



# A Retreat from Opportunity: Is the Canadian Dream Still Alive?

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Charles Lammam

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This study was commissioned by the Centre for Civic Engagement. The CCE is a non-partisan Canadian charity dedicated to conducting original research on public policy issues related to Canadian prosperity, productivity, and national flourishing. The CCE's research informs an active program of policy seminars, events, conferences, and lectures all aimed at providing the policy making community with actionable insights that encourage informed decision making on issues that matter to Canadians.

# Introduction

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For generations, the Canadian covenant was straightforward: work hard, play by the rules, and you'll climb higher than your parents did. Merit, not inheritance, would determine success. That certainty is eroding.

Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre's persistent claim that "Canada is broken" resonates because it captures a growing anxiety that effort no longer guarantees advancement. The sentiment transcends party lines.

In early 2025, Policy Horizons Canada (the federal government's own foresight agency) released projections<sup>1</sup> for 2040 where "upward social mobility is almost unheard of" and "downward social mobility might become the norm." This scenario challenges the foundation of Canadian identity.

The evidence increasingly confirms what many Canadians already feel: Canada's meritocratic engine is stalling. This study examines the decline of intergenerational mobility in Canada and the headwinds from rising costs of necessities, and identifies policy areas to reform that could strengthen the pathways to advancement.

<sup>1</sup> Canada, Government of Canada, *Future Lives: Social mobility in question*, Policy Horizons Canada, Ottawa, 2025, <https://horizons.service.canada.ca/en/2025/01/10/future-lives-social-mobility/index.shtml>.

# What Canadians Believe

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For the first time since pollsters started asking in 1990, Canadians are evenly split on whether they're better off than their parents were at the same age. According to the Environics Institute's 2024 survey,<sup>2</sup> 40% say better off, 39% say worse off. The proportion feeling they've fallen behind is the highest on record. In 1990, it was just 21%.

The pessimism is consistent across age groups but sharpest among young adults. Among those aged 18 to 29, 54% report being worse off than their parents, compared to just 25% who feel they're ahead. Back in 1990, only 23% of this age group felt financially behind.

All this points to a negative sentiment about the next generation: 53% of Canadians expect the next generation (their children, nieces, nephews) will be worse off, while only 21% expect better.

Immigrants remain more optimistic, with 38% expecting the next generation to be better off – more than twice the rate among Canadian-born citizens (15%). This “aspirational dividend” reflects immigrants’ global perspective, where their baseline comparison is often international rather than purely intergenerational. But newcomers face the same structural barriers that constrain native-born mobility. If these barriers persist, immigrant optimism may erode.

A recent *Globe and Mail* piece<sup>3</sup> by Darrell Bricker and John Ibbitson captures the sentiment:

An entire generation of younger Canadians are at risk of giving up on their own future. A succession of Nanos polls has revealed that seven in 10 Canadians believe the next generation will experience a lower standard of living than people enjoy today. Eight in 10 Millennials and nine in 10 Gen Zs believe that home ownership is a luxury reserved for the rich, according to a 2024 Ipsos poll. Obtaining a college degree has become a crippling expense, with the average graduate carrying \$28,000 in student debt, and those graduates confront the precarity of the gig economy, with relatively few secure, well-paying jobs that offer adequate pensions.

<sup>2</sup> “Intergenerational Mobility in Canada,” Environics Institute for Survey Research (2024).

<sup>3</sup> Darrell Bricker and John Ibbitson, “There are divisions in every part of the country. Is Canada at the breaking point?,” *The Globe and Mail*, October 24, 2025, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-canada-divisions-nationalism-breaking-point/>.

# What the Data Shows

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Public sentiment tells one story. The evidence confirms it – and the details are equally concerning. Economists track two types of mobility: absolute mobility (whether you earn more than your parents, adjusted for inflation) and relative mobility (whether your income rank depends on theirs). In Canada, both are declining.

The most comprehensive evidence on relative mobility comes from researchers Marie Connolly and Catherine Haeck, who examined Canadians born between 1963 and 1985 using Statistics Canada's Intergenerational Income Database. Their 2021 analysis,<sup>4</sup> subsequently published in the 2024 Canadian Journal of Economics,<sup>5</sup> reveals a persistent trend of declining relative mobility.

Their key measure of *immobility*, which shows how tightly a child's income rank in their late 20s and early 30s correlates with their parents', increased by 21% from 0.202 to 0.245 between the 1963 and 1985 cohorts. For Early Millennials born in the early 1980s, parental income became more determinative of outcomes compared to Boomers and Gen-Xers. The bulk of the mobility deterioration occurred for children born between 1970 and 1975, with continued erosion for those born through the mid-1980s.

The poverty trap also tightened. Children from bottom-quintile families born in 1985 face a 33.1% chance of remaining there as adults, up from 27.5% for those born in 1963. That's a 20% increase in the likelihood of intergenerational poverty. Their probability of reaching the middle class dropped from 60.1% to 55.0%. Meanwhile, the probability of "rags-to-riches" mobility (moving from a family in the bottom to the top quintile yourself) remained at around 11-12%.

The data reveals a critical pattern: the system's greatest failure isn't that the poor can't reach the top; it's that they increasingly can't reach the middle. The initial rungs of the economic ladder have grown further apart. These patterns hold across all provinces, with Manitoba showing the lowest mobility and Saskatchewan experiencing the largest deterioration.

Canada's international standing on relative mobility has also been revised downward. Early comparisons<sup>6</sup> placed the country among the more mobile societies of the developed world based on the Intergenerational Earnings Elasticity (IEE). Canada's IEE was thought to be about 0.20 (0 is most mobile and 1 is least mobile), partly because researchers measured children's income too early in their careers. A 2016 study<sup>7</sup> using better data corrected this to roughly 0.32, meaning about 32% of a father's earnings advantage transmits to his son. Canada now sits in the middle of international comparisons: more fluid than the United States, but significantly less so than Norway.

<sup>4</sup> Marie Connolly, Catherine Haeck and David Lapierre, Statistics Canada, *Trends in Intergenerational Income Mobility and Income Inequality in Canada*, Analytical Studies Branch Research Paper Series, Catalogue no. 11F0019M – No. 458, Ottawa, 2021, [https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection\\_2021/statcan/11f0019m/11f0019m2021001-eng.pdf](https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2021/statcan/11f0019m/11f0019m2021001-eng.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Marie Connolly and Catherine Haeck, "Intergenerational income mobility trends in Canada," *Canadian Journal of Economics/Revue canadienne d'économique* 57, no. 1 (2023).

<sup>6</sup> Orsetta Causa and Asa Johansson, "Intergenerational Social Mobility in OECD Countries," *OECD Journal: Economic Studies* 1 (2010).

<sup>7</sup> Wen-Hao Chen, Yuri Ostrovsky and Patrizio Piraino, Statistics Canada, *Intergenerational Income Mobility: New Evidence from Canada*, Economic Insights, Catalogue no. 11-626-X – No. 059, Ottawa, 2016, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/11-626-x/11-626-x2016059-eng.pdf?st=Y-2UZm8p>.

On absolute mobility (simply earning more than your parents) Canada's performance is similarly declining. Early research<sup>8</sup> by Yuri Ostrovsky found that for cohorts born 1970–1984, the share of children earning at least as much as their parents remained stable at around 64–66%. During this period, about two of every three Canadians were still meeting the basic definition of upward mobility. But a 2024 international study<sup>9</sup> places Canada in the “lower tier” of developed nations at 57–59%, alongside the United States and Finland. Top performers like Norway achieve 74%, the Netherlands 80%. The study noted a troubling decline of 2.4 percentage points across the 1976–1985 birth cohorts, suggesting the situation is worsening. Financial progress is becoming less reliable.

<sup>8</sup> Yuri Ostrovsky, Statistics Canada, *Doing as Well as One's Parents? Tracking Recent Changes in Absolute Income Mobility in Canada*, Economic Insights, Catalogue no. 11-626-X — No. 073, Ottawa, 2017, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/nl/en/pub/11-626-x/11-626-x2017073-eng.pdf?st=c6oeAsBz>.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Manduca, Maximilian Hell, Adrian Adermon, Jo Blanden, Espen Bratberg, Anne C. Gielen, et al., “Measuring Absolute Income Mobility: Lessons from North America and Europe,” *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 2024 16, no. 2 (2024): 1–30.

# The Inequality Connection

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Part of the decline in social mobility has been linked to rising income concentration – a relationship economists call the Great Gatsby Curve. Connolly and Haeck's work found that parental income inequality, measured by the Gini coefficient (0 is most equal and 1 is least), rose from 0.36 to 0.44 between the 1963 and 1985 birth cohorts. Canada and every province have been steadily “going up”<sup>10</sup> the curve. As wealth concentrates, high-income parents make disproportionate investments in their children – superior housing in high-opportunity zones, private education, professional networks – reinforcing socioeconomic status across generations.

But the relationship is more nuanced than the curve alone suggests. Some inequality is natural – parents who succeed want to invest in their children, and this creates important incentives for progress. The problem emerges when inequality closes off pathways for others to rise. A healthy society can tolerate meaningful income differences, provided opportunity remains broadly distributed. Canada's challenge is that the mechanisms ensuring this are eroding.

According to Statistics Canada's latest data for the second quarter of 2025, the disposable income gap between the top and bottom 40% of households remains at a record high<sup>11</sup> of 48.4 percentage points, continuing an increase that began with the COVID-19 pandemic. In the 2010s, the average gap was 45.1 points.

<sup>10</sup> Connolly, Haeck and Lapierre, Statistics Canada, *Trends in Intergenerational Income Mobility and Income Inequality in Canada*.

<sup>11</sup> Canada, Statistics Canada, *Table 1 – Share of disposable income by income quintile, including gap between top two and bottom two income quintiles*, The Daily, Ottawa, 2025, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/251009/t001a-eng.htm>.

# Geography Matters

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There's also a local dimension to the national mobility challenge. Miles Corak's analysis<sup>12</sup> of 266 Census Divisions reveals a divided landscape clustering into five distinct mobility regions. High-mobility areas include Southern Ontario, parts of Alberta, and Southern Saskatchewan, with some Alberta regions reaching 18.5% for "rags-to-riches" transitions. Alberta's resource sector may be a driving force for its social mobility – evidence<sup>13</sup> suggests natural resource development can break intergenerational earnings patterns, providing jobs and economic opportunities that improve quality of life, particularly in rural and resource-dependent communities. Meanwhile, low-mobility regions – Manitoba, Atlantic provinces outside urban areas, northern and remote areas – show 35–40% chances of remaining in the bottom quintile.

An additional key finding is that mobility outcomes across Canadian regions are shaped by inequality in the bottom half of the distribution, regardless of whether communities are urban or rural. The bigger the income distance between the low-income group (25th percentile) and the middle class (50th percentile), the lower the mobility rate. When these rungs are too far apart, climbing becomes more difficult. While extreme top-end inequality exists, it correlates less strongly with general upward mobility. The gap between the working poor and stable middle class most influences the difficulty of initial advancement.

A separate regional analysis<sup>14</sup> comparing Canada to the United States found that while Canada's overall mobility exceeds the US average, Canadian regions share characteristics with low-mobility regions in the American South. The key difference is that such regions represent a much larger fraction of the US population than Canada's.

<sup>12</sup> Miles Corak, "The Canadian Geography of Intergenerational Income Mobility," *The Economic Journal* 130, no. 631 (2020): 2134–2174.

<sup>13</sup> Aline Bütikofer, Antonio Dalla-Zuanna and Kjell G. Salvanes, "Breaking the Links: Natural Resource Booms and Intergenerational Mobility," *The Review of Economics and Statistics* 107, no. 2 (2025): 306–323.

<sup>14</sup> Marie Connolly, Miles Corak, and Catherine Haeck, "Intergenerational Mobility Between and Within Canada and the United States," *Journal of Labor Economics* 37, no. S2 (2019).

# The Contemporary Challenge: Purchasing Power

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While the evidence above traces declining relative mobility across multiple generations, a pressing issue has accelerated since 2020: the erosion of purchasing power from surging costs for housing, food, and other necessities. Even when today's young adults earn more than their parents, soaring basic expenses consume those earnings, leaving little room for saving, investment in children, or building the financial reserves that facilitate upward mobility.

Canada has weathered affordability storms before. The 1980s and early 1990s saw high inflation and interest rates around 20%, making mortgage carrying costs comparable<sup>15</sup> to today's<sup>16</sup> despite lower home prices.<sup>17</sup> Yet the sustained inflation post-COVID-19,<sup>18</sup> particularly for shelter, food, and transportation, hit when generational mobility was already declining, compounding pressures for young Canadians.

Housing captures the squeeze most clearly. The average share of shelter costs in household budgets rose from 23.4% in 1982 to 32.1% in 2023.<sup>19</sup> By spring 2024, 38% of Canadians<sup>20</sup> expressed serious concern about affording housing, up from 30% two years earlier.

The debt burden compounds the challenge. Canada's household debt-to-disposable income ratio now sits highest among G7 countries.<sup>21</sup> While housing represents a significant share<sup>22</sup> of household wealth, the rising ratio<sup>23</sup> of interest costs to disposable income means households enter their peak earning years already financially constrained, with less capacity to save, invest in children's education, or weather economic shocks. The burden is pushing younger households to increasingly turn away<sup>24</sup> from the housing market entirely, limiting their ability to build wealth through homeownership.

<sup>15</sup> Kyle Dahms and Alexandra Ducharme, "Affordability improves for a seventh consecutive quarter in Q3 2025," *National Bank of Canada*, December 12, 2025, <https://www.nbc.ca/content/dam/bnc/taux-analyses/analyse-eco/logement/housing-affordability.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Hogue, "Easing homeownership costs could soon slow in Canada," *RBC*, October 1, 2025, <https://www.rbc.com/en/economics/canadian-analysis/canadian-housing/housing-affordability/easing-homeownership-costs-could-soon-slow-in-canada/>.

<sup>17</sup> "Buying a home gets a tad more affordable as interest rates drop," *RBC Economics and Thought Leadership*, October 2024, [https://thoughtleadership.rbc.com/wp-content/uploads/housing\\_report\\_Oct.pdf](https://thoughtleadership.rbc.com/wp-content/uploads/housing_report_Oct.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> Jock Finlayson, "Canadians weary after years of brutal inflation," *Fraser Institute*, August 28, 2024, <https://www.fraserinstitute.org/commentary/canadians-weary-after-years-brutal-inflation>.

<sup>19</sup> Canada, Statistics Canada, *Survey of Household Spending*, 2023, The Daily, Ottawa, 2025, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/250521/dq250521a-eng.htm>.

<sup>20</sup> Canada, Statistics Canada, *Nearly half of Canadians report that rising prices are greatly impacting their ability to meet day-to-day expenses*, The Daily, Ottawa, 2024, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/240815/dq240815b-eng.htm>.

<sup>21</sup> Isaac Lamoureux, "Canada's debt-to-income ratio largest in the G7 despite households being second wealthiest," *True North*, February 29, 2024, <https://tnc.news/2024/02/29/canadas-debt-to-income-ratio-largest-in-g7/>.

<sup>22</sup> Canada, Statistics Canada, *Research to Insights: Disparities in Wealth and Debt Among Canadian Households*, Ser. 11-631-X, Ottawa, 2024, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-631-x/11-631-x2024002-eng.htm>.

<sup>23</sup> James Gauthier and Carter McCormack, Statistics Canada, *Housing, wealth and debt: How are young Canadians adapting to current financial and housing pressures?*, Ser. 36-28-0001, Ottawa, 2024, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/36-28-0001/2024003/article/00004-eng.htm>.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

When a greater share of income flows to mandatory costs like housing, food, and debt servicing, the capacity for wealth accumulation diminishes. The purchasing power challenge thus compounds the mobility problem: not only is relative mobility declining, but the absolute gains that do exist are being eroded by rising costs.

The consequences extend to behaviour. Recent reporting documents a generation engaging in “doom spending”<sup>25</sup> – accumulating consumer debt not through recklessness, but as a response to blocked mobility pathways. When homeownership, retirement, and career advancement feel unattainable, rational long-term planning gives way to short-term coping.

<sup>25</sup> Courtney Shea, “The Doom Spenders,” *Maclean’s*, October 14, 2025, <https://macleans.ca/longforms/the-doom-spenders/>.

# The Structural Challenge: Policy Barriers

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In the face of financial pressures and declining mobility, the critical question is: what can public policy do? The Montreal Economic Institute<sup>26</sup> distinguishes between natural barriers such as parental involvement, family stability, and social capital and artificial ones created by policy. While we may not fully understand all the historical drivers of declining mobility, we can identify which mechanisms enable upward advancement and where policy creates barriers. Addressing them could improve mobility outcomes.

## Housing

Housing policy is particularly damaging to mobility beyond affordability alone, as it prevents Canadians from physically moving to high-opportunity regions. The “geographically stranded poor” often cannot relocate to opportunity-rich areas because housing costs in these regions have become prohibitive.

The core policy failure holding back<sup>27</sup> housing supply is a combination of excessive regulations, approval delays, restrictive zoning laws, high municipal fees, labour shortages, and unfavorable economic conditions that increase building costs and financial risk. Together, this creates artificial scarcity.

Record population growth, driven by immigration, accelerates unaffordability<sup>28</sup> when supply constraints prevent housing from keeping pace with demand. This structural mismatch acts as a brake on both young domestic workers and new immigrants seeking to access opportunity-rich labour markets. With the 2024 federal announcement to slow immigration levels, TD Economics<sup>29</sup> estimates lower average rental prices in Canada. Similarly, the Parliamentary Budget Officer<sup>30</sup> projects that slowing immigration growth could reduce Canada’s housing gap by 45% by 2030, underscoring the severity of the demand-supply imbalance.

The mobility consequences of unaffordable housing are significant. A TD Economics report<sup>31</sup> confirms that homeownership access perpetuates inequality across generations. Those without high incomes or parental wealth transfers face significant barriers, creating a self-reinforcing cycle where homeowner wealth begets more homeownership in the next generation.

<sup>26</sup> Justin Callais, Vincent Geloso and Gabriel Giguère, “Barriers to Social Mobility across Canada,” *Montreal Economic Institute*, October 2, 2025, <https://www.iedm.org/barriers-to-social-mobility-across-canada/>.

<sup>27</sup> Steve Lafleur, “Barriers to Housing Supply in Ontario and the Greater Toronto Area,” *Fraser Institute* (2024).

<sup>28</sup> Austin Thompson and Steven Globerman, “The Crisis in Housing Affordability Population Growth and Housing Starts 1972–2024,” *Fraser Institute* (2025).

<sup>29</sup> Beata Caranci and Marc Ercolao, “Is the Dial-Back of Immigration Having the Intended Impact in Canada?,” *TD Economics*, October 28, 2025, <https://economics.td.com/ca-dial-back-of-immigration-intended-impacts>.

<sup>30</sup> Caroline Nicol and Zachary Vrhovsek, “Impact of the 2025–2027 Immigration Levels Plan on Canada’s Housing Gap,” *Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer*, November 15, 2024, <https://www.cbo-dpb.ca/en/additional-analyses--analyses-complementaires/BLOG-2425-006--impact-2025-2027-immigration-levels-plan-canada-housing-gap--repercussions-plan-niveaux-immigration-2025-2027-ecart-offre-logement-canada>.

<sup>31</sup> Beata Caranci, Francis Fong and Mekdes Gebreselassie, “Digging Beneath The Surface: Is Housing Perpetuating A Wealth Divide in Canada?,” *TD Economics*, October 5, 2022, <https://economics.td.com/esg-housing-wealth-inequality>.

In response to high housing costs, a massive societal adaptation has occurred: an estimated 9.5 million Canadians<sup>32</sup> are pooling resources and living in either multigenerational or intergenerational setups.

Policy must address both liberalizing supply through regulatory reform while managing demand pressures through immigration levels aligned with housing capacity.

## K-12 Education

The link of K-12 education to mobility is straightforward. Quality K-12 education forms the foundation for human capital development and increasing high school completion rates.

Over the past decades, the performance of Canadian high school students has declined significantly across all subjects. John Richards documents the trends in a recent CD Howe report.<sup>33</sup> Math scores fell from 532 in 2003 to below 500 in 2022, the first time Canada dropped below the OECD benchmark. With limited exceptions, scores declined in each successive PISA cycle. In Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Atlantic Canada, math scores fell 50 points, reading 38 points, and science 27 points. Since a 20-point drop approximates losing a year of schooling, students in these provinces have effectively lost two and a half years of math education since 2003.

COVID-19 compounded educational inequality through learning losses<sup>34</sup> that disproportionately affected disadvantaged students. Seventy percent of teachers<sup>35</sup> in low-income schools reported performance drops, compared to 40% in high-income schools. High-income parents could supplement privately; low-income families couldn't. This differential impact will suppress mobility for the next generation by reinforcing class-based educational inequality.

Expanding school choice – through open enrolment, charter schools, or funding models that follow students – could introduce competitive pressure to improve outcomes while giving disadvantaged families options previously available only to those who could afford private schools or homes in desirable catchment areas.

## Post-Secondary Education

Education levels account for between 40.5% and 50.1%<sup>36</sup> of the correlation between parental and child income, making post-secondary education (PSE) a key driver of Canada's mobility engine. Reductions in its access and efficacy will eventually correspond to a decline in mobility.

A growing threat is the mounting financial burden that risks turning PSE into a barrier for lower-income families. Soaring housing costs in university cities, driven partly by the surge of international students, force some students to work excessively to cover expenses, hindering academic success. Financing

<sup>32</sup> Canada, Statistics Canada, *Canada's multigenerational and intergenerational households*, 2021, The Daily, Ottawa, 2025, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/250814/dq250814a-eng.htm>.

<sup>33</sup> John Richards, "The Case of the Boiling Frogs: Provincial Indifference to Declining Education Outcomes," *C.D. Howe Institute*, March 25, 2025, <https://cdhowe.org/publication/the-case-of-the-boiling-frogs-provincial-indifference-to-declining-education-outcomes/#:~:text=From%202003%20to%202018%2C%20eight,lsoiland%20experienced%20non%2Dstatistical%20declines>.

<sup>34</sup> Harry A. Patrinos, Emiliana Vegas and Rohan Carter-Rau, "COVID-19 school closures fueled big learning losses, especially for the disadvantaged," *World Bank Blogs*, May 16, 2022, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/developmenttalk/covid-19-school-closures-fueled-big-learning-losses-especially-disadvantaged>.

<sup>35</sup> Justin Zadorsky, "Students from low-income households felt more learning losses during pandemic: Study," *Western University News*, September 26, 2023, <https://news.westernu.ca/2023/09/students-from-low-income-households-felt-more-learning-losses-during-pandemic-study/>.

<sup>36</sup> Gaëlle Simard-Duplain and Xavier St-Denis. "Exploration of the Role of Education in Intergenerational Income Mobility in Canada: Evidence from the Longitudinal and International Study of Adults," *Institut national de la recherche scientifique* 24, no. 3.

PSE contributes to significant debt (the average bachelor's graduate carries over \$30,000<sup>37</sup>), inhibiting asset accumulation and delaying milestones like homeownership. High tuition for lucrative professional programs compounds this problem: the most financially rewarding credentials are disproportionately accessed<sup>38</sup> by the affluent, reinforcing inherited class advantages rather than promoting meritocracy.

Hindering this pathway is the growing misalignment with the labour market, which reduces the economic value of credentials. Approximately one in six<sup>39</sup> core-aged workers with post-secondary credentials work in jobs unrelated to their field of study, a figure that climbs to nearly one in five among young adults aged 25–34. For recent immigrants, the barrier is even higher, with an estimated one in three classified as overqualified for their current roles. As RBC reports, higher educational attainment doesn't always correspond<sup>40</sup> with higher skills, and employer surveys consistently indicate difficulty finding new hires with needed interpersonal and communication skills, revealing a gap between institutional curriculum and workforce reality.

Policy Horizons warns the sector risks becoming a "stranded asset"<sup>41</sup> if returns fail to materialize. Rising costs coupled with delayed adulthood are weakening certain degrees' value proposition, prompting a shift<sup>42</sup> toward vocational training that offers more direct paths to employment. Reform should focus on accountability for outcomes, stronger industry partnerships, and ensuring funding models reward programs that genuinely enhance employability and earnings potential.

## Labour Market Frictions

Onerous occupational licensing<sup>43</sup> and slow credential recognition are artificial barriers that disproportionately impact immigrants and those without established networks. Canada licenses 160 professions<sup>44</sup> with requirements varying widely across provinces, creating redundancies and compliance costs for workers relocating internally.

The mobility costs are substantial. US research shows occupational licensing reduces worker mobility<sup>45</sup> by 7%, resulting in 12% welfare losses. An OECD assessment<sup>46</sup> ranked Canada among the more restrictive countries for entry into personal and professional services professions, with comparably high restrictions for aestheticians, driving instructors, electricians, painters, hairdressers, plumbers, civil engineers, and real estate agents. A recent CD Howe analysis<sup>47</sup> suggests that for many Canadian occupations, the added

<sup>37</sup> Canada, Statistics Canada, *Student debt from all sources, by province of study and level of study*, Data, Table 37-10-0036-01, Ottawa, 2024, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=3710003601>.

<sup>38</sup> Grace Barakat, "The unfair barriers to public university education," *Policy Options*, January 9, 2023, <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/2023/01/public-education-barriers/>.

<sup>39</sup> Christoph Schimmele and Feng Hou, *Trends in education–occupation mismatch among recent immigrants with a bachelor's degree or higher, 2001 to 2021*, Economic and Social Reports, Ser. 36–28–0001, Ottawa, 2024, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/36-28-0001/2024005/article/00002-eng.htm>.

<sup>40</sup> RBC Economics, "A Smarter Path: The case for postsecondary education reform," *RBC*, March 31, 2025, <https://www.rbc.com/en/thought-leadership/skills/a-smarter-path-the-case-for-postsecondary-education-reform/>.

<sup>41</sup> Canada, Government of Canada, *Future Lives: Social mobility in question*.

<sup>42</sup> Sanni Yaya, "Canadian higher education at a crossroads," *University Affairs*, September 7, 2023, <https://universityaffairs.ca/opinion/canadian-higher-education-at-a-crossroads/>.

<sup>43</sup> Callais, Geloso and Giguère, "Barriers to Social Mobility across Canada."

<sup>44</sup> Tingting Zhang, "A New Trade War, an Old Barrier: Why Canada's Labour Mobility Bill is Long Overdue," *C.D. Howe Institute*, August 27, 2025, <https://cdhowe.org/publication/a-new-trade-war-an-old-barrier-why-canadas-labour-mobility-bill-is-long-overdue/#:~:text=Canada%20currently%20operates%20a%20balkanized,~and%20contribute%20to%20GDP%20growth>.

<sup>45</sup> Morris M. Kleiner and Evan J. Soltas, "A Welfare Analysis of Occupational Licensing in U.S. States," *Review of Economic Studies*. (2022).

<sup>46</sup> OECD, *Measuring occupational entry regulations: A new OECD approach* (OECD Economics Department Working Papers), 2020, [https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/measuring-occupational-entry-regulations-a-new-oecd-approach\\_296dae6b-en.html](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/measuring-occupational-entry-regulations-a-new-oecd-approach_296dae6b-en.html).

<sup>47</sup> Robert Mysicka, Lucas Cutler and Tingting Zhang, "Licence to Capture: The Cost Consequences to Consumers of Occupational Regulation in Canada," *CD Howe Institute Commentary* No. 575 (2020), [https://www.cdhowe.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Commentary\\_20575\\_0-2.pdf](https://www.cdhowe.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Commentary_20575_0-2.pdf).

costs consumers pay for regulated services may outweigh demonstrable public safety benefits. These rules prevent young talent from capitalizing on regional opportunities and trap skilled immigrants in roles below their qualification levels, making streamlined occupational regulations potentially as impactful for mobility as massive education investments.

Artificial intelligence presents another emerging friction, though its ultimate impact remains uncertain. AI promises productivity gains but could narrow traditional entry points where young workers build skills, networks, and credibility. If automation displaces entry-level positions before workers establish themselves, it risks severing the bottom rungs of the mobility ladder, not through malice, but by eliminating the roles that once launched careers.

Record immigration levels compound these challenges. When newcomers arrive faster than housing stock and labour market infrastructure can absorb them, intensified competition for entry-level positions, housing, and public services follows. This isn't an argument against immigration – Canada benefits enormously from newcomers – but recognition that immigration policy must align with absorption capacity. Misaligned population growth strains the systems enabling upward mobility for everyone. The mismatch penalizes both established residents and new immigrants competing for insufficient opportunities.

## Tax and Transfer System

High Marginal Effective Tax Rates<sup>48</sup> create powerful mobility traps. When families with children earn more money, they face a double penalty: they pay more in taxes and lose government benefits. These benefit reductions, called "clawbacks," act like hidden taxes that make it much harder for families to get ahead through work.

The problem is especially severe for lower-income families, who face much higher effective tax rates than wealthier families. For families earning between \$30,000 and \$60,000 – when various benefits like the Canada Workers Benefit phase out simultaneously – around 50 cents<sup>49</sup> of every extra dollar earned is lost to taxes and reduced benefits. In the worst cases, the penalties can be extreme. A working parent in a two-child family who takes on extra hours can lose up to 79 cents per dollar<sup>50</sup> in Ontario or 88 cents in Quebec. These punitive rates create powerful disincentives to increase earnings and trap families at lower income levels, making upward mobility extremely difficult.

It's important to acknowledge that the federal government increased the Canada Child Benefit (CCB) after the final year of the cohort assessment in the mobility studies. Expanded by the Trudeau government, the CCB has been credited<sup>51</sup> with reducing child poverty. Statistics show a substantial drop in the number of children living below the poverty line after the CCB's 2016 implementation, with some attributing the decrease to the direct cash transfer to families. While rising above the poverty line may improve income, it does not guarantee access to the opportunities that enable upward mobility. Nonetheless, poverty rates have been rising since 2020, and some suggest the CCB's effectiveness in combating poverty is being eroded by the rising cost of living.

<sup>48</sup> Trevor Tombe, "DeepDive: What a pro-growth tax reform might look like," *The Hub Canada*, June 24, 2024, <https://thehub.ca/2024/06/24/deepdive-what-a-pro-growth-tax-reform-might-look-like/>.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Nicholas Dahir and Alexandre Laurin, "Softening the Bite: The Impact of Benefit Clawbacks on Low-Income Families and How to Reduce It," *C.D. Howe Institute*, November 30, 2022, <https://cdhowe.org/publication/softening-bite-impact-benefit-clawbacks-low-income-families-and-how-reduce/>.

<sup>51</sup> Peter Zimonjic, "After years of decline, child poverty in Canada is rising swiftly: report," *CBC News*, November 19, 2024, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/campaign-2000-national-report-card-child-poverty-1.7387176#:~:text=Prime%20Minister%20Justin%20Trudeau%27s%20Liberal,the%20Liberals%20came%20to%20power>.

## Other Economic Factors

These specific barriers operate within broader economic challenges. Over the past decade, Canada's real GDP per capita has barely grown, ranking 37th<sup>52</sup> out of 38 OECD nations. That means stagnating living standards for the average person. Rising unemployment and underemployment, especially among youth, further limits opportunity, with the national unemployment rate trending upward<sup>53</sup> since mid-2022.

Structural problems compound these headwinds. New business formation has halved since 2000, while oligopolistic market concentration in banking, telecommunications, and groceries extracts economic rents<sup>54</sup> from consumers, suppresses competition for talent, and limits the overall dynamism required for widespread upward mobility.

<sup>52</sup> Pallavi Rao, "Ranked: Real GDP Per Capita Growth by Country (2014–2024)," *Visual Capitalist*, April 7, 2025, <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/real-gdp-per-capita-growth-country-2014-2024/>.

<sup>53</sup> Canada, Statistics Canada, *Labour Force Survey, September 2025*, The Daily, Ottawa, 2025, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/251010/dq251010a-eng.htm>.

<sup>54</sup> Canada, Government of Canada, *Competition Bureau Retail Grocery Market Study Report*, Competition Bureau, Ottawa, 2023, <https://competition-bureau.canada.ca/en/how-we-foster-competition/education-and-outreach/canada-needs-more-grocery-competition>.

# Restoring the Covenant

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The bigger picture shouldn't be lost. Canada remains a country where social mobility exists – we aren't a rigid society like Peru or Bangladesh. But the data reveals a concerning trend: relative mobility has been declining across generations. While this historical trend is clear, the future trajectory remains uncertain. The recent confluence of rising costs for necessities like housing, combined with structural headwinds in key policy areas (education, labour markets), could further constrain mobility for future generations.

The hardening of ranks occurred even with progressive tax policies and income transfers in place, underscoring a key reality: redistributing income after people earn it is insufficient against powerful structural forces. These forces include concentrated educational opportunity, lack of inherited human capital, and local regulatory barriers – factors that shape outcomes before individuals even enter the labour market.

The path forward demands structural reforms: liberalizing housing markets through regulatory reform, aligning immigration with absorptive capacity, improving K-12 school choice and quality, reforming post-secondary education to align with labour market needs, dismantling occupational licensing barriers, and reorienting the tax and transfer system to reward work. Strengthening competition and reducing barriers to business formation would also create opportunities for advancement. The ultimate goal is ensuring the next generation's success is determined by merit, not birthright.

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**Charles Lammam** is an economic and policy professional with over a decade-and-a-half of combined experience as a think-tank scholar and thought leader, trusted senior advisor to government, executive leader at a financial services member association, and consultant to private and non-profit corporations.

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