic characteristics and political preference. In the case of local public agencies, those most apt to say immigrants are made to be *very welcome* include Atlantic Canadians (42%), those ages 30 to 54 (42%), and supporters of the Conservative Party (41%) or Peoples Party (45%), while this view is least evident among those 18 to 29 (27%).

Refugees in Canada

Canadians are divided on whether some refugees are not legitimate, but such concerns have moderated slightly over the past six months. Moreover, there has been no uptick in the view that refugees are placing a severe strain on the welfare system.

Agree-Disagree: “Most people claiming to be refugees are not real refugees.” Refugees make up a very small percentage of newcomers arriving each year, but they currently receive an outsized proportion of public attention. In 2015 and 2016, Canada enthusiastically welcomed 25,000 Syrian refugees, but more recently a surge of asylum seekers crossing the border from the USA appears to be challenging the country’s capacity for openness. To date, the ongoing controversy over the continued influx of asylum seekers at the border has not hardened Canadians’ view about the legitimacy of refugees arriving in the country.

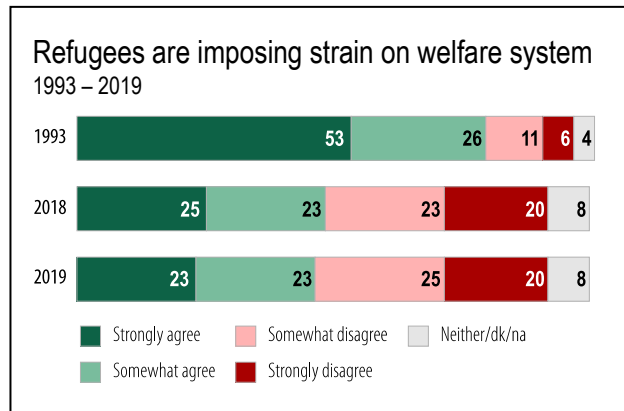


Opinions about the legitimacy of refugees has been divided for the past several years, but the balance has shifted a bit in a positive direction since last fall, reversing a small negative trend over the previous period. Fewer than four in ten (37%) Canadians agree that most people claiming to be refugees are not real refugees; this is down four percentage points since October 2018, and is now at the lowest level since Focus Canada began asking this question in 1987. A plurality (43%) now disagree with this statement (up 3 points), while one in five (19%) continues to have no clear opinion either way.

This improving perception of refugees is evident in all regions of the country, but most noticeably in Atlantic Canada (27% say too many refugees are not legitimate, down 10 points), as well as in Manitoba and Saskatchewan (32%, down 10) and among Canadians 18 to 29 (35%, down 6). Agreement with the statement about most refugees *not* being legitimate remains most prevalent among Albertans (46%, down 4), Canadians with the lowest levels of education (46%, down 2) and income (45%, up 3), and supporters of the Conservative Party (53%, down 5) or Peoples Party (58%, up 3).

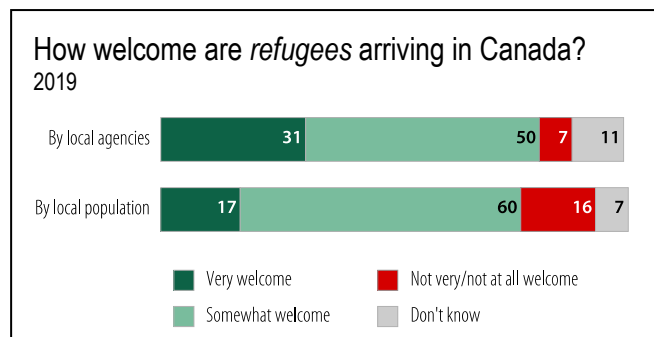
Agree-Disagree: “People coming to Canada claiming to be refugees are imposing a severe strain on our welfare system.” The large number of asylum seekers arriving across the border has put a strain on the capacity of local municipalities to manage their settlement while awaiting resolution of their claims. Canadians remain divided on whether this presents a significant problem for the country’s social services.

Just under half strongly (23%) or somewhat (23%) agree with the statement about refugee claimants imposing a severe strain on the welfare system (down 2 points since last October), while a comparable proportion (45%) disagree (up 1). This balance of opinion stands in sharp contrast to views expressed 25 years ago when this statement reflected the views of more than eight in ten Canadians (53% of whom strongly agreed).



Opinions on this question remain largely divided across the country, but there is clear majority agreement about refugees putting a strain on the welfare system among Canadians without a high school diploma (58%) and supporters of the Conservative Party (68%) or Peoples Party (79%). This view is least apt to be shared by Canadians ages 18 to 29 (34%), those with a university degree (35%), and those who support the Liberal Party (31%).

How welcomed are refugees arriving in Canada? As with immigrants, refugees are seen by most Canadians to be welcomed when they arrive. Eight in ten say that when refugees arrive in Canada they are made to feel very (31%) or somewhat (50%) welcome by public agencies in their local municipality, and almost as many believe they are made very (17%) or somewhat (60%) welcome by the local population.



Opinions on this question are consistent across the population, with Atlantic Canadians standing out as most apt to say that refugees are made to feel *very welcome* by local public agencies when they arrive (51%).

The Environics Institute for Survey Research was established in 2006 as an independent non-profit organization to promote relevant and original public opinion and social research on important issues of public policy and social change. It is through such research that organizations and individuals can better understand Canada today, how it has been changing, and where it may be heading.

For further information see www.EnvironicsInstitute.org, or contact Dr. Keith Neuman at 416-969-2457 or keith.neuman@environics.ca

