

Executive Summary

What is it like to be a Muslim in Canada, and how has this changed over the past decade? The overall picture painted by this research is very different from the stereotyped images that often form the basis for broader public opinion. The results portray a small but growing part of the country's diverse population that is embracing Canada's diversity, democracy and freedoms, in the face of continuing controversy and mistreatment. The main conclusions of this research can be summarized as follows:

How well do Muslims feel accepted in Canada today? In spite of pervasive reporting of violence and terrorism abroad in the name of Islam, as well as stereotyping and controversy over religious and cultural practices here in Canada, Muslims are more likely than not to feel their religion is broadly accepted by the non-Muslim population. A small majority of Canadian Muslims believe that other Canadians have a generally positive impression of Islam, and that relatively few non-Muslims are openly hostile to their community; this view has strengthened since 2006. And in comparative terms, a large and growing majority of Muslims agree they are better treated than their co-religionists in other western countries (84% say they are treated better, versus only 2% who believe they are treated worse). In fact, most of the non-Muslim Canadians surveyed are more positive than negative in their general impression of Islam, although public opinion has not measurably improved over the past decade.

At the same time, discrimination and stereotyping continue to be a difficult reality for Muslims in Canada, and this is of particular concern to women and youth. One in three Canadian Muslims reports having experienced discrimination in the past five years, due primarily to one's religion or ethnicity; this is well above the levels of mistreatment experienced by the population-at-large. Such negative experiences take place in a variety of settings, most commonly in the workplace, in public spaces, in retail establishments, and in schools and universities. One in four Muslims reports having encountered difficulties crossing borders, and this experience happens irrespective of gender, age and country of birth. Moreover, opinions about prospects for a better future are mixed, and it is Muslim

youth (those aged 18 to 34) who are the least optimistic about the next generation facing less discrimination than their own.

How are religious identity and practice influenced by the Canadian context? Canadians are among the most secular people in the world, and this presents a different context for individuals who immigrate with non-western religious traditions. How are Muslims adapting their religious identity and practices to life in secular Canada? Muslims are one of the most religiously observant groups in Canada, and their religious identity and practices appear to be strengthening rather than weakening as their lives evolve in Canada. Being Muslim is a very important part of the identity for most followers of Islam, and comparatively stronger than for members of other major religious groups in Canada. And moving to Canada does not appear to be having a secularizing effect: Immigrants are more likely to say their attachment to Islam has grown than waned since arriving in the country.

Religious observance among Muslims has strengthened over the past decade. An increasing number are attending mosques for prayers on a regular basis (at least once a week) and (among women) are wearing the hijab. In both cases the trend is most noticeable among Muslims 18 to 34 years of age, in contrast with the broader trend in Canadian society where youth are turning away from organized religion. A plurality of Muslims believe their youth are less religious than previous generations, but concerns about the decline in importance placed on religion in their community have declined since 2006.

Consistent with the importance placed on religious practice, most Muslims in Canada support the right for individuals to pray in schools, and smaller majorities support the right for women to take the citizenship oath and/or receive public services while wearing the niqab. Not all Muslims agree, however, and opposition to such rights is more evident among older Muslims. Non-Muslim Canadians are also more likely than not to support the right to prayer in schools and wearing the niqab in public, although opinions are more divided.

One area in which religious and cultural traditions of the Muslim community clearly differ with other Canadians is in certain social values pertaining to family and sexuality. Muslims are more likely than other Canadians to value patriarchy (“the father must be the master in the home”) and to reject homosexuality. Second generation Muslims are closer to the majority perspective in both cases (particularly in rejecting patriarchy while less so in accepting homosexuality), which suggests that Muslim community values may gradually move into closer alignment with the rest of the population over time.

Do Muslims feel attached to Canada? As a population made up mostly of immigrants (many having arrived in the past decade), Muslims truly stand out as being among the most enthusiastic group of Canadian patriots. More than eight in ten are very proud to be Canadian (more so than the non-Muslim population) and this sentiment has strengthened over the past decade, especially in Quebec. Strong religious identity notwithstanding, Muslims are as likely as others in this country to say their Canadian identity is very important. And they agree with other Canadians on what makes Canada a great country: its freedom and democracy, and its multicultural diversity. Their greatest dislike, not surprisingly, is the cold climate.

Muslims increasingly express a strong sense of belonging to the country, and one manifestation is a high level of participation in last fall’s federal election. They also stand out as being upbeat about the direction of the country overall: nine in ten say it is moving in the right direction, a 10 point increase since 2006 and in contrast to declining confidence expressed by the non-Muslim population. Notably, negative experiences with discrimination have not measurably sullied individuals’ sense of connection with the country and what it stands for.

Because Muslims have a religion and cultural backgrounds unfamiliar to most other Canadians, they face questions about their interest and commitment to becoming part of Canadian society. But as was revealed in the first survey in 2006, this is largely a misconception. A majority of Muslims believe their community wants to integrate into broader society rather than remain distinct, and this view has strengthened over time. And this reality is also becoming more evident to non-Muslims, as fewer now believe than

a decade ago that Muslims in this country prefer not to integrate.

More important is the fact that Muslims are as likely as non-Muslims to place strong value on diversity and connections between cultures. And they agree with other Canadians about the values that immigrants should be adopting when they settle in Canada – language fluency, tolerance and respect for others and different cultures, appreciation of Canadian history, and respect for the law.

Arguably the sharpest flash point for non-Muslims is the perceived threat of domestic terrorism emanating from extremist Islamic ideology. This is as much, if not more, of a concern to Muslims, who take the threat of radicalization to violence very seriously given the impact extremist Islamic movements can have on their community. Muslims believe that very few in their faith support violent extremists abroad, and hold this view even more strongly than 2006. The vast majority place great importance on their community cooperating with government agencies to address radicalization, and for the most part are comfortable with the powers currently granted to the country’s security agencies (although there is clear discomfort with the provisions in the 2015 legislation known as Bill C-51).

How experiences and opinions vary across the Muslim community.

The paragraphs above describe the main study conclusions for the Canadian Muslim population overall, but experiences and attitudes of specific groups within this community stand out as follows:

Country of birth. Canadian-born Muslims (most of whom are second generation) stand out from immigrants in several ways. On the one hand they are the most integrated into Canadian society (having been born in the country), and this is reflected in their rejection of the patriarchal values more strongly espoused by their forebears. On the other hand, Canadian-born Muslims are also much more concerned than immigrants about the treatment of their community by the broader society. Compared with immigrants, they are more likely to express concerns about discrimination, to have experienced it personally, and to have felt inhibited about expressing political beliefs. They (along with youth) are the most pessimistic about the treatment of the next generation of Muslims and the most uncomfortable with Bill C-51.

Youth (ages 18 to 34). Muslim youth (who also tend to be second generation Canadians) stand out as being the most religiously observant generation in the Muslim community. They are most likely to visit mosques for prayer on a regular basis, wear the hijab, and support the right to pray in schools. Compared with older Muslims, they identify primarily as Muslim rather than as Canadian, and express a slightly weaker sense of belonging to the country. They also report higher levels of discrimination and feel pessimistic about how Muslims will be treated in the future. By comparison, Muslims 60 and older are among the most integrated of generations in that they identify as Canadian more than as Muslims, and express the least concern about discrimination and the threat of violent extremism.

Women. The experiences and opinions within the Muslim community are generally similar across genders, but a few differences are apparent. Women are much less likely than men to visit mosques for prayers, but also are more likely to identify primarily as a Muslim rather than as a Canadian, and to express a weaker sense of belonging to Canada. They are also more conscious of discrimination against Muslims

in their local community, to have personally experienced mistreatment by non-Muslims due to their religion, and to feel that hostility from the broader society is systemic rather than isolated.

Quebecers. Society's targeting of Muslims has been more prevalent in Quebec than anywhere else in Canada, and yet Quebec Muslims are surprisingly upbeat. Muslims in Quebec express the lowest levels of concern about discrimination against their community and about the provisions in Bill C-51. They are among the most positive about how future generations will be treated, and their level of pride in being Canadian has jumped dramatically over the past 10 years. While these findings may appear counterintuitive, it could well be that Quebec Muslims are feeling a sense of relief having dodged two recent bullets. First, the election defeat of the PQ Government and its proposed Charter of Values that would have banned the wearing of religious symbols in the public service. And second, the election defeat of the Harper Conservatives which stoked anti-Muslim sentiment during its recent reelection campaign, especially in Quebec.