

## Resuming economic activities during COVID-19: A comparison of experiences for immigrant versus Canadian-born workers with a gendered perspective

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### Key findings

- **Immigrant men and women workers** were more likely to report that they did not feel safe returning to their physical workplace compared to Canadian-born workers;
- Among **all workers**, the most commonly reported reasons for not feeling safe returning to work were fear of infecting family members, using public transit, and childcare/caregiving concerns; **immigrant workers** were more likely to report these reasons than Canadian-born workers regardless of gender;
- Among **all workers**, increasing sanitization of the physical workplace was the most preferred measure for feeling safer about returning to work; **Canadian-born workers** were more likely to report this measure than immigrant workers, regardless of gender;
- Notable differences for feeling safer about returning to work were found for immigrant men compared to all other workers for their preference for modifying work space to increase distance between employees, and for **immigrant workers** compared to Canadian-born workers for their preference for adopting shiftwork to increase social distancing at work, regardless of gender.

### Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has differentially affected immigrant workers compared with Canadian-born workers with immigrant workers expressing greater concerns regarding employment and financial security during the early stages of the pandemic (Senthana and Koehoorn, 2020). After months of restrictions that included lockdown measures and

physical distancing, some restrictions are being eased, including allowing workers to return to their physical workplace. This project used Statistics Canada survey data to examine whether workers feel safe returning to work, the reasons for their fears/concerns, and their safety preferences for returning to work by immigration status and by sex/gender, where possible. Sex and gender are considered here given that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a unique combination of circumstances



at the intersection of gender, immigration status and economic activities, including greater familial responsibilities (e.g., online schooling) (Yildirim & Eslen-Ziya, 2020), and higher risk of occupational exposure to COVID-19 (St-Denis, 2020) for those in health care occupations and occupations deemed essential work but for which there is a lack of employer-paid sick leave benefits.

## Approach

### The survey

This study used the Canadian Perspectives Survey, Series 3 (CPSS3) conducted by Statistics Canada between June 15 and 21, 2020 to investigate topics related to the resumption of economic and social activities during COVID-19. The CPSS3 is a rapid cross-sectional survey that was administered to a sub-sample of respondents from Statistics Canada's Labour Force Survey, providing a representative snapshot of the Canadian population aged 15 years and older and residing in the 10 provinces. The survey asks participants whether they feel safe returning to their physical workplace and their concerns about returning to the physical workplace. Participants also reported on safety measures they would like to see implemented in the workplace in order to feel comfortable returning to work. Immigration status (yes/no) and sex/gender (women, men) were self-reported on the survey.

### The survey sample

There were 4,209 respondents. Respondents were sampled to be representative of over 31 million Canadians within age and sex/gender groups. Roughly three quarters of respondents were Canadian-born workers (3,457, representing

approximately 23 million Canadians) and one quarter were immigrant workers (752, representing approximately eight million Canadians).

The current analyses focused on a subsample of the CPSS3 respondents who reported that they were not yet back at their regular workplace at the time of the survey, including those who continued to work from home or were absent from their physical workplace. This subsample included 1,181 respondents (28% of all respondents) of which 74% were Canadian-born (952, representing approximately 5 million Canadians) and 26% were immigrants (229, representing approximately two million Canadians).

### Outcomes of interest

- *Hesitancy returning to physical workplace*  
Respondents were asked (yes versus no) if they felt safe returning to their physical workplace now.
- *Concerns about transmission*  
Respondents were asked (yes versus no) if they had concerns about returning to their physical workplace, including fear of contacting the virus, fear of using public transit, fear of infecting family members, or concerns about childcare/caregiving.
- *Precautions to reduce transmission*  
Respondents were asked (yes versus no) if they would feel comfortable returning to their physical workplace if employers took certain precautions, such as sanitization of the workplace, adopting shiftwork to increase social distancing, or modifying the work space to increase distance between employees.

## Analysis

The percentage of workers who reported hesitancy returning to their workplace, common concerns of returning, and precautions to reduce COVID-19 transmission were calculated by immigrant status and sex/gender, where possible. Responses are based on non-missing data. Percentages were weighted using Statistics Canada survey weights to provide representative population-based estimates.

## What we found

Overall, among Canadian workers who are not yet back in their regular workplace, immigrant workers reported greater concerns for resuming economic activities at their regular physical workplace during the reference week of the survey than Canadian-born workers (See Figures 1 to 3).

## Hesitancy

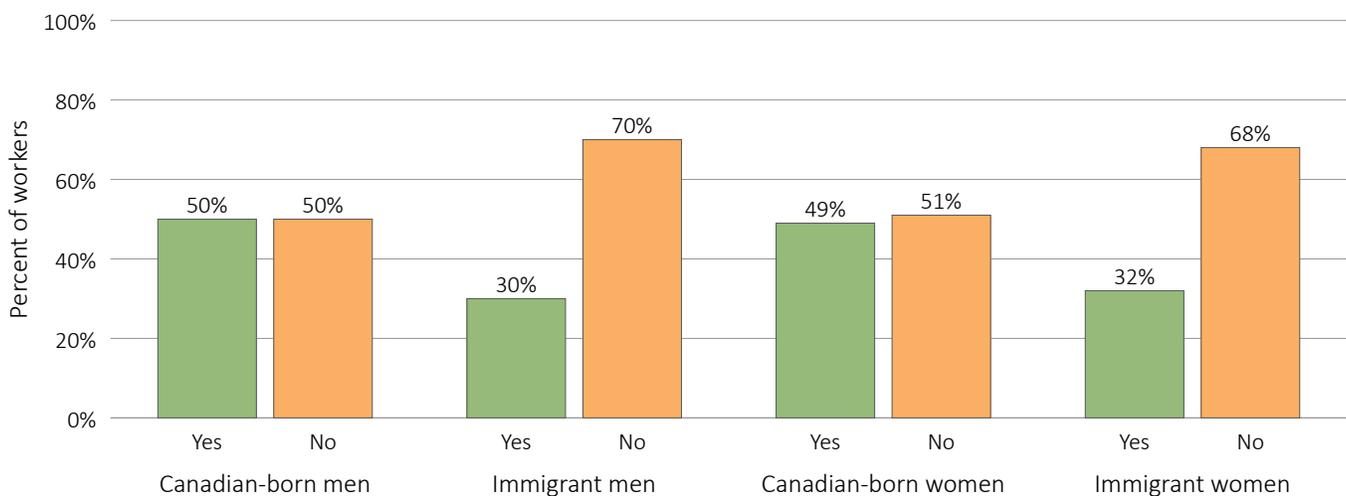
Approximately half of Canadian-born workers, both men (50%) and women (51%), reported that they felt unsafe about returning to their physical workplace;

whereas, more than two-thirds of immigrant workers, both men (70%) and women (68%), reported they felt unsafe about returning to their physical workplace (Figure 1).

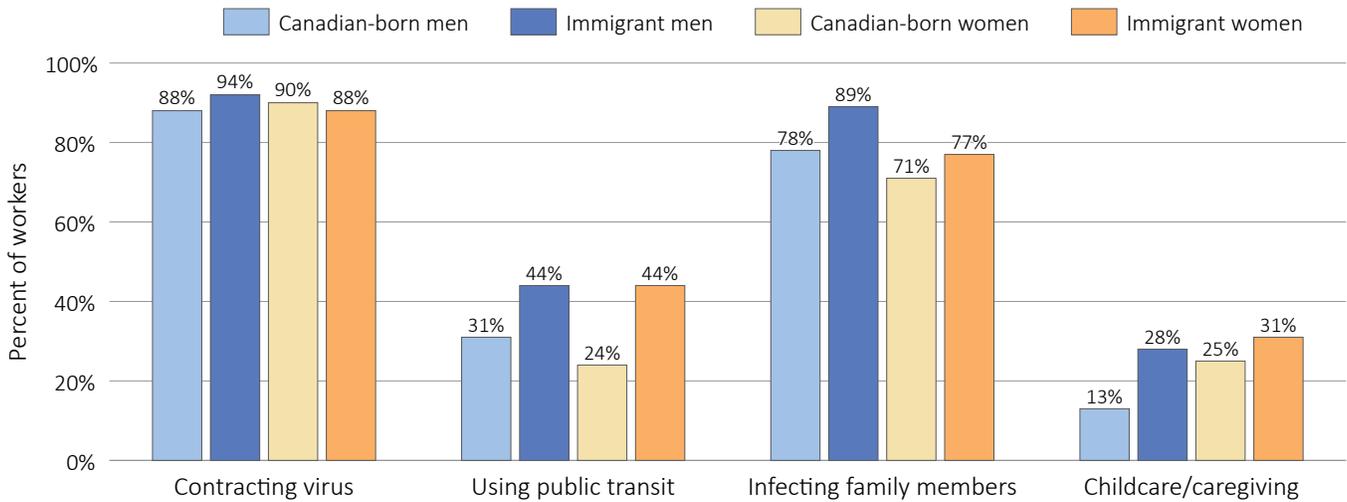
## Concerns about transmission

The majority of all workers (88% to 94%) reported that they had concerns about contracting the virus upon return to the workplace, although the highest percentage was reported among immigrant men (Figure 2). Immigrant men (89%) were also more likely to report concerns about infecting family members upon return to work than all other worker groups (71% to 78%). Differences by immigration status were observed, with a higher percentage of both immigrant men (44%) and women (44%) workers reporting concerns using public transit than Canadian-born men (31%) and women (24%) workers, and a higher proportion of both immigrant men (28%) and women (31%) workers reporting concerns for childcare and caregiving than Canadian-born men (13%) and women workers (25%) (Figure 2).

**Figure 1 |** Percentage of immigrant and Canadian-born workers who reported they felt safe returning to their physical workplace, by sex/gender



**Figure 2 |** Percentage of immigrant and Canadian-born workers who reported yes to concerns about returning to their physical workplace



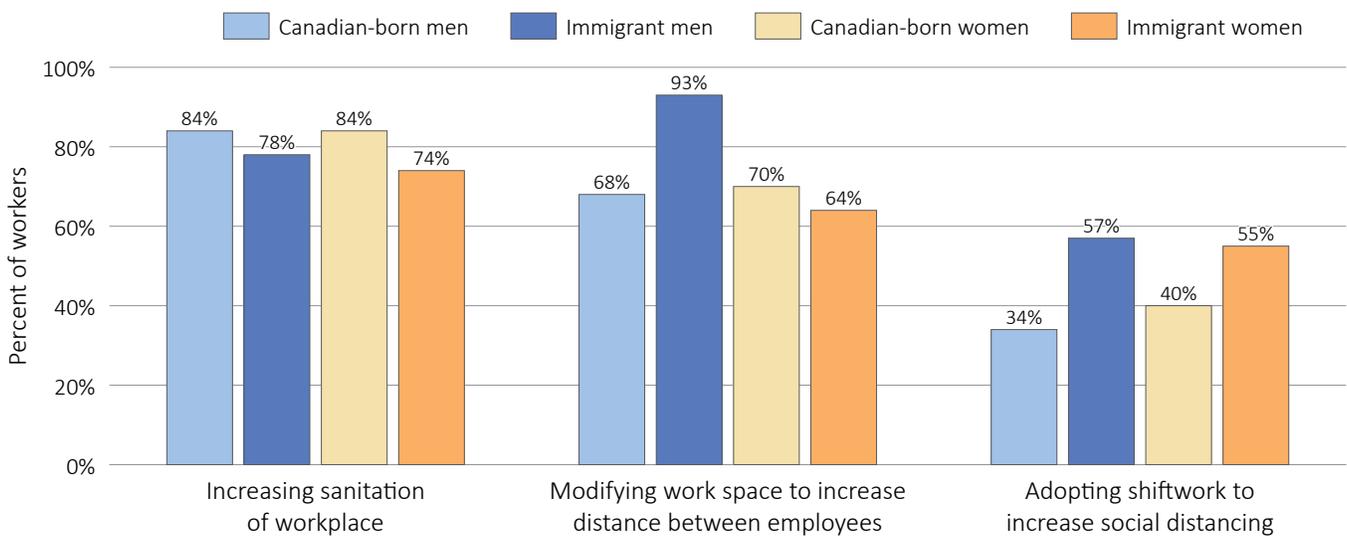
Note: Percentages for using public transit and childcare/caregiving for immigrant men are based on a weighted sample of five participants and adhere to minimum reporting guidelines by Statistics Canada.

**Precautions to reduce transmission**

With a few exceptions, the majority of all worker groups reported, in order of preference from a prescribed list of options, that they wanted increased sanitization, the modification of work spaces to increase social distancing, and the adoption of shiftwork to increase distancing, to make them feel more comfortable about returning to their physical workplace (Figure 3). A notably higher percentage

of immigrant men (93%) than other work groups (range 64% to 70%) reported a preference for the modification of work space to increase social distancing as a precaution for safe return to work. The exception to the majority was that fewer Canadian-born men (34%) and women (40%) workers reported shiftwork as a precaution for safe return to work than immigrant men (57%) and women (55%) workers.

**Figure 3 |** Percentage of immigrant and Canadian-born workers who reported yes to the implementation of precautions in their physical workplace to feel safe upon return to work, by sex/gender



## What do the results mean?

Overall, immigrant workers were less likely to report feeling safe returning to work compared to Canadian-born workers. The majority of all workers were concerned about contracting the virus and infecting a family member upon return to their physical workplace, but more so for immigrant men than any other worker group. Fewer workers were concerned about using public transit or childcare/caregiving upon return to their workplace, but immigrant workers were still more likely to have these two concerns than Canadian-born workers. To reduce transmission of COVID-19 in the workplace, most workers reported that increased sanitization followed by modifying work spaces to increase social distancing would make them feel safer at work, except immigrant men who were more likely to report modifying work spaces over sanitization. Immigrant workers were further more likely to report adopting shiftwork to increase social distancing to make them feel safer at work than Canadian-born workers.

Observed differences for immigrant versus Canadian-born workers may be partially explained by overall differences in the nature of work for these two groups. In general, immigrant workers are more likely than Canadian-born workers to work in precarious employment relationships and in jobs defined as low-skilled, low-waged, and with high exposure levels to occupational hazards (Ali & Newbold, 2020). These employment characteristics may place immigrant workers at greater risk of COVID-19 infection compared to Canadian-born workers that translates to their greater hesitancy to return to the physical workplace (OECD, 2020). Immigrant workers may be more likely to work in low-income

occupations with greater physical proximity between workers (St-Denis, 2020) such as large manufacturing workplaces for immigrant men and essential/front line service jobs such as long-term care homes for immigrant women and that explains their preference for modifying work spaces to increase physical distancing at work. This preference would parallel media reports of transmission among immigrant workers and male workers in large manufacturing facilities such as meat processing, for example (Jabour, 2020; Mosleh, 2020). As well, adopting shiftwork may be easier in these industries and thus a preferred measure to reduce transmission for immigrant workers as observed in this survey. In other words, hesitancy for return to work and preferences for precautions may be related more to the division of labour and nature of work and risk of transmission, than about immigration status or gender directly. However, in addition to unsafe working conditions, immigrant workers' hesitancy to return to work may be further mediated by their context. Particularly, immigrants arrive to Canada with fewer supports and resources that could speak to their increased concern around childcare/caregiving and using public transportation compared with Canadian-born workers.

A hesitancy to return to work following public health measures that focused on minimizing contacts especially in indoor spaces is understandable among all workers, especially when the majority of workers share concerns about the risk of transmission for both themselves and their family members. Increased vaccination rates across Canada since this survey was completed may help to alleviate these concerns about transmission and about returning to physical

workplaces. It is important to note that the CPSS3 did not ask workers about their own vaccination and vaccination rates in the population as a measure that would make them feel safer returning to work. The high proportion of all workers who report that increased sanitization and physical distancing would make them feel safer at work parallels the public health measures that were implemented and communicated to the public and workers throughout the pandemic and before vaccines were available. The finding that most workers want increased sanitization at work to feel safe returning to work, and more so than other measures, may present an avenue for updated risk communication in light of the emerging evidence about the low transmission of COVID-19 via surfaces (Lewis, 2021). In workplaces where physical distancing is not practicable or feasible, risk communication about vaccination as a public health measure may also be warranted for workers returning to their physical workplace.

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## 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.

## More information

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