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Insights on Canadian Society

Community and well-being: Exploring sense of belonging among youth

by Helen Foran

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INSIGHTS ON CANADIAN SOCIETY



Community and well-being: Exploring sense of belonging among youth

by Helen Foran

Overview of the study

This study uses data from the Canadian Social Survey (2021 to 2024) to explore the experiences of youth (aged 15 to 29) and their sense of belonging to their community across the urban and rural divide. Specifically, it describes the characteristics of youth who are most likely to experience a “somewhat strong” or “very strong” sense of belonging to their local community. It also examines the relationship between having a strong sense of belonging and other indicators related to social supports and well-being in both urban and rural settings.

- Nearly two-thirds of youth aged 15 to 19 reported a strong sense of belonging to their local community (63%), while less than half of those aged 20 to 24 (47%) and 25 to 29 (43%) reported that they felt this way.
- Rural youth were more likely to report a strong sense of belonging to their local community (59%), compared with those living in urban centres (50%).
- A strong sense of belonging is associated with positive general health and mental health among youth—96% of those with a strong sense of belonging also reported being in good physical health, and 86% reported positive mental health. By comparison, 87% of youth with a weaker sense of belonging reported being in good physical health, and 59% reported positive mental health.

SPECIAL EDITION ISSUE OF INSIGHTS ON CANADIAN SOCIETY

The special edition issue of *Insights on Canadian Society* expands Statistics Canada’s flagship social publication to offer policy-relevant articles united across a common theme, leveraging visuals and accessible multimedia formats. This issue focuses on the makeup of Canadian society in times of transformation, shedding light on the challenges and opportunities shaping the future. This article is featured within this issue.

Introduction

A strong sense of belonging to a local community is a key sign of social connectedness, which plays a crucial role in an individual's overall health and quality of life. Sense of belonging refers to the feeling of being accepted and valued within a social group, and it is influenced by both the physical and the social environment where a person lives.¹ It is particularly relevant to explore sense of belonging among youth (aged 15 to 29) because people in this age group often experience significant transitions in life, such as changing their place of residence, school, workplace or social groups. Findings show that adolescents (aged 15 to 19) report a stronger sense of belonging, compared with young adults (aged 20 to 29), suggesting age-related development or contextual shifts during this period.

“Adolescents (aged 15 to 19) report a stronger sense of belonging, compared with young adults (aged 20 to 29).”

Statistics Canada has previously highlighted the relationship between age group and sense of belonging, showing that younger people overall

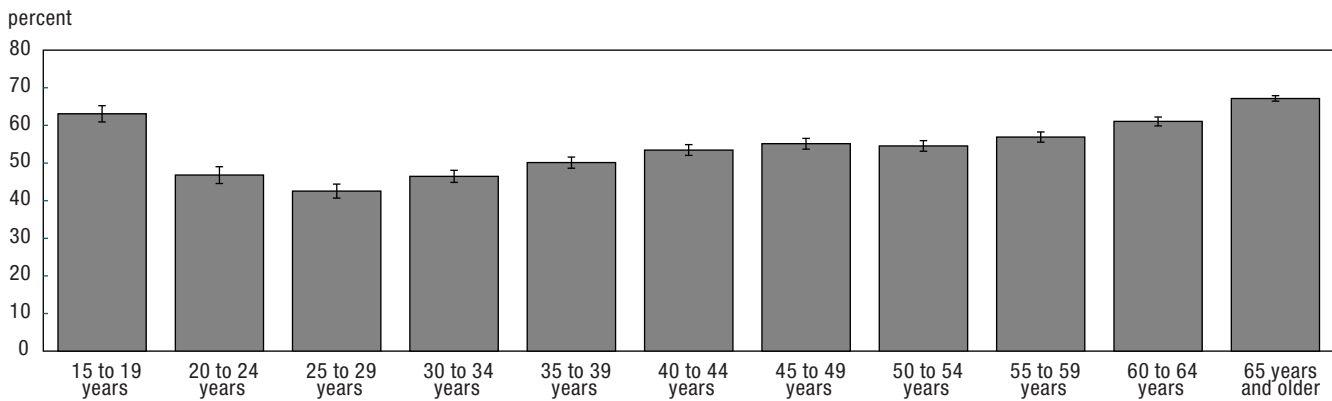
(aged 15 to 34) are less likely to report feeling a strong sense of belonging,² with this feeling generally increasing as people age. As an additional consideration, the data suggest that residents of rural areas tend to report a stronger sense of belonging, compared with those living in urban areas.³ However, less is known about how geographic and contextual factors interact to shape the experiences of youth across rural versus urban settings.

This paper addresses this gap by examining the characteristics of rural and urban youth with a strong sense of belonging, while also considering other relevant quality of life indicators.

A higher proportion of younger youth report a strong sense of belonging, compared with older youth

In general, youth were less likely than older Canadians to report feeling a strong sense of belonging to their community. From 2021 to 2024, just over half (51%) of youth aged 15 to 29 reported a strong sense of belonging to their local community. A similar percentage (52%) of adults aged 30 to 59 reported a strong sense of belonging, while two-thirds (66%) of adults aged 60 and older expressed a strong sense of belonging. However, when groups were further broken down by age, a similar percentage of

Chart 1
Percentage of Canadians reporting a strong sense of belonging to their community, by age group, 2021 to 2024



Note: Error bars represent the 95% confidence intervals.

Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Social Survey, 2021 to 2024.

adolescents reported a strong sense of belonging to their community as adults aged 60 years and older. Specifically, 63% of youth aged 15 to 19 reported a strong sense of belonging to their local community, while this was reported by 47% of those aged 20 to 24 and 43% of those aged 25 to 29 (Chart 1).

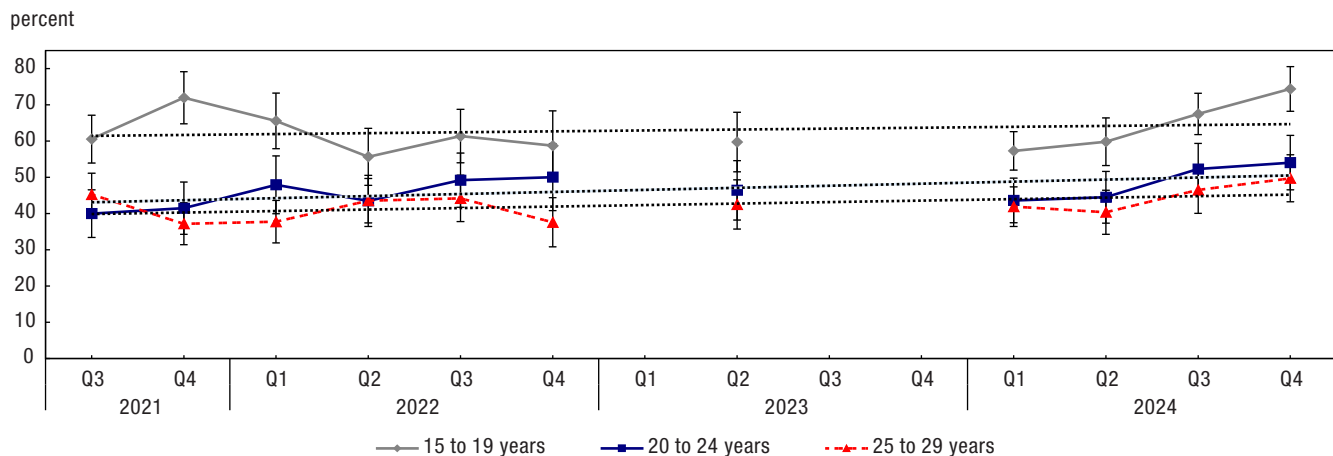
Some research points to the concept of “rootedness,” suggesting that duration of residence is positively associated with community belonging.⁴ Youth aged 15 to 19 more frequently live at home and may feel more rooted in the community where they grew up and continue to live. Conversely, many youth aged 20 to 29, who are entering early adulthood, may have yet to establish deep roots in a community because they frequently experience changes to their living situation or location and face pivotal decisions about work, education and their personal lives before they are settled in their adult identity.⁵

Furthermore, other factors such as participation in organized sports are known to strengthen sense of belonging and positively influence other indicators of well-being such as trust in others and feelings of social inclusion,⁶ which can vary throughout the life course. Adolescents typically have greater access to sports and other extracurriculars in school, providing opportunities for social bonding and community involvement. However, once young people transition to postsecondary life or the workforce, they are less likely to take part in activities like sports because these built-in avenues for participation diminish.⁷

The percentage of youth reporting a strong sense of belonging increased modestly from 2021 to 2024, by an average of 2.0 percentage points per year. When broken down by smaller age group, youth aged 20 to 24 saw the largest gains in reporting a positive sense of belonging over the past few years, with an increase of 2.3 percentage points per year (Chart 2).

Chart 2

Percentage of youth reporting a strong sense of belonging to their community, by age group, 2021 to 2024



Note: Error bars represent the 95% confidence intervals.

Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Social Survey, third quarter of 2021 to fourth quarter of 2024 (excluding first, third and fourth quarters of 2023).

2SLGBTQ+ youth and youth with a disability are more likely to report weaker community ties

Some youth face more systemic barriers or social challenges that may hinder their sense of belonging to their local communities. For example, 2SLGBTQ+ youth were less likely to report a strong sense of belonging than youth who were not 2SLGBTQ+ (35% versus 54%) (Table 1). For transgender or non-binary youth, just under one in four (23%) reported a strong sense of belonging to their community, compared with just over half of cisgender youth (52%). There was no difference in sense of belonging between male and female cisgender youth.

Other groups who were less likely to report strong community ties included youth with a disability. Among youth with a disability, 36% reported a strong sense of belonging, compared with 53% of youth without a disability (Table 1).

Meanwhile, youth from racialized groups were more likely to report a strong sense of belonging to their community (55%), compared with non-racialized, non-Indigenous youth (49%) (Table 1). In particular, Arab (69%) and South Asian (64%) youth were the most likely to report a strong sense of belonging, while Chinese (46%) and Southeast Asian (48%) youth were among the least likely.

Table 1
Percentage of youth aged 15 to 29 years reporting a strong sense of belonging to their community, by selected characteristics, 2021 to 2024

	Proportion	95% confidence interval		Predicted probabilities
		Lower limit	Upper limit	
		percent		
Sociodemographic characteristics				
Total	51.1	50.0	52.3	...
Gender				
Men (ref.)	50.5	48.8	52.3	49.6
Women	51.8	50.1	53.5	52.8
Age group				
15 to 19 years (ref.)	63.1	60.9	65.2	62.9
20 to 24 years	46.8	44.6	49.0	47.1*
25 to 29 years	42.5	40.7	44.4	42.4*
Racialized status				
Racialized population (ref.)	55.3	53.2	57.3	53.9
Non-racialized, non-Indigenous population	48.7	47.2	50.2	49.4*
Immigrant status				
Non-immigrants (ref.)	50.2	48.8	51.6	50.5
Immigrants and non-permanent residents	54.1	51.5	56.6	53.1
2SLGBTQ+ status				
2SLGBTQ+ people (ref.)	35.0	31.8	38.1	38.9
Non-2SLGBTQ+ people	53.9	52.6	55.2	53.1*
Disability status				
People with a disability, difficulty or long-term condition (ref.)	36.2	32.6	39.7	40.3
People without a disability, difficulty or long-term condition	52.9	51.7	54.2	52.4*
Region				
Atlantic (ref.)	51.9	48.7	55.1	53.0
Quebec	51.4	48.7	54.1	51.0
Ontario	50.6	48.6	52.7	50.6
Prairies	51.5	48.9	54.0	51.3
British Columbia	51.5	48.1	54.9	51.9

... not applicable

* significantly different from reference category (ref.) ($p < 0.05$) in a fully adjusted regression model

Note: Predicted probabilities are the results from a logistic regression controlling for gender, 2SLGBTQ+ identity, transgender identity, racialized status, immigrant status, disability status, region, age group and rural or urban designation.

Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Social Survey, 2021 to 2024.

Rural youth report stronger community ties than their urban counterparts

Rural youth were more likely to report a strong sense of belonging to their local community (59%), compared with those living in urban centres (50%). Modest increases in sense of belonging over the past few years were seen for both urban and rural youth (2.6 percentage points per year for rural youth and 2.0 percentage points per year for urban youth). Despite the stronger sense of belonging reported by rural youth, some young people are known to leave rural areas for educational and economic opportunities.⁸



Rural youth were more likely to report a strong sense of belonging to their local community (59%), compared with those living in urban centres (50%).

Geographically, there were no significant differences in sense of belonging among youth across different Canadian regions (Table 1). However, some differences emerge when comparing rural and urban areas. For example, rural youth in the Prairies were among the most likely to report a strong sense of belonging, at 63%—a higher proportion than urban youth in the Prairies (50%) (Table 2).

Table 2

Percentage of youth reporting a strong sense of belonging to their community, by various characteristics and rural or urban designation, 2021 to 2024

	Rural (ref.)			Urban		
	Proportion	95% confidence interval		Proportion	95% confidence interval	
		Lower limit	Upper limit		Lower limit	Upper limit
percent						
Sociodemographic characteristics						
Gender						
Men	57.0	51.5	62.5	49.8*	48.0	51.6
Women	60.5	55.2	65.8	50.9*	49.1	52.6
Age group						
15 to 19 years	66.3	59.5	73.2	62.7	60.4	65.0
20 to 24 years	54.5	46.9	62.2	46.0*	43.7	48.4
25 to 29 years	53.0	47.1	59.0	41.4*	39.5	43.4
Racialized status						
Racialized population	x	x	x	55.4	53.4	57.4
Non-racialized, non-Indigenous population	59.7	55.8	63.7	46.7*	45.1	48.4
Immigrant status						
Non-immigrants	58.4	54.4	62.3	49.0*	47.6	50.5
Immigrants and non-permanent residents	x	x	x	53.9	51.3	56.5
2SLGBTQ+ status						
2SLGBTQ+ people	46.0	35.1	57.0	33.9*	30.6	37.1
Non-2SLGBTQ+ people	60.7	56.5	64.8	53.2*	51.8	54.5
Disability status						
People with a disability, difficulty or long-term condition	33.5	21.7	45.3	36.5	32.8	40.3
People without a disability, difficulty or long-term condition	62.5	58.5	66.4	51.9*	50.6	53.3
Region						
Atlantic	57.0	50.5	63.4	49.9	46.3	53.6
Quebec	56.3	48.4	64.2	50.7	47.7	53.6
Ontario	58.5	50.3	66.6	50.1	48.0	52.2
Prairies	63.4	55.5	71.4	49.9*	47.2	52.5
British Columbia	x	x	x	51.3	47.8	54.7

x suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the *Statistics Act*

* significantly different from reference category (ref.) (p < 0.05)

Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Social Survey, 2021 to 2024.

Considering rural and urban residence alongside age groups revealed some important nuances. Among youth aged 15 to 19, a similar percentage reported a strong sense of belonging in rural (66%) and urban (63%) areas (Table 2). However, for youth in their 20s, urban youth were less likely to report a high sense of belonging than their rural counterparts—41% of urban youth aged 25 to 29 reported a strong sense of belonging, compared with 53% of rural youth in the same age group.

Because of rising housing costs, many older youth who may prefer to live in urban centres are increasingly being displaced to more affordable municipalities on the outskirts of these cities,⁹ and some may face long commutes to employment or educational hubs. A previous study found that Canadians living in “commuter communities” just outside of Canada’s largest cities experienced some of the lowest levels of sense of belonging.¹⁰

Comparing the characteristics of youth with stronger community ties across urban and rural environments revealed some other interesting nuances. For instance, a larger percentage of non-racialized, non-Indigenous youth reported a strong sense of belonging in rural communities (60%), compared with their counterparts in urban centres (47%) (Table 2).¹¹ Furthermore, 2SLGBTQ+ youth in rural areas were more likely to report a strong sense of belonging to their community (46%) than their urban counterparts (34%).

A strong sense of belonging is associated with positive general health and mental health among youth

Most youth with a strong sense of belonging (96%) also reported being in good physical health, compared with 87% of youth with a weaker sense of belonging (Table 3). This finding is consistent with previous studies¹² that revealed that a strong sense of belonging is strongly and consistently positively associated with self-perceived health. Similar patterns were seen for mental well-being; among youth with a strong sense of belonging, 86% reported positive mental health, compared with 59% of young people with a weaker sense of belonging (Table 3). Some research suggests that this could be partly because the social norms associated with community involvement lead to more health-promoting behaviours. At the same time, social isolation causes stress, which could lead to poorer health outcomes.¹³

In addition to reporting better general health and mental health, youth with a strong sense of belonging were more likely to report always or often having someone to count on (90%) than those with a weaker sense of belonging (69%) (Table 3).

Table 3
Quality of life indicators among youth, by strong or weak sense of belonging to their community, 2021 to 2024

Quality of life indicators	Somewhat or very strong sense of belonging (ref.)				Somewhat or very weak sense of belonging			
	Proportion	95% confidence interval		Predicted probabilities	Proportion	95% confidence interval		Predicted probabilities
		Lower limit	Upper limit			Lower limit	Upper limit	
percent								
Positive physical health	95.9	95.2	96.6	89.5	86.6	85.4	87.8	81.4*
Positive mental health	86.4	85.2	87.5	88.6	59.4	57.7	61.1	73.6*
Rarely or never lonely	55.2	53.4	56.9	74.6	28.7	27.2	30.2	20.7*
Always or often having someone to count on	90.1	89.0	91.1	84.3	69.0	67.3	70.6	62.6*
High life satisfaction	60.2	58.5	61.9	61.2	28.6	27.1	30.1	35.4*
Positive future outlook	76.8	75.4	78.2	73.3	43.9	42.1	45.6	45.9*
Satisfied with friendships	77.8	73.2	82.5	75.8	45.7	39.5	51.8	48.3*
Satisfied with family relationships	85.6	81.8	89.4	83.3	61.4	55.4	67.4	63.4*

* significantly different from reference category (ref.) ($p < 0.05$) in a fully adjusted regression model

Note: Predicted probabilities are the results from a logistic regression controlling for gender, 2SLGBTQ+ identity, transgender identity, racialized status, immigrant status, disability status, region, age group and rural or urban designation.

Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Social Survey, 2021 to 2024.

A further age breakdown reveals that youth aged 15 to 19 were more likely to have someone to count on (84%), compared with those aged 20 to 24 (79%) or 25 to 29 (76%). This result is consistent with the idea of teenagers being more rooted within their communities.



Youth with a strong sense of belonging to their community were more likely to report that they had a hopeful view of the future (77%) than those with a weaker sense of belonging (44%).

Similar patterns emerged regarding future outlook—youth with a strong sense of belonging to their community were more likely to report that they had a hopeful view of the future (77%) than those with a weaker sense of belonging (44%) (Table 3). Additionally, youth aged 15 to 19 were more likely to report a positive future outlook (64%), compared with those aged 20 to 24 or 25 to 29 (56% for both age groups).

In terms of loneliness, 1 in 10 youth with a strong sense of belonging (10%) reported regularly feeling lonely, compared with 3 in 10 youth with a weaker sense of belonging (30%). In a similar vein, youth who had a strong sense of belonging were more likely to report being satisfied with their friendships (78%) and family relationships (86%), compared with those with a weaker sense of belonging (46% and 61%, respectively) (Table 3). This is aligned with

previous research that found a correlation between a strong sense of belonging and feelings of familiarity, reciprocal exchanges and trust in neighbours.¹⁴

Among youth with a strong sense of belonging to their local community, residing in a rural area versus an urban centre did not significantly impact other quality of life outcomes. The one exception was loneliness; 61% of rural youth with a strong sense of belonging reported rarely or never feeling lonely, compared with 54% of urban youth with a strong sense of belonging.

Conclusion

Given the associations between a strong sense of belonging and positive health and overall well-being, this article explored some of the geographic factors and sociodemographic characteristics of youth with stronger community ties.

By examining urban and rural differences, in addition to various other demographic characteristics or access to support networks, this article found that, overall, urban youth have weaker community ties than rural youth. It also found that youth aged 20 to 29—particularly those in urban areas—report a lower sense of belonging to their community.

The transition to adulthood can feature many changes, such as moving out or moving back in with parents,¹⁵ as well as exploring academic pursuits, career opportunities or personal relationships. Therefore, some young adults might not feel “rooted” in their communities at this stage of their lives, particularly those who are experiencing major life changes. This lack of stability may contribute to a weaker sense of belonging to one’s community.

Helen Foran is an analyst with the Centre for Social Data Development and Insights at Statistics Canada.

Data sources, methods and limitations

Data sources

The data used in this article are from the [Canadian Social Survey \(CSS\)](#), using waves collected from April 2021 to December 2024. The CSS is a voluntary, cross-sectional, quarterly survey that collects information on well-being, health, time use, confidence in institutions and other social issues. The target population for the CSS is all non-institutionalized people aged 15 or older living off reserve within the 10 provinces of Canada. Exclusions represent less than 2% of the Canadian population aged 15 and older. The response rate for each cycle varied from 43.3% to 58.9%, with a stratified sample of approximately 20,000 dwellings selected probabilistically. Population-level estimates in the time series were determined using survey and bootstrap weights to reflect the underlying population of Canada.

Methods

Using pooled data from the 11 waves of the CSS (2021 to 2024) that asked the question “How would you describe your sense of belonging to your local community?” this paper examines the proportion of youth aged 15 to 29 who reported that they had a “somewhat strong” or “very strong” sense of belonging to their local community to assess belonging across other demographic characteristics and quality of life indicators.

When appropriate, a linear correlation model was used for time series to provide an estimate of annual percentage point changes for some indicators.

A logistic regression model was used to assess whether the relationship between sense of belonging and various individual characteristics still exists when accounting for other characteristic variables, such as gender, 2SLGBTQ+ identity, transgender identity, racialized status, immigrant status, disability status, region, age grouping and rural or urban place of residence.

Limitations

A limitation of using the “urban” versus “rural” designation is that these are broad categories—disaggregation at a lower level of geography would paint a more nuanced picture.

Chart 2 examines sense of belonging over time (third quarter of 2021 to fourth quarter of 2024), but there is a potential for seasonal influences on how respondents answered survey questions, and these data were not adjusted for seasonality.

Notes

1. Schellenberg et al., 2017.
2. Statistics Canada, 2022.
3. Thomson et al., 2025.
4. Schellenberg et al., 2017.
5. Eliason et al., 2015.
6. Arriagada et al., 2022; Brown et al., 2023.
7. Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute, 2024.
8. Sano et al., 2020.
9. Statistics Canada, 2023.
10. Thomson et al., 2025.
11. Because of the small number of youth from racialized groups and immigrants living in rural areas who responded to this question, data points are unavailable for this subpopulation. In surveys, a smaller number of respondents can affect the ability to apply the results more broadly because these respondents may not represent the entire group accurately.
12. Kitchen et al., 2012; Schellenberg et al., 2017.
13. Ross, 2002.
14. Dirksmeier, 2025.
15. Statistics Canada, 2017.

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