Canada is miles – or rather, kilometres – away from a uniform system of measurement

Young people use metric the most, but nearly everyone thinks of their height and weight in imperial.

March 1, 2017 – How tall is Sidney Crosby? And how far is it from Vancouver to Halifax? For most Canadians, the answers to these questions are “5 feet, 11 inches,” and “6,160 km,” respectively.

Contained within these answers is a distinctly Canadian contradiction: Although this country officially went metric in the 1970s, there are many day-to-day measurements for which Canadians have not forgotten their imperial roots.

A new public opinion poll from the Angus Reid Institute finds this is especially true of older Canadians, who were schooled in a system of pounds and gallons instead of kilograms and litres.

Conversely, younger (under 25) Canadians’ stated unfamiliarity with the imperial system suggests the shift towards the metric system will continue as time goes on.

But even those who came of age after the official shift have hardly embraced metric across-the-board, and it appears that Canadians, young and old, are content to continue using both systems in their daily lives.

Key Findings:

- The most commonly used metric measurement is Celsius to measure air temperature (87% of Canadians do so), while imperial is most often used for personal height and weight (91% of Canadians use feet and pounds over centimetres and kilograms)

- Most Canadians say they know each system either “very well” or “fairly well,” with more expressing this degree of familiarity with metric (86%) than imperial (74%)

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Two-thirds of Canadians (67%) are perfectly fine with the country’s mixture of measurements. The rest split roughly evenly between saying they’d prefer to go back to imperial (16%) and saying the country should “work harder” to fully embrace metric (17%).

**Metric vs. Imperial: Which is used for what measurements?**

Canada made its first formal switch from imperial to metric units on April 1, 1975. That was the first day weather reports gave temperatures in degrees Celsius, rather than Fahrenheit. Many did not take kindly to the change.

More than 40 years later, Celsius is the default measure for air temperature in the minds of nearly all Canadians, but other changes in measurement have not stuck quite so well.

Asked what units they think of first when considering 10 common measurement situations, Canadians express a preference for imperial measurements on six of them, as seen in the infographic (click to enlarge):

![Metric vs. Imperial infographic](Click to enlarge)
The infographic includes some remarkable contradictions that bear highlighting. For example, though Celsius is the norm for air temperature, more than three-in-four Canadians (76%) think in terms of Fahrenheit when setting their ovens.

Temperature measurement usage by Canadians

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Celsius</th>
<th>Fahrenheit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The air temperature outside</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oven/cooking temperature</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Likewise, Canadians think of their own height in feet and inches, but have abandoned miles in favour of kilometres when measuring travel distance:

Distance measurement usage by Canadians

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Centimetres/Metres/Kilometres</th>
<th>Inches/Feet/Miles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Your own height</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The distance between two locations</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The same trend can be observed, to a lesser extent, when looking at weight. Despite ounces and pounds being the popular choice for both produce and people, Canadians are more than three times more likely to use metric at the grocery store than they are at home on the bathroom scale (27% versus 8%, respectively).
Measuring our differences

Canadians of all ages tend to use a mix of both metric and imperial measurements in their day-to-day lives, but there is a distinct generational pattern in their tendencies. Canadians younger than 35 are more likely to use the metric option in every situation canvassed, while those ages 55 and older tend to express a stronger preference for the imperial system Canada used at the time of their birth.

Notably, of the four measures on which the majority of Canadians think of metric first, air temperature is the only one a majority of older Canadians tend to think of in metric, as seen in the graph that follows.

Everyday measurements most Canadians make in metric (percentage preferring metric shown):

- The air temperature outside: 94% metric, 79% imperial
- The distance between two locations: 47% metric, 71% imperial
- Beverage volume: 40% metric, 73% imperial
- The volume of everyday liquid products at home like soap and shampoo: 36% metric, 62% imperial

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Conversely, on the six measures that most Canadians think of primarily in imperial units, a majority of younger respondents think of each one in imperial as well, following the overall trend, rather than bucking it as the older generation does on most metric measures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Everyday measurements most Canadians make in imperial (percentage preferring imperial shown):</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Your own weight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your own height</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The size of a large plot of land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The internal area of a home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oven/cooking temperature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The weight of produce at the grocery store</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These differences are even more noticeable in situations where Canada’s preferred measurement choice is less clear-cut.

When measuring the volume of beverages, for example, four-in-five (86%) of those aged 18-24 use the metric system compared to only two-in-five (37%) of those aged 65 and over, as seen in the following graph.

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Similarly, when measuring the volume of household liquids such as soap and shampoo, almost four-in-five 18-24-year-olds (78%) prefer millilitres, while a solid majority of those 65 and older (62%) prefer ounces:

There is also a generational schism in Canadians’ personal understanding of the two systems. Self-professed knowledge of the metric system, while lower for those ages 55 and older, is quite high across all age groups.
By contrast, the knowledge of the imperial system is dwindling amongst the youngest generation, with only half (48%) of 18-34-year-olds feeling they know that system fairly or very well, while nearly all (98%) respondents in the 55-plus age group claim proficiency in imperial.

This finding – that older Canadians have a better understanding of metric than younger Canadians have of imperial – is perhaps attributable to the metric system’s relatively more intuitive base-10 measurements, which are uniform and consistent, especially in comparison to imperial.

**We’ve got two languages, why not two systems of measurement?**

Fifteen years after official metrication, in response to the many Canadians who preferred the imperial system, the Mulroney government ended the threat of prosecution for those violating metric laws. Since then, metric has remained a mandatory measure, but imperial measures have been accommodated.

As asked to weigh in on this current-day mishmash of measurements, more than two-in-three Canadians (67%) say they are fine with it. Those that have a strong preference one way or the other are evenly distributed between preferring a return to imperial (16%), and working harder to fully adopt metric (17%).

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Canada has officially been a metric-using country since the 1970s, but lots of people still use the imperial system of measurement for different things. Overall, what do you think about this?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, 18-34-year-olds are the strongest supporters of working towards full adoption of metric (22%, compared to 7% who want to go back to the imperial system) while those aged 55 and older are mirrored in opposition (24% would like to return to imperial, while 12% would prefer to work harder on using metric).

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 organization 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.