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Institute**  
For Survey Research



# Reconciliation & Relations with Indigenous Peoples

2023 SERIES



# Confederation of Tomorrow

The Confederation of Tomorrow surveys are annual studies conducted by an association of the country's leading public policy and socio-economic research organizations. The surveys give voice to Canadians about the major issues shaping the future of the federation and their political communities.

The 2023 study consists of a survey of 5,365 adults, conducted online in the provinces between January 26 and February 9; and by telephone in the territories between January 24 and February 26.

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The Environics Institute for Survey Research was established by Michael Adams in 2006 with a mandate to conduct in-depth public opinion and social research on the issues shaping Canada's future. It is through such research that Canadians can better understand themselves and their changing society.

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Date published:  
June 2023

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# Executive Summary

**Confederation of Tomorrow** surveys have covered relations with Indigenous Peoples from the beginning in 2019, documenting a gradual shift in Canadian public opinion toward greater support for the rights of Indigenous Peoples and the process of reconciliation. The 2023 survey updates this research, highlighting how the perspectives of both Indigenous Peoples and non-Indigenous Canadians continue to evolve.

The past year has seen positive movement in public opinion about relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada, in some cases reversing a previous negative trend. An increasing proportion of Canadians view such relations as positive overall, for the first time since 2020 reflecting the perspective of a majority of the population. This latest shift since 2022 is evident across the country, and not limited to specific segments of the population. And perhaps most notably, this perspective has strengthened most significantly among First Nations Peoples.

The basis for this improving view of relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people over the past year is unclear from the data collected on this survey. But does not stem from a growing public awareness of the history of Indian residential schools, since this level of awareness is unchanged. Six in ten Canadians say they have some familiarity with this history, essentially the same proportion as reported in 2020 and 2021, despite recent highly-publicized discoveries of unmarked graves of children at the sites of several of these former schools.

Reconciliation between Indigenous Peoples and non-Indigenous Canadians has been on the public agenda since the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report was released in 2015. The term “reconciliation” is understood to mean various things to people, encompassing such concepts as apology or making amends, improved relations, acknowledgement or accepting responsibility for what transpired, compensation, and equality of opportunity. Indigenous and non-Indigenous people are notably similar in how they think about the term reconciliation.

What do people see as obstacles to achieving reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people? Of 10 barriers presented on the survey, the public is most likely to emphasize inadequate infrastructure and services to Indigenous Peoples living in remote areas, socio-economic inequalities, a lack of political leadership willing to implement real change, and myths or stereotypes about what Indigenous Peoples receive from Canada; each of these is named by roughly one-third to represent a major barrier to reconciliation, with a similar proportion labelling it as a moderate barrier. In all cases Indigenous Peoples are noticeably more likely than non-Indigenous Canadians to name each of the 10 barriers as major. One exception relates to difference in world views or values between Indigenous Peoples and non-Indigenous Canadians: both populations are in close agreement is that this is the least important barrier to reconciliation.

Are governments in Canada doing enough to advance reconciliation? As on past surveys the public is more likely than not to say “no”, although this view has softened over the past year, especially among First Nations Peoples. When it comes to what individuals can do, a strong majority of Canadians continue to recognize and acknowledge that people like themselves have a role to play in efforts to bring about reconciliation, with half stating they feel strongly about this.

As with the general sentiment about relations between Indigenous Peoples and non-Indigenous people, a majority of Canadians express optimism that meaningful progress toward reconciliation will happen in their lifetime. Opinions on this question remain essentially unchanged among non-Indigenous people over the past two years, but have improved noticeably among Indigenous Peoples since 2022; the proportion feeling very optimistic has almost doubled in the past year, and they are now more than twice as likely as non-Indigenous people to express this level of optimism about meaningful progress toward reconciliation in their lifetime.

# Relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people

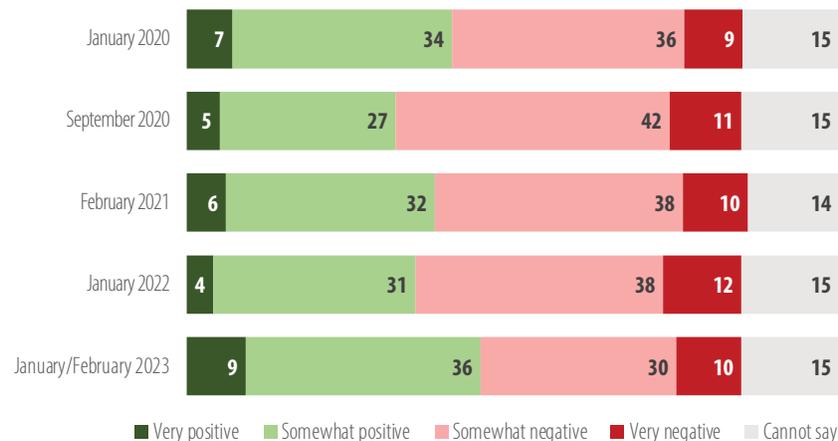
## Overall state of relations

Canadians' overall assessment of relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people has improved over the past year and is now the most positive since 2020. The most noticeable improvement in views is among First Nations Peoples.

How do Canadians as a whole view relations between Indigenous Peoples and non-Indigenous people in this country today? There is no public consensus, but opinions have improved noticeably over the past year, reversing an earlier negative trend and now reflecting the most positive view about relations since 2020 when this research was launched. Across the population as a whole, more than four

in ten now describe such relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people as very (9%) or somewhat (36%) positive, an increase of ten percentage points since 2022. By comparison, a smaller proportion say that relations are somewhat (30%) or very (10%) negative (down 10 points), with the remaining 15 percent offering no opinion on the question.

Current state of relations between Indigenous Peoples and non-Indigenous people in Canada  
2020 – 2023



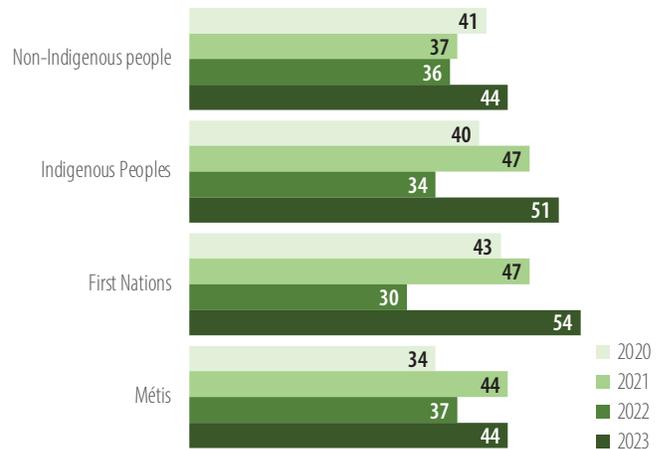
Q.34  
Would you describe the current relations between Indigenous Peoples and non-Indigenous people in Canada today as very positive, somewhat positive, somewhat negative or very negative?

This positive shift in opinion about Indigenous-non-Indigenous relations since 2022 is evident across the population and among all identifiable groups, except residents of the territories where opinions were already the most positive in the country (53% very or somewhat positive, down 2 points). Notably, the most dramatic improvement in views on this question since last year has occurred among First Nations Peoples (to 54% positive, up 24 percentage points), and especially among those living on-reserve. The opinion of Métis people is closer to that of non-Indigenous people (44% positive, up 7).

Across the country, a positive perspective on the state of relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people continues to be most widespread among residents of the territories, PEI, Nova Scotia and B.C., as well as among Canadians 18 to 24 years of age and those who are first generation in the country (especially among recent immigrants). This perspective is least apt to be shared among residents of Prairie provinces (especially in Saskatchewan at 34%), although opinions in this region have also improved over the past year (to 39%, up 8 points).

### Current state of relations between Indigenous Peoples and non-Indigenous people in Canada

2020 – 2023 By group, very or somewhat positive



Q.34

Would you describe the current relations between Indigenous Peoples and non-Indigenous people in Canada today as very positive, somewhat positive, somewhat negative or very negative?

## Familiarity with Indian Residential Schools

The discovery of unmarked graves of children at the sites of former Indian residential schools in 2021 has not led to increasing public awareness of this history. Six in ten Canadians say they have some familiarity with Indian residential schools, as was the case in 2020 and 2021.

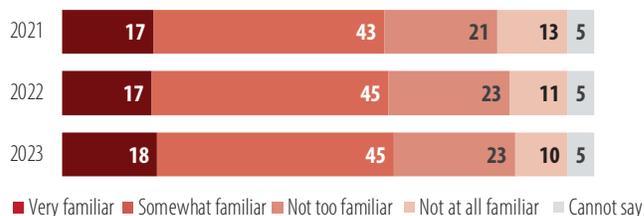
The history of Indian Residential Schools has been documented and publicized over the past decade, especially through the work of the Truth and Reconciliation which issued its final report in 2015. In 2021, the tragedies inflicted through this colonial institution were further revealed through the discovery of unmarked graves of Indigenous children at the sites of several former schools.

Many Canadians have come to learn about Indian Residential Schools, but the recent discoveries of unmarked graves do not appear to have had a noticeable impact on public awareness of this history. Just over six in ten say they are very (18%) or somewhat (45%) familiar with the history of Indian Residential Schools, essentially unchanged from 2022 and also early in 2021 (prior to the discovery of unmarked graves). This suggests that awareness of this history has not been a factor in the improving opinions about the state of relations between Indigenous Peoples and non-Indigenous Canadians.<sup>1</sup>

As before, familiarity with residential schools is significantly greater among Indigenous Peoples (with just over eight in ten indicating they are very (49%) or somewhat (33%) familiar), but these figures also remain essentially unchanged since a year ago. Strong familiarity continues to be more widespread among First Nations Peoples (55%; especially those living on reserve, at 77%) than among those who are Métis people (41%).

Across the country, overall familiarity with the history of Indian residential schools is strongest in the territories (87% very or somewhat familiar) and somewhat more evident among residents in western Canada and those aged 18 to 24 years of age (73%). By comparison, familiarity is least apt to be reported by residents of Newfoundland & Labrador (53%) and Quebec (52%), as well as among first generation

### Familiarity with the history of Indian residential schools 2021 – 2023



Q.40

How familiar do you feel you are with the history of Indian Residential Schools in Canada?

Canadians (50%). Since 2022, such awareness has increased noticeably only among B.C. residents and Canadians ages 18 to 24.

The finding that younger adults in Canada are more aware of this history is encouraging, as it may reflect changes to the curriculum in schools and post-secondary education institutions implemented in response to the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (though the survey data cannot validate this interpretation). But the fact that overall awareness among Canadians about residential schools does not appear to be increasing suggests that further efforts or new approaches to teach this history, both in the classroom and in other settings such as within professional associations, are warranted.

<sup>1</sup> In a previous Environics Institute national survey of non-Indigenous Canadians conducted in 2016, two-thirds (66%) said they had read or heard something about Indian residential schools. (Canadian Public Opinion on Aboriginal Peoples).

# Reconciliation

## Concepts of reconciliation

The idea of reconciliation means different things to Canadians, and evokes themes of apology and acknowledgement of responsibility, forgiveness, relationship building, and better relations. Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants are notably similar in how they think about the concept.

In its 2015 final report, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission set the country on a path toward reconciliation between Indigenous Peoples and non-Indigenous Canadians. It articulated a vision of reconciliation through 94 Calls to Action to be taken by governments, other institutions, and all peoples, but the concept is a broad one that has come to mean different things. The survey asked participants what the word “reconciliation” means to them, when they think about Indigenous Peoples in Canada (asked in an open-ended format, with responses then coded into conceptually-meaningful themes).

Responses to this question cover a range of themes, none of which predominate (i.e., mentioned by more than one in six survey participants). The most common ways in which Canadians think about “reconciliation” are in terms of an apology or making amends (14%), having better relations or getting along better (12%), and acknowledgement or acceptance of responsibility (11%). Other themes mentioned include compensation (9%), equality of opportunity (9%), living in harmony or with mutual respect (7%), and healing or forgiveness (5%). Notably, close to four in ten (37%) do not offer any response to this question.<sup>2</sup>

Notably, conceptions about the meaning of reconciliation are very similar between Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants – they identify the same themes in almost the same proportions, including the likelihood of offering no

## What does “reconciliation” mean to you?

2023 Unprompted responses



Q.34

What does the word “reconciliation” mean to you, when you think about Indigenous Peoples in Canada?

response to the question. Across the country, providing one or more responses to the question increases marginally by age and level of education.

<sup>2</sup> A similarly-worded question was included on the 2016 national survey (referenced in footnote 1), and elicited a similar set of themes. This earlier survey was administered by telephone rather than online, which has a direct impact on how some questions are answered and does not allow for a direct comparison with the current results (for instance, in 2016 only 13% did not offer a response to the question, compared with 37% in the current survey).

The finding that close to four in ten Canadians do not offer a response as to what reconciliation means to them raises some questions. In some cases, no answer may have come to mind. In other cases, people answering the survey may not have felt they could summarize their thoughts easily in the time they had available. And even though this question was not presented as a test, some may have been reluctant to share an answer they were unsure about. Moreover, the question may not be easy for some people to answer, since the term reconciliation as it applies to Indigenous-

non-Indigenous relations in Canada means different things to different people and communities; there is no single definition about which everyone agrees. Nonetheless, it appears that, despite the ongoing news coverage of reconciliation, an important number of Canadians find it a challenge to say what the term means in their own words. This underlines the importance of encouraging further public discussion in a constructive manner where people hear more about what reconciliation might mean to different people or communities.

## Barriers to reconciliation

Each of 10 barriers to reconciliation is seen by a majority of Canadians to be a moderate if not major obstacle. Indigenous Peoples are more likely to view each of these barriers as major, but agree with non-Indigenous people that least significant obstacle is a difference in worldviews or values.

What do people see as the barriers to achieving reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada? The survey presented a list of 10 types of barrier, as potentially major, moderate or minor obstacles to reconciliation.

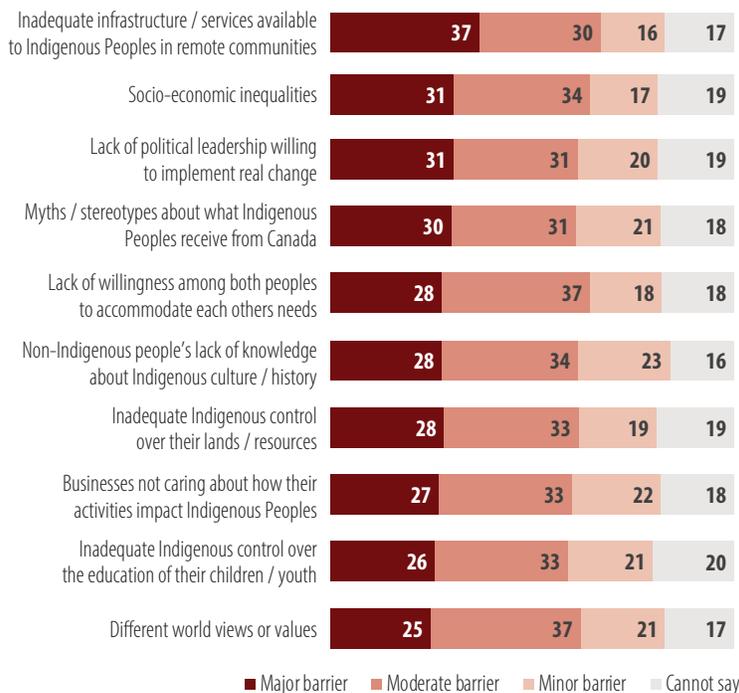
Across the population, all 10 barriers presented were considered by a majority to represent a moderate if not major barrier to reconciliation. In all but one case, a plurality labelled the barrier as moderate, with roughly four in ten identifying them as either minor or were unable to offer any response.

Across the 10 barriers, Canadians are most likely to identify inadequate infrastructure and services available to Indigenous Peoples living in remote areas (37% major

barrier), followed by socio-economic inequalities (31%), and lack of political leadership willing to implement real change (31%). Least apt to be named as a major barrier is different world views or values between the two peoples (25%).

As would be expected, Indigenous Peoples are more likely to say all of these barriers represent major barriers to reconciliation. The most notable gaps related to non-Indigenous people's lack of knowledge about Indigenous culture and history (a gap of 19 percentage points) and inadequate Indigenous control over their lands and resources (gap of 15 points). In the case of Indigenous Peoples, non-Indigenous people's lack of knowledge is one of the items that is most likely to be seen by as a major barrier to reconciliation; this is not the case for non-Indigenous Canadians. While it is not surprising that non-Indigenous Canadians might be less likely to point the finger at themselves, this finding nonetheless suggests that more dialogue and exchange of information could help build a more common understanding.

### Barriers to reconciliation 2023



Q.37a-j

To what extent do you think each of the following presents a major barrier, a moderate barrier, or a minor barrier to achieving reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous People in Canada?

The one notable exception to the pattern is the absence of a difference in opinion about different world views or values as a major barrier to reconciliation, with a gap of only four percentage points (and with this item being the least likely to be mentioned as a major barrier to reconciliation by both Indigenous Peoples and non-Indigenous Canadians).

Opinions about barriers to reconciliation are generally similar between First Nations and Métis people, with First Nations somewhat more likely to name as major non-Indigenous people’s lack of knowledge, inadequate Indigenous control over education of their children and youth, control over their land and resources, and inadequate infrastructure and services in remote communities.

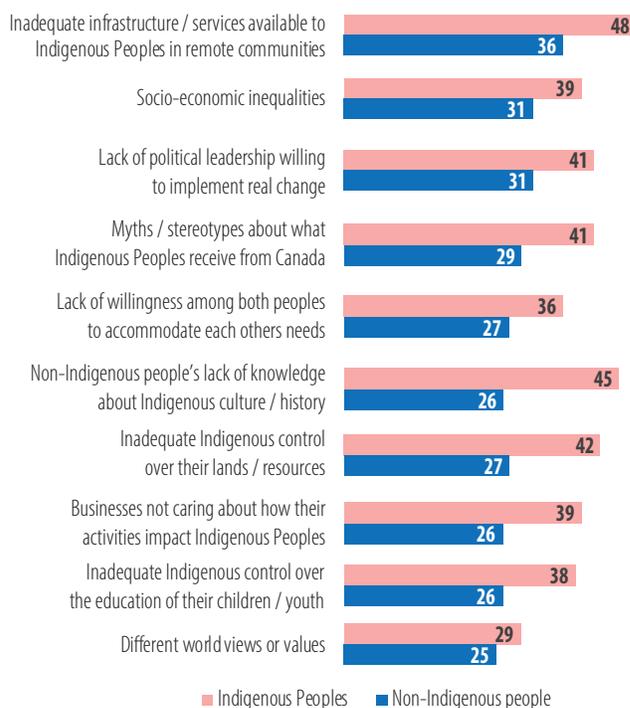
Across the country, views about barriers to reconciliation are very similar across provinces, but in all but one case are more apt to be seen as major among residents of the territories (with an average gap of 12 points). The gap as to the importance of inadequate infrastructure and services available to Indigenous Peoples in remote communities is especially notable, with 60 percent of residents of the territories seeing this as a major barrier, compared to 37 percent of those in the provinces. The exception, once again, is with the barrier presented by a difference in world view or values, the one least apt to be seen as a major by both provincial and territorial residents.

Opinions about reconciliation barriers are largely similar across the population by demographic characteristics. Education appears to play some role as those with a university degree are more apt to name some barriers as major, while those without a high school diploma are among the most likely to have no opinion to offer.

Political ideology also emerges as relevant, with those identifying on the political left most likely to name eight of the 10 barriers as major, compared with those who identify with the centre or right (with an average gap of 15 percentage points, compared with the national total). Where Canadians across the political spectrum agree is on the significance of barriers to reconciliation related to different worldviews or values and a lack of willingness among both peoples to accommodate to the needs of the other.

## A major barrier to reconciliation

2023 By group



Q.37a-j

To what extent do you think each of the following presents a major barrier, a moderate barrier, or a minor barrier to achieving reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous People in Canada?

## Government and individual responsibility

Canadians are more likely than not to say that governments have not gone far enough to advance reconciliation, although this view has softened over the past year. Two-thirds continue to believe that individual Canadians have a role to play, with half feeling strongly about this issue.

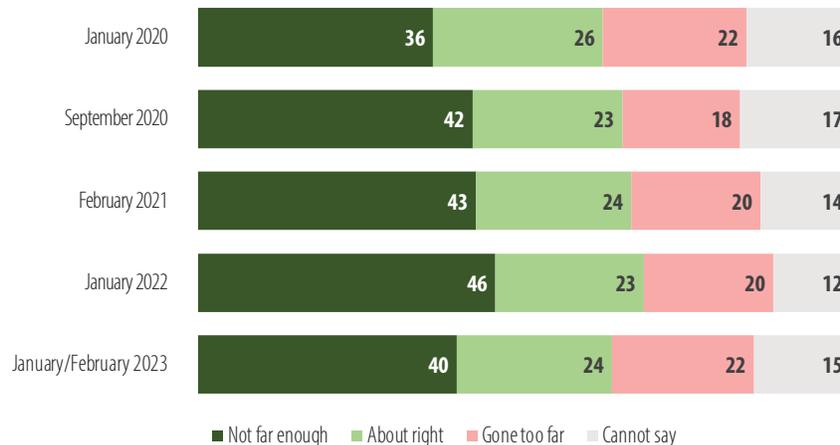
**Have governments done enough to advance reconciliation?** What do Canadians think about the intentions and actions of their governments in advancing reconciliation? There is no public consensus on this question, with a plurality continuing to say that governments in Canada have not gone far enough, although this proportion has declined since 2022 (to 40%, down 6 points) and reverses an upward trend dating back to 2020. By comparison, half as many (22%, up 2) express the opposite view in stating that governments have gone too far, while the remainder believe either that the balance is about right (24%, up 1) or have no opinion to offer on this question (15%, up 3).

As on past surveys, Indigenous Peoples are more likely than non-Indigenous people to say that governments in Canada have not gone far enough in advancing reconciliation. But

this gap has narrowed considerably over the past year, as Indigenous Peoples are now less apt to express this view (56%, down 15 points since 2022), and more likely to believe they have gone too far (24%, up 12); this shift is most substantial among First Nations Peoples on reserve.

Across the population as a whole, this decline in the view that governments not gone far enough is most evident among Canadians under 35 years of age and those without a high school diploma. This opinion is most widely voiced among residents of the territories (53%), Canadians under 35 years of age (48%), second generation Canadians (48%), and those on the left of the political spectrum (59%). Those most apt to say that governments have gone too far on reconciliation include residents of Saskatchewan (30%), Canadians with household incomes of \$100K or more (30%), and those on the political right (38%).

Have governments gone too far or not far enough to advance reconciliation?  
2020 - 2023



Q.36

*In your opinion, have governments in Canada gone too far or have they not gone far enough in trying to advance reconciliation with Indigenous peoples?*

### Do individual Canadians have a role in reconciliation?

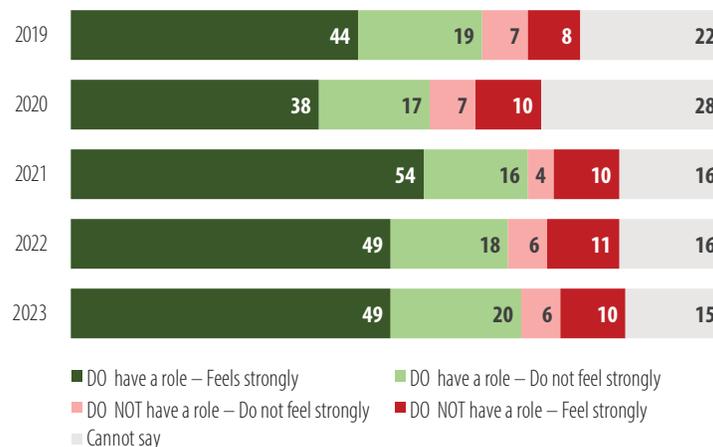
Much of the focus on reconciliation has centred on government policy, but the Truth and Reconciliation Commission made it clear that reconciliation must involve all parts of society, including individuals. The latest survey confirms that most Canadians recognize and acknowledge this responsibility. Seven in ten say they believe either strongly (49%) or not strongly (20%) that individual Canadians have a role to play in efforts to bring about reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, compared with 16 percent who do not agree, and another 15 percent who have no opinion either way.

These results are essentially the same as those recorded in 2022, and reflect a somewhat reduced majority opinion than in 2021 (when 54% felt strongly about this responsibility), but greater than proportions expressing this perspective in 2019 and 2020, and especially in 2008 (42%), before the TRC began its work.<sup>3</sup>

As in past surveys, belief in the role of individual Canadians with reconciliation is more widely held among Indigenous Peoples (66% feel strongly) than non-Indigenous people (48%); but the gap narrows considerably when including those who agree but not strongly (74%, versus 69%).

Public opinion on the role of individual Canadians in advancing reconciliation is largely similar across the country, with a clear majority in agreement and a much smaller minority adopting the opposite view. Variation is most noticeable in the likelihood of feeling strongly about individuals having a role to play; by region with a low of 44 percent in Quebec to a high of 64 percent in the territories. A strongly held affirmative opinion is most widely voiced by those with a university education, those ages 25 to 34, first generation Canadians, and those on the political left. This strongly held view is least apt to be shared by Canadians on the political right, but the gap with those on the left is much smaller when both strongly and not strongly positions are included.

### Role of individual Canadians in reconciliation 2019 - 2023



Q.38

*Do you believe that individual Canadians do, or do not, have a role to play in efforts to bring about reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples?*

<sup>3</sup> The 2008 results are drawn from an Environics Research survey conducted by telephone for Indian Residential Schools Resolution Canada (IRSRC) and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

## Future outlook for reconciliation

More than half of Canadians feel optimistic that meaningful progress toward reconciliation will happen in their lifetime. For the population as a whole, there has been little change in views on this question since last year, but this view has strengthened since 2022 among Indigenous Peoples. How do

Canadians feel about the prospects for meaningful progress on reconciliation? The balance of opinion is positive, with a modest majority who say they are very (11%) or somewhat (46%) optimistic that there will be meaningful progress on reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in their lifetime. Three in ten are somewhat (21%) or very (8%) pessimistic about the future, with another 13 percent with no opinion to offer.

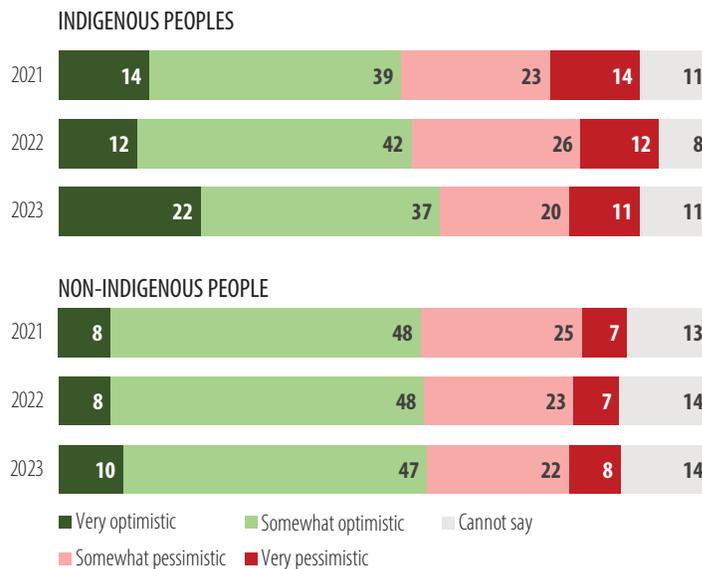
For the population as a whole, there has been little change in views on this question since 2021 or 2022. But over the past year, optimism has strengthened among Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous Peoples are now more than twice as likely to

express strong optimism (22%, up 10 percentage points since 2022) compared with non-Indigenous people (10%, up 2)

Among Indigenous Peoples, perspectives are largely similar among First Nations and Metis people, with First Nations on-reserve most widely expressing strong optimism. Across the population, outlook on reconciliation over time does not vary noticeably by region, but as before optimism is more evident among younger and more educated Canadians. Notably, those who identify on the political right (22%) are twice as likely as those on the political left (12%) to say they are very optimistic about meaningful reconciliation in their lifetime.

### Prospects for meaningful progress toward reconciliation in your lifetime

2021-2023 By group



Q.39

Thinking about Canada over the next decade, are you very optimistic, somewhat optimistic, somewhat pessimistic or very pessimistic that we will make meaningful progress towards reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people?

# Conclusion

Two general themes emerge from the findings of the latest Confederation of Tomorrow Survey of Canadians on the subject of reconciliation and relations with Indigenous Peoples.

The first is that there are some encouraging trends. More people are seeing relations between Indigenous Peoples and non-Indigenous people in Canada as positive, and a majority remains optimistic about the prospects for reconciliation, with a growing number of Indigenous Peoples feeling very optimistic. Canadians are almost twice as likely to say that governments have not gone far enough to advance reconciliation than they are to say that they have gone too far. And seven in ten Canadians recognize that they have a role as individuals in advancing reconciliation.

The second theme is the continued need for more dialogue, information and education to bring Indigenous Peoples and non-Indigenous Canadians closer together. While a majority of Canadians say they are familiar with the history of Indian Residential Schools in this country, the level of

familiarity has not increased over the period covered by this series of surveys. Many Canadians do not provide an answer to a question about what reconciliation means to them, perhaps because some are not sure or are not confident in their answer. And for a significant number of Indigenous Canadians, non-Indigenous peoples' lack of knowledge about Indigenous culture and history appears a major barrier to reconciliation.

While most Canadians most Canadians recognize or acknowledge they have role in advancing reconciliation, in practice it is possible that many are unsure about what steps they might take. Encouraging constructive dialogues, that bring people together rather than turning them away, and allow people to ask questions without fear of criticism, can contribute to progress. This type of outreach and bridge-building can be undertaken in partnership with Indigenous-led organizations and governments, with appropriate resourcing to avoid placing the burden for the work in advancing reconciliation on Indigenous Peoples themselves.

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