



EXAMINING THE MENTAL HEALTH EXPERIENCES OF NEWCOMERS

December 2023

EXAMINING THE MENTAL HEALTH EXPERIENCES OF NEWCOMERS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides an analysis of mental health indicators for newcomers to Canada, focusing on key aspects such as demographics, mental health, accessibility of services, and financial concerns, as well as an overview of key findings from interviews with people who have moved to Canada in the last ten years and who mentioned some level of mental health concerns (high anxiety, depression, access to mental health support services, etc). The data consists of 2,152 foreign-born individuals, of which 17% are students and 4% are refugees.

Issues getting settled in Canada (particularly in terms of employment and housing) are at the root of mental health concerns for most New Canadians. **More than half of newcomers (57%) express concerns about providing food for their families, compared to 31% of non-newcomers.** A lack of a personal support systems exacerbates these issues. Both food insecurity and poor family/friend support systems have been tied to higher incidences of mental health challenges.

Those who come to Canada to escape war or economic instability told us about the guilt they would feel if they admit their mental health challenges in Canada. Those who were not settled at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic were hit particularly hard due to the isolation and travel restrictions.

One important finding from this analysis is the **higher prevalence of anxiety and depression among newcomers** compared to non-newcomers. Notably, 27% of newcomers with 6 - 15 years of residency reported moderate to severe symptoms of anxiety, compared to only 22% among Canadian-born individuals.

Further, this analysis explores challenges in accessing services, especially among newcomers. Specifically, 11% of newcomers indicated the need to access mental health services but have not done so, compared to only 4% of non-newcomers. The most often mentioned barrier to obtaining mental health support is cost. Many say they cannot afford to obtain this support, particularly if it is not covered by their employer benefits plan.

Research Question



What are the mental health indicators and key challenges experienced by newcomers in Canada since April 2020, as compared to the general Canadian population?

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BACKGROUND

Mental Health Research Canada (MHRC), with the financial support of Health Canada, has been collecting, analyzing, and presenting data on the mental health of Canadians. The information in this report was collected from April 2020 to May 2023, encompassing Polls 1 to 16 of our national population study. The data consists of responses from **2,152 foreign-born residents** who have been residing in the country for less than 15 years, in which the indicators are compared with all other Canadians (non-newcomers). The qualitative information includes interviews with 30 individuals who have moved to Canada within the last ten years.

Analyzing the mental health status of immigrants in Canada is essential for early identification of issues, connecting them with appropriate support, promoting successful settlement, preventing long-term consequences, and enhancing overall public health. It is important to identify that mental health is a complex interplay between environmental triggers, neurological underpinnings, physical health and resilience capacity. This paper will explore the various factors which have been identified as key environmental triggers, resiliency factors, mental health scores and service access.

For the purpose of this report, the terms "newcomer," "foreign-born," and "new Canadian" will be used interchangeably. However, it is important to note that the term "newcomer" specifically refers to immigrants or refugees who are **adapting to life** in the country. They can be classified into three groups: a) permanent residents, b) refugees or protected persons, and c) temporary residents, which include students, workers, or individuals with temporary resident permits.

Understanding that being a newcomer is not determined by a specific time frame is crucial. Even if a permanent resident has lived in Canada for ten years, they can still be considered a newcomer.

Time spent in Canada by newcomers



“My mental health was fine before coming to Canada. But I came to Canada alone. Once I was here there were at lot of responsibilities that fell on me. And I was by myself. It was hard.”

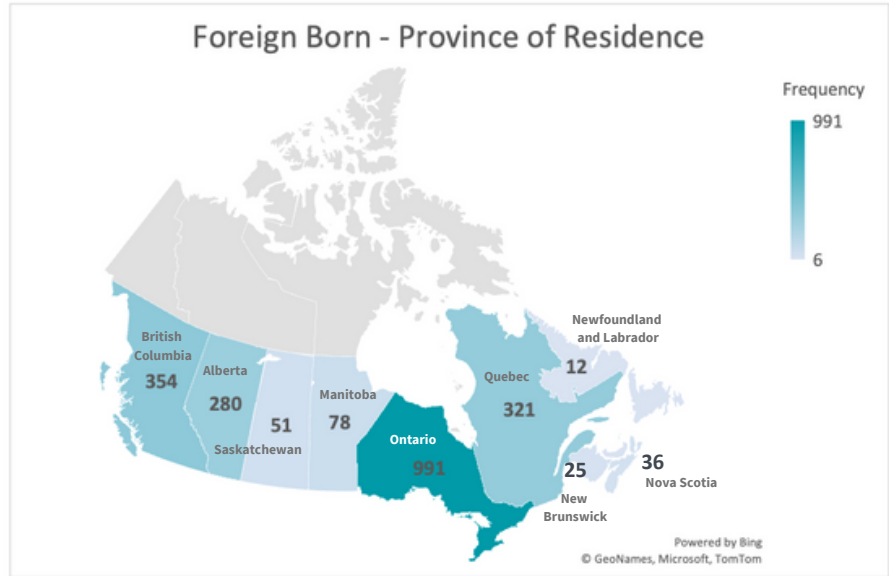
Male, 26, Saskatchewan, came to Canada 5 years ago.

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DEMOGRAPHIC DATA OF NEW CANADIANS

- Average age = 34 years
- Population skewed towards younger age groups:
57% - 18-34 age range
38% - 35-54 age range
5% are aged over 55 years.
- Similarity in sex distribution (women 47%, men 52%)

Ontario has the highest number of foreign-born Canadians (46%), followed by British Columbia (17%) and Quebec (15%).



Regarding the ethnic group of origin, one-quarter of the respondents who arrived in the country within the last five years come from South Asia, followed by 18% from Africa, 10% from Europe (Central East and West), and an equal number from South and Central America. The table also shows the ethnic group of origin for the 6-15 age group.

5 years or less	Ethnic group	6 - 15 years
25%	South Asian	18%
17%	African	12%
10%	European (Central, East and West)	16%
10%	South and Central American	7%
9%	Arab/West Asian/ Middle East	7%
5%	Chinese	12%

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ISSUES GETTING SETTLED IN CANADA

These new Canadians all mention some amount of struggle when they first came to Canada. To many, this struggle is caused by getting settled in their new country, particularly when it comes to finding suitable employment and housing, as well as navigating the government processes necessary to be a permanent resident. A few who have had experience relocating to other countries in the past say settling in Canada is more difficult than in other countries, particularly when it comes to finding suitable employment.

Many new Canadians, particularly those who have been in the country for five years or less, have expressed concerns about paying **rent or mortgage**. In fact, **39% of this group is experiencing a higher level of concern**. However, as newcomers spend more time in Canada, their level of concern gradually decreases. For Canadian-born individuals, the high level of preoccupation with ensuring secure housing is 22%.

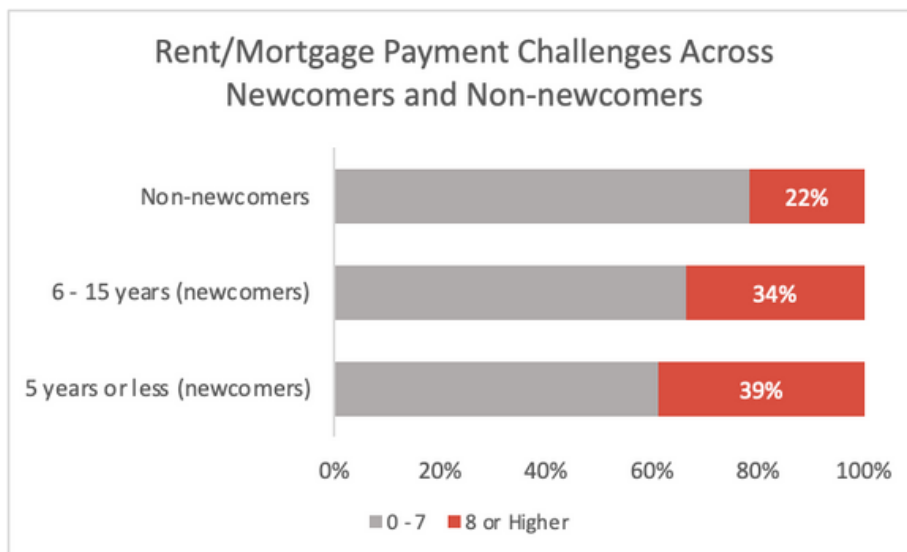


Figure 1. Housing insecurity, April 2022 - May 2023 (Polls 12-16)

Housing, economic or employment instability and poor social supports have been correlated with higher incidences of mental health challenges.

Regarding **employability**, data reveals a higher proportion of individuals who are **students in the "5 years or less" category (24%) compared to the other category**. This suggests that newcomers within the initial years of their residence are more likely to pursue educational opportunities. The "6-15 years" category shows the highest employment rate of 75%, indicating a potential improvement in employment opportunities and stability over time.

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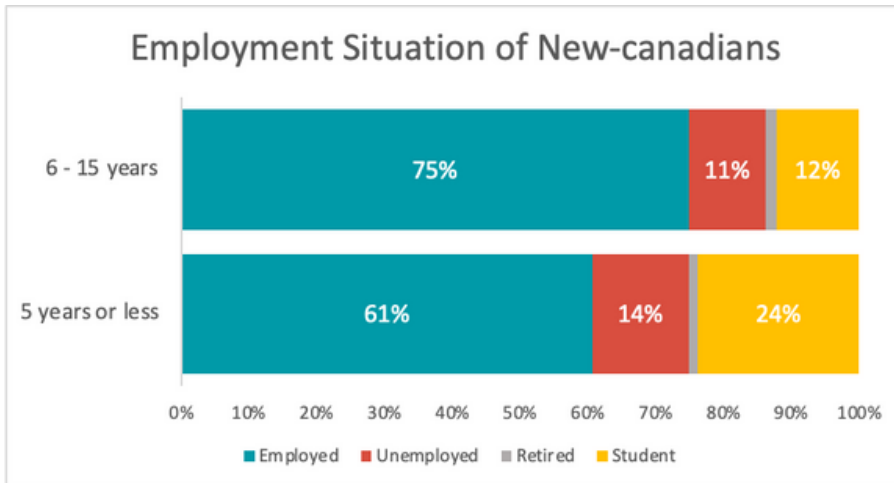


Figure 2. Employment Situation, April 2020 - May 2023 (Polls 1-16)

However, it's important to highlight that there is a **14% unemployment rate among those with 5 years or less of stay in the country**, which can also be attributed to the challenges of finding employment.

Regarding this employment situation, one of the individuals points out these challenges:

It is still really hard. My wife and I, we have jobs, but it is not what I wanted to do, what I have been trained to do. I have worked in other countries and it has not been this hard... no other countries have needed "Canadian Experience." The only one of us who is not having a hard time is my son. He is in school and is the only one who is happy. Male, 32, Quebec, came to Canada less than a year ago.

Some wish Canada would help with the root of the mental health issues they are facing, specifically the difficulty in getting settled in Canada. **These people feel that if they were better able to find jobs and housing, they would not have mental health concerns.**

"Help us get appropriate jobs, appropriate housing. If we had that, we would be happy and we wouldn't need any mental health supports." Male, 47, Ontario, came to Canada less than a year ago.

Likewise, when it comes to **food security**, newcomers who have been in Canada for **5 years or less exhibit a higher percentage of concern at 57%**. It is worth emphasizing that, overall, among all newcomers sharing this concern, 70% are employed, 64% fall within the 18-34 age range, and 54% are women.

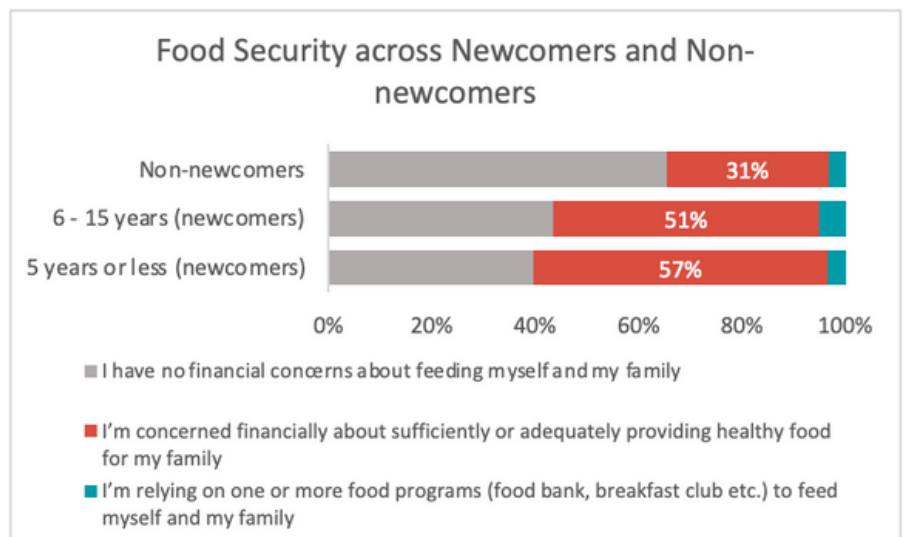


Figure 3. Food Security, April 2022 - May 2023 (Polls 12-16)

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SUPPORT NETWORKS OF NEW CANADIANS

Regarding support networks, interesting scenarios are observed among newcomers, specifically among those aged 6 to 15 years. Approximately 24% of newcomers to Canada report having a lack of connection with their family and friends.

Similarly, new Canadians appear to have a lower percentage of "people to count on," with an average of 36% indicating having support networks, compared to 52% of Canadians.

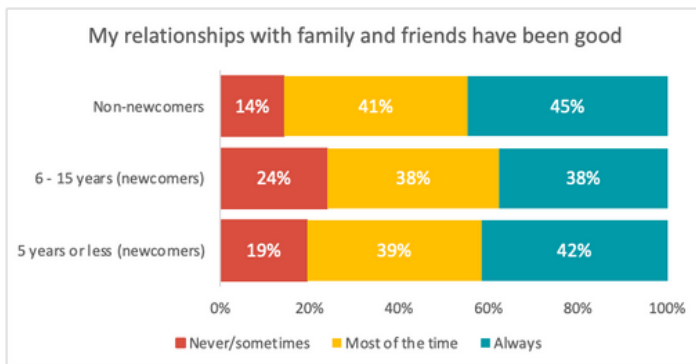


Figure 4. Relationships with Family , August 2021 - May 2023 (Polls 8-16)

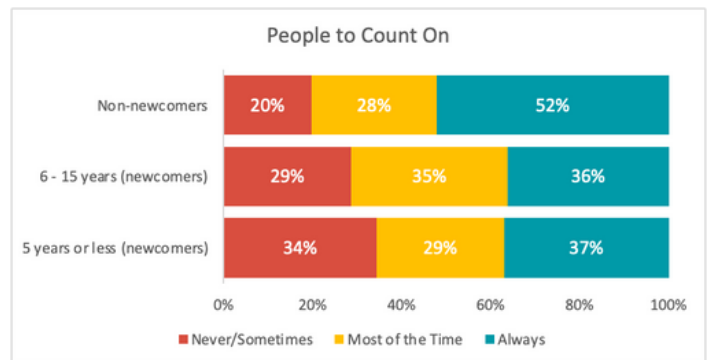


Figure 5. People to Count On , August 2021 - May 2023 (Polls 8-16)

The information reflects that **newcomers, on average, have lower percentages of strong support networks or people they can rely on compared to Canadian citizens.** This indicates that, as a group, newcomers may face challenges in establishing robust social support systems, which can be crucial for their integration, well-being, and adaptation to life in Canada.

Many new Canadians do not feel particularly connected to their community here in Canada. Those who have family or friends from their home country in Canada feel connected to those specific people but not to the community at large. A few say they have become friends with people from their home country, particularly meeting them at their place of worship, and a couple have made the effort to join online groups to meet these people.

“Not really... I have some family that moved to Canada before me that live close by. I would say that is the only connection I really have to my community.” Male, 47, Ontario, came to Canada less than a year ago.

“Yes, I have made friends with other people from Cameroon – mostly through school and church.” Male, 24, from Newfoundland, came to Canada 2 years ago.

“I have joined a Facebook group... that is about it.” Female, 27, Ontario, came to Canada 5 years ago

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The reasons for not having this connection are varied. Some say they do not live in an area where these community groups are available. Others feel they have enough friends or family from their home country, that they do not need to have this bigger sense of community. Others still want to be more connected to Canada than to others from their home country.

“I live outside of Toronto, so there is not much going on here. There is not much in terms of the Ukrainian community. If I lived closer to Toronto, then yes, I think I would try to join up with the community.” Female, Ontario, 25, came to Canada less than a year ago.

“I wouldn’t say I am particularly connected to people of my own community here. I am connected to people from all different countries”. Male, 33, Quebec, came to Canada 4 years ago.

“I am settled in Canada now, and I feel a great sense of community where I live. But there are not a lot of foreign people where I live – they are Canadian people. It makes me feel a little bit more Canadian.” Female, 36, Quebec, came to Canada 5 years ago.

Preferences in Mental Health Support among Diverse Communities

Only a couple of people thought it would be helpful to have mental health supports in their own community. Most feel the issues they are facing are related to being people rather than a specific ethnicity. One person specifically mentioned they would not want to speak to someone from their community as it may work against their confidentiality of the therapy. A couple felt that the benefit of speaking to someone from their ethnicity would be the ease of speaking in their mother tongue.

“Therapy in French is beneficial, but aside from language, culture isn't so important.” Male, 31, Alberta, came to Canada 8 years ago.

“No (it doesn’t have to be from my community). I want it to feel personal. As long as it is personal support that is all that matters.” Female, 25, Newfoundland, came to Canada a year ago.

“No, I prefer someone who is not similar to me. It feels more confidential and private that way.” Female, 25, Nova Scotia, came to Canada less than a year ago.

“Yes, it would be good if they came from the same community... I would like to talk to someone who can fully understand what I am experiencing.” Female, 24, Newfoundland, came to Canada 2 years ago.

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ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION TRENDS AMONG NEW CANADIANS

Newcomers tend to have higher levels of anxiety on self-rated scales (8 or higher on 1 to 10 scale). **There is a higher percentage of individuals reporting such scores in the "6-15 years" group (27%)** and the "5 years or less" group (25%) compared to Canadian-born individuals (22%).

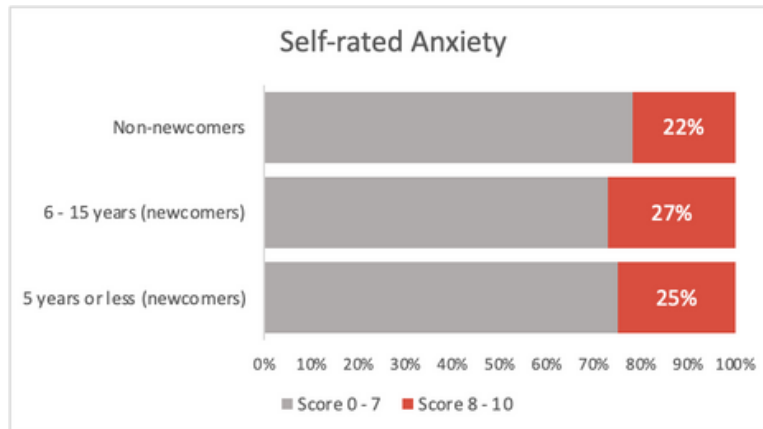


Figure 6. Self-rated Anxiety, April 2020 - May 2023 (Polls 1-16)

As with self-rated anxiety, newcomers are more likely to indicate high levels of self-rated depression (8 or higher on a 1 to 10 scale). **There is a higher percentage of individuals reporting such scores in the "6-15 years" group (20%)** and the "5 years or less" group (19%) compared to non-newcomers (14%).

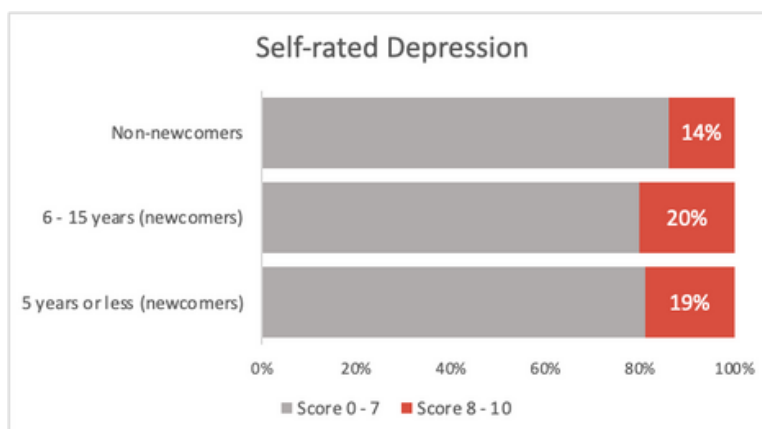


Figure 7. Self-rated Depression, April 2020 - May 2023 (Polls 1-16)

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With respect to this situation, one of the interviewed individuals commented:

“My mental health is bad. I have been depressed. I work and take care of the baby, that is it. That is all I have time for. I don’t have time to do anything for myself... some days I don’t brush my teeth. And it is not getting better. I am alone here, I have no one to talk to. I try to talk to family back home but with the time difference, it is hard. I try to talk to my husband, but he is just as stressed as I am – he doesn’t have time either.” Female, 33, British Columbia, came to Canada less than a year ago.

Some, particularly those coming from countries experiencing war or economic instability, speak of how happy they are to be in Canada and how fortunate they feel to have this opportunity. But, if anything, this adds to their mental health struggles. **Not only do they have to deal with the stress associated with their experiences back home, but they also do not think they have the right to have mental health concerns** when they were able to get to Canada while others were not.

“But even if I had time to get mental health support, I don’t think I would. I don’t have anything to complain about. People are going through a lot worse in the Ukraine. I shouldn’t whine about my little problems when I have it so good.” Female, Ontario, 25, came to Canada less than a year ago.

The pandemic toll on New Canadians

For those who came to Canada at the start of or during the pandemic, the lockdowns had a devastating impact on their mental health. As many did not have a personal support system in Canada, it was important for them to be able to meet new people, but restrictions made this impossible. Work and school either coming to an end or moving remotely made them feel even more isolated. Some desperately wished they could visit family during this time, but, again, restrictions made this impossible. A few mentioned concerns about being able to support themselves, and they were not sure if they would be eligible for CERB payments.

“My mental health was not good during the pandemic. It coincided with my arrival in Canada. It made it harder because I felt trapped. I couldn’t get used to Canada. Couldn’t get adjusted. I was trapped.” Female, 24, Newfoundland, came to Canada 2 years ago.

“I was working in hospitality, so of course, that ended. That was very stressful because I didn’t know what would happen to me. I wasn’t sure if I would get the CERB payments – but how could I support myself? And I couldn’t go home...” Non-Binary, 30, British Columbia, came to Canada 4 years ago

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Those who had come to Canada before the pandemic felt much of the same issues with their mental health as those who had been born in Canada. The fear of the unknown, along with the lockdowns caused anxiety and depression. Some also had the added worry of family living in other countries that they were unable to visit or help.

“During the pandemic, it was hard. I was working from home for 2 years. I wasn’t getting out, I wasn’t seeing people. And my family was not here – we were separated from my family. It definitely affected my mental health. I didn’t have a great depression, but I definitely had some issues with anxiety, not sleeping...” Female, 36, Quebec, came to Canada 5 years ago.

“It was tough, for sure... I felt lonely and so isolated. It was a hard time.” Female, 30, Quebec, came to Canada 5 years ago.

The status of their current mental health is primarily dependent on how settled they feel in Canada. Many say they are doing better now, as the pandemic restrictions have lifted, and they feel more settled in their new life. Those who feel they have not managed to get settled in their new life are still feeling impacted by their mental health conditions.

“It is getting better. Getting more settled in Canada has really helped. I know what I am doing here. I have set new goals for myself.” Male, 33, Ontario, came to Canada less than a year ago.

SELF-REPORTED RESILIENCE

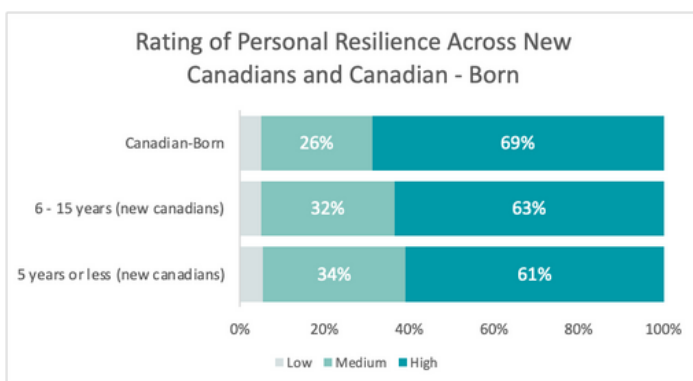


Figure 8. Personal Resilience, August 2020 - May 2023 (Polls 2-16)
(New Canadians sample= 2,152 Canadian-Born sample=

When we compare the personal resilience levels of newcomers with those of all other Canadian-born individuals, it becomes clear that on the whole, Canadian-born show a slightly higher level of resilience. A significant majority of Canadians (69%) fall into the high resilience category, compared to 61% of new Canadians who have lived in Canada for five years or less.

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ANXIETY AND DEPRESSIVE SYMPTOMS KESSLER PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS SCALE (K10)

Overall, individuals who rated their anxiety or depression as high (8-10) since the beginning of COVID-19 are more likely to have symptoms of moderate or severe mental distress. However, significant differences are observed between newcomers and non-newcomers. Specifically, regardless of the duration of their stay, 50% of newcomers are likely to have symptoms of severe mental health distress (Scoring between 30 - 50 points on the K10). These findings underscore the significance of various factors such as housing instability, food insecurity, and a lack of community support, all of which demonstrate strong associations with compromised mental well-being.

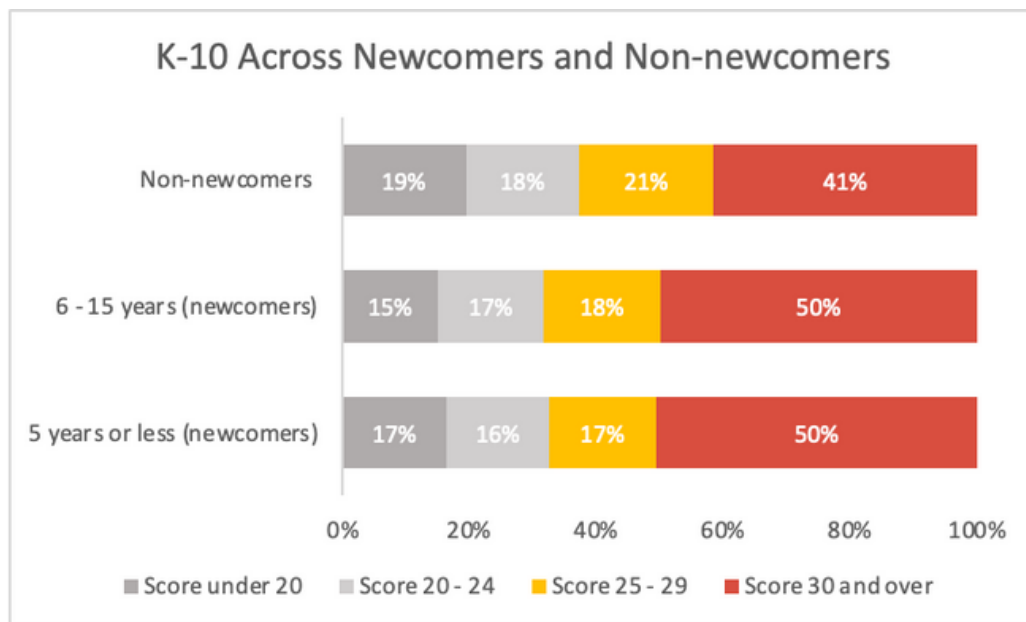


Figure 9. Kessler 10 Psychological Distress Scale, August 2020 - May 2023 (Polls 2-16)

When examining the characteristics of individuals who are likely to have severe mental health issues, it was discovered that **67%** of them fall within the age range of **18 to 34 years**. No significant relationships were found between this likelihood and other variables. This is due to the sample size.

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ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH

No significant differences were found in access to mental health and substance services over the last year when comparing all new Canadians (who have been in Canada for 15 years or less) to all other Canadian-born respondents (approximately 13%). However, the situation is different when looking at the percentage of individuals who have felt the need for health services but haven't actually sought them out. Here, 11% of newcomers indicate having a need for care but have not accessed it, compared to only 4% of Canadian-born individuals.

It's crucial to highlight that the sample size is limited when discussing access to mental health. Therefore, it's essential to approach the data analysis cautiously.

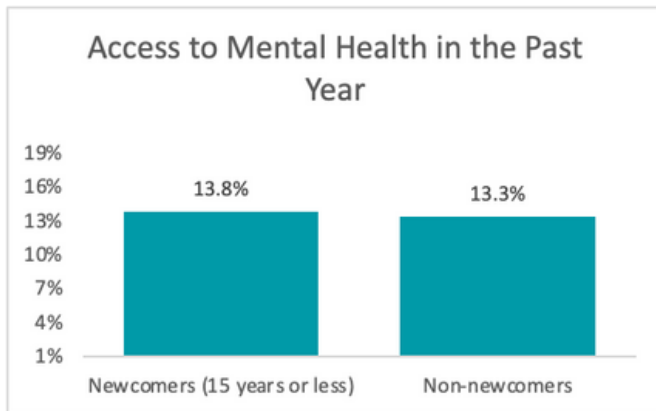


Figure 10. B15: Have you accessed any kind of mental health or substance use service or resource in the past year?, July - 2022 - May 2023 (Polls 13 -16)

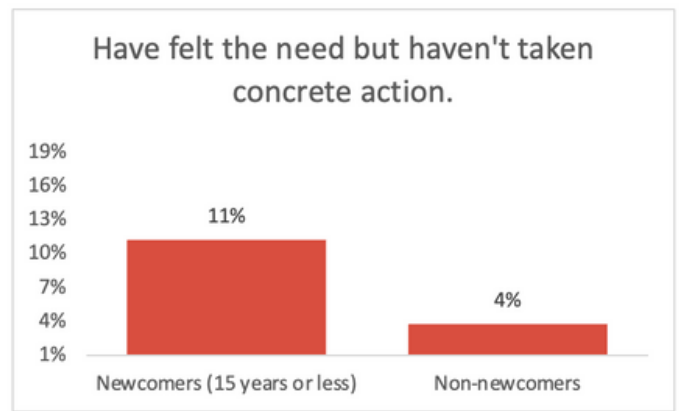


Figure 11. B15: Have you accessed any kind of mental health or substance use service or resource in the past year?, July - 2022 - May 2023 (Polls 13 -16)

56%

Of newcomers express confidence in their knowledge of how to access mental health support when their family members or friends require it, compared to 60% of Canadian-born

57%

Most newcomers hold the belief that the mental health supports available in Canada are adequately meeting the needs of the population, compared to 27% of the Canadian-born.

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BARRIERS THAT PREVENT ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH

Despite the belief that they are free to obtain mental health support in Canada without stigma, many have not done so. Many, even those who talk about struggling with their mental health, **feel their problems are not bad enough to warrant mental health support**. This is particularly true of those who said that mental health support was only used in very serious situations in their home country. Although they say they appreciate living in a country that allows for mental health support, **they seem to have held on to the stigma of their home country that stops them from obtaining it**.

“Mental health is seen as the sickness of the rich (in Bangladesh). It is not a real problem, it is not serious. Normal people don’t get help for mental health. The only time you would is if you became unable to function.” Male, 25, Nova Scotia, came to Canada less than a year ago.

“I don’t feel I have reached the point where it is necessary to get help. It is not that bad. And I am busy – I am tired all the time, so I don’t have time to worry about that.” Female, 25, Nova Scotia, came to Canada less than a year ago.

“I don’t need to. I haven’t reached such a low that warrants getting help.” Female, 24, Newfoundland, came to Canada 2 years ago.

“I haven’t looked for support... I don’t need it. I can talk to my friends and family, that’s enough for me.” Female, 27, Ontario, came to Canada 5 years ago.

The **most often mentioned barrier to obtaining mental health support is cost**. Many say they cannot afford to obtain this support, particularly if it is not covered by their employer benefits plan. There are a few participants who also mention lack of availability, long wait times, and doctors who are too busy to care, but most have not gotten to the point of trying to get the support to realize this is an issue.

“It is the cost. If you don’t have insurance, it is hard... you can’t afford to pay it. And if you want anything you can afford, the wait times are really long.” Male, Ontario, 31, came to Canada less than a year ago.

“It is not available. You can try to get help but you have to wait. And that is a problem... Because sometimes you can’t wait for three or four months. Sometimes you need the help now.” Female, 36, Quebec, came to Canada 5 years ago.

“Doctors are all about billing. They see so many patients in a day. They hardly spend any time with their patients, so they don’t know what is going on with them. They don’t really help.” Male, 47, Ontario, came to Canada 1 year ago.

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Students who are new to Canada are more likely to have gotten mental health supports than other new Canadians. They learn about the available supports from their schools and know they can get these supports quickly and free of charge. This availability, as well as the participant's younger age, helps overcome the stigma against mental health supports they may have brought with them from their home country.

"You can get counselling through the school, free of charge. It is available to all students. And there is not too bad of a wait... I have had to wait a bit because the counsellor was sick. But really it is not bad at all." Non-Binary, 30, British Columbia, came to Canada 4 years ago

"Nothing – there were no barriers for me because I am a student. It was free and very easily available." Female, 25, Newfoundland, came to Canada a year ago.

Those who were able to offer suggestions, would want mental health supports to be available at a **lower cost or wish there were more supports available without a wait time**. A few students talked about the supports available through their university and wished those same supports were available to those not in school.

"There needs to be better insurance coverage. It needs to be focused on newcomers who do not yet have employment benefits and do not have the savings to pay for it." Male, 31, Ontario, came to Canada less than a year ago.

"Funding – it needs to be better subsidized, particularly for new Canadians who are just trying to get settled." Male, 31, Alberta, came to Canada 8 years ago.

A few would like to have more information on what resources are available and where to get these resources. **Understanding how available resources could be used** could also be helpful.

"They could have forums where you could post about your problems so you can discuss and get direction on where to get support." Female, 30, Quebec, came to Canada 5 years ago.

"I called the Suicide help line... it was very helpful. I didn't think it would be that helpful. I think people need to be told that they don't actually have to be suicidal to call those lines. Those people will help." Female, 33, Manitoba, came to Canada 5 years ago.

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CONCLUSIONS

Mental Health Challenges: The study underscores the higher prevalence of anxiety and depression among newcomers compared to all other Canadian-born individuals. Notably, they show elevated levels of anxiety and depression, emphasizing the need for targeted mental health support to address their unique challenges.

Service Accessibility and Confidence: there were no significant differences in access to mental health and substance services between all newcomers (those in Canada for 15 years or less) and other non-newcomer respondents. However, it's important to note that a disparity arises when considering the percentage of individuals who felt the need for health services but did not seek them out. Addressing barriers to service accessibility is crucial for ensuring adequate support for newcomers. Some of the reasons for the lack of access mentioned were costs, waiting lists, or preconceived ideas about mental health.

Financial Concerns and Food Security: Financial challenges related to housing and providing healthy food for their families are a prominent concern among newcomers, especially those with five years or less in Canada. Some individuals express the belief that addressing these root causes, such as facilitating access to appropriate jobs and housing, can significantly alleviate their mental health concerns. To address these concerns, it is essential to implement interventions and support programs aimed at improving food security and relieving the financial burden on newcomers.

In conclusion, this study sheds light on various aspects of the newcomer experience in Canada. The findings underscore the need for tailored support programs and interventions to address mental health challenges, improve service accessibility, and alleviate financial burdens related to housing and food security. By understanding and addressing these unique needs, we can foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for newcomers, facilitating their successful integration into Canadian society.

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Acknowledgments

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Full reports of our findings can be found at www.mhrc.ca

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