



# COVID-19 IMPACTS: NEWCOMER AND REFUGEE MOTHERS IN CANADA

FINAL REPORT



The Vanier Institute of the Family is a national, independent, charitable organization dedicated to understanding the diversity and complexity of families and the reality of family life in Canada. The Institute offers access to a range of publications, research initiatives, presentations and social media content to enhance the national understanding of how families interact with, have an impact on and are affected by social, economic, environmental and cultural forces.

The Mothers Matter Centre is a not-for-profit, registered charity dedicated to serving socially isolated and low economic status mothers and their families. A virtual, national consortium of organizations founded in 2001, the Mothers Matter Centre works with isolated mothers in their homes to connect them with other mothers in their communities who share an intimate awareness of the issues and challenges they face.

#### **Authors**

Nathan Battams and Margo Hilbrecht, PhD

#### **Publisher**

The Vanier Institute of the Family

#### **Editing, Proofreading and Translation**

Veronica Schami Editorial Services Inc.  
[www.veronicaschami.com](http://www.veronicaschami.com)

#### **Graphic Design**

Denyse Marion  
Art & Facts Design Inc.  
[www.artandfacts.ca](http://www.artandfacts.ca)

The Vanier Institute of the Family  
94 CentrepoinTE Drive  
Ottawa, Ontario K2G 6B1  
613-228-8500  
[www.vanierinstitute.ca](http://www.vanierinstitute.ca)

Copyright © 2022 The Vanier Institute of the Family and Mothers Matter Centre

Readers are free to reprint parts of this publication as background for conferences, seminars and classroom use with appropriate credit to the Vanier Institute of the Family. Citation in editorial copy for newsprint, radio and television is permitted. However, all other rights are reserved and therefore no other use will be permitted in whole or in part without written permission from the Vanier Institute of the Family.

#### **How to cite this document:**

Battams, N., & Hilbrecht, M. (2022, February 7). *COVID-19 impacts: Newcomer and refugee mothers in Canada – Final report*. The Vanier Institute of the Family and Mothers Matter Centre.

# CONTENTS

<b>List of Tables and Figures</b> .....	<b>i</b>
<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	<b>ii</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Methodology and Participant Characteristics</b> .....	<b>3</b>
Methodology .....	3
Participant Characteristics .....	3
<b>COVID-19 Impacts on Well-Being</b> .....	<b>6</b>
Life Satisfaction .....	6
Health and Well-Being Trajectories .....	8
Mental Health and Stress .....	8
Sleeping Patterns .....	10
Reaching Out for Support .....	11
<b>COVID-19 Impacts on Household Finances</b> .....	<b>13</b>
Impact on Finances and Current/Future Concerns .....	13
Financial Support and Adaptations/Strategies .....	15
Dwelling Information .....	17
<b>COVID-19 Impacts on Family Roles and Relationships</b> .....	<b>18</b>
Change in Main Activities and Household Tasks .....	18
Relationship With Spouse or Partner .....	20
Feelings of Connection to Others .....	20
<b>Other Participant Thoughts and Reflections</b> .....	<b>22</b>
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>23</b>

# LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

**Table 1A:** Sample Characteristics .....4

**Table 1B:** Sample Characteristics (Cont.) .....5

**Table 2:** Frequency of Experiencing Mental Health-Related Factors Since the Start of COVID-19 .....9

**Table 3:** Frequency of Experiencing Stress-Related Factors Since the Start of COVID-19 .....9

**Table 4:** Frequency of Experiencing Sleep Issues Before and During COVID-19 .....10

**Table 5:** Looked for Help/Found Help for Health or Mental Health Since the Start of COVID-19 .....11

**Table 6:** Level of Financial Impact of COVID-19, by Age Group and Refugee Status .....14

**Table 7:** Financial Support Received Since the Beginning of COVID-19 .....16

**Table 8:** Strategies Used to Cope With the Financial Impacts of COVID-19 .....16

**Table 9:** Change in Main Activities from Before the Start of COVID-19 .....19

**Table 10:** Change in Division of Caring for Children and Household Tasks .....19

---

**Figure 1:** Level of Life Satisfaction .....6

**Figure 2:** Level of Life Satisfaction by Location of Residence .....7

**Figure 3:** Level of Life Satisfaction Among Refugees and Non-Refugees .....7

**Figure 4:** Change in Levels of Family Well-Being, Physical Health and Mental Health During COVID-19 .....8

**Figure 5:** Amount of Time Usually Spent Sleeping per Day Before and During COVID-19 .....10

**Figure 6:** Use and Delivery Mode of Mental Health Services Since the Beginning of COVID-19 .....12

**Figure 7:** Change in Frequency of Selected Weekly Habits Since the Beginning of COVID-19 .....12

**Figure 8:** Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Family’s Financial Situation .....13

**Figure 9:** Impact of the Pandemic on Family’s Ability to Meet Financial Obligations and Essential Needs .....14

**Figure 10:** Level of Concern About Family’s Current and Future Financial Situation .....15

**Figure 11:** Experiences of Housing Conditions .....17

**Figure 12:** Changes to Relationship With Partner or Spouse During COVID-19 .....20

**Figure 13:** Feelings of Connection to Others During COVID-19 .....21

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To enhance our understanding of how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected newcomer and refugee mothers, the Mothers Matter Centre partnered with the Vanier Institute of the Family to conduct a survey of those enrolled in their Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPPY), Supporting Mothers and Raising Toddlers (SMART) and Bond to Literacy (BTL) programs.

The survey was conducted from April 13 to May 13, 2021. It sought to explore the impacts of the pandemic on mothers' well-being, daily activities, work and finances, access to programs and supports, and more.

## **COVID-19 has had a negative impact on the well-being of newcomer and refugee mothers**

While a slight majority of participants (52%) said they were currently satisfied or very satisfied with their lives, this is far lower than the 93% reported by the total population in Canada. Participant well-being declined during the pandemic – especially their mental health. Many reported a worsening of their mental health (44%), physical health (31%) and family well-being (27%), and there was an increase in the percentage who were sleeping less than six hours per night.

Nearly three in 10 newcomer and refugee mothers (28%) said they had sought help for their own health/mental health or that of a family member at some point during the pandemic. Nearly (45%) said this help was not available to them when needed.

## **Household finances have been affected by the pandemic, and newcomer and refugee mothers have adapted by using diverse supports**

The pandemic had a clear impact on household finances of the newcomer and refugee mothers, with 22% reporting a “major impact” on their family's ability to meet financial obligations or essential needs, and 43% saying they were financially worse off than before COVID-19. Participants reported accessing a variety of supports to help cope with these financial impacts, with CERB being the most widely used (38%); however, more than 30% said no support was needed.

## **Family roles and responsibilities have changed as families adapt to the pandemic**

The percentage of participants citing paid work as one of their top three main activities dropped from 40.1% before COVID-19 to 35.3% when surveyed in Spring 2021, while the percentage going to school fell from 13.8% to 3.9%. As seen in other surveys,<sup>1</sup> participants reported an increase in the sharing of household tasks, such as cooking and cleaning, and, to a lesser extent, caring for children. Participants reported diverging trends in their personal relationships, with a majority (54%) saying they feel more connected to their families at home but less connected to others (e.g., neighbours, friends). Couple relationships appear strong, with most saying they and their spouse or partner have been supporting each other well, spending more quality time together, engaging in more meaningful conversations and feel closer to one another.

Findings from this survey offer unique insights into the experiences and well-being of newcomer and refugee mothers involved with programs run by the Mothers Matter Centre. As we continue to navigate the pandemic and adapt to new contexts, data on these experiences and adaptations will inform and facilitate evidence-based decision-making to support their well-being.

---

<sup>1</sup> Zossou, C. (2021, February 15). *Sharing household tasks: Teaming up during the COVID-19 pandemic* (StatCan COVID-19: Data to insights for a better Canada, Catalogue no. 45280001). Government of Canada. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/45-28-0001/2020001/article/00081-eng.htm>

# INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic and public health measures enacted to prevent contagion have had major social and economic impacts across Canada, and have disrupted the relationships, routines and networks of care that are important to families and family well-being.

Many studies have shown that, throughout the pandemic, newcomers and refugees in Canada have had unique experiences and have seen disproportionate impacts to multiple facets of their quality of life, including their health and well-being, work and household finances,<sup>2</sup> and relationships with their social circles and communities.

The well-being of newcomer and refugee mothers is a key focus of the Mothers Matter Centre, which manages an evidence-based program that works in the home to support vulnerable and isolated mothers in their critical role as their child's first and most important teacher. The Mothers Matter Centre strengthens families and communities by empowering mothers to actively participate in Canadian society and prepare their children for success in school and life.<sup>3</sup>

To enhance our understanding of how the pandemic has affected newcomer and refugee mothers, the Mothers Matter Centre partnered with the Vanier Institute of the Family to conduct a survey of those enrolled in their Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPOY), Supporting Mothers and Raising Toddlers (SMART) and Bond to Literacy (BTL) programs. Open from April 13 to May 13, 2021, the questionnaire gathered information on various topics, including their health and well-being, main activities, household finances and relationships.

Measures of well-being are approached from different angles, including both the physical and mental health of the mother and the family unit, as well as the social and economic factors that can affect well-being.

In addition to looking at *how* mothers are doing, the study looks at *what* they are doing, including their involvement with family care, work and training programs. The survey explored the ways the pandemic may have created or magnified barriers in mothers' access to supports and services, such as skills training programs and language classes.

Finally, the project also asked mothers to share their insights and opinions on what would best help them to support their well-being going forward.

---

<sup>2</sup> Ferrer, A., & Momani, B. (2020, October 21). The startling impact of COVID-19 on immigrant women in the workforce. *Policy Options*. <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/october-2020/the-startling-impact-of-covid-19-on-immigrant-women-in-the-workforce/>

<sup>3</sup> Mothers Matter Centre. (2019). *Who we are*. <https://mothersmattercentre.ca/who-we-are/>

## How to Read This Report

The report is presented in three sections to align with priorities for understanding the impact of the pandemic on newcomer and refugee mothers, in terms of their:

- Health and well-being
- Household finances
- Social relationships

Highlights of findings are summarized at the beginning of each section, followed by tables and figures presenting the data. Note that, in tables showing responses to whether indicators of well-being have become “worse” or “better,” the response options of “significantly worse” and “slightly worse” were grouped as “worse.” Similarly, the response options of “significantly better” and “slightly better” have been combined into “better.”

Interspersed throughout the report are comments from participants when asked to complete the sentence, “Wouldn’t it be great if [after the pandemic]...” These help to more fully illustrate newcomer and refugee mothers’ experiences, concerns and hopes for the future.

Throughout the report, the term “participants” is used to describe the entire group of people who took part in the survey (i.e., both newcomer and refugee mothers). To avoid repetitive vocabulary, “mothers” is also sometimes used interchangeably with “participants” and “newcomer and refugee mothers” to describe the entire group.

This survey was targeted to newcomer and refugee mothers who are in the HIPPY, SMART and BTL programs. As such, its findings should not be taken to represent the experiences of all newcomer and refugee mothers in Canada.

Note that this survey was conducted in English only.

## Definition of Terms

**Home Visitor:** Mothers from the communities served by the Mothers Matter Centre who are hired to deliver programming in a peer-to-peer format to participants in the participants’ homes.

**Isolated mothers:** Mothers who, due to various barriers, are unable to participate in social, economic, political and civic activities. The contexts of these mothers differ only because of their isolation; they are often unable to access pre-existing services or to take part in community building.

**Newcomers:** People who have been in Canada for less than five years.

**Percent of cases:** The percentage of survey participants who selected a specific response option when given the option to select multiple responses.

**Refugees:** People who have been forced to leave their country due to persecution, war, conflict or natural disaster to find safety in another country.<sup>4</sup>

**Well-being:** “How people feel and how they function, both on a personal and a social level, and how they evaluate their lives as a whole.”<sup>5</sup> P.6 It extends the focus beyond health and economic circumstances to include people’s social, emotional and spiritual needs.

---

<sup>4</sup> UNHCR. (2021). *What is a refugee?* <https://www.unhcr.org/frequently-asked-questions.html#whatisarefugee>

<sup>5</sup> New Economics Foundation. (2012). *Measuring well-being: A guide for practitioners.* <https://neweconomics.org/uploads/files/measuring-wellbeing.pdf>

# METHODOLOGY AND PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

## Methodology

- Survey participants were newcomer and refugee mothers ages 20 and older who participated in the HIPPY, SMART and BTL home visiting programs offered by the Mothers Matter Centre.
- The valid sample for this survey was 341, a response rate of 77.5% of the 440 program participants who were invited to complete the survey.
- The survey was open from April 13 to May 13, 2021.
- The survey was conducted online using Qualtrics survey software and administered by Home Visitors while on a visit.
- Demographic categories of interest were age group, education, place of residence, refugee status and year of admission to Canada, the latter being divided into “Newcomers (2016 to 2021)” and “Established immigrants (before 2016).”
- Gender was recorded but men were excluded from the sample since 98% of participants identified as women. Excluded from analysis were whether the respondent lived with their partner (also the case for 98% of participants) and whether they were a person with a disability (99% reported no disability). Marital status was recorded but left out of analysis because more than nine in 10 (92%) were married.

## Participant Characteristics

- Nearly 90% of the participants were ages 30 to 49.
- Overall, participants were well educated, with more than seven in 10 having completed college, university or trades certificate (69%).
- Most of the survey participants lived in Ontario (48%), British Columbia (20%) and the Prairies (16% in Alberta, 9% in Saskatchewan, 7% in Manitoba).
- Nearly 83% lived in a big city (58%) or a small city (24%), with just under 16% located in a small town. Less than 2% lived in rural areas.
- Arabic, Mandarin, English and Spanish were the most common first languages of participants, while 30 languages were identified in the “other” category.
- The highest proportions of participants were born in China (14%), followed by those from Syria (11%) and India (9%).
- Refugees accounted for 23% of participants, nearly half (45%) of whom were government-assisted.
- A majority (56%) of participants completed the survey on their own, with another 17% doing so with the help of a Home Visitor (see Tables 1A and 1B).

**Table 1A***Sample Characteristics*

	<b>Category</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Age	20-29	30	9.4
	30-39	189	59.2
	40-49	91	28.5
	> 50	9	2.8
Education	No formal education	8	2.4
	Less than high school diploma or equivalent	36	10.9
	High school diploma or equivalent	46	14.0
	Trade certificate or diploma	9	2.7
	College or University	224	68.1
	Other	6	1.8
Province/territory	Quebec	1	0.3
	Ontario	166	47.6
	Manitoba	24	6.9
	Saskatchewan	31	8.9
	Alberta	55	15.8
	British Columbia	71	20.3
	Northwest Territories	1	0.3
Location type	Rural area	6	1.9
	Small town	49	15.6
	Small city	77	24.4
	Big city	183	58.1
Marital status	Single	7	2.1
	Married, living together, common-law	311	92.3
	Separated, divorced	16	4.7
	Widowed	3	0.9
Live with partner?	Yes	304	98.1
	No	6	1.9

**Table 1B***Sample Characteristic (Cont.)*

	Category	N	%
Refugee?	Yes	77	23.3
	No	253	76.7
If yes, were you a...	Government-assisted refugee	33	44.6
	Privately sponsored refugee	28	37.8
	Refugee seeker	13	17.6
What country were you born in?	China	46	14.3
	Syria	34	10.6
	India	29	9.0
	Pakistan	19	5.9
	Philippines	19	5.9
	Sri Lanka	19	5.9
	Mexico	13	4.0
	Eritrea	12	3.7
	Sudan	9	2.8
	Colombia	9	2.8
	Ethiopia	9	2.8
	Egypt	8	2.5
	Nigeria	6	1.9
	Iraq	6	1.9
	El Salvador	5	1.6
Other	79	24.5	
What year did you come to Canada?	Established immigrants (before 2016)	151	48.3
	Newcomers (2016 to present)	125	51.8
Who completed this survey?	HIPPY mom/dad alone	152	55.5
	HIPPY mom/dad with help from home visitor	47	17.2
	Home Visitor for themselves	46	16.8
	Coordinator for themselves	8	2.9
	Other (please specify)	21	7.7

# COVID-19 IMPACTS ON WELL-BEING

## Highlights

- **Majority of participants are satisfied with life but at a much lower rate than the general population**  
More than half (52%) of participants said they were currently satisfied or very satisfied with their lives, far lower than the 93% reported by the total population. Refugees were more likely than non-refugees to be very dissatisfied.
- **Participant well-being declined during the pandemic, especially their mental health**  
Many participants reported that their mental health (44%), physical health (31%) and family well-being (27%) became worse during the pandemic, and participants were more than three times as likely to report that they sleep less than six hours per night during the pandemic (21.2%) than before (6.4%).
- **Many newcomer and refugee mothers reached out for help, which wasn't available for half of them**  
Nearly three in 10 participants (28%) said they had looked for help for their own health/mental health or that of a family member at some point during the pandemic. Nearly half (45%) reported that this help was not available to them when needed.

## Life Satisfaction

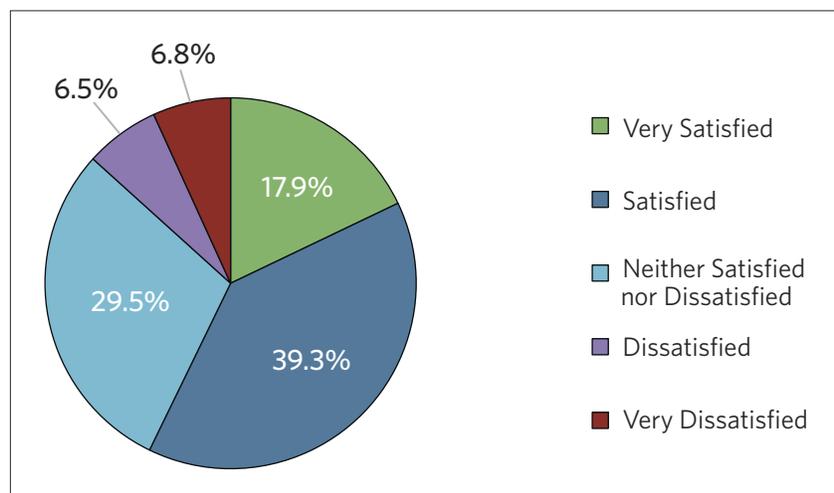
Life satisfaction is a widely used measure of well-being that provides information about how people evaluate their life as a whole.

### *How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your life right now?*

Just over half of surveyed mothers (51.7%) said they were currently satisfied or very satisfied with their life (see Fig. 1). While this represents a slight majority of participants, it is far lower than the 93% of Canadian women ages 18 and older in 2020 who said the same.<sup>6</sup>

**Figure 1**

*Level of Life Satisfaction*

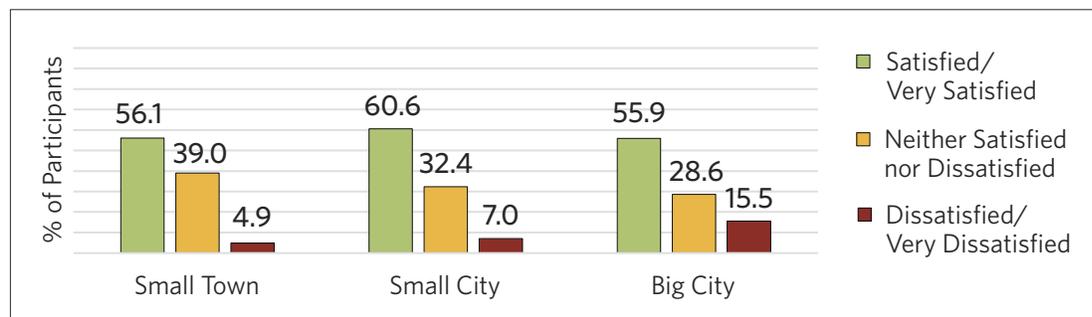


<sup>6</sup> Statistics Canada. (2021). Table 13-10-0096-05 Life satisfaction, satisfied or very satisfied, by age group (Women ages 18 to 64 years). <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1310009605>

Participants who lived in a small city (60.6%) were most likely to report being satisfied or very satisfied with their life. Slightly lower (and similar) rates were found among participants living in either small towns (56.1%) or big cities (55.9%) (see Fig. 2). This aligns with previous research that has found a negative relationship between life satisfaction and living in relatively dense and urbanized settings.<sup>7</sup>

**Figure 2**

*Level of Life Satisfaction by Location of Residence<sup>a</sup>*

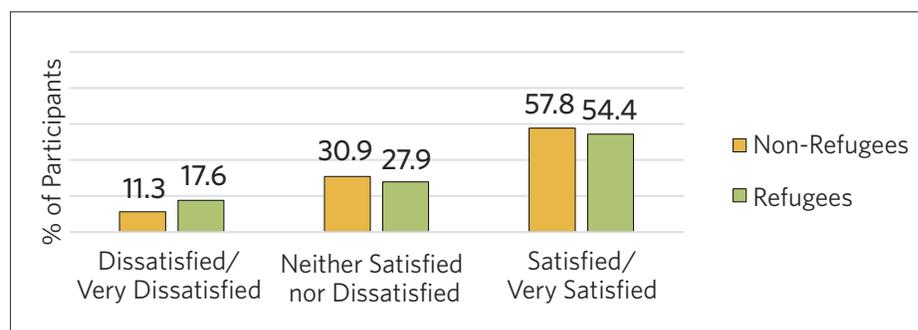


<sup>a</sup>“Rural area” is excluded from the above figure due to a low number of responses, which precludes meaningful analysis.

There was no major difference among refugees and non-refugees in the proportion of mothers reporting being either satisfied or *very satisfied* with their life (see Fig. 3). Even so, refugees were more than three times as likely as non-refugees to report being very dissatisfied, at 13.2% and 3.9%, respectively (not shown).

**Figure 3**

*Level of Life Satisfaction Among Refugees and Non-Refugees*



<sup>7</sup> Helliwell, J. F., Shiple, H., & Barrington-Leigh, C. P. (2019). How happy are your neighbours? Variation in life satisfaction among 1200 Canadian neighbourhoods and communities. *PLoS ONE*, 14(1), e0210091. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0210091>

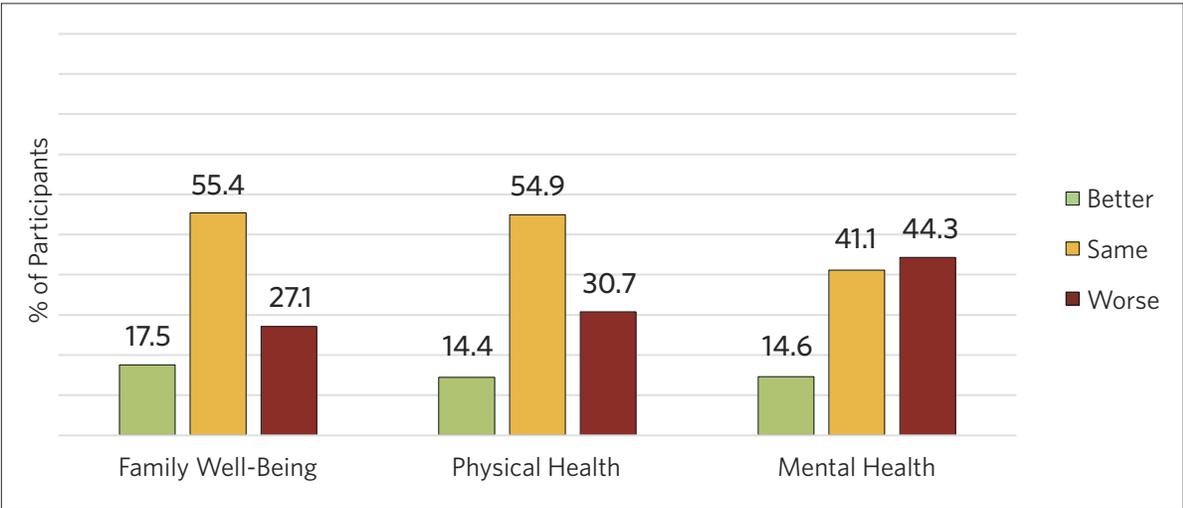
## Health and Well-Being Trajectories

*Compared with before the start of the pandemic, how would you say your [family well-being/physical health/mental health] has changed?*

Participants were asked how the pandemic has changed their family well-being, physical health and mental health (if at all). The evidence suggests that the greatest impact of the pandemic has been on mental health, with 44% reporting that it had become worse (compared with 31% for physical health and 27% for family well-being).

Fortunately, nearly three-quarters of participants said that their family well-being had stayed the same (55%) or become better (18%). This was similar to physical health, where almost one in seven participants (69%) reported that their physical health was the same or better, compared with pre-pandemic levels (see Fig. 4).

**Figure 4**  
*Change in Levels of Family Well-Being, Physical Health and Mental Health During COVID-19*



## Mental Health and Stress

*Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, how often have you experienced the following?*

Mothers were asked how often they felt or experienced certain mental health-related factors since the beginning of the pandemic. Nine of the 10 mental health-related experiences were prevalent in at least three-quarters of participants. Nervousness/anxiety was the most common experience (90%) and restlessness was the least common experience (69%) (see Table 2).

When asked about the frequency of various mental health-related experiences since the start of the pandemic, the top three stressors mothers experienced either *a lot* or *every day* were feeling bored (41%), feeling trapped (37%) and worrying too much about different things (35%). However, between 15% and 20% said they never had experienced these concerns.

**Table 2***Frequency of Experiencing Mental Health-Related Factors Since the Start of COVID-19*

Mental health-related factors	% of participants			
Since the start of the pandemic, how often have you experienced the following?	Never	Sometimes	A lot	Every day
Bored	17.1	41.9	31.0	10.0
Trapped	20.1	43.2	26.4	10.2
Worrying too much about different things	15.2	50.3	26.8	7.7
Becoming easily annoyed or irritable	15.5	52.8	24.4	7.3
Feeling nervous, anxious or on edge	9.9	58.9	27.1	4.1
Afraid as if something awful might happen	16.4	55.3	20.7	7.6
Trouble relaxing	16.8	55.7	19.4	8.1
Not being able to stop or control worrying	19.7	52.8	22.3	5.2
Depressed	21.8	56.0	16.3	5.9
Being so restless that it is hard to sit still	31.0	48.0	16.0	4.9

*Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, how often have you felt stressed by the following problems [personal and family]?*

There was little difference in the extent to which participants felt stressed by family or personal problems. Three in 10 said they had experienced stress related to family problems (30%) or personal problems (27%) either a lot or every day since the start of the pandemic, although 13% to 15% said they never experienced these problems (see Table 3).

**Table 3***Frequency of Experiencing Stress-Related Factors Since the Start of COVID-19*

Stress-related factors	% of participants		
Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, how often have you felt stressed by the following problems?	Sometimes	A lot	Every day
Family	57.1	24.4	5.2
Personal	58.6	22.0	4.8

## Sleeping Patterns

- More than six in 10 newcomer and refugee mothers (62%) said they slept 6 to 8 hours each night.
- Participants were more than three times as likely to report that usually they had been sleeping less than six hours per night during the pandemic (21%) compared with before the pandemic (6%).
- Conversely, the percentage who said that before COVID-19 they usually slept for 8 or more hours (26%) decreased by almost half (16%) during COVID-19 (see Fig. 5).

### *Wouldn't it be great if [after the pandemic]...*

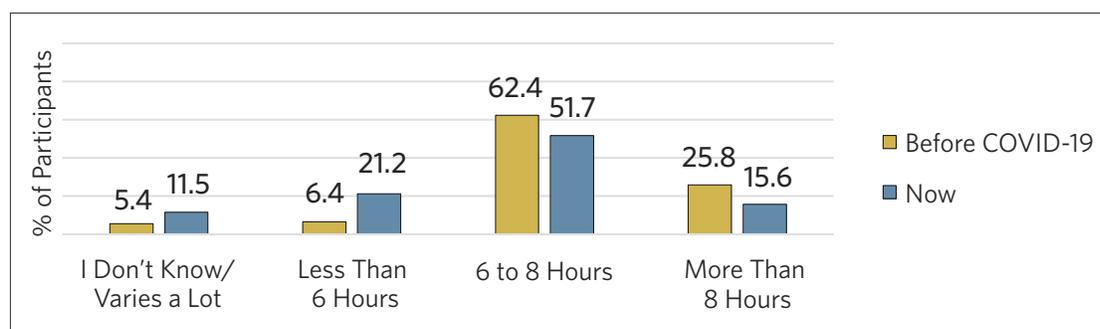
*"...nous pouvions à nouveau vivre simplement sans stress?"*

*"...I could connect in person with my family from my home country and my friends here? I feel terribly lonely and overwhelmed with kids responsibilities, career goals and it can be depressing."*

(Various participants)

**Figure 5**

*Amount of Time Usually Spent Sleeping per Day Before and During COVID-19*



Newcomer and refugee mothers reported a notable impact of the pandemic on their sleeping patterns and experiences. They were more than twice as likely to have trouble falling asleep and three times as likely to have trouble staying asleep during the pandemic. Further, the proportion of participants who sometimes or always had nightmares before the pandemic (47%) increased to 57% during the pandemic (see Table 4).

**Table 4**

*Frequency of Experiencing Sleep Issues Before and During COVID-19*

How often do/ did you have...?	Trouble falling asleep		Trouble staying asleep		Nightmares	
	% of participants		% of participants		% of participants	
	Before COVID-19	Now	Before COVID-19	Now	Before COVID-19	Now
Never	44.9	27.9	47.6	33.1	52.6	42.8
Sometimes	49.5	60.8	49.5	57.9	44.5	51.8
Always	5.6	11.3	2.9	9.0	2.9	5.4

## Reaching Out for Support

Nearly three in 10 mothers (28%) said they had looked for help for their own health/mental health or that of a family member at some point during the pandemic. Of these participants, nearly half (45%) said this help was not available to them when needed. Mental health services were accessed by 15.2% of newcomer and refugee mothers, two-thirds of whom did so virtually.

- Nearly three in 10 mothers (28%) said they were *looking for help* for physical or mental health reasons; 55% of them said the help was *available*.
- Since the start of the pandemic, roughly 15% of the participants reported having *accessed* mental health services in person or virtually for themselves or a family member.
- Among the weekly habits people had been taking part in since the start of the pandemic, practising their faith or religion and trying new things increased among mothers by 33% and 42%, respectively.

*Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, was there ever a time when you were looking for help for any reason (e.g., for your health or mental health, or for a family member's health or mental health)?*

Many people have experienced a negative change in their mental and physical health since the beginning of the pandemic. Nearly three in 10 participants (28%) looked for help for health concerns either for themselves or a family member, while 5% chose not to disclose that information. Just over half of those who looked for help (55%) reported that the kind of help they needed was available (see Table 5).

**Table 5**

*Looked for Help/Found Help for Health or Mental Health Since the Start of COVID-19*

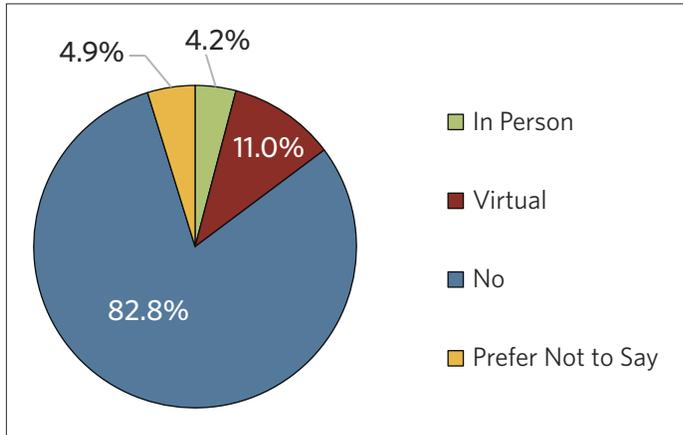
Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, was there ever a time when you were looking for help for any reason (e.g., for your health or mental health, or for a family member's health or mental health)?	% of participants
Yes	27.5
No	67.6
Prefer not to say	4.9
(If yes) was the kind of help you were looking for available to you when you needed it?	
Yes	55.4
No	44.6

*Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, have you accessed mental health services for any reason (e.g., for your mental health or for a family member)?*

More than eight in 10 participants (83%) had not accessed mental health services since the beginning of COVID-19. Of those who did, just over 4% did so in person, and 11% accessed the services virtually (see Fig. 6).

**Figure 6**

*Use and Delivery Mode of Mental Health Services Since the Beginning of COVID-19*

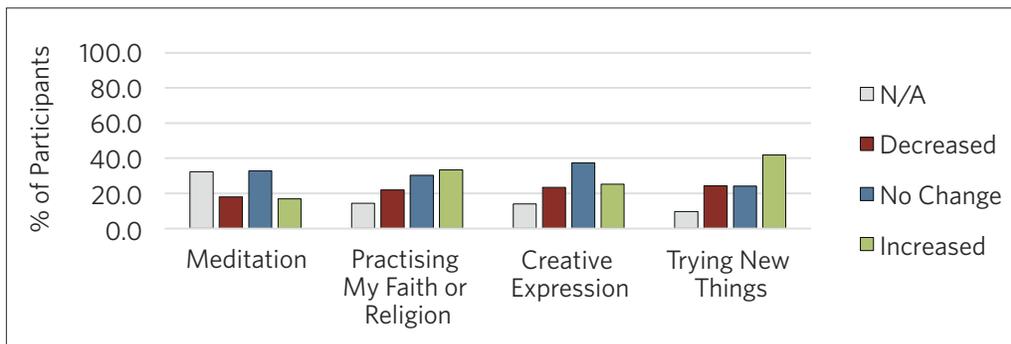


*Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, have your weekly habits changed for any of the following activities?*

Since the start of the pandemic, newcomer and refugee mothers who engaged in positive habits – such as meditation, practising their religion, creative expression and trying new things – were more likely to have increased these activities than to have decreased them. However, approximately one in five participants decreased each of these behaviours (see Fig. 7).

**Figure 7**

*Change in Frequency of Selected Weekly Habits Since the Beginning of COVID-19*



Note. The N/A option was for behaviours that participants did not engage in either before or during the pandemic.

# COVID-19 IMPACTS ON HOUSEHOLD FINANCES

## Highlights

- **One in five participants report a “major impact” to their finances**

The pandemic had a clear impact on household finances, with 22% reporting a “major impact” on their family’s ability to meet financial obligations or essential needs and 43% saying they were financially worse off than before COVID-19.

- **Newcomer and refugee mothers used diverse sources of financial support**

Participants reported accessing a variety of supports, with CERB being the most widely used (38%); however, more than 30% said no support was needed.

*Wouldn’t it be great if [after the pandemic]...*

*“...we [did] not need to worry about our financial constraints and professional growth?”*

*“...we don’t have to worry about money and health anymore?”*

*“...work from home and flexible options can continue so we can spend more time with family?”*

(Various participants)

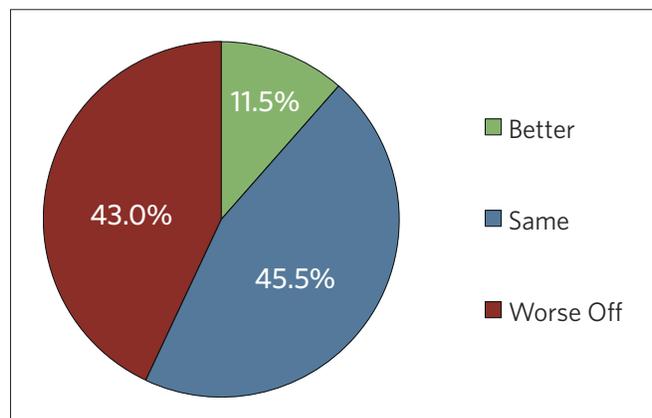
## Impact on Finances and Current/Future Concerns

*How has COVID-19 impacted your family’s financial situation?*

A similar percentage of participants felt that their family’s financial situation was either worse (43%) or about the same (46%) compared with before COVID-19. Only 11.5% felt that their family has been in a better financial situation during the pandemic (see Fig. 8).

**Figure 8**

*Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Family’s Financial Situation*

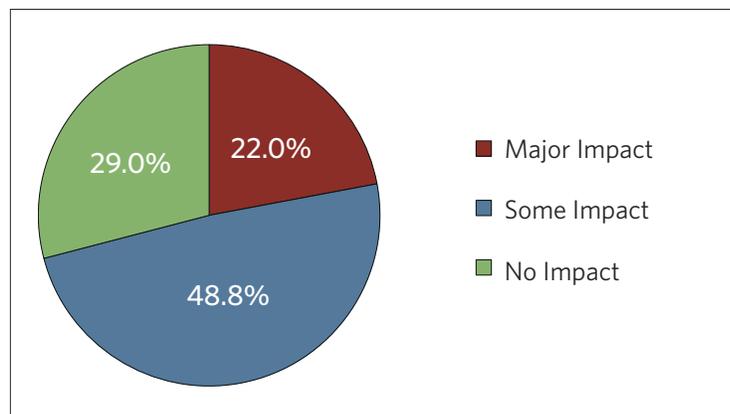


Which of the following best describes the impact of COVID-19 on your/your family's ability to meet financial obligations or essential needs (e.g., rent, utilities and groceries)?

Overall, 71% of mothers felt that there had been some or a major impact of COVID-19 on their family's ability to meet financial obligations and essential needs. Just three in 10 (29%) experienced no impact (see Fig. 9).

**Figure 9**

*Impact of the Pandemic on Family's Ability to Meet Financial Obligations and Essential Needs*



Participants in their 20s were the most likely age group to have seen a major financial impact (26.3%) and, to an even greater degree, less likely to report no impact (15.8%) (see Table 6).

**Table 6**

*Level of Financial Impact of COVID-19, by Age Group and Refugee Status*

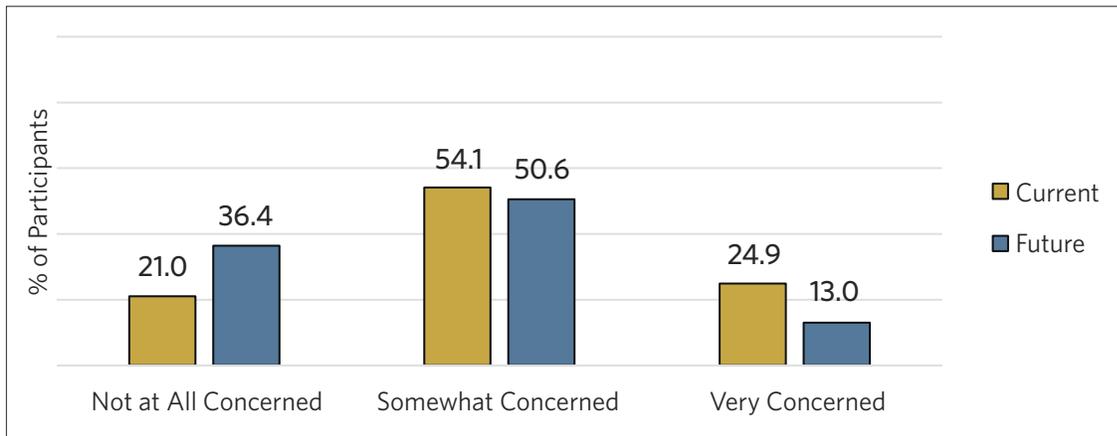
Which of the following best describes the impact of COVID-19 on your/your family's ability to meet financial obligations or essential needs (e.g., rent, utilities and groceries)?	% of participants		
	No impact	Some impact	Major impact
Age group <sup>a</sup>			
20-29	15.8	57.9	26.3
30-39	27.7	46.9	25.4
40-49	32.4	54.1	13.5
Refugee status			
Refugee	18.4	63.3	18.4
Non-refugee	32.0	45.9	22.2

<sup>a</sup>Age 50 and older excluded due small sample size.

*How concerned are you about your family's [current/future] financial situation?*

More than half of participants reported that they were somewhat concerned about their family's financial situation during the pandemic (54%) and in future (51%). While one in five said they were not at all concerned about their current finances, 25% were very concerned – although when asked about the future, 36% were not at all concerned (see Fig. 10).

**Figure 10**  
*Level of Concern About Family's Current and Future Financial Situation*



### **Financial Support and Adaptations/Strategies**

Most newcomer and refugee mothers and their families needed additional financial support to cope with the financial impacts of COVID-19. A variety of sources were accessed, most of which were administered by the federal government. The Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) was the most widely used, with 38% of participants and their families having received it.

Regular Employment Insurance (EI) benefits were accessed by those whose employment had been affected (18%) and EI Special Benefits were used for maternity, parental, caregiving or compassionate leave (4.4%). For 6% of participants, family members provided some financial support. Three in 10 mothers (31%) needed no additional financial support since the start of the pandemic (see Table 7).

**Table 7***Financial Support Received Since the Beginning of COVID-19*

Since the beginning of COVID-19, what types of financial support or help has your family received? <sup>a</sup>	% of cases
Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB)	38.2
Other regular Employment Insurance Benefits	17.8
Financial support received from other family members	5.8
Other EI (maternity, parental, caregiving or compassionate care)	4.4
Canada Emergency Student Benefit (CESB)	4.4
Wage subsidy through your employer (CEWS)	1.8
Temporary wage top-up for essential workers	1.8
Other government programs	20.9
No support was needed	30.7

<sup>a</sup>Participants were asked to indicate all sources of financial support.

Beyond accessing financial support, a number of other strategies were used to manage the financial impact of the pandemic. Three in 10 newcomer and refugee mothers cut down on spending on essential items, while 27% used money that had been saved for other purposes to pay for regular expenses. Ten percent asked family and/or friends for financial assistance, and 5% asked for financial support from community organizations (see Table 8).

**Table 8***Strategies Used to Cope With the Financial Impacts of COVID-19*

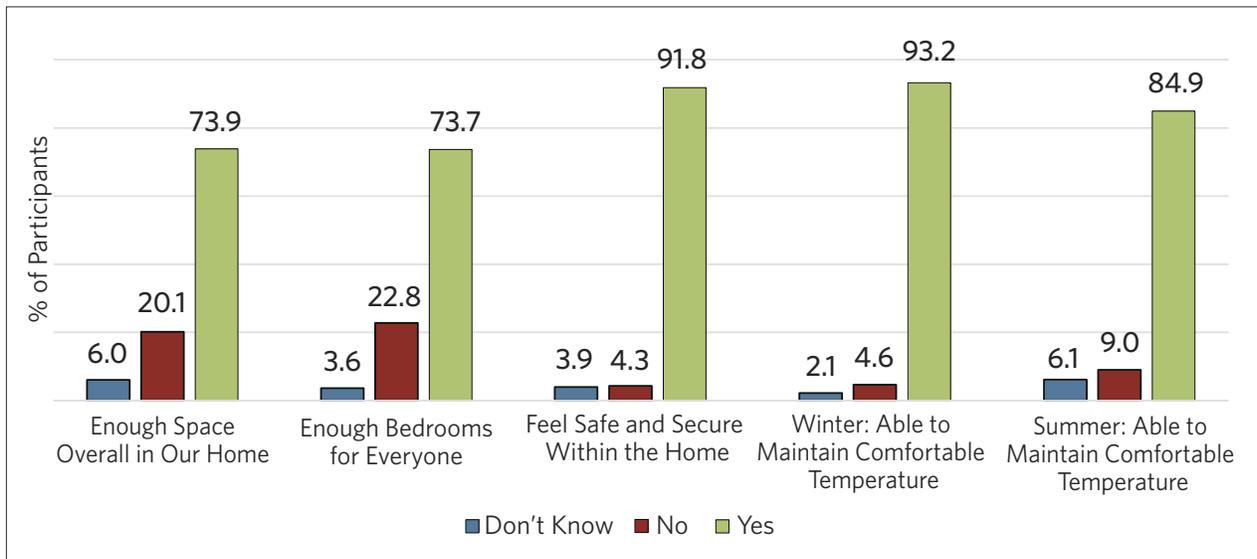
Has anyone in your household done any of the following due to financial impacts of COVID-19? <sup>a</sup> Select all that apply.	% of cases
Cut down on spending on essential items (e.g. groceries)	30.3
Used money saved for other purposes to pay for everyday expenses	27.3
Asked for financial help from friends or family	10.1
Asked to skip rent or mortgage payments	7.9
Applied for a loan, new credit card or an increase to a credit card limit	6.0
Applied for deferred payments or an interest freeze on a credit card, personal loan or car loan	5.6
Asked for help from welfare or community organizations	4.9
None of the options listed	47.2
Other (please specify)	1.5

<sup>a</sup>Not mutually exclusive.

## Dwelling Information

Roughly nine in 10 participants (92%) said they feel safe and secure within their home, where they can maintain a comfortable temperature in the winter (93%) and, to a lesser extent, in the summer (85%) (see Fig. 11).

**Figure 11**  
*Experiences of Housing Conditions*



# COVID-19 IMPACTS ON FAMILY ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS

## Highlights

- **Proportion with paid work and school as main activity declined during pandemic**

The percentage of participants citing paid work as one of their top three main activities dropped from 40.1% before COVID-19 to 35.3% while surveyed, while the percentage “going to school” fell from 13.8% to 3.9%.

- **There was an increase in equal sharing of household tasks during pandemic**

As seen in other surveys,<sup>8</sup> participants reported an increase in the sharing of household tasks, such as cooking and cleaning, and, to a lesser extent, caring for children.

- **Participants felt more connected to those at home, less to those outside home**

Participants reported diverging trends in their personal relationships, with a majority (54%) saying they feel more connected to their families at home but less connected to others.

*Wouldn't it be great if [after the pandemic]...*

*“...I can travel back home and hug my parents.”*

*“... nous pouvions rendre visite à notre famille à l'étranger.”*

*“...the borders were opened to visit my family in China!”*

*“... I can travel freely and be together with my family back home.”*

*“...we can go travel without restrictions to visit families who are sick.”*

*“...I could hug my parents who live abroad.”*

*“...I can see my mom and siblings in Thailand.”*

(Various participants)

## Change in Main Activities and Household Tasks

Almost six in 10 newcomer and refugee mothers (58%) were working for pay at a job, self-employed or looking for work before the pandemic. During the pandemic, this decreased to half of the mothers (50%), due mostly to fewer mothers working for pay. Only 1% of participants attended school in person during the pandemic, compared with 10% before the pandemic. However, there was an increase from 4% pre-pandemic to 24% during the pandemic of mothers attending school online.

Mothers saw a substantial increase in unpaid work. More than eight in 10 (82%) reported caring for children as a main activity during the pandemic, compared with 74% before the pandemic. Similarly, household work increased from 65% pre-pandemic to 77% during the pandemic. There was little change in other activities, such as caregiving or attending language classes (see Table 9).

<sup>8</sup> Zossou, C. (2021, February 15). *Sharing household tasks: Teaming up during the COVID-19 pandemic* (StatCan COVID-19: Data to insights for a better Canada, Catalogue no. 45280001). Government of Canada. [https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection\\_2021/statcan/45-28/CS45-28-1-2021-6-eng.pdf](https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2021/statcan/45-28/CS45-28-1-2021-6-eng.pdf)

**Table 9***Change in Main Activities from Before the Start of COVID-19*

What was/are your TOP 3 MAIN activities? <sup>a</sup>	% of cases	
	Before COVID-19	Now
Working at a paid job	40.1	35.3
Self-employed	8.2	4.9
Looking for paid work	9.6	9.9
Going to school	13.8	3.9
Caring for children	73.8	81.6
Household work	65.2	76.7
Long-term illness	0.4	1.4
Caregiving other than for children	2.8	2.8
Attending language lessons	12.1	10.6
Attend school in person	9.6	1.4
Attend school online	4.3	24.4
Other (please specify)	5.3	5.3

<sup>a</sup>Columns do not total to 100% since participants each selected up to three main activities.

Newcomer and refugee mothers were asked about changes during the pandemic (if any) in who cared for children and performed household tasks, such as cleaning and cooking. There was a slight increase in the percentage who said they cared for their children “about equally.”

There was, however, a larger increase in the equal sharing of household tasks, from 25% before COVID-19 to more than 31% when surveyed in April–May 2021 (this coincides with a decrease in those reporting “always me” from 34.3% to 30.5%). Both before and during, though, participants were clearly responsible for managing both responsibilities, with less than 2% saying it was usually or always their partner (see Table 10).

**Table 10***Change in Division of Caring for Children and Household Tasks*

Who in your household typically took care of...	Children <sup>a</sup>		Household tasks (cleaning, cooking)	
	% of cases		% of cases	
	Before COVID-19	Now	Before COVID-19	Now
No one (they take care of themselves)	0.0	0.6	-- <sup>b</sup>	-- <sup>b</sup>
Always me	36.4	36.4	34.3	30.5
Usually me	25.5	23.0	35.5	35.0
My partner and me about equally	31.0	34.5	25.0	31.3
Usually my partner	1.7	1.2	1.6	1.6
Always my partner	1.3	1.2	1.2	0.8
Another person(s)	4.2	3.0	2.4	0.8

<sup>a</sup>When the children were home.

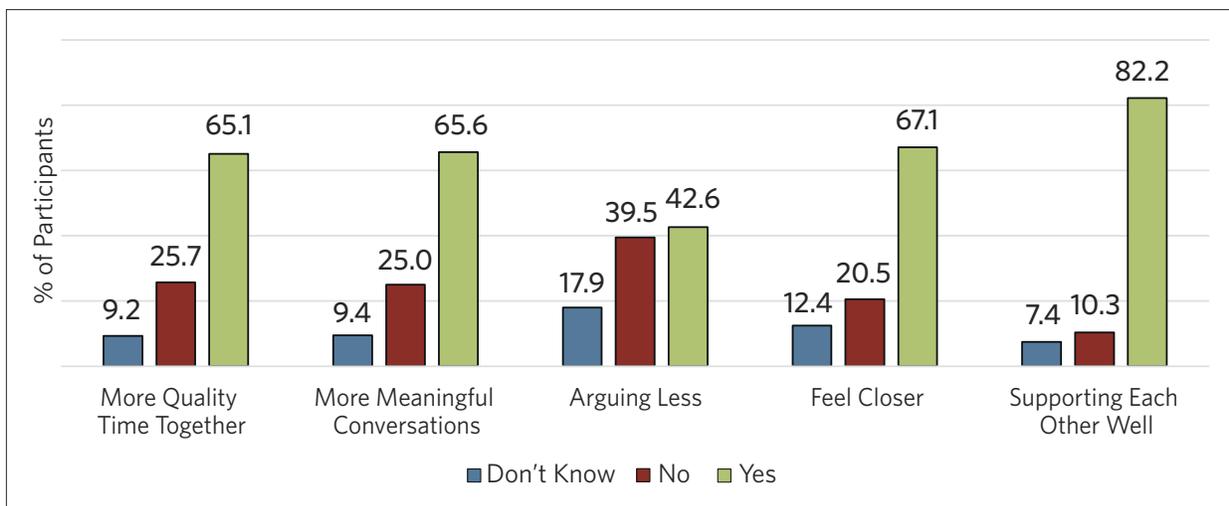
<sup>b</sup>Response option not available.

## Relationship With Spouse or Partner

How much do you agree with each of the following statements? Thinking of your relationship with your spouse or partner in the past month, compared with before COVID-19...

Fortunately, responses suggest the pandemic has not, on average, been detrimental to couples, with more than eight in 10 (82%) saying they and their spouse or partner have been supporting each other well and two-thirds reporting that they have been spending more quality time together (65%), have been having more meaningful conversations (66%), have been having more meaningful conversations (66%) and feel closer (67%) (see Fig. 12).

**Figure 12**  
Changes to Relationship With Partner or Spouse During COVID-19



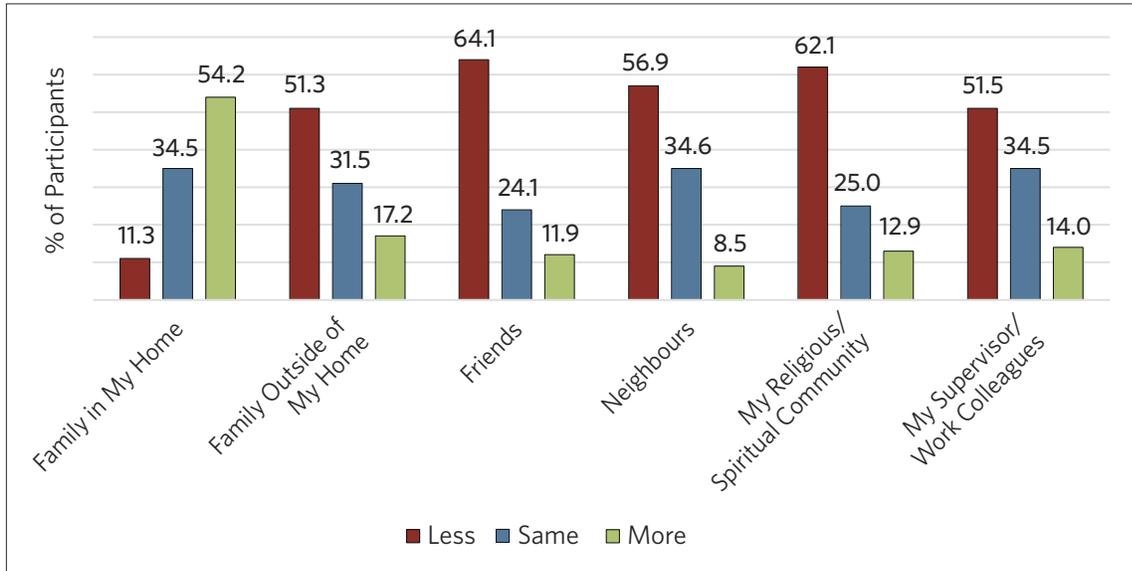
## Feelings of Connection to Others

What would you say the impact of COVID-19 has been on how connected you feel to others?

Overall, participants reported diverging trends in their personal relationships, with a majority (54%) saying they feel more connected to their families at home but less connected to others, such as neighbours and friends. More specifically, they felt less connected to family members living outside the home (51%), friends (64%), people from their religious/spiritual community (62%) and their work colleagues (52%) (see Fig. 13).

**Figure 13**

*Feelings of Connection to Others During COVID-19*



## OTHER PARTICIPANT THOUGHTS AND REFLECTIONS

Examples of open-ended responses that provide further context for understanding the impact of the pandemic on newcomer and refugee mothers are found below (some of which have appeared throughout this report).

*Thinking about the future (after pandemic), how would you complete the phrase “Wouldn’t it be great if...”*

*“...things get back to normal as soon as possible, and my children can have their friendships back!”*

*“...my children could go to school to learn English.”*

*“...everything [was] open again [and things], returned to normal..., libraries, swimming pools, festivals, meeting friends...”*

*“...I could take the kids to [the] library, swimming pools, malls and indoor playgrounds during winter [and] get together with my friends.”*

*“...if online shows, spectacles, concerts and plays continue.”*

## CONCLUSION

With a growing body of research showing that the pandemic has disproportionately affected women, newcomers and refugees in Canada (e.g., see Kaddatz<sup>9</sup> and Martin<sup>10</sup>), the Vanier Institute of the Family partnered with the Mothers Matter Centre – a national not-for-profit that runs support programs serving socially isolated and low socioeconomic status mothers and their families – to conduct a survey on the impacts of COVID-19 on newcomer and refugee mothers enrolled in their programs.

Not surprisingly, surveyed mothers reported many of the same general impacts and trends seen among the general population in Canada. Many said their well-being has declined, particularly with regard to mental health, and a large number have been sleeping less during the pandemic. While nearly three in 10 looked for help for their own health/mental health or that of a family member at some point during the pandemic, nearly half (45%) said this help was not available to them when they looked. A slight majority (52%) said they were satisfied or very satisfied with their lives, but it is important to note that this is far lower than the 93% of Canadian women ages 18 to 64 in 2020 who said the same.<sup>11</sup>

The pandemic clearly affected the household finances of participants. More than one in five reported a “major impact” on their family’s ability to meeting financial obligations or essential needs and more than four in 10 said they were financially worse off than before COVID-19. Younger participants were more likely to have seen a major impact. While one-quarter said they were very concerned about their current finances, one in five said they were not concerned at all. This increased to more than one-third when asked if they were concerned about *future* finances.

Fortunately, family relationships – an important protective factor for well-being – remain strong, with most saying they and their spouse or partner have been supporting each other well, spending more quality time together and having more meaningful conversations, and feel closer. As seen in other surveys,<sup>12</sup> participants reported an increase in the sharing of household tasks, such as cooking and cleaning and, to a lesser extent, caring for children. Also, more than nine in 10 participants said they feel safe and secure within their home.

The “Wouldn’t it be great if...” open-ended question provided some additional insight that was not touched on elsewhere in the survey. There was a commonly expressed longing for a “return to normal” so they can travel to see family, start or resume language classes, and more.

As we continue to navigate the pandemic and adapt to new contexts, the findings and unique insights gathered through this survey will inform and facilitate evidence-based decision-making to support these mothers, who are raising our future generations and serving as “the catalyst for change within their families and communities.”<sup>13</sup> (para. 1)

---

<sup>9</sup> Kaddatz, J. (2020, April 16). *Survey finds gender gaps in COVID-19 pandemic experiences and responses*. The Vanier Institute of the Family. <https://vanierinstitute.ca/survey-finds-gender-gaps-in-covid-19-pandemic-experiences-and-responses/>

<sup>10</sup> Martin, L. (2020, May 21). *Families new to Canada and financial well-being during pandemic*. The Vanier Institute of the Family. <https://vanierinstitute.ca/families-new-to-canada-and-financial-well-being-during-pandemic/>

<sup>11</sup> Statistics Canada. (2021, September 8). Table 13-10-0096-05 Life satisfaction, satisfied or very satisfied, by age group (Women ages 18 to 64 years). <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tb1/en/tv.action?pid=1310009605>

<sup>12</sup> Zossou, C. (2021, February 15). *Sharing household tasks: Teaming up during the COVID-19 pandemic* (StatCan COVID-19: Data to insights for a better Canada, Catalogue no. 45280001). Government of Canada. [https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection\\_2021/statcan/45-28/CS45-28-1-2021-6-eng.pdf](https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2021/statcan/45-28/CS45-28-1-2021-6-eng.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Mothers Matter Centre. (2019). *Who we are*. <https://mothersmattercentre.ca/who-we-are/>