

What does poverty look like in Canada? Survey finds one-in-four experience notable economic hardship

More than half of all Canadians see poverty on the rise in their communities today

July 17, 2018 – What does it mean to be poor in Canada? Does it mean having to rely on food banks and payday loans to make ends meet? Does it mean struggling to afford warm clothes for the winter? What about having to live far away from work or school?

A new, two-part study from the Angus Reid Institute examines the state of poverty in Canada by looking at lived experiences, rather than income, with some striking results.

This first chapter of the report finds fully one-in-five Canadian adults (21%) say an inability to afford dental care has been a chronic problem for them in their lives. One-in-six are routinely unable to afford new clothes or good-quality groceries, and one-in-seven have struggled with inadequate housing – spaces that are too small or too far from work or school – throughout their lives.

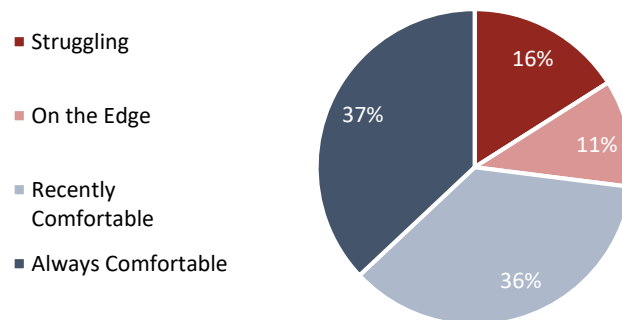
Looking at these experiences in aggregate, ARI researchers are able to sort the Canadian population into four groups: The Struggling (16% of the total population), those On the Edge (11%), those who are Recently Comfortable (36%), and those who are Always Comfortable (37%). As their names suggest, the Struggling are facing financial challenges that are negatively affecting their quality of life, and those On the Edge are not far from joining them.

Between these two groups, more than one-quarter of the Canadian population (27%) could be described as experiencing notable financial hardship today.

More Key Findings:

- Almost one-in-three Canadians (31%) feel “very stressed about money” on a regular basis – either “often” or “all the time”
- More than half of Canadians (52%) believe poverty has been increasing where they live in recent years. Fewer than one-in-ten (9%) say poverty has been on the decline in that time

Four types of Canadians based on experience with economic hardship:



METHODOLOGY:

The Angus Reid Institute conducted an online survey from May 28 – June 13, 2018, among a representative randomized sample of 2,542 Canadian adults who are members of Maru Voice Canada. The sample plan included a special booster sample of 242 respondents with household incomes below \$35,000. For comparison purposes only, a probability sample of this size with this sample plan would carry a margin of error of +/- 2 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. Discrepancies in or between totals are due to rounding. The survey was self-commissioned and paid for by ARI. Detailed tables are found at the end of this release.

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- Three-in-ten Canadians (30%) are pessimistic about their personal financial situation over the next few years
- More Canadians believe their children's generation will be worse off (43% do) than themselves than believe they will be better off (32%)

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Introduction

This special Angus Reid Institute study on poverty and economic struggle in Canada today sought to capture personal experiences with – and attitudes toward – this topic. The study will be released in two chapters.

This first chapter of the report on the findings of this study will focus on defining and quantifying poverty in Canada through the day-to-day economic struggles of Canadians. It will also look at poor Canadians' self-perceptions, as well as the financial anxieties of Canadians across the spectrum of personal experience with poverty and deprivation.

Chapter two of this report, to be released in the coming weeks, will deal with attitudes toward poverty in Canada, including empathy for the poor, views of governmental handling of this file, and support for various proposals for alleviating poverty.

Poverty as a lived experience

The Canadian government has [no official definition](#) of poverty. Instead, it uses a variety of income-based measures to facilitate comparisons between Canada and other countries, and between Canadian cities, regions, and provinces.

This Angus Reid Institute survey sought to quantify economic struggles in a different way, relying on self-reported personal experiences to provide a sense of the relative ease or difficulty with which Canadians are able to make ends meet.

Because this study was conducted online, those living in extreme poverty – without access to the Internet or a smartphone on which to take the survey – are likely underrepresented in the sample. As such, the findings of this study should be considered low-end estimates of the actual prevalence of the experiences and attitudes in question.

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Respondents were asked about a dozen specific money-related scenarios, ranging from having to forgo relative luxuries like movies (44% of Canadians say they have done this) and dinners out on a special occasion (46%), to more serious instances of deprivation like having to use a food bank (16%) or being unable to afford warm winter clothes (17%). In addition to these four items, the following scenarios were canvassed:

- Using a “pay day loan” type service that offers access to cash but at higher interest rates (11% of Canadians have done this in their lives)
- Being late paying rent or mortgage (18%)
- Being unable to pay a utility bill (24%)
- Having to borrow money for essentials like groceries or transportation (25%)
- Living in a place that is too small or too far away from work or otherwise doesn’t meet one’s needs (27%)
- Being unable to buy new clothes when they’re needed (39%)
- Being unable to afford dental care (40%)
- And, being unable to afford good quality groceries and having to buy what’s cheap instead (43%)

Canadians with children living at home were asked an additional series of questions about their ability to provide for them. Nearly one-in-five (18%) say they can’t always afford to feed their children as nutritiously as they would like, and nearly one-quarter (24%) are unable to buy their children a requested gift for Christmas or a birthday.

Three additional struggles are even more prevalent for Canadian parents and guardians:

- Three-in-ten (31%) cannot afford for their kids to participate in after-school sports or music programs
- Four-in-ten (41%) haven’t been able to save any money for their children’s post-secondary education
- And an even larger number (45%) say they could not afford to pay for a tutor if their child was failing at school

Note that Canadians were asked whether they had ever experienced each of these situations in their lives. Those respondents who said yes to any of the scenarios were asked a follow-up question about the frequency of their experiences.

For many Canadians who have dealt with the circumstances asked about in this survey, the experience came long ago – when they were children – and has not recurred since. For others, these challenges are a more recent occurrence, or have been ongoing for most of their lives.

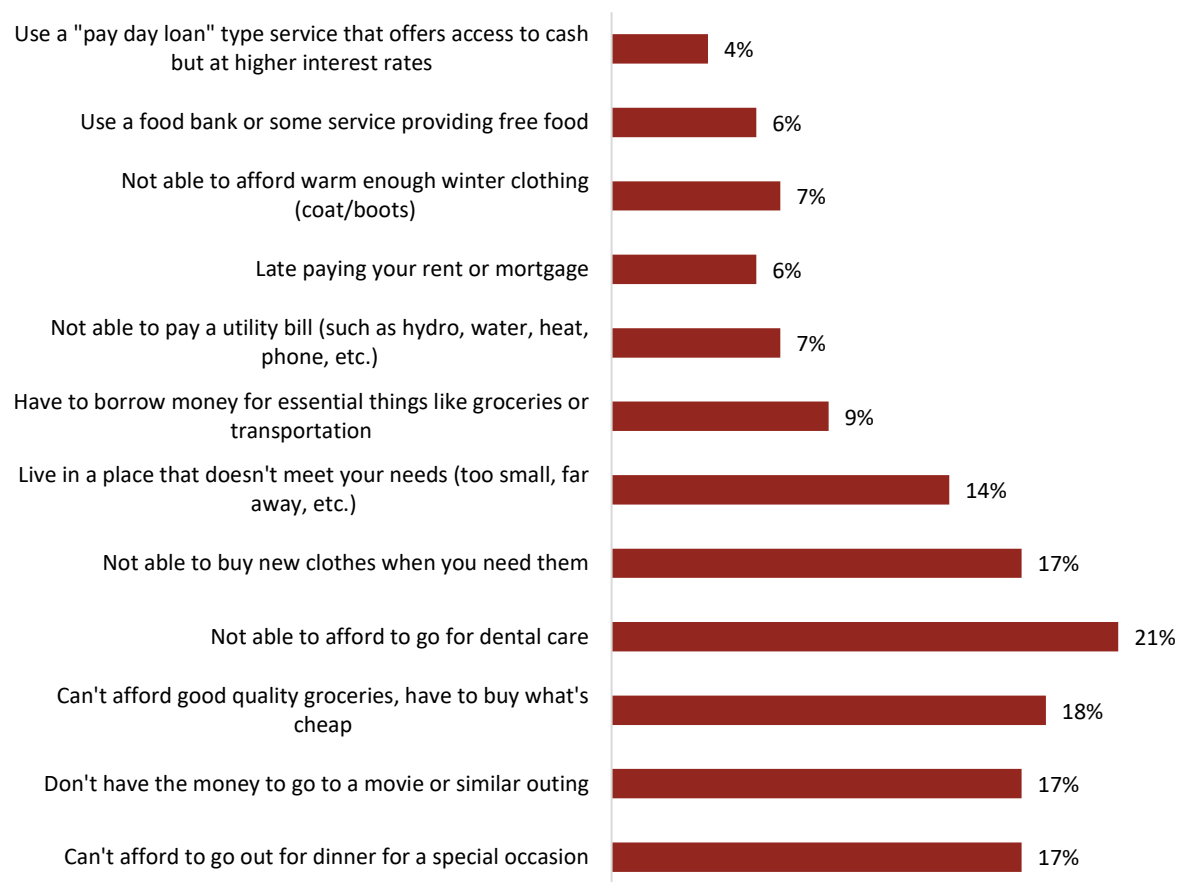
The following graph shows the same list of situations, but with bars showing only the percentage of Canadians who have either experienced each one chronically throughout their lives or recently began to

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experience each one. This provides a rough approximation of the number of Canadians who are currently struggling with each issue on the list.

Percentage of Canadians currently experiencing each of the following due to a lack of money:



Each of the individual items on this list tells the story of a segment of the Canadian population that is struggling. Even the four per cent of respondents who either recently began taking out pay day loans or have been doing so on an ongoing basis throughout their lives represents the equivalent of more than a million adults who feel they must turn to a loan practice frequently described as “predatory.”

Likewise, the equivalent of more than 1.5 million Canadian adults say they recently began getting food from a food bank or a similar service – or have had to rely on such services all their lives. This total is significantly higher than the estimated 850,000 people who use food banks each month, a likely by-product of the broader scope of this ARI question.

Other, less-severe struggles are even more prevalent. One-in-seven Canadians say they live in a place that doesn't meet their needs because they can't afford to move elsewhere, and one-in-six can't afford to buy new clothes or good-quality groceries.

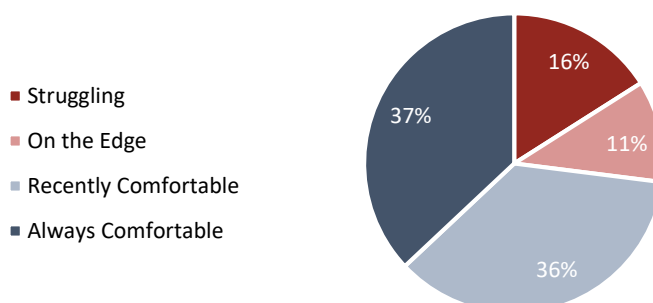
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Each of these experiences, by itself, is a form of deprivation due to a lack of funds. Taken together, Canadians' interactions with the items on this list paint a detailed picture of economic hardship in Canada today.

Angus Reid Institute researchers combined respondents' answers to the 12 scenarios on the list to derive the four segments of the Canadian population shown in the graph that follows. The following section will discuss these segments, and how they were derived, in greater detail.

Four types of Canadians based on experience with economic hardship:



Meet the four segments

Based on their experiences with economic hardship, Canadians can be grouped into four broad categories. They are:

- The **Struggling** (16% of the total population): Members of this group have dealt with at least four of the 12 items on the list in their lives, and the vast majority of them (77%) have been experiencing at least one on an ongoing basis throughout their lives. As the group's name suggests, these Canadians are struggling financially. Membership in this group overlaps significantly with traditional, income-based measures of poverty.
- Those **On the Edge** (11%): Members of this group have experienced at least three of the 12 items on the list in their lives, but unlike the Struggling, they're more likely to have only recently begun facing these economic challenges. They tend to have encountered fewer of the scenarios on the list than the Struggling, and on a less-frequent basis, but they are nevertheless "on the edge" of serious difficulty.
- Those who are **Recently Comfortable** (36%): This group's members have all experienced at least one item on the list at some point in their lives, but for most of them (59%) their brushes with deprivation came long ago and have not recurred. Significantly fewer members of this group have recently begun facing any of the scenarios listed or had ongoing struggles in their lives. In general, members of this group know what it's like for money to be tight, even if it's not that way for them right now.
- And, those who are **Always Comfortable** (37%): These Canadians are overwhelmingly untouched by the 12 scenarios canvassed in this survey. More than nine-in-ten in this group (92%) have never experienced any of these issues in their lives. The remaining 8 per cent have

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only the most limited exposure to financial difficulty, having had to forego dinners out or visits to the movie theatre on occasion in their lives.

It should be noted that these four groups of Canadians exist along a continuum. Respondents were assigned a “score” between 10 and 50 based on their answers. Each group includes respondents who scored within a specific range. For greater detail on how the scores were assigned and how the ranges were determined, see notes on methodology at the end of this release.

That said, looking at the percentage of each group that reports having ever had each of the 12 experiences asked about in this survey helps illuminate the differences between segments of the continuum.

As seen in the following table, those in the Struggling group are much more likely to have faced each of the financial challenges included in the list, while those in the other groups are progressively less likely to do so. Note that this is especially the case on more extreme scenarios like being late on a mortgage or rent payment, or not being able to afford warm winter clothing:

Percentage who have ever experienced this in their lives:					
	Total	Segment			
		Struggling (16%)	On the Edge (11%)	Recently Comfortable (36%)	Always Comfortable (37%)
Can't afford to go out for dinner for a special occasion	46%	89%	79%	58%	6%
Don't have the money to go to a movie or similar outing	44%	86%	74%	53%	6%
Can't afford good quality groceries, have to buy what's cheap	43%	91%	83%	53%	0%
Not able to afford to go for dental care	40%	88%	75%	49%	0%
Not able to buy new clothes when you need them	39%	92%	81%	43%	0%
Live in a place that doesn't meet your needs (too small, far away, etc.)	27%	72%	53%	27%	0%
Have to borrow money for essential things like groceries or transportation	25%	81%	48%	17%	0%
Not able to pay a utility bill (such as hydro, water, heat, phone, etc.)	24%	77%	44%	19%	0%
Late paying your rent or mortgage	18%	55%	37%	13%	0%
Not able to afford warm enough winter clothing (coat/boots)	17%	65%	30%	10%	0%
Use a food bank or some service providing free food	16%	58%	33%	9%	0%
Use a "pay day loan" type service that offers access to cash but at higher interest rates	11%	40%	25%	6%	0%

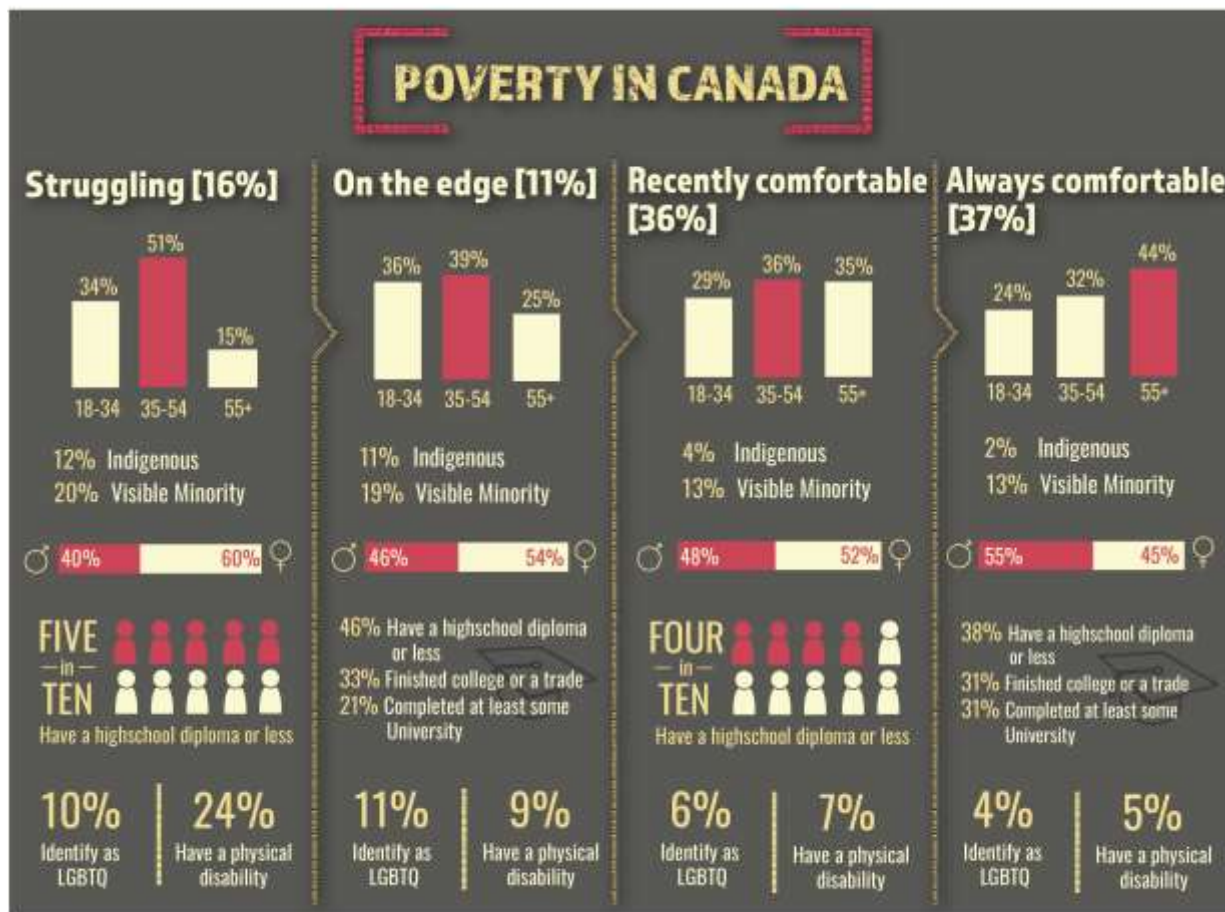
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Who are the struggling?

The one-in-six Canadian adults who qualify as Struggling according to this measure have [a lot in common](#) with those who fit the traditional characteristics of poverty in Canada. Like those who might be called “poor” based on income alone, the Struggling group tends to include larger numbers of Indigenous people, visible minorities, people with disabilities, LGBTQ people, women, and people with high school education or less.

The proportion of each of these demographics in each segment is summarized in the following infographic (click on the image to see a larger version).



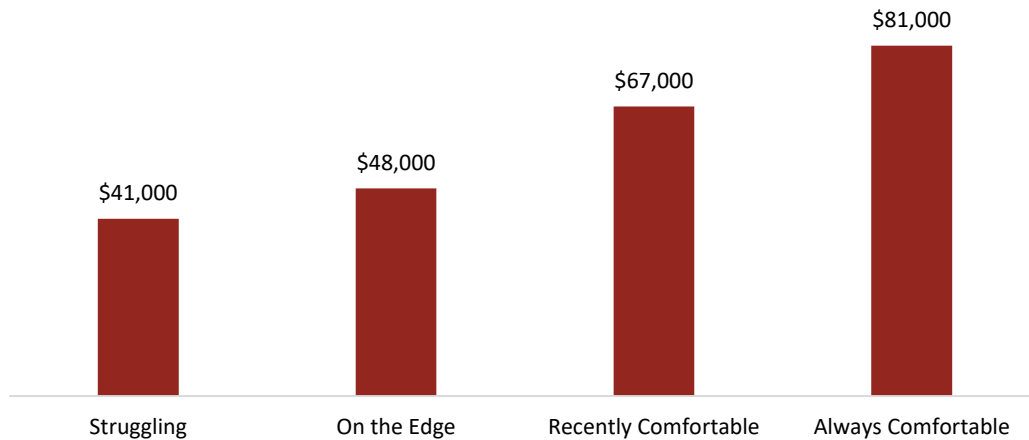
Measuring economic hardship by personal experience also yields some surprising differences from traditional definitions of poverty, however. First, and foremost, segmenting Canadians by their personal histories with financial struggle leads to groups that don't fit neatly into low, middle, or high-income categories.

Household income *is* highly correlated with these four segments, to be sure, but perhaps not as highly as might be expected. While the average household income in each group ascends from the Struggling to the On the Edge to the Recently Comfortable to the Always Comfortable, as seen in the following graph, there is also significant variation within the groups.

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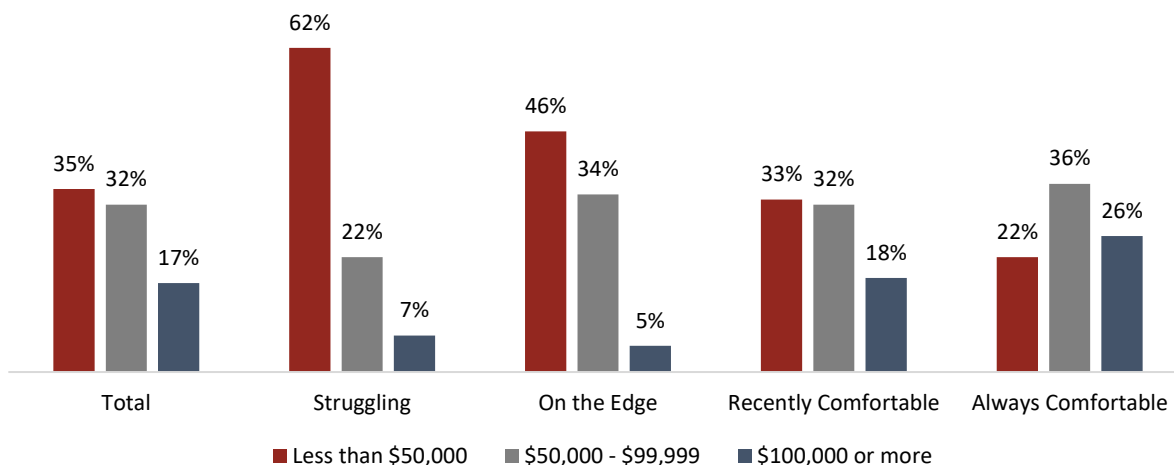
**Average household income of each group
(estimated based on income ranges provided by respondents)**



More than one-in-five of the Struggling (22%), for instance, come from households earning between \$50,000 and \$100,000 per year – [well above the low-income cut-offs](#) for an individual or even a family of four. Their experiences with the 12 scenarios on the list nevertheless indicate that they are facing genuine financial difficulty, perhaps as a result of factors not captured by questions about their income, such as debt, the cost of living in their areas, or the expenses associated with raising children.

The following graph shows the distribution of income within each segment:

Household income within each segment:



Another unusual hallmark of the Struggling group that makes them distinct from strictly income-based segments of the population that could be called “poor” is their age. Those who are Struggling are overwhelmingly under age 55 (85% of them are). Those ages 55 and older, meanwhile, are

overrepresented among the Always Comfortable group, suggesting that – though many of them may be on fixed incomes in retirement – they are able to make ends meet in most situations.

This differs significantly from income-based measures of poverty, which typically find older people more likely to have lower incomes.

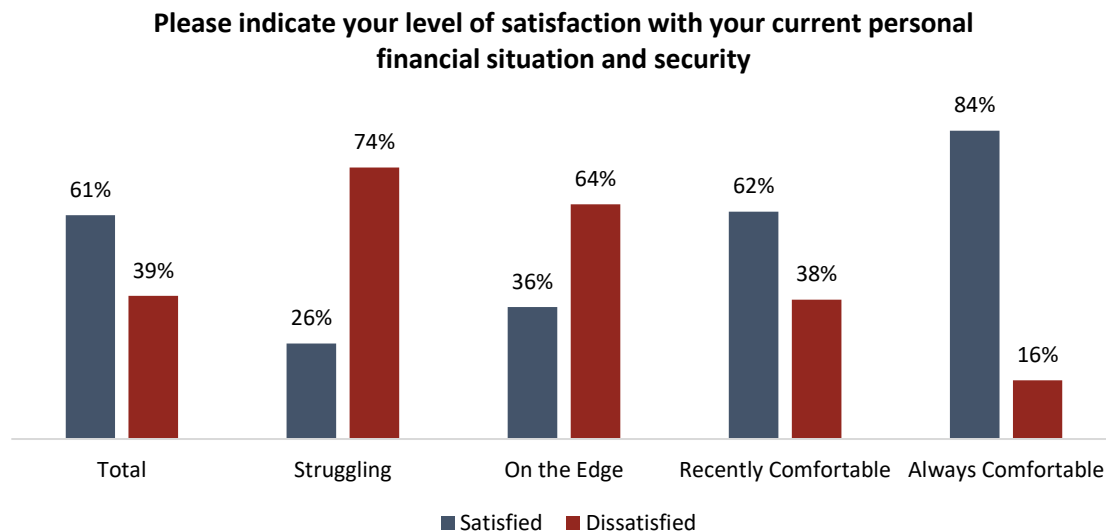
Looking at this data in a slightly different way, fully one-third (34%) of both the 18-34 and 35-54 age groups find themselves in either the Struggling or On the Edge groups, while among those ages 55 and older, the percentage in these two groups totals just 15 per cent.

This significant age gap is likely correlated with a couple of things: First, most of those in the 55-plus group are members of the Baby Boom generation, who benefitted significantly from post-war prosperity in the mid-to-late 20th Century. It largely does not include the older, “Silent” generation, who were children during the Great Depression.

Second, poverty and life-expectancy are highly correlated: People who experience significant economic hardship in their lives are simply less likely to live to old age.

Is the struggle self-perpetuating?

In an era of wage stagnation and growing economic inequality, both in Canada and across the world, many Canadians find themselves dissatisfied with their personal economic situations and pessimistic about the future. This is especially true of the Struggling, who overwhelmingly express dissatisfaction with their current financial situations:



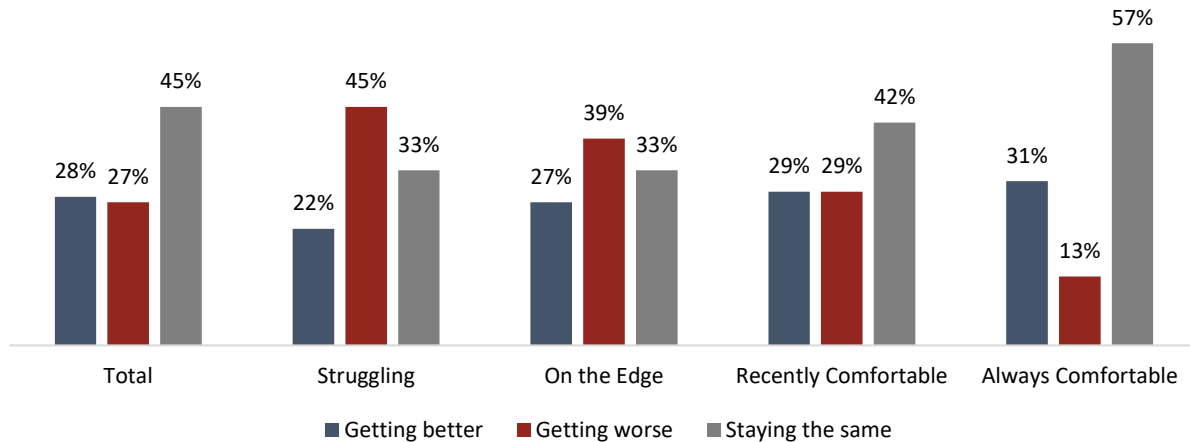
In a similar vein, the Struggling are twice as likely to say their financial situation has been worsening than to say it has been improving over the last few years.

Notably, only those in the Always Comfortable cohort are more likely to say their finances have been improving than worsening. Every other segment offers a much gloomier account of their recent fortunes, as seen in the graph that follows.

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Over the past few years or so, would you say your financial situation and security have been getting better, getting worse, or staying about the same?



Poverty is often described [as a cycle](#): People who grow up in low-income households tend to go on to be low-income adults. Higher economic classes also tend to be self-perpetuating, with people who grow up in relative wealth more likely to maintain or improve upon their parents' standard of living.

Research [has shown](#) that Canada has more intergenerational economic mobility, overall, than the United States and the United Kingdom, but that this mobility varies dramatically from province to province and between areas within provinces. Generally speaking, people who grow up in Canada's largest cities and their suburbs tend to have greater economic mobility later in life than those who grow up in rural areas – especially northern portions of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Ontario, and British Columbia's northwest coast.

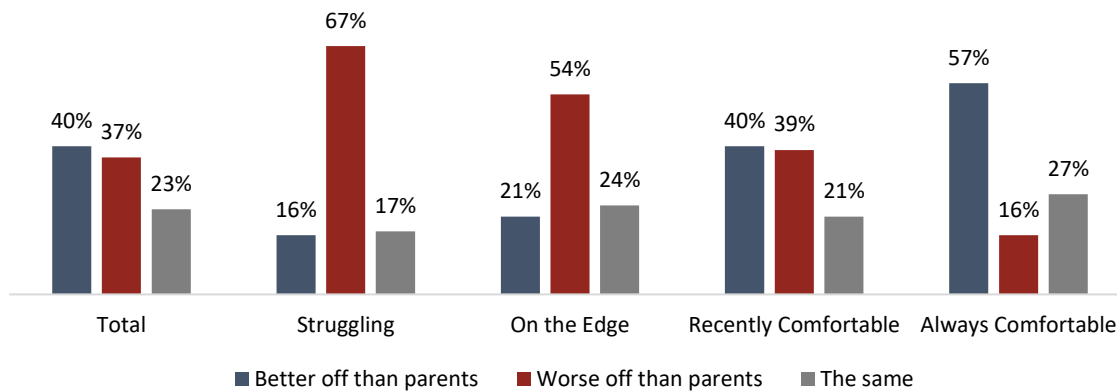
When Canadians are asked directly whether they see themselves as better or worse off than their parents were at their age, regional variations are minimal ([see comprehensive tables for greater detail](#)).

That said, there is significant variation on this question across the four segments, with those who are Struggling most likely to see themselves as worse off than their parents, and those On the Edge not far behind:

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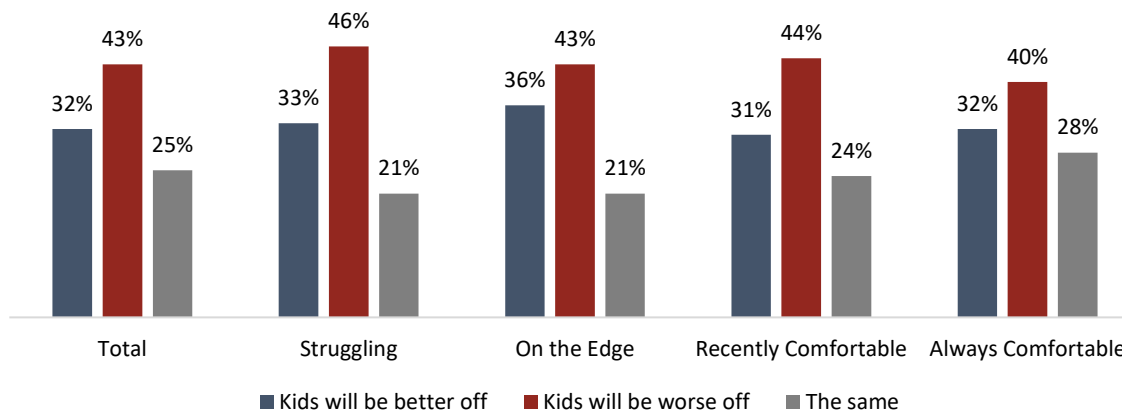
In terms of your own personal financial situation and security, would you say you are better off, worse off, or the same as your parents were at this stage of life?



This finding – that those who are experiencing the most symptoms of poverty are also the most likely to say that they’ve been losing ground relative to where their parents were at a similar life stage – suggests that the self-perpetuating nature of economic class is alive and well in Canada.

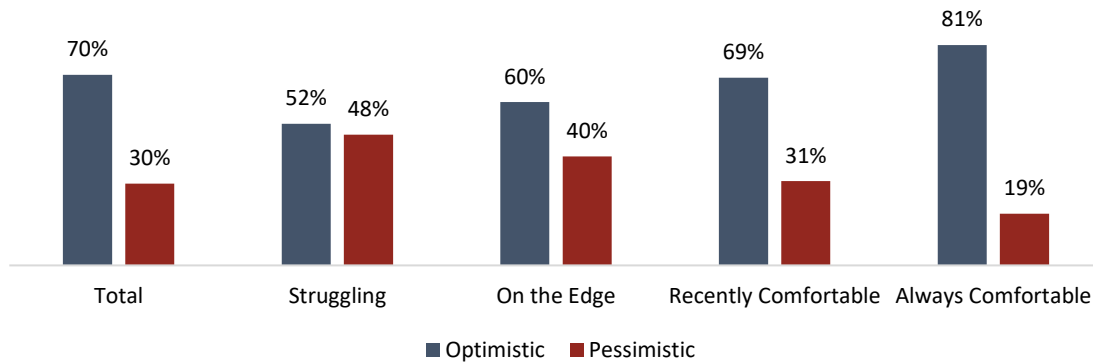
That said, it’s interesting to note that all four segments express significant concern when it comes to the next generation. Asked whether their own children – or, if they don’t have any, people of the equivalent age – will be better off or worse off than themselves, Canadians are almost uniformly pessimistic:

And, what do you predict for your own kids (or the next generation) - will they be better off, worse off, or the same as you in terms of their overall financial situations?



Interestingly, this pessimism about the next generation doesn’t seem to translate to pessimism about one’s own situation. While there is a sharp skew in outlook across the segments, even the Struggling are as likely to be optimistic as pessimistic about their own personal financial prospects.

Looking ahead to the next few years, are you optimistic or pessimistic about your personal financial situation and security?



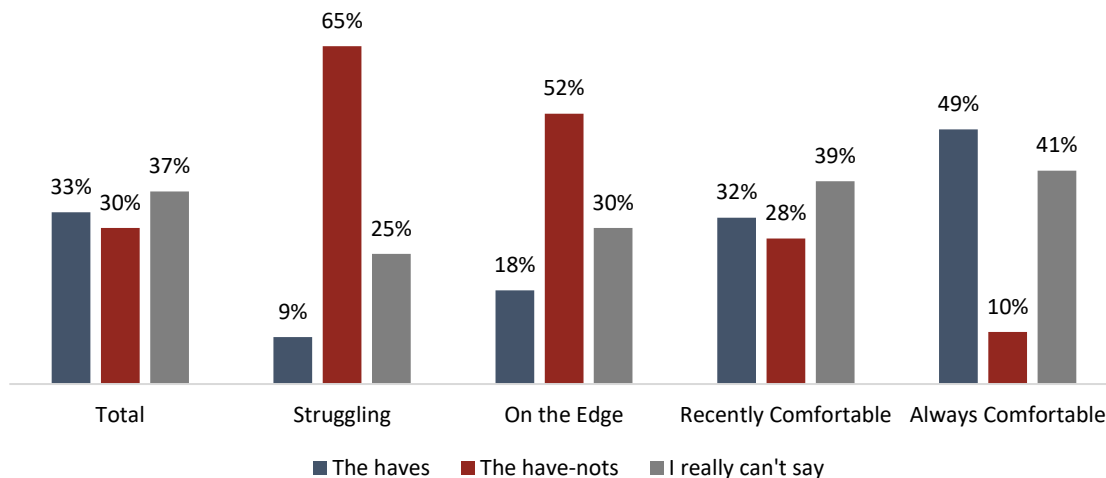
Haves or have-nots? How the Struggling see themselves

Discussions about poverty and income inequality are often framed in terms of two broad groups: The haves, and the have-nots. As [previous ARI research](#) – conducted ahead of the 2015 federal election – has shown, Canadians are not confident about sorting themselves into these groups.

Today, as back then, there is no clear consensus among Canadians on which group best describes them. Roughly one-third (33%) see themselves as haves, and only a slightly smaller number (30%) say they are have-nots. The rest (37%) are unsure how to categorize themselves.

The groups' self-perceptions on this question tend to follow a predictable pattern based on their lived experiences, with those on the low end of the continuum more likely to consider themselves have-nots, and those on the higher end more likely to say they are haves. That said, it's notable that fewer than half of those in the Always Comfortable segment see themselves as haves:

If you had to choose, which of these two groups would you say you are in?

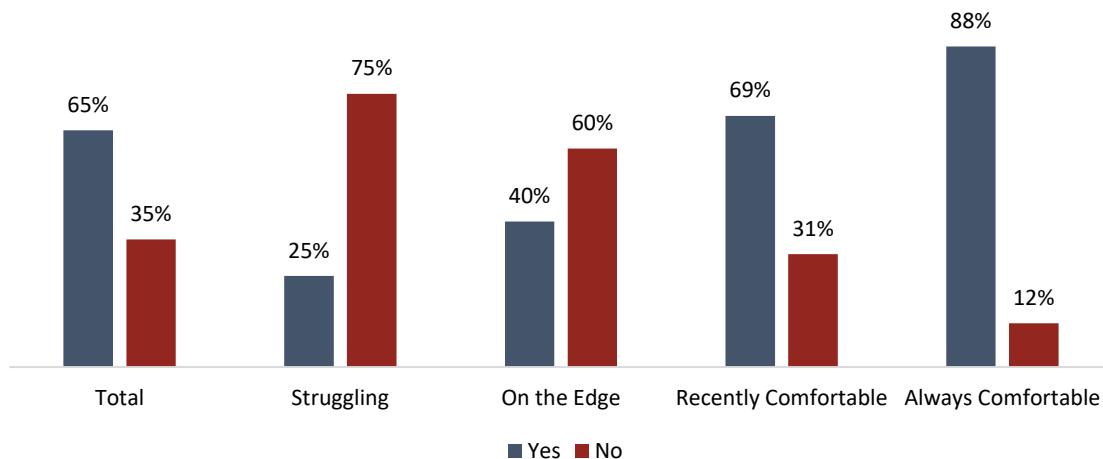


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Looking at this concept of financial self-assessment in a slightly different way yields similar results. Asked if they have enough money to live at a standard generally considered “comfortable” or “typical” in Canada today, three-quarters of those in the Struggling group (75%) say no. Those in the Always Comfortable group, meanwhile, overwhelmingly say yes, indicating that they see themselves in the terms their group’s name suggests, even if they don’t necessarily view themselves as among society’s “haves.”

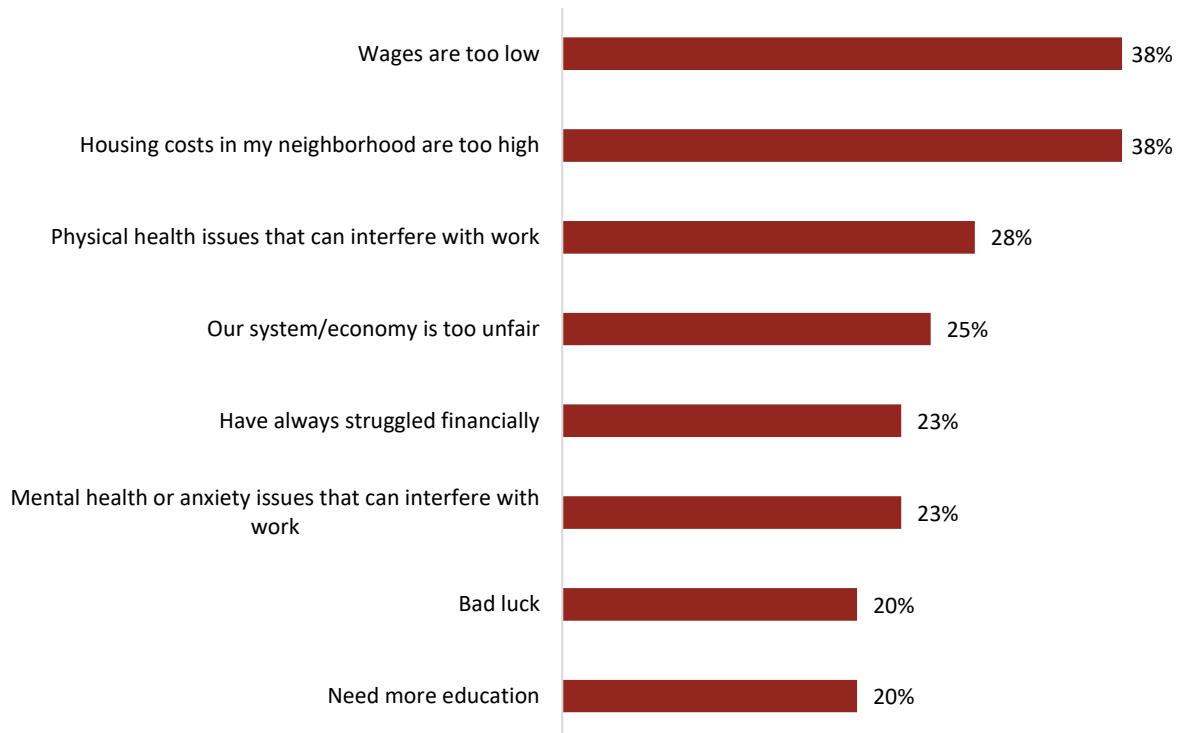
Do you feel that you have enough money to live at the standard generally considered comfortable or typical in our Canadian society?



Respondents who either said “no” to this question, described themselves as “have-nots,” or both, were asked a follow-up question about their reasons for feeling this way. Nearly everyone in the Struggling group, as well as significant portions of the other three groups, were asked the follow-up question.

Nearly four-in-ten (38%) blame low wages for their perceived lot in life, and the same number point a finger at high housing costs. Other common reasons people who feel they are falling behind economically offer for their plights include physical disabilities that prevent them from working (28%), and the inherent unfairness of Canada’s economic system (25%). Reasons mentioned by at least one-in-five respondents who were asked this question are summarized in the following graph:

Please indicate which, if any, of the following have had a negative impact on your own financial situation
(asked of those who see themselves as 'have-nots' OR say they can't afford to live a 'comfortable' life, N=1145)



Because this question was asked based on respondents' perceptions of their economic status, rather than based on the reported experiences on which the four segments were based, there are respondents from each segment who were asked this question.

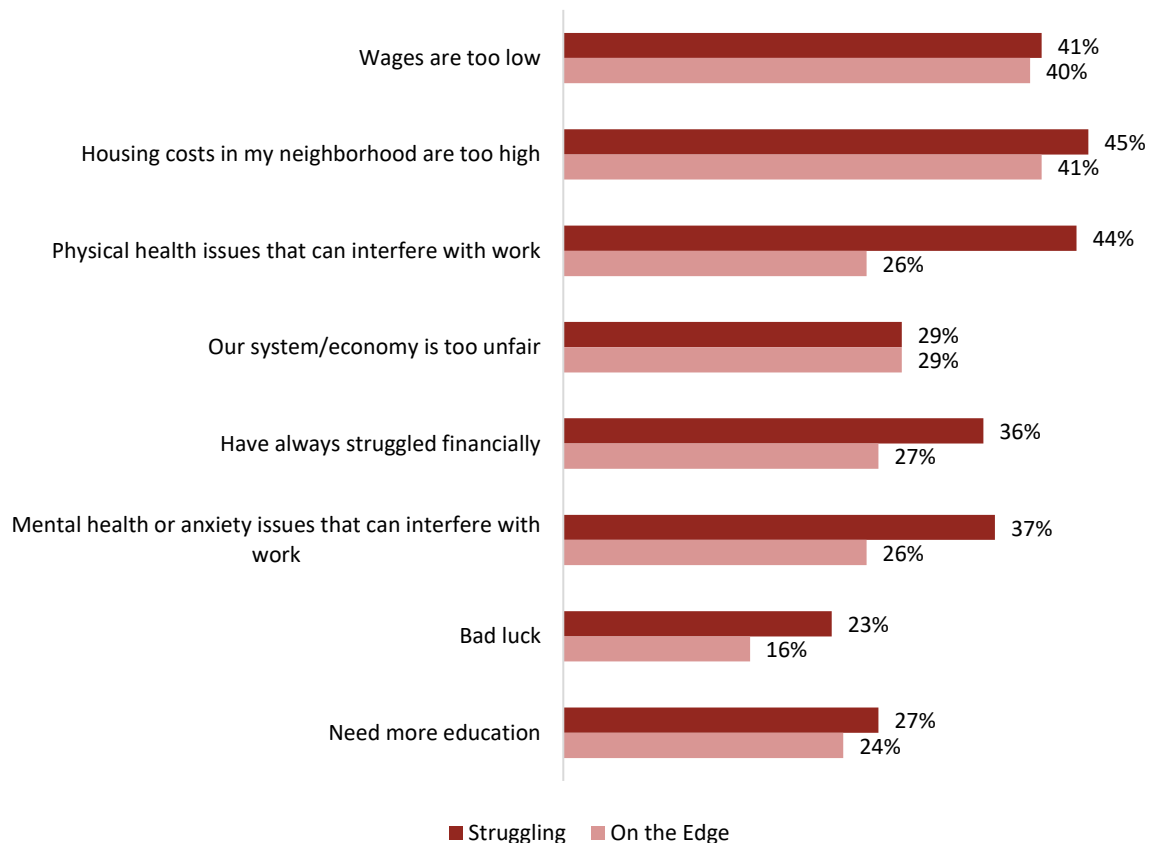
Looking only at the two groups with the highest level of economic struggles, some significant differences emerge. While the Struggling and the On the Edge cite low wages and high housing costs as key reasons for their economic troubles at similar rates, there are large gaps in how they perceive other factors. Most notably, 44 per cent of those in the Struggling segment say they have physical health issues that can interfere with work, compared to 26 per cent of the On the Edge who say the same.

Similar gaps can be seen between these two poorer groups on having "always struggled financially," as well as having mental health or anxiety issues that can interfere with work, as seen in the following graph:

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Many more see themselves on the edge

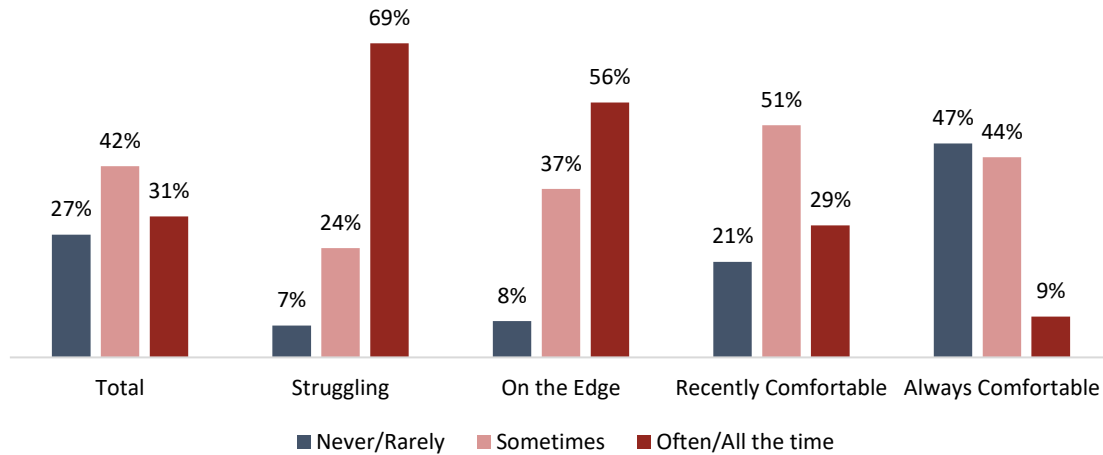
While those in the Struggling and On the Edge groups tend to have a greater amount of financial stress in their lives, they hardly have a monopoly on such worries. Indeed, economic anxiety is most acute among the two groups at the low end of this spectrum, but it exists in significant levels across all four segments.

Asked how often they “feel very stressed about money,” nearly seven-in-ten among the Struggling and more than half of those On the Edge report doing so “often” or “all the time.” Likewise, it’s notable that these concerns manifest themselves at least “sometimes” for those in the other two groups:

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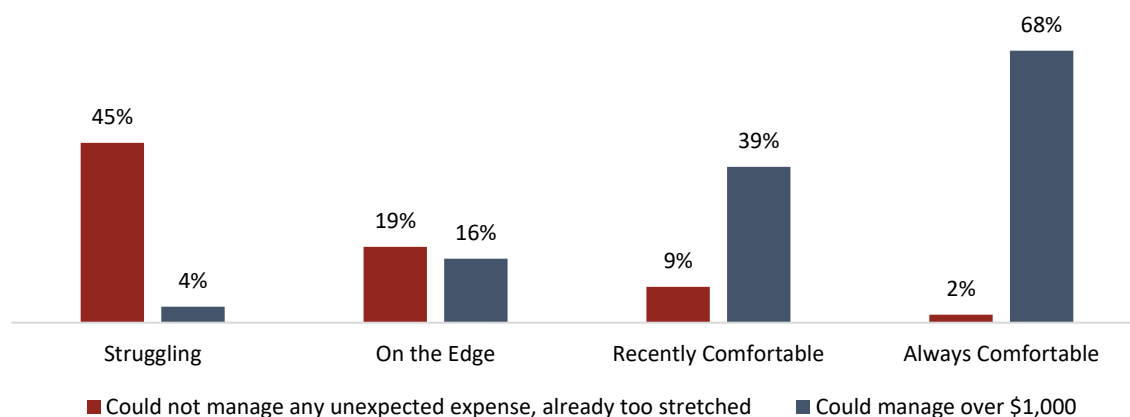
How often do you feel very stressed out about money?



The type of money-related stress experienced likely varies significantly across the four groups, of course. For those who are Always Comfortable, feeling stressed about money almost certainly manifests itself in a more abstract way: as anxiety about potential future problems, rather than about problems currently being faced.

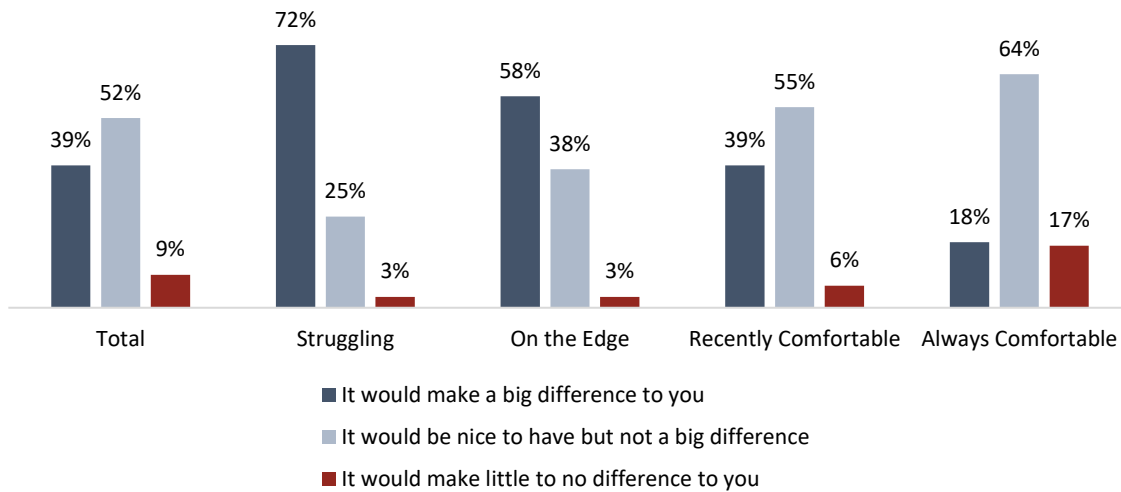
Consider another question in this survey, which asked respondents how well they felt they could manage an unexpected expense. Among the Struggling, nearly half said they could not handle any such expense because their budgets are already too stretched. Two-thirds of the Always Comfortable, meanwhile, felt they could manage a sudden expense of more than \$1,000:

How large of a one-time unexpected expense could you manage this month?



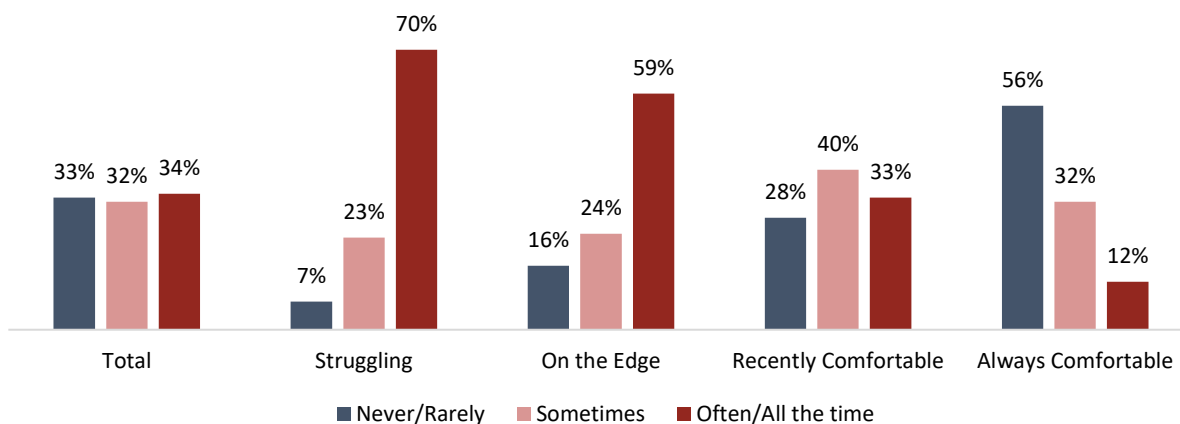
Similarly, when asked how significant an unexpected windfall of \$1,000 would be in their lives, those in the Struggling group mostly say it would make “a big difference,” while those in the Always Comfortable segment tend to downplay its significance:

Suppose you received a surprise bonus or gift of \$1,000. How much of a difference would that unexpected \$1,000 mean for you today?



That said, while those who in the Always Comfortable or Recently Comfortable segments are in considerably better financial situations than those in the other two segments, they still experience anxiety about money-related issues. Those who are Recently Comfortable, especially, worry regularly about how they will support themselves in retirement – though not nearly as frequently as those in the lower two groups do – as seen in the graph that follows.

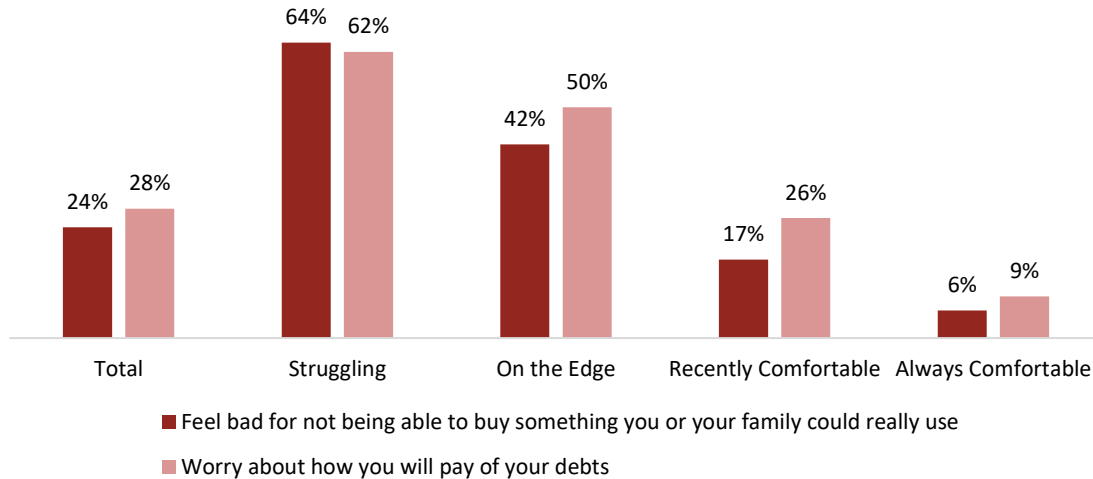
How often do you worry about how you will support yourself in retirement?



Two other worries – about paying off debts and not being able to buy something one could really use – are less-often preoccupying for those in the comfortable groups. These concerns stand out as the purview of those on the lower end of the lived-experience spectrum, with two-thirds of the Struggling (64%) saying they frequently feel bad for not being able to buy something they or their family could really use, and a similar number worrying this often about how they will pay off their debts:

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Percentage who do each of the following "often" or "all the time":



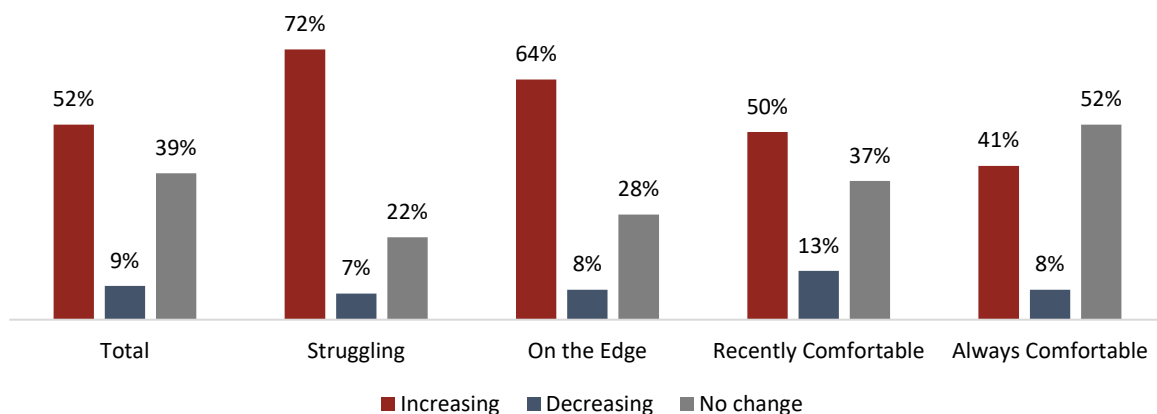
Visible poverty in Canadian communities

Regardless of where they fall on the continuum of economic hardship, Canadians generally think the number of people living in poverty in their communities is increasing.

Overall, fewer than one-in-ten Canadians (9%) say poverty is on the decline in Canada today, while fully half (52%) say it is on the rise.

The Struggling and those On the Edge, who are closer to poverty themselves, are especially likely to say it has increased in prevalence in their communities over the last few years, but significant numbers across all four segments say this is the case:

Would you say the number of people living in poverty in your community has been increasing or decreasing in recent years?

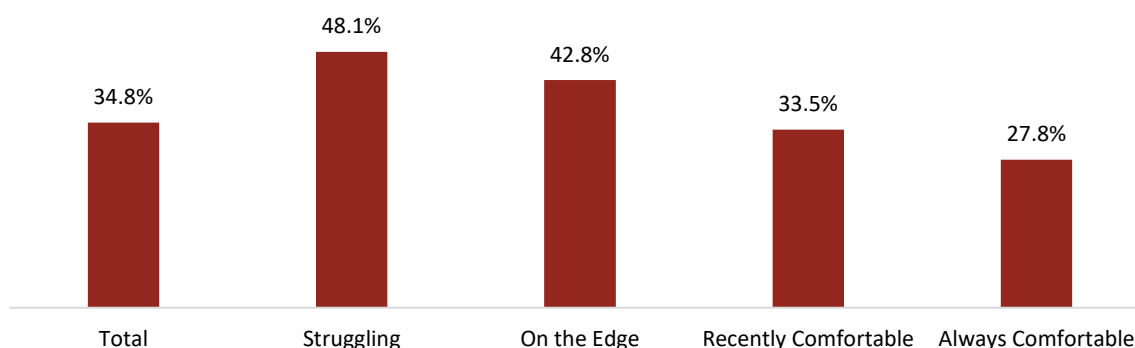


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When asked to estimate the number of people living in poverty in their communities, Canadians, on average, put the number at about one-in-three (34.8%). Those in the Struggling and On the Edge groups tend to offer higher estimates, while those in the other two segments offer lower ones, as seen in the graph that follows.

What percentage of people in the community where you live do you think could be considered "poor"?



It should be noted that even the lowest estimate in the preceding graph is significantly higher than official estimates based on income, which put the percentage of Canadians living in poverty between 9 and 13 per cent.

Canadians perceive similarly high numbers of people in their communities facing specific poverty-related circumstances, including one-in-four (24%) who say either some or lots of people where they live are experiencing homelessness, and more than one-in-three (36%) who say either some or lots of people are hungry and having to miss meals.

How many people in your community would you estimate are experiencing the following types of circumstances due to a lack of money?				
	No one	A few	Some	Lots
Being homeless (living on the street or in homeless shelters)	32%	44%	19%	5%
Being hungry, having to miss meals	20%	44%	29%	7%
Not being able to afford to fill a prescription for medicine	13%	38%	36%	13%
Having to eat poor quality and "filler" food	11%	36%	37%	16%
Having no spending money for occasional outings like going to a movie	6%	33%	41%	19%

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These findings, along with the spectrum of lived experience and its four segments, provide a detailed picture of both the real and perceived scope and scale of poverty in Canada today. But how do Canadians think about poverty and the poor? What are their attitudes toward this complex societal problem? And what sorts of solutions to it would they support?

Chapter two of this report will answer these questions and more, focusing on Canadians' attitudes, sense of empathy for the struggling, and support for various policy proposals aimed at alleviating poverty in their country.

Notes on methodology

The four groups discussed in this survey are the result of an index based on the two-part lived experience question asked in this survey. Respondents were scored based on their answers to 10 of the 12 scenarios (all of the scenarios on the list except for "don't have the money to go to a movie or similar outing" and "can't afford to go out for dinner for a special occasion").

Respondents who said they had not experienced an item received 5 points and were not asked the follow-up question about how frequently the scenario had occurred in their lives. Those who had experienced an item were scored based on their responses to the follow-up question, receiving 1 point if they said the experience was "ongoing in my life," 2 points if the experience took place "from time to time," 3 points if the experience was "more recent," and 4 points if the experience happened "long ago" and has not happened since.

Adding up these scores yielded a total score for each respondent, ranging from 10 (all items "ongoing in my life") to 50 (no to all items). The four segments correspond to four segments of this range. Those scoring 10 – 35 are the Struggling, those scoring 36 – 40 are On the Edge, those scoring 41 – 49 are the Recently Comfortable, and those scoring 50 are the Always Comfortable.

*The **Angus Reid Institute (ARI)** was founded in October 2014 by pollster and sociologist, Dr. Angus Reid. ARI is a national, not-for-profit, non-partisan public opinion research foundation established to advance education by commissioning, conducting and disseminating to the public accessible and impartial statistical data, research and policy analysis on economics, political science, philanthropy, public administration, domestic and international affairs and other socio-economic issues of importance to Canada and its world.*

For detailed results by age, gender, region, education, and other demographics, [click here](#).

For detailed results by the four segments, [click here](#).

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