Canadians prioritize border security over aid to those crossing illegally

Almost three-in-four say it’s “not fair” that people can cross illegally and apply for refugee status.

April 10, 2017 – Will the slow-but-steady stream of asylum-seekers crossing the border illegally grow into a roaring flood this summer? Canadian officials have downplayed this possibility, but a new public opinion poll from the Angus Reid Institute finds a substantial portion of the Canadian public anticipating such a surge, and worried about the potential security risks that might be associated with it.

Asked whether their country should put more emphasis on assisting the new arrivals walking across the border in places like Emerson, Man., and Lacolle, Que., or on monitoring and patrolling the border to deter future crossings, nearly three-quarters of Canadians (72%) prefer a focus on border security.

The public is far from united in its views on this issue, however. There are deep divisions – particularly along generational and partisan lines – over the legitimacy of the refugee claimants crossing the border and confidence in the federal government to identify and deal with any newcomers who pose a threat to Canadian security.

The Angus Reid Institute conducted an online survey from March 13 – 17, 2017, among a representative randomized sample of 1,511 Canadian adults who are members of the Angus Reid Forum. For comparison purposes only, a probability sample of this size would carry a margin of error of +/- 2.5 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.

Key Findings:

- Canadians are more likely to say their country should be “concerned about the threat posed by these arrivals” (37%) than “focused on the opportunity to help” them (24%). The largest group (38%) think the country is torn between the two.

- Three-in-five Canadians (60%) believe their country should be “an example for the world when it comes to generosity toward refugees.”

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• Political partisanship helps shape views on this issue, with those who voted for the Conservative Party of Canada in the 2015 federal election more skeptical of these new arrivals than others.

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• Divisions on whether border jumpers are “genuine refugees”
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Half anticipate a security risk

Since January, hundreds of people have walked across the Canada-U.S. border to seek refugee status here in Canada. The RCMP reportedly arrested 1,134 people for illegal border-crossings in the first two months of this year, nearly half as many as it arrested in all of 2016.

The rising number of asylum seekers has become a political issue, with members of both opposition parties criticizing the federal Liberal government for its decision not to make any significant policy changes to address the issue.

Conservative Party leadership candidates Maxime Bernier and Kevin O’Leary have garnered headlines in recent weeks for their proposals on dealing with illegal border-crossings. Bernier pledged more resources for patrolling the border, including potentially using the armed forces, something the top elected official in Emerson, Man., says would be “overkill.”

O’Leary, meanwhile, has focused on using the notwithstanding clause of the constitution to revoke the right of those who cross illegally to make an application for refugee status, a proposal experts say is legally dubious.

Still, these proposals reflect a real concern that exists in Canada today – especially among the Conservative base – namely that there is a serious risk that dangerous people are among those crossing the border illegally.

Typically, border-jumpers are arrested and subjected to security screenings before being released to make their refugee claims, but this survey finds that many Canadians remain concerned about the danger these people pose.

Overall, half of Canadians say there is a “huge” (20%) or “significant” (30%) risk that criminals or other dangerous individuals will be among those crossing the border illegally. The other half sees the risk as minor or non-existent, though this latter camp includes fewer than one-in-ten respondents, as seen in the following graph:

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Fully two-thirds of those who voted for the Conservative Party of Canada in the 2015 election say the risk is significant or huge, while past Liberal and NDP voters lean almost as heavily in the opposite direction:

Younger Canadians (61%) and those with university degrees (65%) are considerably more likely than older and less formally educated groups to say the risk of a criminal element entering Canada this way is minimal (see comprehensive tables for greater detail).

When asked to weigh this potential threat against the opportunity to help people in need, Canadians are torn. While a larger number say their country should be concerned about the threat posed by these new arrivals (37%) than say Canada should be focused on helping them (24%), neither of these camps comes anywhere close to a majority.

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Instead, the largest group (38%) says Canada *should be* torn between these two considerations:

**Considering the issue of people crossing into Canada at unguarded places along the border and applying for refugee status here, overall should Canada be:**

- More concerned about the threat posed by these arrivals: 38%
- More focused on the opportunity to help these people: 24%
- Torn between the two: 37%

Notably, this lack of clear consensus extends even to those demographic groups that tend to have a firm opinion on other questions in this survey. Canadians under age 35, for instance, are more likely than other age groups to say Canada should be focused on helping (33% are, compared to 21% of those ages 35 – 54 and 20% of those 55 and older), but roughly equal numbers in this group say Canada should be concerned about potential threats (35%) or torn between the two (32%).

Likewise, though education is a fault-line on this question, each educational cohort contains a significant diversity of opinion, as seen in the following graph:

**Considering the issue of people crossing into Canada at unguarded places along the border and applying for refugee status here, overall should Canada be:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>High School or less</th>
<th>College/Tech school</th>
<th>University+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>24%</td>
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<td></td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>41%</td>
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<td></td>
<td>37%</td>
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</table>
Past CPC voters are an exception to this pattern of ambivalence. Fully six-in-ten of them say Canada should be more concerned about the threat posed by these border-jumpers:

Considering the issue of people crossing into Canada at unguarded places along the border and applying for refugee status here, overall should Canada be:

![Bar chart showing public opinion on whether border-crossers should be more concerned about the threat or focused on opportunity to help.](chart.png)

**Divisions on whether border-jumpers are “genuine refugees”**

In general, would-be refugees cross the border illegally because if they did so at an official border-crossing, they would be turned away under the Safe Third Country Agreement between Canada and the U.S. This agreement requires asylum-seekers to make their claims in the first country – of the two – that they reach. Crossing illegally circumvents that requirement, because the agreement doesn’t apply to “inland” refugee claimants (i.e. people who are already on Canadian soil).

The Safe Third Country Agreement is intended to prevent “asylum shopping,” in which people apply for refugee status in one country, are rejected, and then cross the border and try again. Because of the ad hoc nature of the current influx of refugee claimants, it’s hard to say how many of the people crossing the border illegally have legitimate claims and how many might be considered asylum shoppers.

Asked what proportion of those crossing the border illegally are “genuine refugees fleeing a crisis or persecution” and what proportion are “people looking for economic opportunities,” most Canadians say the border-crossers are likely a mix of the two.

Overall, a slightly larger number of Canadians think most of the border-crossers are genuine refugees than think most of them are not:

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As seen in the following graph, supporters of the CPC are much more skeptical of the legitimacy of those crossing the border than supporters of other parties, a fact that may go a long way to explaining other areas of divergence between partisans:

Canadians tend to prioritize security over assistance

The residents of towns where these crossings are taking place – such as like Emerson, Man., and Hemmingford, Que. – express concern for the wellbeing of the people crossing, and fear that the number of illegal crossings will continue to rise.
These two competing priorities – the safety of the people crossing and the need for security at the border – are weighing on the minds of Canadians, fully two-thirds (66%) of whom say they have been following this issue in a way that goes beyond “just scanning the headlines.”

Asked how much priority should be given to each of these considerations, Canadians are divided on the importance of providing services for asylum-seekers, but largely in agreement that assigning police, immigration officers, and technology to monitor and secure unguarded portions of the border is either “important,” or a “major priority.”

How much priority do you yourself think should be given to each of the following:

As the following graph illustrates, past CPC voters are least likely to place a priority services for new arrivals, and most likely to prioritize security. Supporters of the governing Liberals and the New Democratic Party are more inclined to weigh each of these concerns equally, though it should be noted that larger numbers still place a greater emphasis on security:

How much priority do you think should be given to each of the following? (Those saying 'major' or 'important' priority shown)
A similar pattern emerges when Canadians are asked to weigh these two priorities against each other. As seen in the graph that follows, past CPC voters are almost entirely in agreement that border monitoring and security should take precedence over assisting the new arrivals, while supporters of other parties are more divided.

Crucially, even among past Liberal and NDP voters, the majority of respondents prefer a focus on security, a fact reflected in the more than seven-in-ten who lean this way overall:

**Putting this another way, if you were in charge of the Canadian border, how would you focus available resources? Would you focus:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>CPC</th>
<th>LPC</th>
<th>NDP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exclusively/Mostly on assisting the arrivals</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exclusively/Mostly on border monitoring and security</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While border monitoring and security clearly win out for most Canadians, it should be noted that relatively few say that either side of this face-off should be the “exclusive” focus of available resources. Most Canadians are in the middle, saying they would focus Canada’s efforts “mostly” on one priority or the other, as seen in the following graph:

**Putting this another way, if you were in charge of the Canadian border, how would you focus available resources? Would you focus:**

Exclusively on assisting the arrivals | 3%
Mostly on assisting the arrivals | 25%
Mostly on border monitoring and security | 52%
Exclusively on border monitoring and security | 20%
In addition to the political differences on this question, there are significant age and education gaps as well. While majorities of Canadians of all ages prefer a focus on security, the percentage of younger respondents (those ages 18 – 34) who do so is six-in-ten (60%), compared to more than three-quarters of those ages 35 and older (76% of those 35 – 54, and 77% of those 55-and-older).

Similarly, 58 per cent of those with university degrees opt to prioritize security, compared to more than seven-in-ten of those with lower levels of formal education (see comprehensive tables).

**A trickle or a flood?**

While there is some debate about just how much the number of asylum seekers crossing the border illegally has increased, residents on both sides of the border say they’ve noticed a surge since U.S. President Donald Trump took office.

Many of the refugee claimants themselves say Trump’s hardline immigration policies – including a stated desire to temporarily ban Muslims from entering the U.S. and halt or reduce the acceptance of refugees – are the reason they came to Canada.

Canadians seem largely sympathetic to these concerns. Asked whether they agree or disagree with the statement, "Many of these people have real reason to be concerned they won’t be treated fairly under Donald Trump’s policies," more than two-in-three Canadians (67%) agree.

![Pie chart showing responses to the statement](image)

Whether the people crossing are fleeing Trump or coming for some other reason, most Canadians don’t expect them to stop coming any time soon. A majority of respondents to this survey (53%) say they anticipate that the number of people crossing the border illegally to either “increase quite a bit” (32%) or “become a flood” (21%) as 2017 progresses. Fewer than one-in-four (22%) expect the number of asylum-seekers to stay the same (17%) or decrease (5%).

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While Canadians of all political stripes are more likely to expect an increase than a decrease, past CPC voters are almost twice as likely as supporters of other parties to characterize the expected surge as a “flood”:

Percentage saying they expect the number of people crossing the border illegally to “become a flood of refugee seekers”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>21%</th>
<th>31%</th>
<th>16%</th>
<th>16%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPC</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LPC</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NDP</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015 Federal Vote</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An example for the world?

When Trump’s since-stayed executive order suspending acceptance of refugees and banning travelers from certain majority-Muslim countries first took effect, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau tweeted a message of support for refugees of all faiths. The clear – if oblique – reference to Trump’s policy ended with the hashtag #WelcomeToCanada.

Trudeau’s portrayal of Canada as a welcoming place reflects the way a majority of Canadians see themselves. Six-in-ten (60%) agree with the statement “Canada should be an example for the world when it comes to generosity toward refugees.”

Of course, the government did not change its refugee policy in response to the U.S. travel ban, a decision previous Angus Reid Institute polling found most Canadians support.

This apparent contradiction – in which Canadians view their country as welcoming, but don’t necessarily favour policy changes that would make it more so – can also be seen in opinions on this specific issue of illegal border-crossers already discussed in this report.

On this particular issue, concerns about fairness may go a long way toward shaping opinion. Almost three-in-four Canadians agree with the statement, “It’s not fair that people can cross into Canada illegally and apply for refugee status here,” as seen in the following graph:
One way the government could address concerns about fairness would be to suspend the Safe Third Country Agreement, which would allow asylum seekers to make their claims at official border-crossings. The federal government has so far declined to do this, despite pressure from NDP members of Parliament and refugee advocates.

Assessing the government's response so far

Canadians are mixed in their assessment of the government’s handling of this issue so far. Almost half of all respondents (47%) say the government has done either a “poor” or “very poor” job on the file, while hardly anyone says it has done a “very good job” (3%):

Overall, what kind of job do you think the Canadian federal government has done so far in managing this issue?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job Grade</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very good job</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good job</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor job</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very poor job</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't know</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>16%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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Perhaps tellingly, even among past Liberal voters, the government gets only 5 per cent of respondents saying it has done a “very good job.” Most Liberals do say the government has done a good job overall, however (54% do so, see comprehensive tables).

Asked a different – but related – question, Canadians are divided in terms of their confidence in the government’s ability to deal with security risks posed by people crossing the border illegally. Half (50%) express confidence and half do not, though it should be noted that only one-in-ten (11%) say they are “very confident,” as seen in the graph that follows:

And, how confident are you in the Canadian government to identify and appropriately deal with newcomers who are criminals or represent a threat to Canadian security?

![Confidence Graph](image)

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, 2015 federal vote, and other demographics, click here.

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