

# The lingering effects of COVID-19

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# About the Survey on Employment & Skills

This report is based on data from the fifth wave of the Survey on Employment and Skills.

The Survey on Employment and Skills is conducted by the [Environics Institute for Survey Research](#), in partnership with the [Future Skills Centre](#) and the [Diversity Institute at Toronto Metropolitan University](#). In early 2020, the Survey began as a project designed to explore Canadians' experiences with the changing nature of work, including technology-driven disruptions, increasing insecurity and shifting skills requirements. Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the survey was expanded to investigate the impact of the crisis on Canadians' employment, earnings and work environments. A second wave of the survey was conducted in December 2020, a third wave in June 2021, and a fourth wave in March and April of 2022.

The fifth wave of the study consists of a survey of 5,904 Canadians age 18 and over, conducted between March 1 and April 3, 2023, in all provinces and territories. It was conducted both online (in the provinces) and by telephone (in the territories). This wave of the survey includes oversamples of Canadians living in smaller provinces and territories, those under the age of 34, racialized Canadians and Canadians who identify as Indigenous, in order to provide a better portrait of the range of experiences across the country. The survey results in this report are weighted by age, gender, region, education, racial identity and Indigenous identity, to ensure that they are representative of the Canadian population as whole.

Survey reports can be found online at:

> <https://www.environicsinstitute.org/projects/listing/-in-tags/type/survey-on-employment-and-skills>

> [fsc-ccf.ca/research/2020-survey-on-employment-and-skills](https://fsc-ccf.ca/research/2020-survey-on-employment-and-skills)

# Table of Contents

1

Executive Summary

4

Introduction

5

Recent experiences  
with COVID-19

6

Variations within the  
population

12

Length of time away  
from work or school

17

Experiences with  
COVID-19 and  
well-being

21

Conclusion





## Executive summary

This report fills an important information gap by examining how many Canadians missed work or school due to COVID-19 in the 12 months prior to March 2023, and how long their absences were. The findings confirm that in the pandemic’s third year, a significant number of Canadians – almost one in two – continued to be directly affected by the disease, either because they had been sick, were caring for someone who was sick, or were dealing with the symptoms associated with “long COVID.” These experiences imposed significant costs on the individuals affected, on their employers and on the economy in general.

The fifth wave of the Survey on Employment and Skills, conducted in March 2023, found that 45 percent of adult Canadians in the labour force or in education had missed at least one day of work or school in the previous 12 months because they or someone they were caring for were ill with COVID-19. This includes 31 percent who were sick with COVID-19, 15 percent who were caring for someone else who was sick with COVID-19, and 10 percent who had previously been sick with COVID-19, and were suffering from lingering effects of the disease, such as fatigue (an experience generally referred to as “long COVID”).

The proportion that missed at least one day of work or school in the 12 months up to March 2023 because of these experiences varies in a number of ways. This proportion is higher among younger adults and decreases with age. It is also higher among women compared to men; among those with children at home compared to those without; among those with a disability that at least occasionally limits their daily activity compared to those without a disability; among Indigenous Peoples compared to non-Indigenous peoples; among those employed in either the public or non-profit sectors compared to those employed in the private sector; and among those who are members of a labour union compared to those who are not.

A plurality of those who missed at least one day of work or school missed between one and five days. However, more than one in three missed between six and 10 days, and one in five missed 11 days or more. When expressed as a percentage of the total population – and not just of those who reported one of the three COVID-related experiences mentioned in the survey – one in four of adult Canadians in the labour market or in education missed more than one week of work or school in the 12 months up to March 2023 because they or someone they cared for was sick with COVID-19.

Among those with long COVID, two in five reported missing more than two weeks of work or school for that reason during the 12 months up to the time of the survey in March 2023 (this group corresponds to four percent of the total adult population in the labour force or in education).

The likelihood of missing more than a week of work or school declines with age: it is highest among those aged 18 to 24 and lowest among those aged 55 and older. Those with children at home are also more likely than those without to have missed more than a week of work or school. The same is true of those who are racialized compared to those who are white, those who are Indigenous compared to non-Indigenous peoples, and those who have a disability compared to those who do not.



Finally, Canadians who missed one or more days of work or school because they were sick with COVID-19, because they were caring for someone who had COVID, or because they had long COVID, report poorer health and well-being than those who did not have these experiences. For instance, compared to those who did not report any of the three COVID-related experiences in the 12 months up to March 2023, those who missed work or school to care for someone who was sick with COVID-19 are much more likely to have had trouble sleeping or to have felt anxious, depressed, or lonely. Similarly, those experiencing long COVID are much more likely to report poor mental health, as well as feelings of anxiety or depression, or trouble sleeping.

While highlighting the pandemic's general impact through 2022 and the beginning of 2023, the survey findings also underline a number of more specific points. First, while older Canadians were more susceptible to serious illness, younger adults at this later stage of the pandemic were more likely to miss work or school due to COVID-19. This no doubt has had a negative effect on their education, earnings and advancement at work. Second, certain groups have been more affected by the need to care for others who are sick with COVID-19. This includes parents, as well as both Indigenous Peoples and racialized Canadians. Finally, the survey corroborates other evidence about the prevalence of long COVID. About one in ten adults in the labour force or in education in Canada are experiencing the lingering effects of previous bouts with COVID-19, to the extent that they are still having to miss days of work or school.

# Survey questions used in this report

This report features results to the following two questions:

*In the past 12 months, have you had any of the following experiences related to the COVID-19 virus (select all that apply):*

- *You missed one or more days of work / school because you were sick with COVID-19*
- *You missed one or more days of because you were caring for someone else who was sick with COVID-19*
- *You missed one or more days of because you had previously been sick with COVID-19, and were suffering from lingering effects of the disease, such as fatigue (this is sometimes referred to as “long COVID”)*
- *None of these*

*If yes to any of the three COVID experiences mentioned above: Roughly how many days of work / school in the past 12 months did you miss as a result of these experiences with COVID-19? (select one response)*

- *Between one and five days*
- *Between six and 10 days*
- *Between 10 and 20 days*
- *More than 20 days*

These questions were asked to those in the labour force (whether employed or unemployed and looking for work) and to students. Those in the labour force were asked about work, and students were asked about school. Readers should keep in mind that, as the results presented below are based on these questions, they are always based on the subsample of respondents who are in the labour force or in education and always refer to experiences in the 12-month period up to when the survey took place in March 2023.



# Introduction

Three years after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is not yet clear if the crisis is truly over. On the one hand, as of the summer of 2023, most aspects of everyday life in Canada have resumed. Businesses, schools, restaurants and entertainment venues are all fully open. Most people have stopped wearing masks in public and are no longer practicing social distancing. On the other hand, many people continue to catch COVID, with some experiencing serious illness and even death. Others continue to struggle to return to full health, months after having first gotten sick. It seems we are in an in-between phase, with most living their lives as if the pandemic had ended, even though the threat from and impact of the virus has not fully disappeared.

Understanding the current scale of the problem is challenging. In the first years of the pandemic, case numbers were regularly reported. The number of days during which businesses or schools were closed could be easily tracked. But these indicators are no longer available. While Statistics Canada reports that absences from work are currently higher than prior to the pandemic, there is little information available about the reasons why.<sup>1</sup>

This report helps to fill the information gap by documenting how many Canadians have missed work or school due to COVID-19 in the 12 months prior to the time of the survey in March 2023, and the length of their absences. The findings confirm that even though the formal emergency is over, a significant number of Canadians – almost one in two – continue to be directly affected by the disease, either because they have been sick, caring for someone who was sick, or dealing with the symptoms associated with “long COVID.” This imposes a direct cost on the individuals affected in terms of missed opportunities at work or school, and poorer health, both in the short term and, for some, in the longer term. It also imposes a cost on businesses and the economy in general, in terms of disruption of work and loss of productivity.

In short, the costs of the pandemic are not limited to those incurred during the first two years, when public health restrictions disrupted many aspects of daily life. Costs – to individuals, to employers and to society – continue to accumulate today.





# Findings

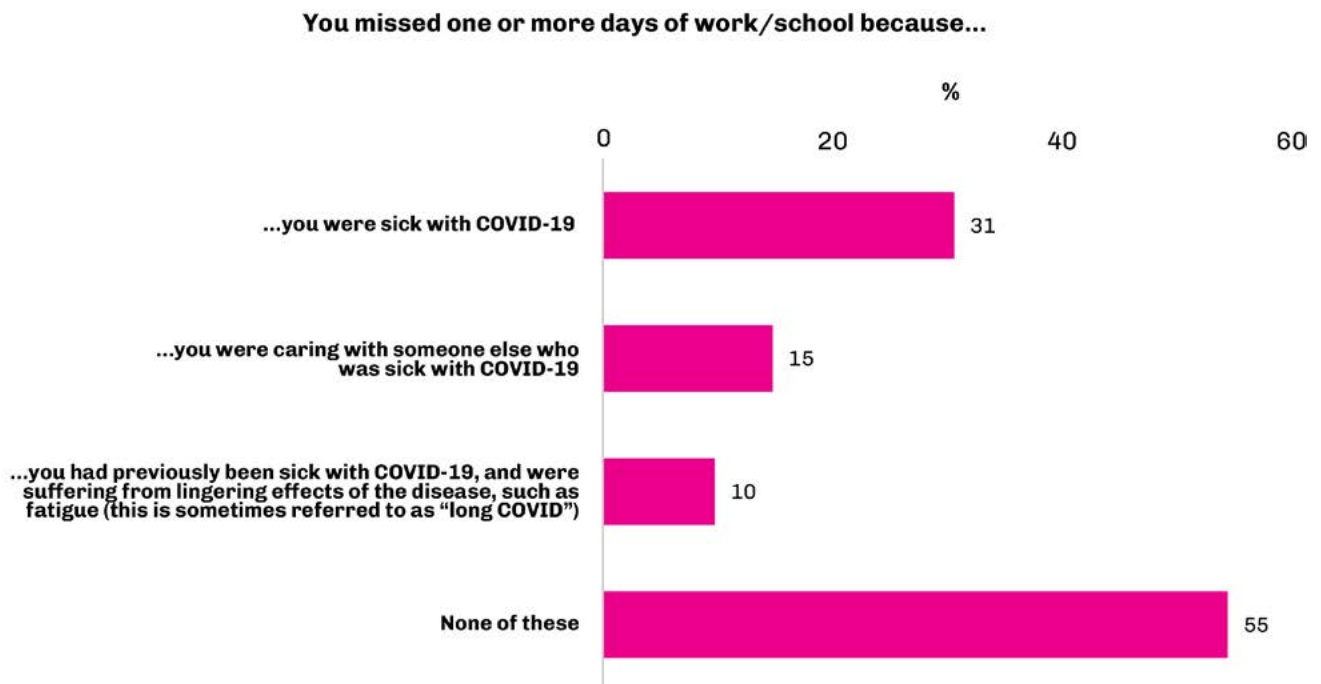
## Recent experiences with COVID-19

The lingering effect of COVID-19 is clear if we look at the number of people who missed at least one day of work or school due to the virus in the 12 months preceding the last wave of the Survey on Employment and Skills, which took place in March 2023. At that time, among those either in the labour force or in education:

- 31 percent said they had missed one or more days of work or school in the past 12 months because they were sick with COVID-19;<sup>2</sup>
- 15 percent said they had missed one or more days of work or school because were caring for someone else who was sick with COVID-19;
- 10 percent said they had missed one or more days of work or school because they had previously been sick with COVID-19, and were suffering from lingering effects of the disease, such as fatigue (an experience generally referred to as “long COVID”);<sup>3</sup>
- 55 percent said that they had had none of these experiences.<sup>4</sup>

**CHART 1:**  
**Missing days of work or school in the past 12 months due to COVID-19**  
Subsample: in the labour force or a student

Q24GGW5. In the past 12 months, have you had any of the following experiences related to the COVID-19 virus?





Being affected by COVID-19 therefore remains a fairly common occurrence. Combining the three experiences, 45 percent of adult Canadians in the labour force or in education had missed at least one day of work or school in the 12 months up to March 2023 because they or someone they were caring for were ill with COVID-19. This proportion does not vary that much across the regions of the country (ranging from 40 percent in the Prairie provinces to 48 percent in Quebec).

While the most common of these three experiences is getting sick with COVID-19 – affecting about three in 10 – it is worth underlining the two other findings. First, the effect of the virus is felt not only among those who contract it, but also among those who provide care for those who get sick. Second, about one in ten adults in the labour force or in education in Canada are experiencing the lingering effects of previous bouts with COVID-19, to the extent that they are still having to miss days of work or school.

## Variations within the population

### Age

The extent to which people are missing days of work or school due to COVID-19 varies significantly by age (with the proportion decreasing as age increases). A majority of adults under the age in 35 who are in the labour force or in education missed one or more days of work or school in the 12 months up until March 2023 for any of the three reasons mentioned in the survey, whereas the same is true of only a small proportion of those over the age of 55. This is possibly because younger adults are more likely to be in social settings (including classrooms), while older adults, a greater proportion of whom face other health challenges, are more likely to exercise caution by wearing masks or practicing social distancing.

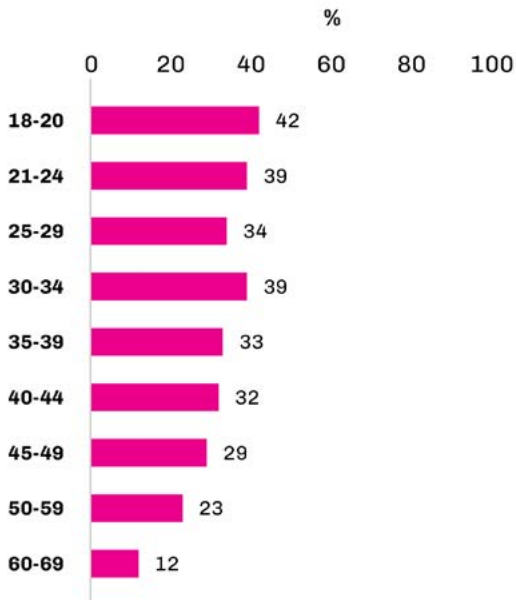
Younger adults are not only more likely to get sick themselves, they are also more likely to miss work or school because they are caring for others who are sick, or because they have long COVID. The proportion of those who missed work or school due to long COVID during the past 12 months is highest among those in their 20s.

## CHART 2:

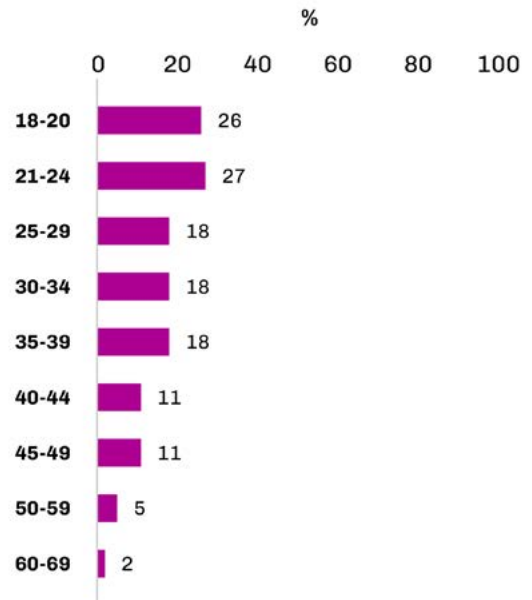
### Missing days of work or school in the past 12 months due to COVID-19, by age group Subsample: in the labour force or a student

Q24GGW5. In the past 12 months, have you had any of the following experiences related to the COVID-19 virus?

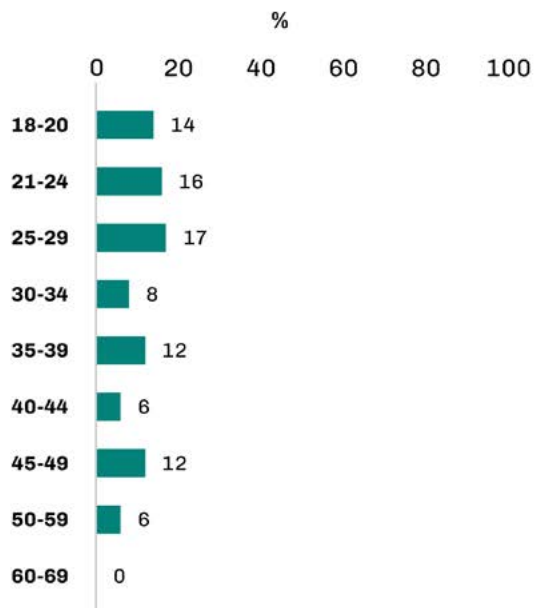
**You missed one or more days of work / school because you were sick with COVID-19**



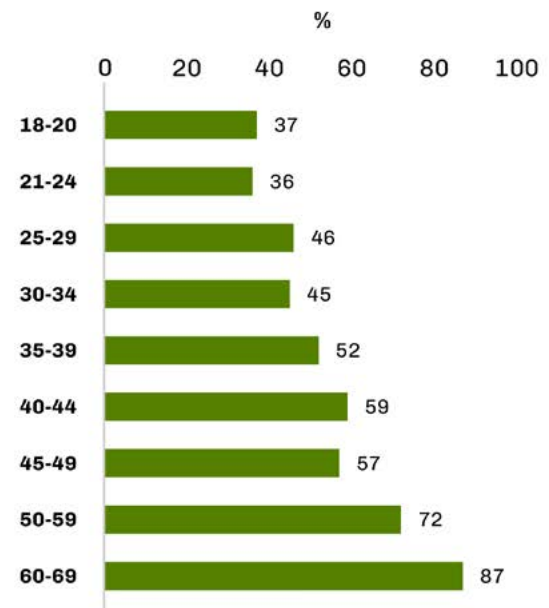
**You missed one or more days of work / school because you were caring for someone else who was sick with COVID-19**



**You missed one or more days of work / school because you had long COVID**



**None of these**



Relatedly, students (who are generally younger) are more likely to miss days of school due to COVID-19, than workers are to miss days of work. Specifically, 57 percent of students missed one or more days of school in the 12 months up until March 2023, while 45 percent of those who are employed missed one or more days of work.

## Gender

Women (35%) are more likely than men (27%) to have missed one or more days of work or school in the past 12 months because they were sick with COVID-19. This difference may be related to occupation. Women (32%) and men (32%) who work in office or administrative positions are equally likely to say they missed at least a day of work because they have COVID. But among professionals, women (45%) are much more likely to report this experience than men (26%). This is possibly because women with professional occupations are more likely to interact with other members of the public (as would be the case, for instance, for teachers or health care professionals).

## Parents

Those with children at home (56% – including 67% of those with children at home under the age of five) are also much more likely than those without (34%) to have had any of the three COVID-related experiences: they are more likely to have missed work or school because they were sick with COVID, caring for someone else with COVID, or dealing with long COVID. This is likely because children themselves often pick up the virus at school and bring it back into the home.



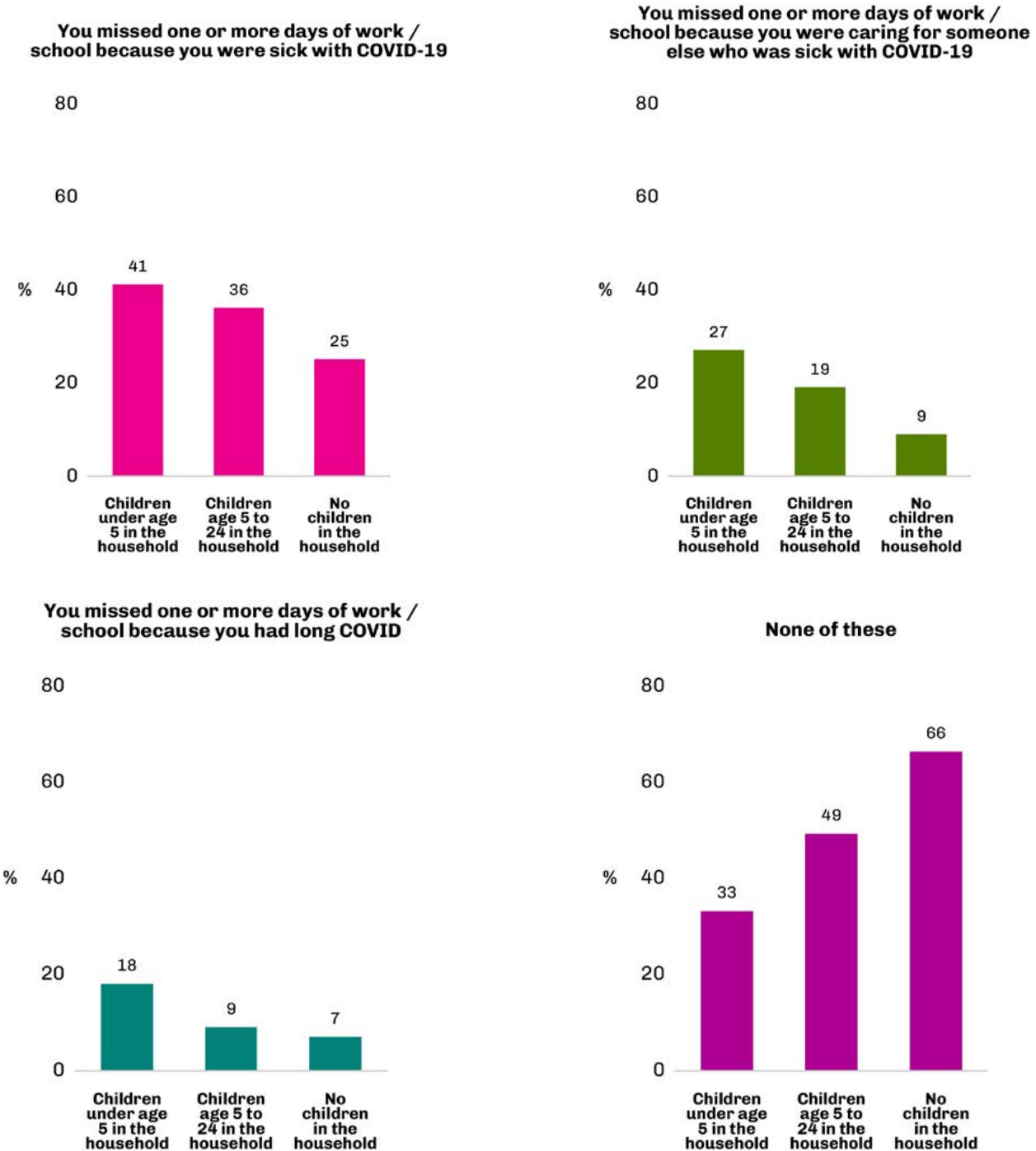


### CHART 3:

## Missing days of work or school in the past 12 months due to COVID-19, by presence of children in the household

Subsample: in the labour force or a student

Q24GGW5. In the past 12 months, have you had any of the following experiences related to the COVID-19 virus?



## Disability

Canadians who have a disability that at least occasionally limits their daily activity (63%) are more likely than those without a disability (37%) to have had any of the three COVID-related experiences mentioned in the survey in the 12 months up to March 2023. However, the situation varies considerably depending on the experience in question, as well as the type and severity of disability.

**Table 1**

*COVID-19-related experiences, by disability*

	No disability	Any disability	Physical disability that always or often limits daily activity	Physical disability that occasionally limits daily activity	Mental health disability that always or often limits daily activity	Mental health disability that occasionally limits daily activity
You missed one or more days of work or school because you were sick with COVID-19 (%)	27	40	38	47	29	46
You missed one or more days of work or school because you were caring with someone else who was sick with COVID-19 (%)	9	25	24	18	22	24
You missed one or more days of work or school because you had previously been sick with COVID-19, and were suffering from lingering effects of the disease (%)	6	18	15	16	18	18
Any of these (%)	37	63	52	59	51	66
None of these (%)	63	37	48	41	49	34

The likelihood of missing days of work or school due to catching COVID-19 is higher among those with a disability that occasionally limits their daily activity, compared to those whose disability always or often limits them. This could be because those with more severe disabilities are less likely to spend time in congregate settings, either because they take more precautions or because of the constraints on their mobility.

## Identity and immigration background

Indigenous Peoples are more likely than non-Indigenous peoples to have had any of the three COVID-related experiences mentioned in the survey in the 12 months up to March 2023. Specifically, they are more likely to have missed work or school because they were sick with COVID-19 (42% compared to 32%), caring for someone with COVID-19 (24% to 14%), or dealing with the lingering effects of a previous bout with COVID-19 (14% compared to 10%). Non-Indigenous peoples (56%) are more likely than Indigenous Peoples (41%) to have had none of these experiences.



Racialized (30%) and non-racialized (31%) people are just as likely to have missed work or school because they themselves were sick. However, racialized Canadians (20%) – particularly those who identify as Black (21%) or as South Asian (22%) – are somewhat more likely than their non-racialized counterparts (12%) to have missed work or school because they were caring for someone else who was sick with COVID.

The difference among those who are first-generation immigrants, second-generation immigrants, or born in Canada to Canadian-born parents are relatively minor. Compared to first-generation immigrants (27%), those born in Canada to Canadian-born parents (33%)

are slightly more likely to have missed at least one day of work or school in the past year because they were sick with COVID-19. However second-generation immigrants (21%) are more likely than either first-generation immigrants (13%) or those born in Canada to Canadian-born parents (13%) to have missed work or school because they were caring for someone else with COVID-19.

In the earlier stages of the pandemic, when more restrictions were in place, differences in exposure to the COVID-19 virus between racialized and non-racialized Canadians, or between immigrants and non-immigrants, were likely greater.<sup>5</sup> At that time, those working in lower-income occupations, or in occupations that involved the direct delivery of essential services (who are more likely to be racialized or recent immigrants), were much less able than other workers to protect themselves by staying at home. With the ending of public health restrictions, some of these differences in experiences are no longer as significant.

## Employment sector

Those employed in either the public (54%) or non-profit sectors (56%) are more likely than those employed in the private sector (41%) to have had any of the three COVID-related experiences mentioned in the survey in the 12 months up to March 2023. The same is true of those who are members of a labour union (52%) compared to those who are not members (42%).

Public sector employees are 10 percentage points more likely than those working in the private sector to say they missed at least one day of work because they contracted COVID-19 during this period (38% compared to 28%). Similarly, union members are more likely than non-members to say they had this same experience (38% compared to 28%). This is possibly because those working in the public sector and union members are more likely than private sector employees or those who are non-union members to be employed as professionals, many of whom interact directly with other members of the public. It may also be related to greater access to paid sick days among public sector or unionised employees.

Those working in the non-profit sector are twice as likely as those working in the private sector to say they missed at least one day of work because they had long COVID during this period (18% compared to 9%). It is not immediately clear why this might be the case, though it could simply reflect the fact that workers in the non-profit sector are younger (see the earlier discussion of the differences by age group).



## Length of time away from work or school

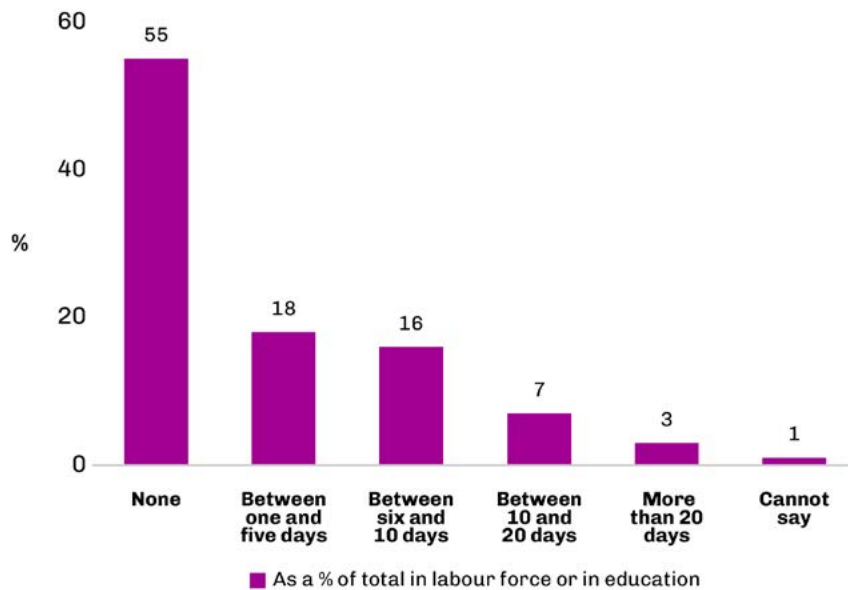
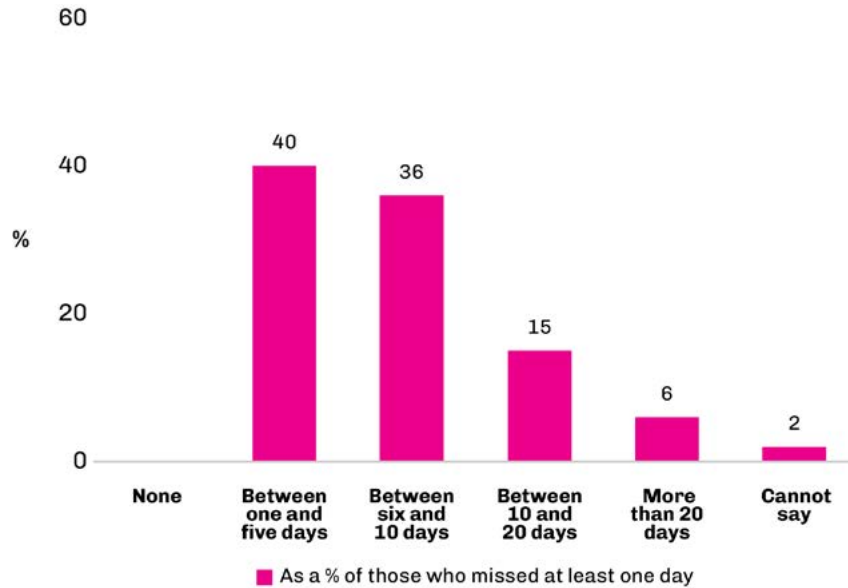
Those who had missed at least one day of work or school in the 12 months up to March 2023 because they or someone they cared for were sick with COVID-19 or affected by long COVID were asked to say roughly how many days of work or school they missed.

- A plurality (40%) said they had missed between one and five days of work or school.
- However, almost as many (36%) say they had missed between six and 10 days.
- One in five had missed more than two weeks, including 15 percent who say they had missed between 11 and 20 days, and six percent who said they had missed 21 days or more.



**CHART 4:**  
**Number of days of work or school missed due to COVID-19**  
 Subsample: in the labour force or a student

Q24hhW5. Roughly how many days of work / school in the past 12 months did you miss as a result of these experiences with COVID-19?

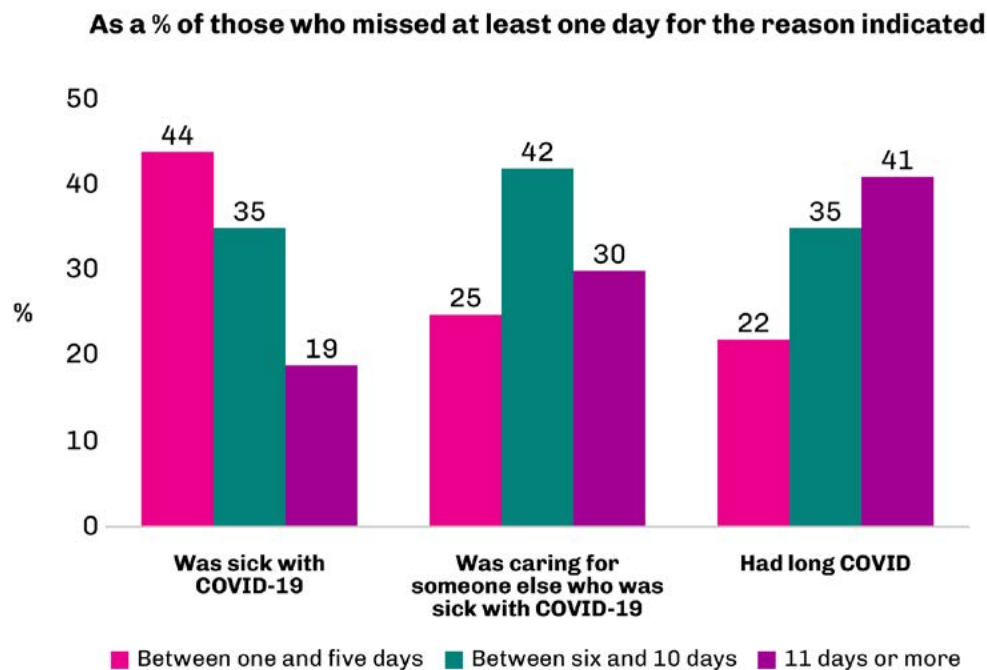


When expressed as a percentage of the total population – and not just of those who reported one of the three COVID-related experiences mentioned in the survey – one in four (26%) of adult Canadians in the labour market or in education missed more than one week of work or school in the 12 months up to March 2023 because they or someone they cared for was sick with COVID-19.

The number of days of work or school missed varies according to the specific COVID-19 experience. Among those who missed at least one day, the proportion missing between one and five days is highest for those who were sick with COVID-19 (44%), and lower for those who were caring for someone else who was sick (25%) or for those who had long COVID (22%). Conversely, the proportion missing more than two weeks is lowest for those who were sick with COVID-19 (55%) and higher for those who were caring for someone else who was sick (72%) or for those who had long COVID (76%). Among those with long COVID, 41 percent report missing more than two weeks of work or school for that reason during the 12 months up to the time of the survey in March 2023 (this group corresponds to four percent of the total adult population in the labour force or in education).

**CHART 5:**  
**Number of days of work or school missed due to COVID-19, by COVID-19 experience**  
 Subsample: in the labour force or a student

*Q24hhW5. Roughly how many days of work / school in the past 12 months did you miss as a result of these experiences with COVID-19?*

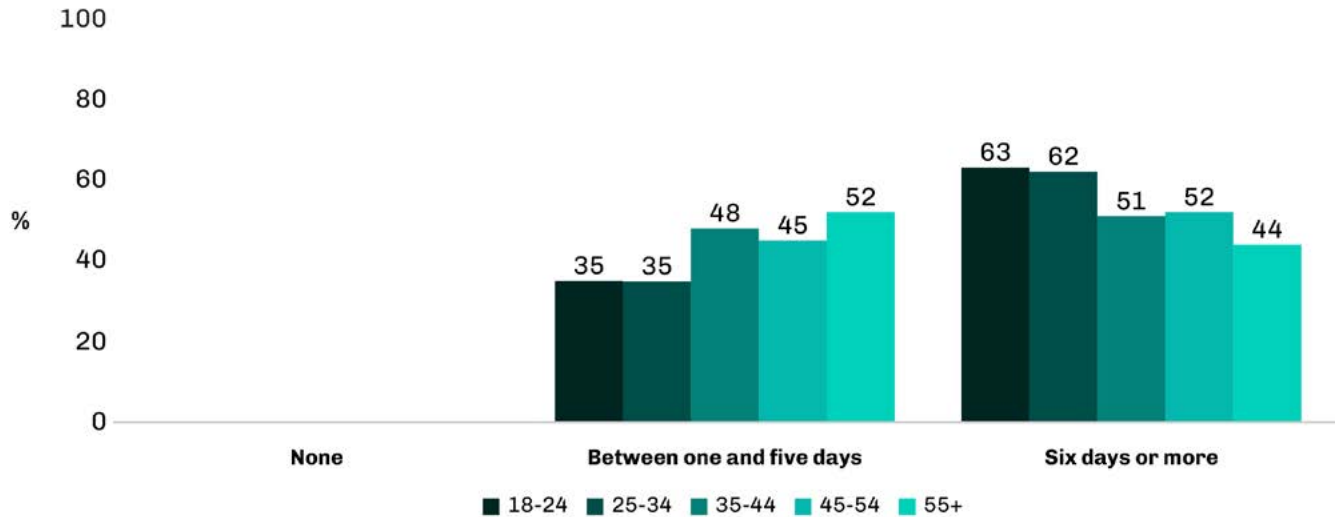


The likelihood of missing more than a week of work or school declines with age: it is highest among those aged 18 to 24 (63%) and lowest among those aged 55 and older (44%). As a percentage of the total population in each age group – and not just of those who reported one of the three COVID-related experiences mentioned in the survey – the proportion missing more than a week of work or school declines from 40 percent among those age 18 to 24, to seven percent among those age 55 and older. The survey cannot say definitely why this is, but it is likely due to several factors, including older Canadians being more likely to take precautions against getting sick, and being more likely to be fully vaccinated.

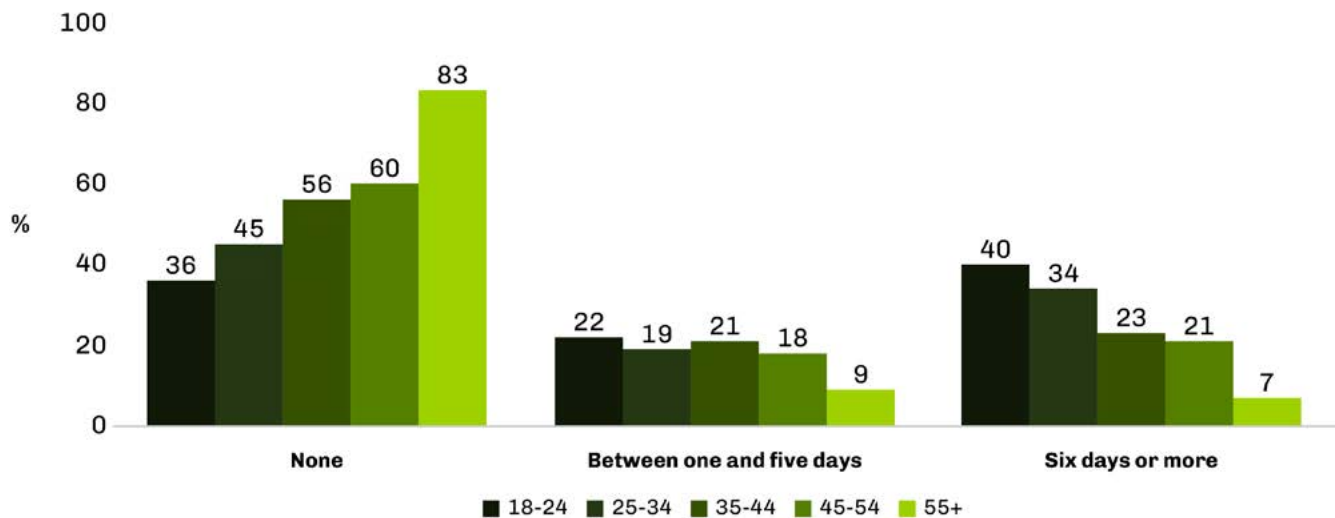
**CHART 6:**  
**Number of days of work or school missed due to COVID-19, by age group**  
 Subsample: in the labour force or a student

Q24hhW5. Roughly how many days of work / school in the past 12 months did you miss as a result of these experiences with COVID-19?

As a % of those who missed at least one day



As a % of total in labour force or in education



There is also a significant difference between the experiences of those with and without children at home. Looking first at those who reported one of the three COVID-related experiences, the proportion missing more than a week of work or school is 62 percent among those with children at home (under the age of 25), compared to 49 percent for those without. As a percentage of the total population in each group – and not just of those who reported one of the three COVID-related experiences mentioned in the survey – the proportion missing more than a week of work or school is twice as high among those with children at home (35% – with the proportion between similar among men and women in this situation) compared to those without (17%). It is especially high (45%) for those with children at home under the age of five.

There are a number of other population groups that are both more likely to have been sick with COVID-19, or caring for someone who was sick, and – for those in this situation – more also likely to have missed more days of work or school. These include those who are racialized, who identify as Indigenous, or who have a disability. The proportion of the total population in each group that missed more than a week of work or school in the 12 months to March 2023 because they were sick with COVID-19, were caring for someone who had COVID, or were dealing with the lingering effects of a previous bout with COVID:

- is higher among those who are racialized (31%) compared to those who are white (23%);
- is higher among those who are Indigenous (39%) compared to those who are not (25%);
- is higher among those who have a disability that always or often (44%) or occasionally (43%) limit their daily activity, compared to someone with no disability (17%).





**Table 2***Length of time away from work or school*

	As a percentage of those who missed at least one day of work or school		As a percentage of the total population (including those who missed no days of work or school)		
	1 to 5 days	6 days or more	No days	1 to 5 days	6 days or more
Racialized	35	63	51	17	31
White	44	53	57	19	23
Indigenous	33	41	41	19	39
Non-Indigenous	66	57	56	18	25
Disability – always or often limits activity	22	76	42	12	44
Disability – occasionally limits activity	31	67	35	20	43
No disability	52	46	63	19	17

## Experiences with COVID-19 and well-being

Canadians who missed one or more days of work or school because they were sick with COVID-19, because they were caring for someone who had COVID, or because they had long COVID, report poorer health and well-being than those who did not have these experiences (during the 12 months up to March 2023).

- Those who were sick with COVID-19 report similar levels of physical health compared to those who did not report any of the three COVID-related experiences, suggesting most had recovered fully from their illness at the time of the survey. But they are slightly more likely to report poorer mental health, and more frequent feelings of anxiety and difficulty sleeping.
- Those who were caring for someone else who was sick with COVID-19 also report similar levels of physical health compared to those who did not report any of the three COVID-related experiences. They are also slightly more likely to report poorer mental health. But the more striking differences relate to feelings of anxiety, depression, loneliness and difficulty sleeping. Compared to those who did not report

any of the three COVID-related experiences in the 12 months up to March 2023, those who missed work or school to care for someone who was sick with COVID-19 are 21 percentage points more likely to have had trouble sleeping in the past seven days, 19 points more likely to have felt anxious, 18 points more likely to have felt depressed, 15 points more likely to have felt lonely.<sup>6</sup>

- Those who had previously been sick with COVID-19, and were suffering from lingering effects of the disease, such as fatigue (“long COVID”), are slightly more likely to report poorer physical health compared to those who did not report any of the three COVID-related experiences.<sup>7</sup> But they are also much more likely to report poor mental health: 50 percent of those with long COVID say their mental health is fair or poor, compared to 31 percent of those who have not had any of the COVID-related experiences. They are also more likely to have felt depressed in the past seven days (a difference of 23 points compared to those who have not had any of the COVID-related experiences), to have felt anxious (17 points), to have felt lonely (15 points) or to have had trouble sleeping (15 points).
- Not surprisingly, those who had had any of the three COVID-related experiences and who missed a longer period of work or school (two weeks or more) are the most likely to report poorer health and well-being. For instance, those missing this much work or school (47%) are twice as likely as those who were not affected (24%) to say they felt depressed at least occasionally, if not more often, in the past week.

The survey cannot say definitively that COVID-19 is the direct cause of poorer well-being. In some cases at least, it is possible that poorer mental health among those more likely to contract COVID-19, or more likely to care for someone with COVID-19, are caused by factors unrelated to the virus itself.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, in some cases a direct relationship between experiences with COVID-19 and poorer well-being cannot be ruled out. Either way, these findings suggest that employers or educators should not expect those affected by the disease to be completely recovered the moment their period of isolation is over and they step back into the workplace or classroom. This includes, but is not limited to, those who specifically identify themselves as having long COVID.



**Table 3a***COVID-19-related experiences and well-being*

	Physical health		Mental health		Felt nervous, anxious, or on edge (in past 7 days)	
	Excellent or very good	Fair or poor	Excellent or very good	Fair or poor	Some, rarely or none of the time	Occasionally, most or all of the time
Total (among those either in the labour force or in education)	39	25	38	34	59	39
You missed one or more days of work or school because you were sick with COVID-19 (%)	38	25	33	38	56	43
You missed one or more days of work or school because you were caring with someone else who was sick with COVID-19 (%)	37	29	31	39	47	52
You missed one or more days of work or school because you had previously been sick with COVID-19, and were suffering from lingering effects of the disease (%)	32	35	27	50	49	50
Any of these (%)	38	27	33	38	54	45
None of these (%)	39	24	41	31	64	33
You missed more than two weeks of work or school due to any of the three COVID-related experiences	36	33	26	46	45	54

**Table 3b***COVID-19-related experiences and well-being*

	Felt depressed (in past 7 days)		Felt lonely (in past 7 days)		Had trouble sleeping (in past 7 days)	
	Some, rarely or none of the time	Occasionally, most or all of the time	Some, rarely or none of the time	Occasionally, most or all of the time	Some, rarely or none of the time	Occasionally, most or all of the time
Total (among those either in the labour force or in education)	68	29	67	31	59	39
You missed one or more days of work or school because you were sick with COVID-19 (%)	68	30	65	33	55	44
You missed one or more days of work or school because you were caring with someone else who was sick with COVID-19 (%)	56	42	56	42	43	55
You missed one or more days of work or school because you had previously been sick with COVID-19, and were suffering from lingering effects of the disease (%)	51	47	54	42	49	49
Any of these (%)	63	35	62	36	53	46
None of these (%)	73	24	71	27	64	34
You missed more than two weeks of work or school due to any of the three COVID-related experiences	51	47	50	47	38	61



## Conclusion

In the third year of the pandemic, the day-to-day impact of the disease became harder to gauge. Public health agencies stopped updating case numbers. At the same time, the reopening of schools and businesses, and the resumption of travel for business and pleasure, created a sense that things were returning to normal. And yet during this period, almost one in two adult Canadians in the labour force or in education were missing at least some days of work or school because they, or someone they were caring for, were sick with COVID-19.

This disruption imposed costs on the individuals affected, their families, their employers and the economy in general. Students missed opportunities to learn, while employees missed opportunities to earn income or advance at work. Experiences with COVID-19 are also associated with poorer mental health and more frequent episodes of anxiety and depression. The short-term absences and longer-term impacts on well-being associated with COVID-19 affected the productivity of businesses and public services. Moreover, the figures presented here likely underestimate the impact, as they do not take into account anyone who had to leave school or exit the labour force entirely due to the effects of the disease.

In May 2023, the World Health Organization declared an end to the COVID-19 emergency. But employers and policy-makers should nonetheless remain attentive to its ongoing effects. Not only does the virus continue to circulate, but about one in ten adults in the labour force or in education in Canada are experiencing the lingering effects of previous bouts with COVID-19, to the extent that they are still having to miss days of work or school. Still others may merit considerations because they fell behind or missed out on opportunities over the past few years, either because they were sick or caring for others who had COVID-19. Younger adults and parents have been particularly affected.

It is too soon to try to turn the page on the pandemic. Researchers should continue their efforts to track its lingering effects.



# Endnotes

- 1 Workplaces absences are reported in Statistics Canada tables [14-10-0390-01](#) (Work absence of full-time employees, annual) and [14-10-0121-01](#) (Hours lost by reason of absence, monthly, unadjusted for seasonality).
- 2 Survey data captures the information that survey participants choose to share based on their own assessment of their experiences; it is not connected in any way to medical testing or verification. Nonetheless, it is notable that this figure is similar to that [reported by Statistics Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada](#) in a study based on blood tests. This study found that, in mid-2022, 53.9 percent of adult Canadians had detectable antibodies from a past COVID-19 infection; however, of that proportion, only 58.2 percent either knew or suspected that they had contracted the disease. The proportion of the total adult population that knew they had had the disease by mid-2022, therefore, was 31 percent (note, however, that Statistics Canada estimates that the true infection rate was likely higher than the one reported as the test may not be able to detect the presence of COVID-19 antibodies in every case). The figures from the two sources are not directly comparable as they cover different time periods (the Survey on Employment and Skills only asked about the previous 12 months, whereas the Statistics Canada study covers the entire period of the pandemic), are based on different samples of the population (the questions on the Survey on Employment and Skills were asked only to those in the labour force or in education), and ask about different experiences (the Survey on Employment and Skills asks specifically about missing days of work or school). But a comparison between the two studies confirms that the self-reported figure from the Survey on Employment and Skills is undoubtedly plausible.
- 3 The Government of Canada reports that 17.2 percent of adults experience longer-term symptoms after having had COVID-19 (a variety of other studies generally estimate this figure to be somewhere between 10 and 20 percent). If just over one in two adult Canadians had had COVID by mid-2022 (see Note 2), this means that nine percent of the adult population would be expected to have long COVID, which is the same as the proportion indicating this experience in Survey on Employment and Skills. (See Government of Canada, [COVID-19: Longer-term Symptoms among Canadian Adults – Highlights](#), last accessed July 4, 2023).
- 4 These figures do not add to 100 percent because some report more than one of the first three experiences.
- 5 See for example: Government of Canada, Social Inequalities in COVID-19 Deaths in Canada (Highlights from 2020 and Early 2021), <https://health-infobase.canada.ca/covid-19/inequalities-deaths/> (accessed June 29, 2023).
- 6 These figures refer to the proportion who had these experiences either occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3 to 4 days in the past week) or most or all of the time (5 to 7 days in the past week).
- 7 Note that someone experiencing long COVID would not necessarily indicate on the survey that they are in poor physical health; they might consider themselves to be, generally speaking, a person with good physical health in the sense that prior to contracting COVID they were active or did not suffer from an identifiable physical disability or illness.
- 8 It is likely, for instance, that some people with pre-existing health conditions were more susceptible to contracting a severe case of COVID-19; in these cases, COVID-19 is as much the effect of poorer health as its cause. Similarly, those who have responsibility caring for others may be more susceptible to anxiety of sleep difficulties, regardless of whether the person they are caring for caught COVID or not.



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