

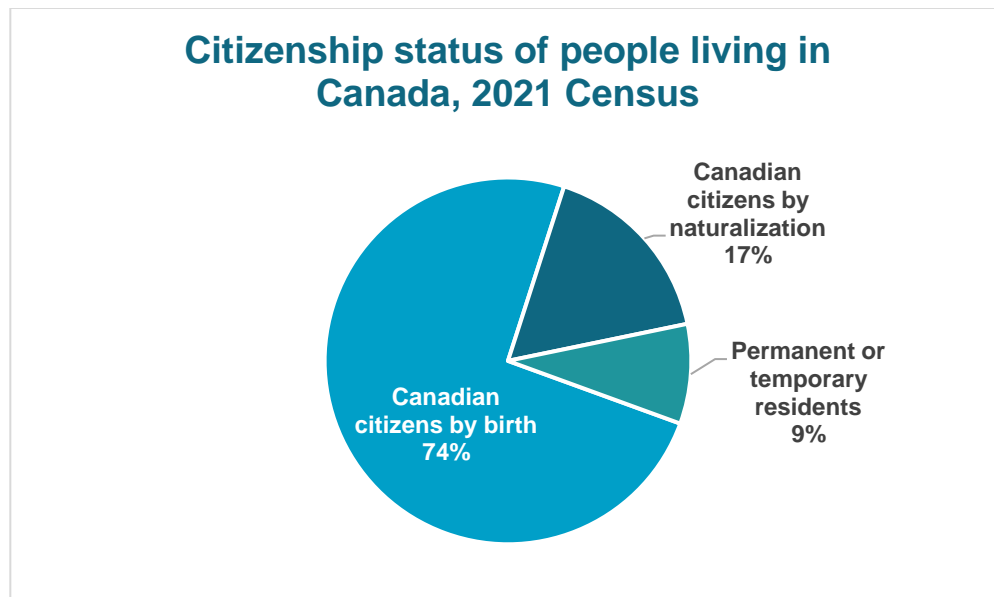
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Supporting the settlement and integration sector's understanding of public policy discourses and changes

This brief focuses on the **decline in Canada's citizenship rate** among recent immigrants.

Canada's naturalization rate has long been among the highest in the world, [in part due to](#) relatively strong settlement supports and an official multiculturalism policy. Based on the [2021 census](#), the **overall** naturalization rate among all immigrants who landed at least four years prior was 83.1%. Immigrants from non-OECD countries, as well as those who arrived as refugees or protected persons, are [more likely](#) to become citizens.



However, the citizenship rate among **recent** immigrants (i.e., immigrants who 'landed' as permanent residents between five to nine years prior to each census) has [significantly decreased](#), dropping from **75.4%** in 1996 to **45.7%** in 2021. The decline was especially steep between 2016 to 2021. While COVID-19 restrictions and processing issues contributed, the pattern started **before** COVID-19. Even after accounting for pandemic effects, the citizenship rate declined faster between 2016 and 2021 than any other period since 1996.

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The citizenship rate did not fall evenly. It was largest among those:

1. with lower education levels, family income, and/or English or French proficiency
2. from East Asia (primarily China) and, to a lesser extent, Southeast Asia

For the most advantaged recent immigrants – i.e., those with a high income, English or French as a mother tongue, **and** a post-secondary degree – it remained mostly unchanged.

Other aspects of naturalization have also changed. The average time from landing to citizenship [increased](#) (from 5.4 years in 2005-2010 to 6.3 years in 2021-22), with family class immigrants taking the longest time to obtain Canadian citizenship on average.

Importantly, Canada's declining citizenship rate is [not as pronounced](#) as in most other OECD countries, where recent immigration naturalization rates have declined faster. This is particularly true in Europe, where a '[restrictive cultural turn](#)' leading to tougher citizenship acquisition criteria – especially language proficiency – is likely a factor.

In Canada, though, the decline is not well understood. [Three key categories](#) of factors have been considered:

1. **Different individual immigrant characteristics** (e.g., a changing demographic profile of immigrants who are potentially less likely to naturalize)
 - In recent decades, the demographic profile of Canada's immigrants has indeed changed, but it changed in a way that **increased**, rather than reduced, the naturalization rate. Thus, this is **not** thought to be a factor.
2. **Changing citizenship legislation and policies** (e.g., administrative burdens; fluctuating residency requirements; tougher 'knowledge of Canada' requirements)
 - Canadian citizenship policy underwent major recent changes; many made naturalization more difficult, although some have been reversed.
 - Eliminating citizenship fees is an unfulfilled Liberal [government promise](#); it is possible some immigrants are postponing their naturalization for this reason.
 - The combination of multiple policy changes, in particular (1) increased application fees, and (2) strengthened language requirements, likely played a **very important** role in the declining naturalization rate, especially among immigrants with multiple socioeconomic disadvantages (i.e., low income, education, and official language abilities).
 - However, changing citizenship policies are likely **not the only factor**.
3. **International factors** (e.g., globalization; rising nationalism in some countries)
 - Because the timing and magnitude of rate decline varied dramatically depending

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- on source region/country, international factors are likely **important**.
- The rapid decline in naturalization among recent immigrants [from China](#) is notable; circular migration and rising economic prospects in China may partially explain these declines (and be a bellwether for countries like India).
- Dual nationality prohibitions likely have [limited impact](#) on the overall decline.

Declining rates matter because [citizenship matters](#) for individual newcomers. To what extent is hard to say; it is methodologically difficult to separate citizenship effects from other factors, such as social class. However, research indicates that becoming a citizen increases political and civic engagement, fosters a sense of [social belonging](#), has [economic benefits](#), and may improve other factors, such as health and well-being.

Significantly, marginalized immigrants tend to [benefit more](#) from naturalization than other immigrants. The disparity in naturalization rates along socioeconomic lines is thus likely further marginalizing precarious newcomers and exacerbating inequities.

Notes for the settlement and integration sector:

- International factors are largely beyond the sectors' control. However, more facilitative citizenship legislation and policies are possible (e.g., New Zealand has no citizenship test). Reducing application fees may be one particularly compelling advocacy goal.

Questions? Feedback? Email lbrunner@amssa.org or submit anonymously [here!](#)