



Quality of Life in Canada

A Citizens' Report Card

CPRN



RCRPP



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H O W A R E W E D O I N G ?

Reading the Scores

CPRN assigned a score indicating progress (or not) over the 1990s on each of the 40 indicators included in this *Citizens' Report Card*. The three scores assigned are presented below.

Better

Indicator

Mixed/No Change

Indicator

Worse

Indicator



A Citizen-Based Tool

Canadians are used to hearing this country's progress summed up in terms of purely economic measures, like the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) or the index of stock market prices. Important as these may be (and economic security *is* vital to citizens), they are not an adequate reflection of what matters to Canadians about their quality of life.

We are increasingly aware that measures like the GDP overlook some important costs and consequences of economic activity, such as environmental damage, resource depletion and the loss of a community's economic base. In fact, the GDP often *rises* at the same time disaster strikes — for example, after an ice storm or flood. Clearly, we need indicators that do a better job of describing the quality of our lives as we experience them and to track our progress as communities and as a society.

This *Report Card* was designed by citizens to capture what they believe contributes to quality of life in Canada. In the fall of 2000, citizens from many walks of life met in 40 small groups in locations across the country. Each group deliberated for three hours on what is important for quality of life and on the information they need to assess progress. The nine themes identified here mirror their choices and order of priority. Experts then helped to identify indicators for each of the themes and a group of the original citizen-participants reviewed and approved the selection.

The job of selecting indicators turned out to be more difficult than expected. While Canada is awash in data, very little of it speaks to citizens' sense of quality of life. In fact, one of the most significant outcomes of this project has been to identify a number of important gaps in data. These gaps are discussed in more detail in the conclusion to this report. Citizens mapped out a large territory in the nine themes. Their choices underscore the complex web of overlapping factors that influence our quality of life. Strikingly, all 40 groups agreed that political rights are crucial to Canada's quality of life. Their choices also provide a portrait of the "social commons" — the shared infrastructure that shapes our lives as Canadians. As well, the themes provide direction to the continuing work of experts in the many organizations in Canada that report on our economic and social progress.

Taken together, the nine theme areas presented here comprise quality of life for Canadians, as defined by Canadians themselves. As you read about each of the themes, bear in mind that the work presented here contributes to one part of the quality of life equation. We have addressed the "what" in quality of life issues for Canadians — the "why" remains to be answered.

The information presented here is based on findings from a comprehensive report entitled *Quality of Life: A Citizens' Report Card — Background Report*. Both this *Report Card* and the longer study are posted on the CPRN Web site (www.cprn.org).


Judith Maxwell
President

1. *On democratic rights and participation*

Most Canadians view their democratic rights, including the right to vote and the protection of basic civil and human rights, as cornerstones to quality of life. Two measures of democracy — voting patterns and acceptance of ethnic and cultural diversity — point to some disturbing trends. (Another measure relating to democracy — faith in the electoral process — is discussed under the theme of government on page 18.)

Voter turnout is declining.

Fewer Canadians are voting. In fact, participation in general elections has declined steadily over the past decade or so, with three-quarters of Canadians voting in the 1988 general election and only three-fifths voting in the 2000 election.

Canadians support multiculturalism, but believe discrimination is increasing.

Canadians are proud to be part of a multicultural country and endorse the rights of different ethnic and religious groups to participate in society fully and without prejudice. In national surveys conducted during the mid-1990s, two-thirds of Canadians agreed that “one of the best things about Canada is our acceptance of people from all races and backgrounds.”

However, in 1995:

- ⌘ more than two-thirds of Canadians considered racism to be a problem, compared to just over one-half in 1985
- ⌘ perceived discrimination was highest in Québec, British Columbia and the Prairie provinces
- ⌘ the Atlantic provinces maintained the lowest rates of perceived discrimination of any region — despite dramatic increases in those rates over the previous 15 years

Worse

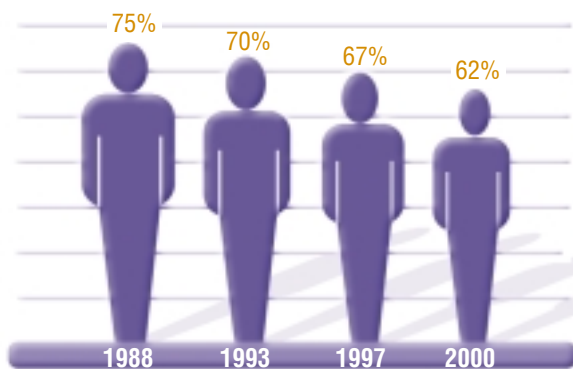
Exercising democratic rights: voter turnout

Worse

Tolerance of diversity



Voter Turnout for General Elections¹

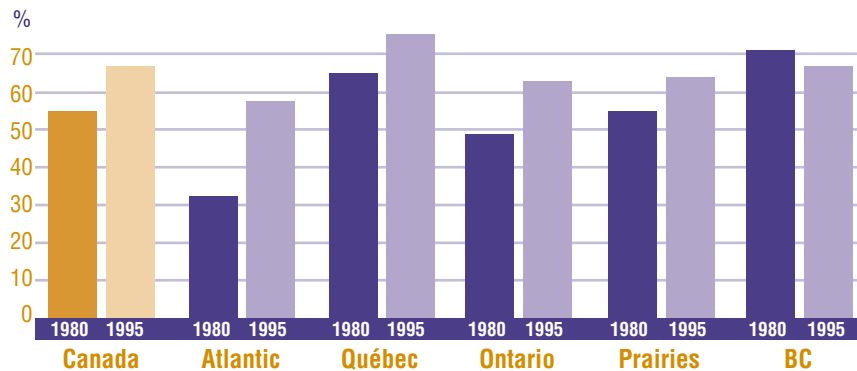


Where the voters are

In 2000, voter turnout was:

- **highest** in Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick and Québec
- **lowest** in Northwest Territories, Nunavut and Newfoundland

Perceived Discrimination Against Racial or Cultural Groups²



2. On health

Canadians agree that health is an essential component of quality of life. In fact, it would be difficult to find *any* quality of life or human development index that did not include one or more measures of health. Health indicators reflect Canadians' concerns about the quality of their health care services and highlight other factors contributing to health and well-being.

Canadians believe in their health care system, but think access to some services could be improved.

The majority of Canadians are satisfied with their local health care system. In a recent national survey, at least six in ten people assigned a grade of “B” or higher to:

- ✪ quality of health care services
- ✪ choice of services available
- ✪ level of satisfaction with their most recent health care experience

About one in ten people assigned a failing grade to these services.

No suitable national data were available on waiting lists for health services. However, a study on access to health care services showed Canadians rated access to some services positively — including family doctors, walk-in clinics and health care services for children. In contrast, access to some specialized services, such as medical specialists, diagnostic equipment and mental health services, received poor ratings.

Canadians are living longer, healthier lives.

- ✪ By 1997, life expectancy had increased to 78.4 years (81.4 years for women, 75.8 years for men).
- ✪ More than two-thirds of Canadians reported their health as “excellent” or “very good” during the mid- to late 1990s.

Better

Mental health status

Better

Lifestyle

Mixed/No Change

Quality of the health care system

Mixed/No Change

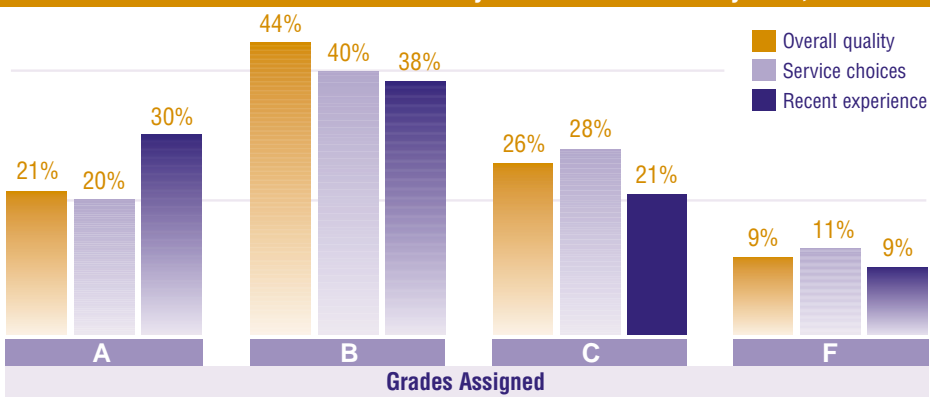
Physical health status



Rates of depression and suicide vary by gender.

In 1998, more than a million Canadians reported experiencing symptoms of depression. Women were twice as likely as men to report suffering a major depressive episode, while men were nearly four times as likely as women to commit suicide. Overall rates of depression and suicide declined slightly during the 1990s.

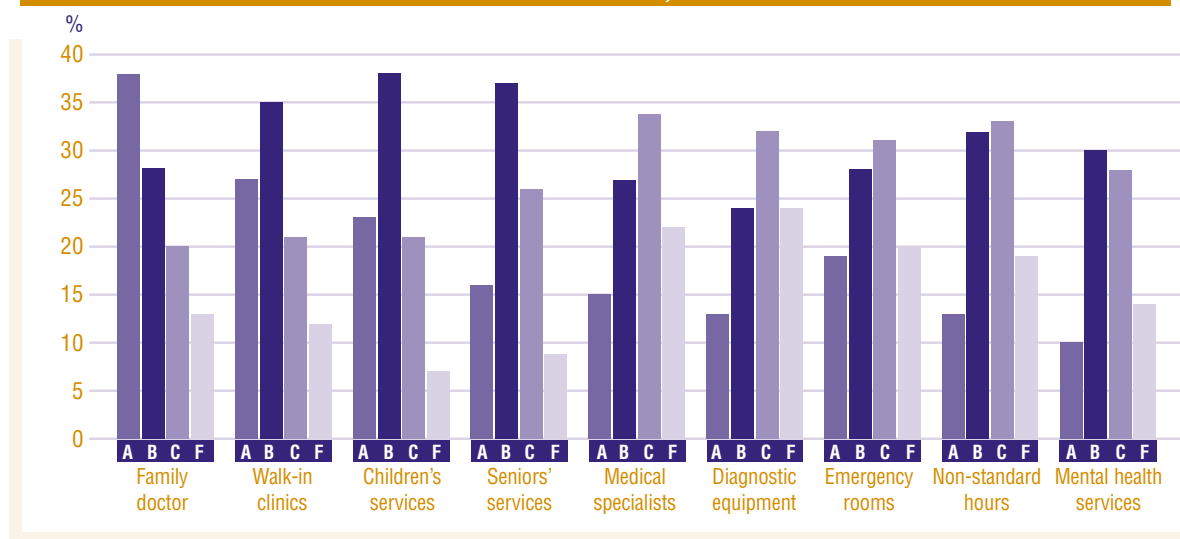
How the Public Rates the Overall Quality of the Health Care System, 2001³



Smoking

- Smoking rates declined gradually over the past decade.
- One-quarter of Canadian children under the age of 12 were exposed to second-hand smoke in 2000, compared to one-third in the mid-1990s.

How the Public Rates Access to Health Care Services, 2001⁴



3. On education

Canadians consider education to be a key determinant of their quality of life. The measures identified by citizens demonstrate the importance of maintaining and improving the quality of a universally accessible system.

Canadians are staying in school longer.

In 1998:

- ⌘ the high school completion rate for Canadians aged 25-54 was 82% — up from 73% in 1990
- ⌘ the proportion of Canadians aged 25-29 who had graduated from university rose to 26%, from 17% a decade earlier
- ⌘ full-time university enrolment rates for young people aged 18-24 were higher in every province than they were 10 years ago; however, university enrolment rates for new entrants have been flat since 1991-92, raising concerns about the rising cost of a university education

More than one-quarter of Canadians participate in adult education and training programs.

Canadians believe that lifelong learning plays an important role in maintaining quality of life. During the 1990s, more than one-quarter of all adults pursued additional education and training programs, often related to their work. However, participation in these programs decreased slightly over the past decade.

Better

Mixed/No Change

Mixed/No Change

Mixed/No Change

Mixed/No Change

Worse

Educational attainment

Adult literacy rates

Access to universal primary/secondary education system

Access to post-secondary education

Child/youth literacy rates

Access to lifelong learning



Literacy results are mixed.

- ✦ In the mid-1990s, more than half the Canadian population aged 25-65 scored “3” or higher on a five-point scale measuring prose literacy (reading ordinary text) — the four Western provinces had the highest proportion achieving “3” or higher.
- ✦ Canadian 15-year-old students performed well compared with students in 31 other countries, ranking second in reading, sixth in mathematics and fifth in science.
- ✦ Socioeconomic background had less of an impact on reading achievement in Canada than in other countries.

The student-teacher ratio increased during the 1990s.

Canada saw a steady increase in student-teacher ratios (a proxy measure for quality of education) during the 1990s, with a peak of 16.4 in 1997-98. At the provincial level, the highest student-teacher ratios in 1998-99 were in Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia.

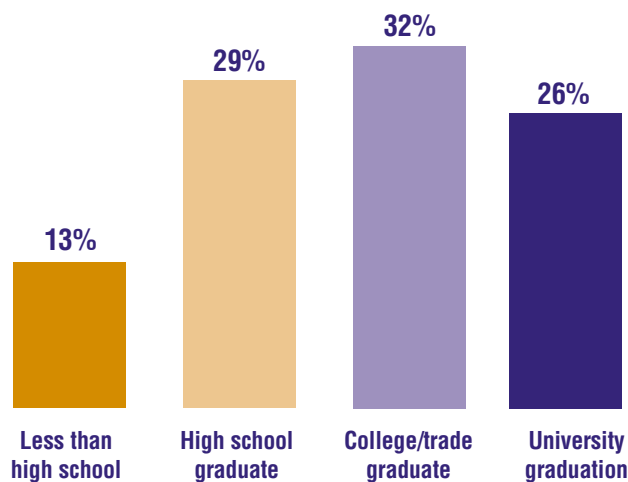
Provinces perform well internationally

In the majority of provinces, students ranked among the top-performing countries in reading, science and mathematics. Even in provinces scoring below the national averages, students performed at or above the international average.

Progress on drop-out rates

- ✦ More young people are finishing high school — the national drop-out rate fell by one-third between 1991 and 1999. In 1999, the drop-out rate was 12%.
- ✦ Drop-out rates fell in all provinces, with the largest decreases in New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia and Saskatchewan.

Highest Level of Education Attained by Canadians Aged 25-29 Years, 1998⁵



4. *On the environment*

Canadians want to know that the environment will be safeguarded for future generations. For many people, issues such as air and water quality, waste management, renewable energy sources and access to healthy outdoor spaces are increasing concerns.

After years of improvement, air quality is declining.

Air quality in Canada improved substantially during the early 1990s, before declining again towards the end of the decade. Environment Canada attributes recent increases in the annual number of “fair” and “poor” air quality days to the burning of fossil fuels, which contributes to higher temperatures and the formation of ground-level ozone.

Canadians are worried about water quality.

A 2001 survey showed:

- ✪ two-thirds of Canadians are either “extremely concerned” or “very concerned” about their drinking water
- ✪ about half are confident that the water coming into their homes is safe to drink
- ✪ about half of Canadians use filtering systems or counter-top filters
- ✪ people place the blame for tainted water equally on government, industry and human error

Better

Water quality

Better

Waste management

Mixed/No Change

Resources devoted to developing renewable energy sources

Worse

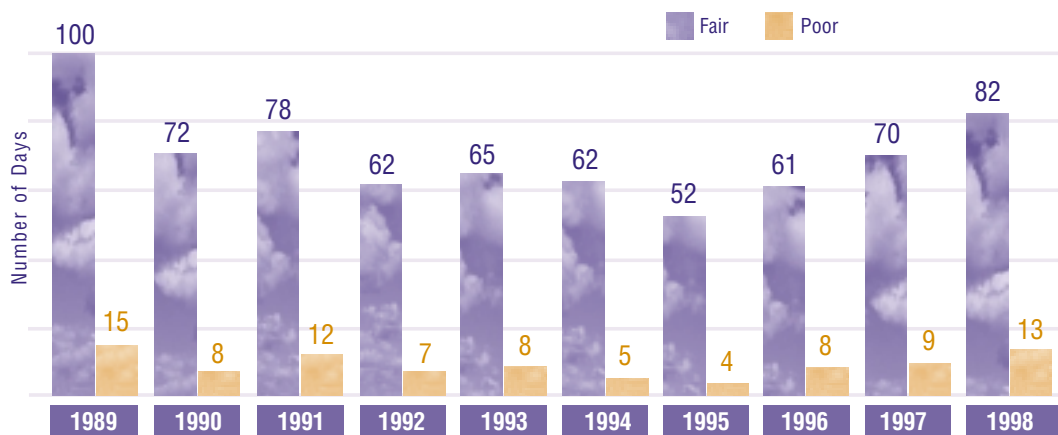
Air quality



Recycling is a priority for Canadians.

Many Canadians are firmly committed to recycling initiatives. While almost all packaging was discarded a decade ago, less than one-third is discarded today. Reuse and recycling rates increased substantially during the 1990s, while waste disposed per capita decreased over the same period.

Number of Days per Year of "Fair" and "Poor" Air Quality⁶



What Canadians said ...

In a 2001 national poll, Canadians were asked: "How concerned are you about the air you breathe?"

- 40% were "extremely concerned"
- 35% were "very concerned"

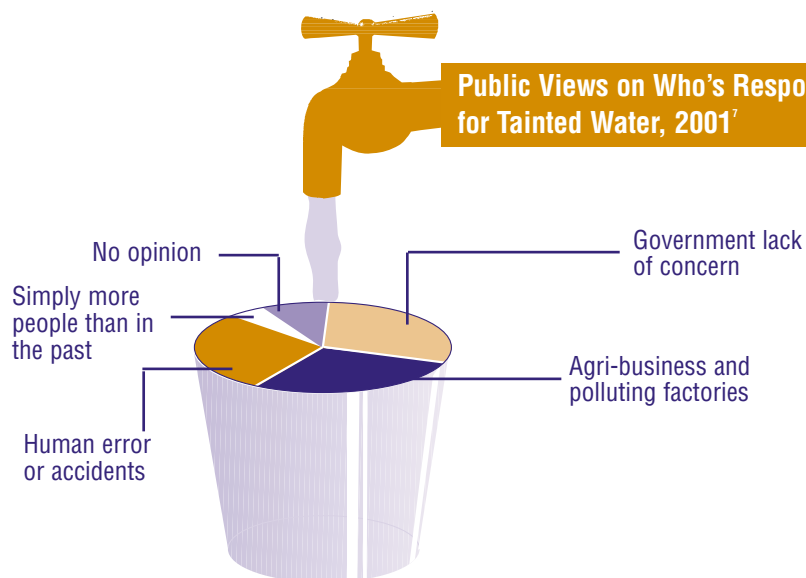
Where are we on renewable energy?

In 1997, renewable fuels comprised less than 6% of the domestic demand for primary energy in Canada.

How safe is our water?

Despite Canadians' concerns, there are no consistent data for measuring water quality. One indirect measure is the proportion of municipal populations served by wastewater treatment facilities. This proportion has risen steadily over the past 20 years and now stands at 96%.

Public Views on Who's Responsible for Tainted Water, 2001⁷



5. *On social conditions and programs*

Canadians believe that social support programs should be available to respond to and meet basic human needs. Measures such as poverty rates, income supports for basic needs, child care services, living wages, use of food banks and housing costs give some indication of how well Canada is doing in this area.

Many Canadians live in poverty.

- ✪ The proportion of Canadians earning less than Statistics Canada's Low Income Cut-Off (LICO) was 16.2% in 1999 (compared to 14% in 1989 and a peak of 18.6% in 1996).
- ✪ In 1997, almost 7% of Canadian households were classified as "working poor," compared to 5% in 1989.

Social assistance supports lag behind low-income cut-offs.

For one-parent families living in medium-sized communities, the national average for social assistance rates (social assistance transfer payments as a proportion of the LICO) was 65% in 1999, compared with 72% five years earlier.

The number of Canadians using food banks has stabilized.

Studies show that:

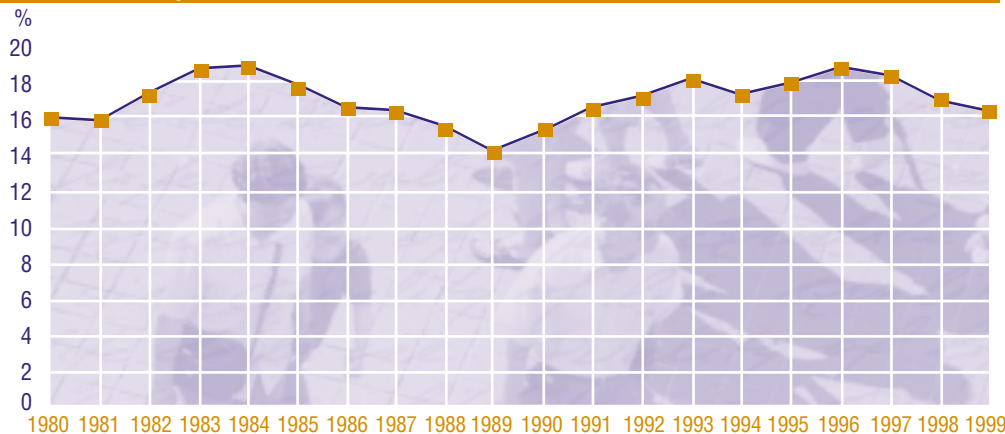
- ✪ while use of food banks has nearly doubled over the past decade, the number of users has stabilized over the past three years
- ✪ residents of Newfoundland had the highest rates of food bank use (roughly 6% of the population)
- ✪ because of the size of their populations, Ontario and Québec are the biggest provincial users of food banks; however, their rates of use (2.5%) are in line with the national average



It's getting harder to find affordable rental housing.

In 1996, more than two million families in Canada lived in rented accommodation; of these, two-fifths spent at least 30% of their family income on housing. Vacancy rates — which were less than 2% in 2000 — contributed to renters' problems.

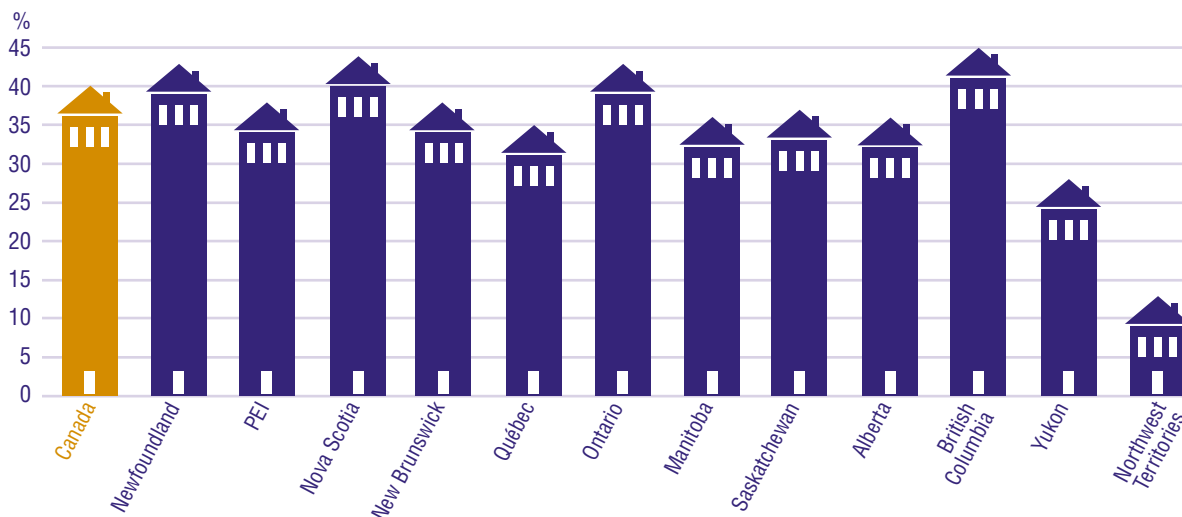
Percent of People with Low Income Before Taxes⁹



What about child care?

- Child care is a major expense for many families, but especially for lone-parent families with more than one pre-schooler.
- Access to regulated child care spaces increased during the 1990s (from 7.5% to 10% of children aged 0-12 years). However, the vast majority of spaces are still provided by unregulated caregivers.
- In some jurisdictions, even the licensed child care that exists is becoming scarcer and/or more expensive.

Percent of Renters with Housing Affordability Problems, 1995⁹



6. *On community*

While communities in Canada vary dramatically in size and diversity, most Canadians agree that the quality of community — which includes factors like the degree to which people take part in voluntary activity and crime levels — is an important determinant of their quality of life.

Volunteer time and total donations are increasing, while participation rates are declining.

From 1997 to 2000:

- ⌘ the proportion of Canadians who volunteered declined from 31% to 27%
- ⌘ the average time spent volunteering increased by 13 hours annually (the equivalent of 549,000 full-time jobs)
- ⌘ the average donation increased by 8% to \$259 per person
- ⌘ the national donation rate remained stable at about 78%

Canadians still believe their neighbourhoods are safe.

A 1999 survey found that:

- ⌘ almost nine out of ten people feel either “very safe” or “reasonably safe” while walking alone in their neighbourhood after dark
- ⌘ eight out of ten people are “not at all worried” about crime while alone in their homes in the evening or at night
- ⌘ more than half believe crime rates in their neighbourhoods have stayed the same over the past five years, while close to one-third think rates have increased

Better

Sense of personal safety and changes in crime rates

Mixed/No Change

Satisfaction with police, courts, prison and parole systems

Mixed/No Change

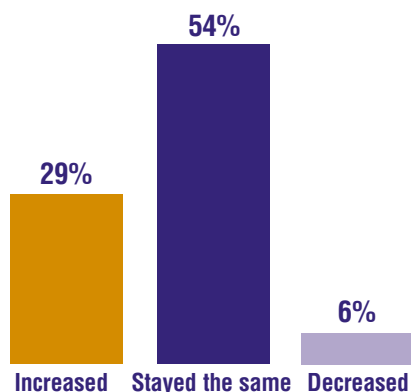
Level of civic involvement



National crime rates are decreasing.

Crime rates declined over the 1990s, with both violent crime and property crime recording their lowest rates of the decade in 1999.

Views on Change in Level of Crime in Neighbourhoods, 1999¹⁰



How satisfied are Canadians ...

With local police?

In 1999, the majority of Canadians viewed their local police as: being approachable; ensuring the safety of citizens; enforcing the laws; and supplying information on reducing crimes. About half of Canadians believed the police responded promptly to calls.

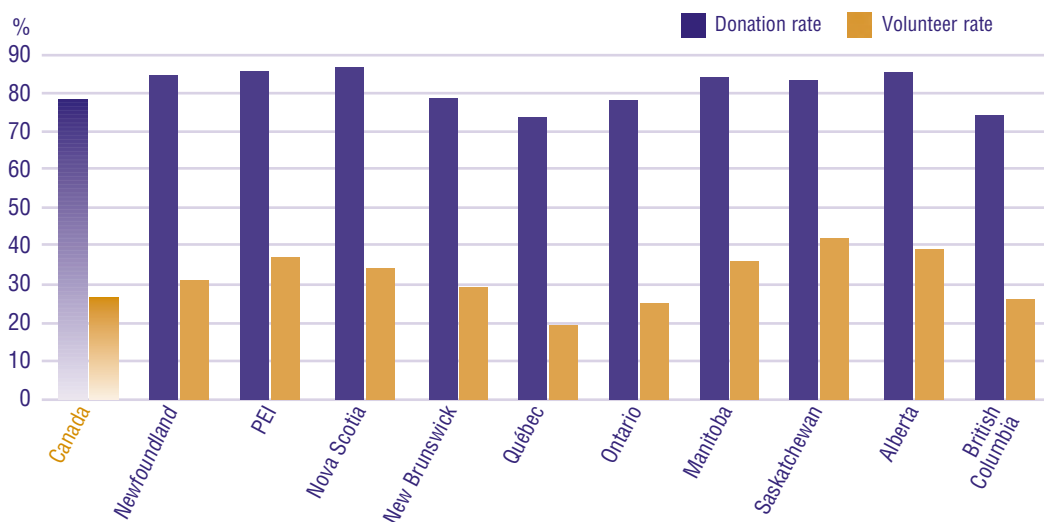
With the criminal courts?

Fewer than one in five people believed the criminal courts were doing a good job of determining the guilt of the accused, while fewer than one in four thought they were doing a good job of helping crime victims or providing justice quickly. About two-fifths agreed that the criminal courts helped ensure a fair trial for the accused.

With the prison and parole systems?

About one in four people thought prisons were doing a good job of supervising prisoners. Fewer than one in five people gave the parole system a positive rating for releasing offenders who are not likely to re-offend or supervising offenders on parole.

Percent of Canadians Who Make Donations and Who Volunteer, by Province, 2000¹¹



Do women feel safe?

- Fewer women than men reported feeling safe when walking alone at night (82% vs. 94%).
- Similarly, only 77% of women feel safe at home alone at night, compared to 88% of men.

7. *On personal well-being*

In reflecting on quality of life, many Canadians stress the importance of personal well-being, a concept that includes factors such as positive social interactions, adequate leisure opportunities, a sense of personal or financial security, a healthy lifestyle and self-respect.

People are feeling the “time crunch” more than ever.

A 1998 survey showed that:

- ✪ the majority of parents in families with children under 15 years of age felt rushed every day; nearly two-thirds felt more rushed than five years ago
- ✪ almost one in five Canadians aged 15 and older was time-stressed, an increase of about one-third from 1992
- ✪ stress varies according to gender — more than one in five women reported feeling time-stressed, compared to one in six men

Most Canadians have a variety of social supports, friendships and family networks.

Social support is an important buffer in helping to cope with stress and prevent illness. In a recent survey, more than three-quarters of Canadians aged 12 and older said they had a person available to provide some type of social support, from practical help to personal interaction and love and emotional support. About four in five people said someone was available most or all of the time to get together with for relaxation or to have a good time.

Mixed/No Change

Degree of social interaction, intimate connections and social isolation

Mixed/No Change

Sense of personal financial security

Worse

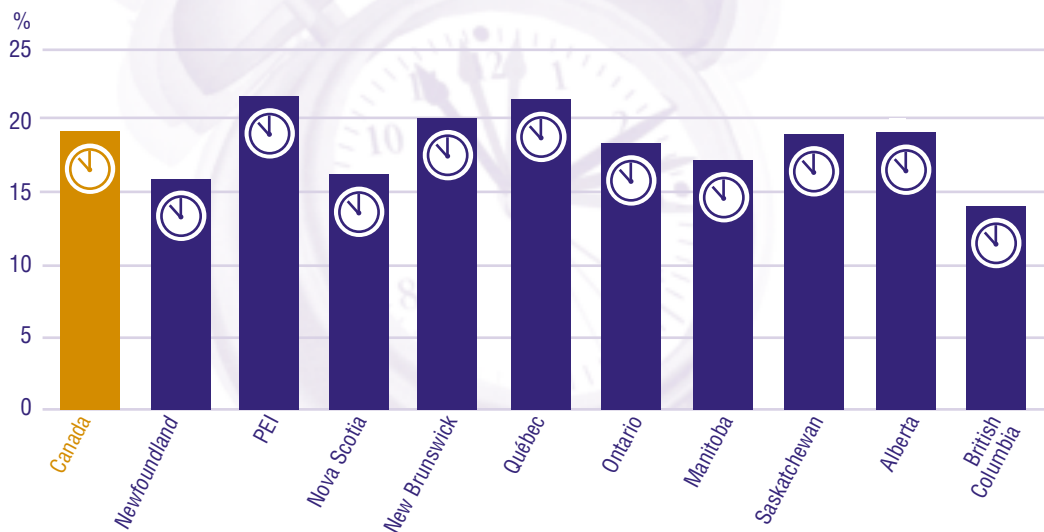
Personal time stress or control over time



Disposable income is about the same as it was a decade ago.

There was a downward trend in personal disposable income during the first half of the 1990s. Gains were made during the second half of the decade so that, by 2000, Canadians had virtually the same per capita disposable income as they did in 1990.

Canadians Experiencing the "Time Crunch," by Province, 1998¹²



What Canadians said ...

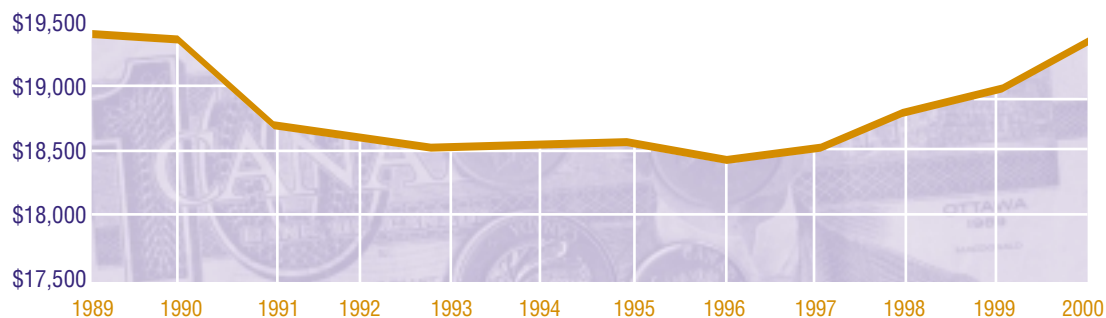
About their income

- In 2000, more than half thought their income was "very adequate."
- About one in six said their income was "inadequate."

About their economic future

In the late 1990s, about one in three people believed they had lost control over their economic future (compared to almost half of Canadians in the mid-1990s).

Disposable Income per Capita in Constant (1998) Dollars¹³



8. *On the economy and employment*

A healthy economy and good employment opportunities are vital quality of life issues. Measures of employment and the economy include: unemployment and employment rates; involuntary part-time workers; job security and satisfaction; bankruptcy rates; income/wealth distribution; and consumer debt levels.

After steady increases in the early 1990s, the unemployment rate fell to a 20-year low in 2000.

During the recession years of the early 1990s, Canada's unemployment rate rose into the double digits. However, a strong economic recovery in the latter part of the decade helped reduce the rate to a 20-year low (6.8% in 2000). The Atlantic provinces continue to have the highest unemployment rates in Canada, followed by Québec and British Columbia.

Other indicators mirror the broader economic recovery of the 1990s.

- ✪ By 1999, total commercial bankruptcies had declined to just over 10,000 — a 30% reduction in three years.
- ✪ The number of consumer bankruptcies peaked at more than 85,000 in 1997 before leveling out to about 75,000 in the following three years.
- ✪ The number of involuntary part-time workers increased during the early 1990s and decreased steadily in the latter half of the decade.

Better

Unemployment and labour force participation rates

Better

Percentage of involuntary part-time workers

Better

Bankruptcies (commercial)

Mixed/No Change

Job security, satisfaction and working conditions

Worse

Income/wealth distribution

Worse

Consumer debt levels



Relatively speaking, the rich are getting richer.

In 1990, the income gap ratio for Canada stood at 9.0 (i.e., the richest one-fifth of the population controlled nine times as much income as the poorest one-fifth). By the late 1990s, the gap had increased to 10.9. This growing income disparity was evident in every province, with Alberta showing the greatest gap between rich and poor.

What Canadians said ...

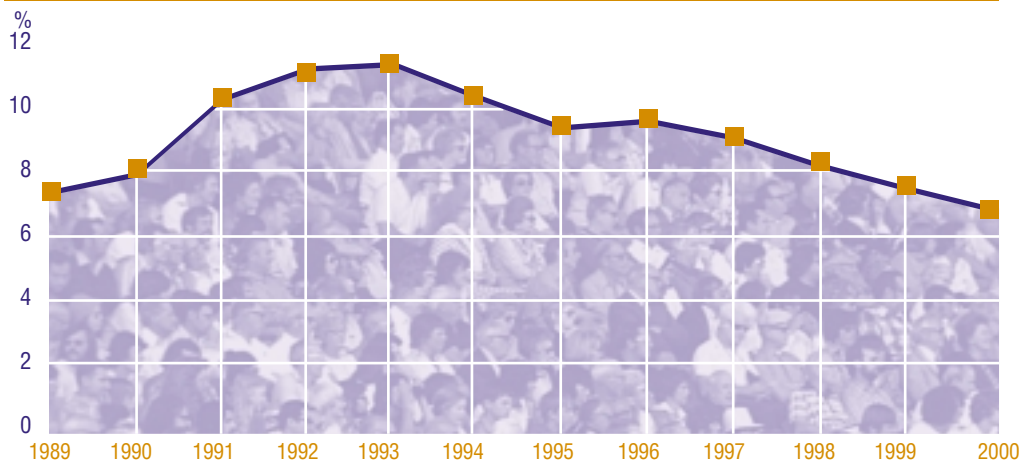
About job security

In 2000, more than three in four Canadians believed it was “very unlikely” they would lose their jobs.

About job satisfaction

More than 70% reported being generally satisfied with their work.

Unemployment Rate¹⁴



9. On government

Canadians think the government has an important role to play in helping to secure a better quality of life. Indicators such as public trust in the government and faith in the electoral process demonstrate how Canadians are feeling about their government. These indicators also relate to the theme of democratic rights and participation, which is discussed on page 2.

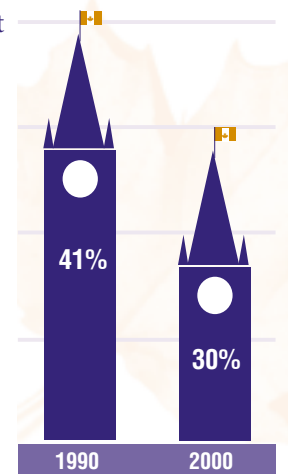
Canadians may disagree about the extent to which government should intrude upon their lives, but most view the government as having a role to play in helping to secure a better quality of life.

Public trust in the federal government increased during the late 1990s.

In a 2001 survey, a national sample of Canadians was asked: “How much do you trust the government in Ottawa to do what is right?” Nearly one in three said they believed that the federal government could be trusted “just about always” or “most of the time,” compared to one in five people in 1990.

Faith in the electoral process is declining.

Canadians who are “fairly satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the way federal elections work — 41% in 1990 and 30% in 2000.



Better

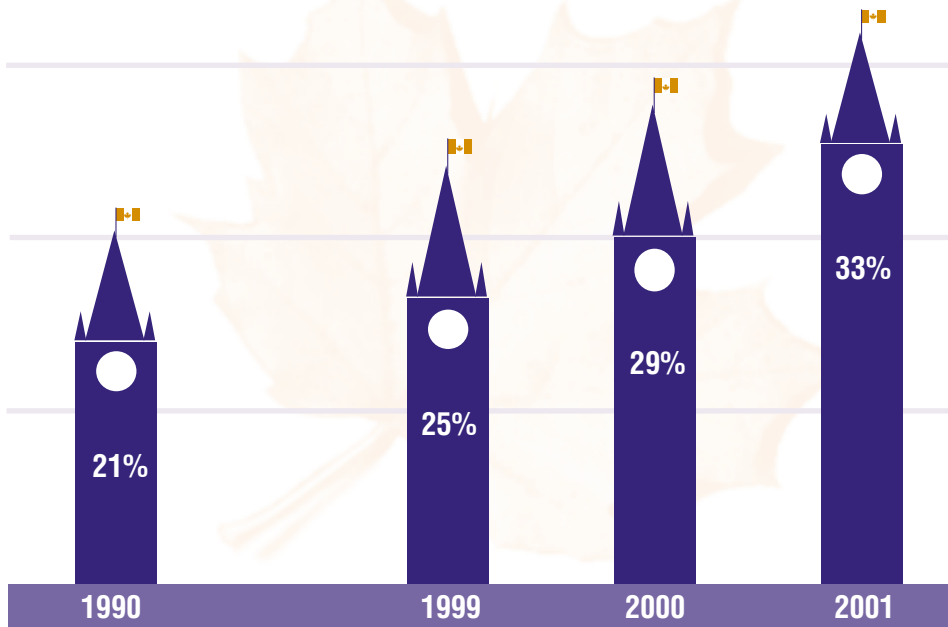
Level of public trust

Worse

Accountability/
stewardship of public
values and funds

Future analyses of public trust ideally will include similar questions asked of provincial governments. Further measures of public trust should be developed to tap into other dimensions of public trust in government.

Public Trust in the Federal Government¹⁶



Measuring government's progress

This theme has the least developed sources of data. Limited measures are available for assessing accountability and stewardship of public values.

A final word

There is much of interest in this collection of indicators. Yet there is no single measure that would allow one to conclude that quality of life in Canada is getting better or worse, or simply staying the same. This is not surprising for the following reasons:

- ✪ While the themes are presented in order of their priority to citizens, there is no acceptable way to determine a relative weight for each indicator in developing a composite measure. How does the value of accessible, quality education compare with that of clean air or water, for example?
- ✪ Ultimately, the question of whether quality of life has improved depends on the circumstances of the observer. What is most important is that we have captured a citizens' perspective, the most fundamental measure of progress in a society. With the results presented here, each of us can reach a valid conclusion about the country's progress on the things that matter most *to us*.

Filling the gaps

Particularly striking about *Quality of Life in Canada: A Citizens' Report Card* are the serious data gaps it uncovers. Citizens have presented a considerable challenge for the experts who measure performance. One thing is clear: no one can claim with confidence that "Canada is the best" or that "Canada is on the road to ruin" without better data on a number of factors that Canadian citizens say are critical to our country's quality of life.

Among the biggest data gaps are the following:

- ✪ a national snapshot of waiting lists for health services
- ✪ a measure of the quality of public education
- ✪ an assessment of the quality of governance and trust in government
- ✪ an indicator of trends in water quality



The citizens who worked with CPRN to create this first *Report Card* have challenged governments, businesses and voluntary organizations to become accountable — for what they do with their money and for how they use their resources to make Canada a better country. Improved data are vital to ensuring this accountability.

Mixed results

That being said, *Quality of Life in Canada: A Citizens' Report Card* does allow us to draw a number of conclusions. A common thread among all the dialogue groups was an emphasis on public trust, access, fairness and, above all, quality. In these respects, mixed results are evident within and across the nine themes:

- ✦ Despite improving trends in physical and mental health status over the decade, there were no assurances about the quality of health care and the fairness of waiting times.
- ✦ World-class performance on educational attainment and university enrolment is mitigated by the rising cost of a university education and a lack of evidence about the quality of public education.
- ✦ Strength in economic indicators must be weighed against deterioration in the indicators for social conditions and programs, and personal well-being.

- ✦ On the environmental front, waste management has improved significantly, but air and water quality have not. Moreover, there is no indicator for access to healthy outdoor green spaces.
- ✦ The right to vote and participate in Canadian life is highly valued, but fewer people are voting and we lack quality data on other patterns of participation.
- ✦ Canadians desire good government, but the concept is difficult to measure.

Within the limitations of the data, one could conclude from *Quality of Life in Canada: A Citizens' Report Card* that, although Canada does not appear to be in a serious decline, there is still plenty of room for improvement. Even then, there will be differences of opinion. The ensuing debate will be good for all of us.

Quality of Life in Canada: A Citizens' Report Card is a first effort. We hope to see the exercise repeated every five years. In the meantime, we will work with others to fill in the gaps and improve the measures that citizens have chosen.

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This publication is based on a report entitled *Quality of Life in Canada: A Citizens' Report Card — Background Report*. Much of the statistical information presented in the two publications was obtained from the following organizations:

Canadian Council on Social Development (www.ccsd.ca)

Conference Board of Canada (www2.conferenceboard.ca)

Federation of Canadian Municipalities (www.fcm.ca)

GPI Atlantic (www.gpiatlantic.org)

Pembina Institute (www.pembina.org)

Statistics Canada (www.statcan.ca)

Treasury Board (www.tbs-sct.gc.ca)

CPRN wishes to acknowledge the financial contributions provided by the Atkinson Charitable Foundation, the Treasury Board Secretariat and Health Canada. Without their support, this work would not have been possible.

