

## Impact of COVID-19 on employment and financial security of immigrant workers compared to Canadian-born workers

June 22, 2020

### Key findings

- More immigrant workers (23.4%) strongly agreed that they might lose their job or main source of self-employment income in the next four weeks compared to Canadian-born workers (19.3%).
  - » Among those very worried over job security, more immigrant workers reported fair/poor mental health (26.8%) than Canadian-born workers (15.2%).
- More immigrant workers (36.0%) reported that COVID-19 is having a major or moderate impact on their ability to meet financial obligations compared with Canadian-born workers (26.8%).
- Overall, more immigrant workers reported receiving or applying for social and financial benefits than Canadian-born workers, including receiving relief for financial obligations (e.g. rent or mortgage, car payments, other bills) (7.2% vs 6.4%), applying for employment insurance (6.4% vs 5.3%), applying for caregiving/compassionate care and work-sharing (1.6% vs 1.1%) and applying for sickness benefits (1.4% vs 1.2%).
- More immigrant workers (9.3%) reported absence from work due to COVID-19 reasons than Canadian born workers (8.7%).

### Background

Changes in labour market activities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic could have different effects on immigrant workers compared to Canadian-born workers based on the nature of their employment. In particular, immigrants are more likely to work in precarious employment positions because their foreign credentials, lack of language proficiency, and lack of Canadian work experience excludes them from other more secure employment opportunities. Precarious employment is defined by concerns over employment continuity, access to social benefits, and financial insecurity. It is reasonable to assume that these employment inequities and associated health consequences are magnified during the uncertainty of a global pandemic.



The purpose of this study was to report on the employment and economic concerns of immigrant workers compared to Canadian-born workers and to investigate if employment concern impacted perceived mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic, using a new web panel survey that was conducted for two weeks in March after the pandemic began.

## Approach

### The survey

This project used Statistics Canada's newly released Canadian Perspectives Survey, Series 1 (CPSS1) addressing the impacts of COVID-19. The CPSS1 is a rapid cross-sectional survey that was administered to a sub-sample of Labour Force Survey respondents, providing a representative snapshot of the Canadian population aged 15 years and older and residing in the 10 provinces. In addition to behaviour and health impact concerns, the survey includes questions on work location, perceptions of job security, and the impact of COVID-19 on financial security. One person from each household was randomly selected to complete the survey online using the week of March 22 to 28, 2020 as the point of reference for questionnaire responses.

### The survey sample

A total of 4,627 individuals responded to the CPSS1, representing just over 31 million Canadians. Of these respondents, 3,826 were Canadian-born workers (representing 23.7 million Canadians) and 801 were immigrant workers (representing over 7 million Canadians).

### Job security

Respondents were asked to report on the extent to which they feared loss of their main job or their self-employment income source in the following four weeks. The response of interest was either 'strongly agree' or 'agree'.

### Financial security

Respondents were asked to describe the impact of COVID-19 on their ability to meet financial obligations or essential needs (e.g. rent/mortgage payments, utilities and groceries). The response of interest was 'major' or 'moderate' impact.

Other labour market variables: Respondents were asked whether they received financial relief for financial obligations and whether they applied for benefits (e.g. employment insurance [EI], sickness, caregiving/other) in the reference week. Responses were measured as yes or no, with 'yes' being the response of interest.

### Mental health

Respondents were asked to rate their perceived mental health as either excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor. Responses were collapsed into two groups as either 'excellent/very good/good' or 'fair/poor' with the latter being the response of interest.

### Analysis

The percentages of workers who reported COVID-19-related job and financial security impacts, access to social and financial benefits, and the relationship between mental health and employment security were calculated by immigrant status. Percentages were weighted using Statistics Canada survey weights to provide representative population-based estimates.

## What we found

Among the sample of workers, employment rates were similar for both immigrant (57.1%) and Canadian-born workers (57.7%); and immigrant and Canadian-born workers were as likely to telework (26.2% and 27.5% respectively) and to work outside the home (38.0% and 39.0% respectively) during the reference week. However, immigrant workers experienced the impact of COVID-19 differently than Canadian-born workers on all measures investigated, underlying differences in precarious employment and vulnerable environments.

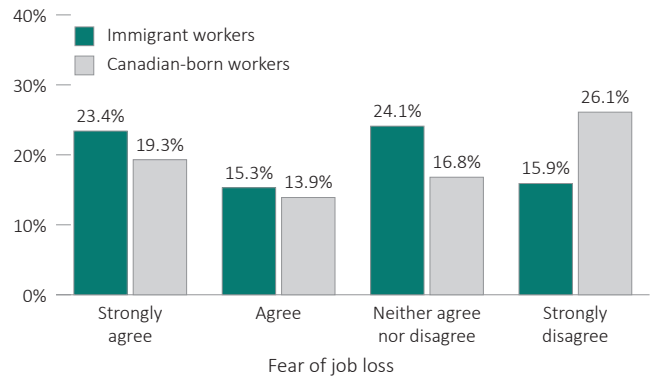
Please see Figures 1 to 4 at right.

## What do the results mean?

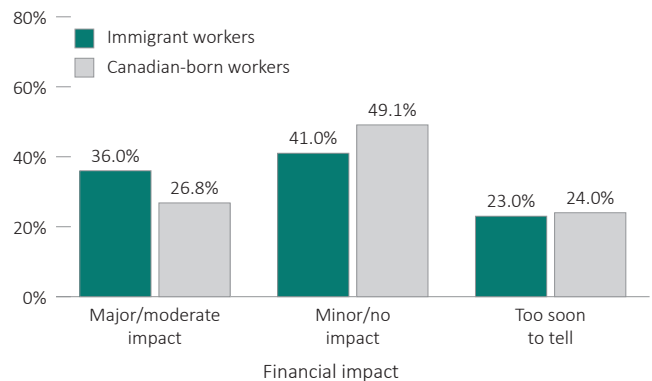
Despite similar labour force characteristics at the time of the survey in terms of employment rate and ability to work remotely/teleworking, immigrants were more likely than Canadian-born workers to believe that they would lose their job as a result of the pandemic and more likely to report that the crisis would have a major or moderate impact on their finances. As a result, immigrant workers were also more likely to have applied for, or to have received, financial and social benefits. Concerns over job security due to COVID-19 were also associated with higher differences in perceived mental health status among immigrant workers.

In sum, this analysis highlights employment and economic vulnerability among immigrant workers during a global pandemic, likely due to a higher proportion of well-documented precarious employment relationships for immigrant workers.

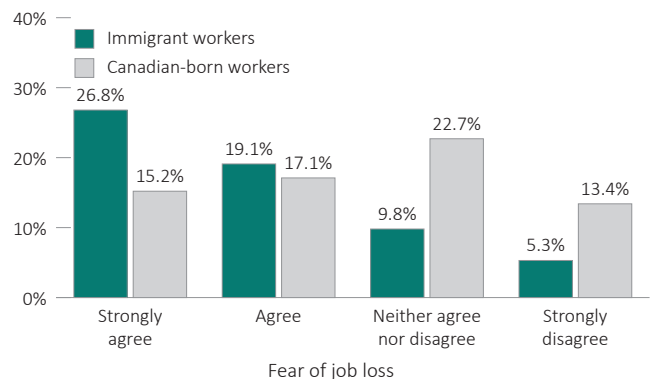
**Fig. 1 |** Percent who reported that their job would be impacted



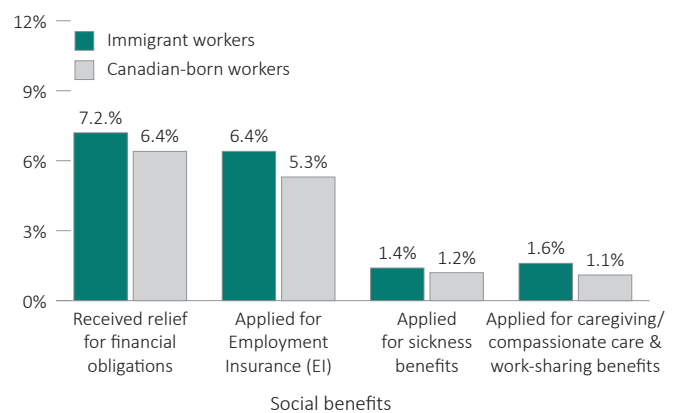
**Fig. 2 |** Percent who reported their finances would be impacted



**Fig. 3 |** Percent who reported fair or poor mental health, across employment security categories



**Fig. 4 |** Percent who reported social benefits



Even in the context of access to emergency income and other social benefits as a result of the pandemic, immigrants were still more likely to report employment, economic and health vulnerabilities. The observed differences provide evidence of inequalities in labour market experiences for immigrant workers versus Canadian-born workers, and draw attention to the need for continued attention to employment standards and regular employment security benefits associated with precarious employment beyond the context of a global pandemic.

## More information

Please contact Sonja Senthanaar, Partnership for Work, Health and Safety Post-doctoral Fellow, at [sonja.senthanaar.ubc.ca](mailto:sonja.senthanaar.ubc.ca) or Mieke Koehoorn, Partnership for Work, Health and Safety Co-Director, at [mieke.koehoorn@ubc.ca](mailto:mieke.koehoorn@ubc.ca) with questions about the methods, results or interpretation of this study. General enquiries should be directed to Suhail Marino, Partnership for Work, Health and Safety Director of Privacy and Operations, at [suhail.marino@ubc.ca](mailto:suhail.marino@ubc.ca).

## About us

The Partnership for Work, Health and Safety (PWHS), between WorkSafeBC and the University of BC, is an innovative research unit that combines rigorous work and health research with effective knowledge translation.

PWHS brings together policy-makers, researchers and data resources from national and international organizations to address current and emerging issues of work-related health in Canada. Our research is aimed at improving understanding of the causes and consequences of injuries and illness, identifying high-risk industries and occupations, and investigating the effectiveness of interventions that improve worker health, prevent occupational illness and injury, and reduce work-related disability.

Our collaboration, based on best practices of knowledge transfer, enables researchers and decision-makers to work together to identify relevant questions, understand data, and produce useful information to effectively inform policy and practice.