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AlieNation: Racism, Injustice and Other Obstacles to Full Citizenship

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Abstract:

This study challenges theories suggesting that the alienation of second-generation immigrants to Canada is a product of settlement and “integration” processes, and offers an alternative theory: that the racism experienced by both immigrant and native-born Canadians is the principal cause of alienation. Based on an extensive survey (more than 3,000 respondents) of youth from across the City of Toronto, we correlate the likelihood of individuals identifying as “Canadian” with immigration status, racial and ethnic identity, and experience of racism. In analyzing the survey data in the context of the history of the political economy of nationalism, we argue that racism is a dominant obstacle to self-identification with the nation-state, and that this finding is entirely logical and consistent with the history of nation-building in Canada and elsewhere.

KEYWORDS: Keywords: racism, youth, nationalism and national identity, immigration, citizenship

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Introduction

In the first decade of the 21st century, there has been much discussion in both academic circles and the popular press about the alienation of some groups from the Canadian nation. It has been argued that some groups’ lack of identification as “Canadian” and their sense of social distance represent threats to national security (Collacott 2006), the common values essential for national unity (Gregg 2006), and the overall well-being of the polity. Many of these studies have focused on the processes and experiences of immigration and settlement as the heart of the “problem,” specifically the identities and practices of the second generation, and their apparent “failure” to integrate. Several academic studies have been reported in the mainstream media apparently documenting connections between immigrants and various economic and social ills.

The present study challenges theories of the alienation of immigrants to Canada, and of the second generation (who are not immigrants themselves), as a product of settlement and “integration” processes. We dispute the exclusive focus on immigrants, the methods previously employed, and the reluctance of scholars and the media to confront the role of racism in the process of developing (or failing to develop) a sense of belonging. Instead, we suggest an alternative theory: that the racism experienced by both immigrant and native-born Canadians is the principal cause of alienation. Based on an extensive survey of youth from across the City of Toronto, we correlate the likelihood of individuals identifying as “Canadian” with immigration status, racial and ethnic identity, and experience of racism. Although the results of the survey may appear anomalous to some, we further argue they are, unfortunately, entirely logical and consistent with the history of nation-building in Canada. In analyzing the survey data in the context of the
history of the political economy of nationalism, we argue that racism is a dominant
obstacle to self-identification with the nation-state, not only because of individual
practices of discrimination, but because racist, exclusionary ideas reside in the heart of
national identity.

Context of the present study

A recent study by Reitz and Banerjee (2007) received prominent national media
attention. It used data from Statistics Canada’s 2002 Ethnic Diversity Study to examine
the phenomenon of a sense of being Canadian. Some of the results were presented in
Canada’s national newspaper, the Globe and Mail, on Friday, January 12, 2007, in an
article by staff writer Marina Jimenez. The article occupied almost the entire front page,
complete with a large photo of a South Asian man and another of an Asian woman, all
under the headline “How Canadian are you?” Above the headline, in smaller but bold
type, ran the warning “Visible-minority immigrants and their children identify less and
less with the country, report says” (Jimenez 2007).

While not greatly emphasized in the newspaper coverage, Reitz and Banerjee also
concluded that “racial inequality is a significant issue in Canada, and…the extent of
discrimination is a point of dispute between racial groups. This creates a potentially
significant racial divide and prompts us to ask whether existing policy responses are
adequate to bridge the gap” (Reitz and Banerjee 2007, 1). From there, however, they
connected the issue to the process of immigrant settlement, arguing that “racial minority
immigrants integrate into Canadian society relatively slowly, and that discriminatory
inequalities are at least part of the reason” (3). Reitz and Banerjee’s contextualization of
these conclusions is somewhat problematic. For example, at times they appear to express an unsubstantiated, generalized concern about diverse societies. Ethnoracial diversity may adversely affect a society’s cohesiveness in two ways: When diversity results in inequality, it may undermine the sense of fairness and inclusion among individuals and groups. Racial diversity may also weaken the commonality of values, commitments and social relations among individuals and groups, thereby affecting their capacity to cooperate in the pursuit of common objectives (2).

There are several difficulties with this research, but let us highlight two. First, Reitz and Banerjee insist on framing the question of racial inequality in terms of immigration and processes of settlement and integration. The analysis is limited in its historical context, examining immigration only since the 1960s, and race is poorly conceptualized. Secondly, and more importantly, the analysis is methodologically unsound, because of a disjuncture between the wording of the questions in the Ethnic Diversity Study and the way in which Reitz and Banerjee have interpreted them. In a footnote to their text, the authors provide the exact wording of several questions, including the one on which they place the most weight:

Canadian identity: “What is your ethnic or cultural identity?” This was asked after a series of questions on ancestry, which was prefaced by this statement: “I would now like you to think about your own identity, in ethnic or cultural terms. This identity may be the same as that of your parents, grandparents or ancestors, or it may be different (Reitz and Banerjee 2007, 51, note 24).

Their analysis of the results asserts that “for recently arrived immigrants, there is no racial gap; indeed, the Chinese group is more likely to identify as Canadian than are groups of European origin,” and that those who had immigrated earlier were still more likely to indicate Canadian identification. Breaking the results along racial/ethnic
categories, they find some difference among those who had resided in Canada longer:

“Overall,” they argue, racial minorities are slower to acquire a sense of identification as Canadian than are immigrants of European origin; this difference can be observed for all racial minority groups, including Chinese. Perhaps equally significantly, among the second generation, for Whites, the rate of Canadian identification is quite high — 78.2 percent — while for racial minorities, it lags by over 20 percentage points (Reitz and Banerjee 2007, 22).

The results of this question are reported in a chart on the same page with a curious y-axis of “Canadian identity” expressed as a percentage, which we presume indicates the percentage of respondents who generated the word “Canadian.”

In the following footnote, the authors explain that the question used to tap self-identification as Canadian asked about ethnic or cultural identity, and for this question up to six responses were coded. Here, the analysis looks at whether respondents give “Canadian” as any one of the six responses, with a view to determining the extent to which the identity of Canadian is salient among the various ethnic identities significant to respondents (Reitz and Banerjee 2007, 51, note 25).

However, this is not a question about Canadian identity, and conclusions about any sense of being Canadian cannot and should not be drawn from its results. In a diverse country like Canada, with its widely absorbed premise of multiculturalism, it is risky to presume that someone who does not answer “Canadian” to a question about “ethnic or cultural” identity does not feel Canadian. Indeed, it is reasonable to speculate that respondents may have understood the question as inquiring about identities other than Canadian.
An earlier question about a sense of belonging comes closer to asking more directly for the desired information: “‘How strong is your sense of belonging to Canada?’ This followed a section in which respondents were asked to rate their sense of belonging to family, ethnic or cultural group, municipality and province on a five-point scale, from not strong at all to very strong” (Reitz and Banerjee 2007, 51, note 24). This question is neither well-phrased, nor well-positioned within the survey to produce strong results. Interestingly, their own summary of the results works against the overall conclusions of the authors, as recent immigrants and visible minorities report stronger senses of attachment to Canada. Indeed, the responses to this question cast doubt on a strong connection to the processes of immigration and settlement and lend more support for the significance of discrimination:

Regarding the sense of belonging to Canada (figure 3), which overall is higher for visible minority groups than for Whites, generational analysis shows that this higher rate is most pronounced for immigrants, particularly recent immigrants. Among the second generation, all visible minorities have less of a sense of belonging than Whites. This is most striking in the case of Blacks, but is quite pronounced for Chinese and other visible minorities, and it is significant even for South Asians (Reitz and Banerjee 2007, 23).

The authors’ general conceptualization of belonging promotes a narrow and linear perspective of the process of attachment. Their attempts at measurement of such belonging thus fail to capture nuances and complexities of what is both a rational and emotional state. Moreover, several points they make remain unsubstantiated, such as: “Voting is a meaningful indicator of participation in the Canadian community…” (19, 23-4). While voting is an indicator of participation, there is no basis here, particularly in an evaluation of multicultural understandings of being Canadian, to argue for its meaningfulness.
Douglas Palmer’s (2006) close review of Reitz’s methods in this study reveals several instances of flawed analysis and misrepresentations of the data, such as including youth under 18 in voting statistics. He concludes that these problems undermine many, if not all, of Reitz’s assertions:

[T]here is little to justify Reitz casting those results as an issue of visible minority immigrant integration being more problematic than White immigrant integration and this getting worse with time spent in Canada. There is scant evidence that differences in the responses of the second generation have anything to do with the fact that they have immigrant parents. Further, the results Reitz presents actually suggest, as do some other analyses, that visible minority immigrants may integrate as or more rapidly than White immigrants. And there is little evidence that Reitz’s “indices of integration” are valid indicators of progress in an immigrant integration process extending beyond the first generation (2006, 4).

We offer here an alternative analysis that avoids these analytical and methodological problems. Between 1998 and 2000, Julian Tanner and Scot Wortley conducted a survey of nearly 3,500 Toronto high-school students. Their Toronto Youth Crime & Victimization Survey (Tanner and Wortley 2002) asked a wide range of questions, with a primary focus on identifying “deviant” activities and experiences of victimization. The extensive data produced by the survey has led to several analyses: previous articles drawn from the study have addressed the debate over the existence of racial profiling and the impact of such practices (or the perception of such practices) on police-community relations (Wortley and Tanner 2003, 2004a, 2005); discrimination against blacks within the criminal justice system more broadly (Wortley and Tanner 2004b; Wortley and McCalla 2003); and the correlation between ethnic identity and tobacco use (Asbridge et al. 2005).
The results of another series of questions within the survey have not yet been analyzed. The first part of the survey consisted of 17 questions asking for “background information.” Following some questions about the composition of the household, immigration status and language spoken at home, and in the midst of questions regarding racial and ethnic identity, the survey asked, “Do you think of yourself as Canadian?” The following section presents an analysis of the results of that question in particular as they correlate to other parts of the survey, and offers a preliminary discussion of the qualitative significance of that analysis.

In contrast to the Ethnic Diversity Study and Reitz and Banerjee’s interpretation of it, the Tanner and Wortley survey placed the question in the context of collecting basic demographic information, associated it by juxtaposition to race and ethnicity, but clearly distinguished it as a question about being “Canadian” – without defining for the respondents whether “Canadian” was an ethnic, racial or national identity, or formal citizenship status. In light of the subject matter of the rest of the survey, which contained questions that might be upsetting, the placement of this question at the outset ensured it would not be affected by the rest of the survey, and would thus be more likely to reflect a general sense of belonging. Moreover, the phrasing of the question, “Do you think of yourself as Canadian?” enabled respondents to answer entirely subjectively and minimized the influence of other aspects of the survey and the possible expectations of the surveyors – not about the answer itself but expectations of what “Canadian” even means.
**Method and Results**

Working with the support of the Toronto District Public School Board and the Toronto Catholic Separate School Board, as well as several municipal social service agencies, Tanner and Wortley began the research with a series of focus groups at schools and shelters. The subsequent 30-page survey was extensive in its geographical coverage of the city and in its breadth of topics. A total of 3,435 students from 202 homeroom classes at 30 schools (20 public schools and 10 separate schools) in a wide variety of neighbourhoods completed the survey in 1998 and 2000. There was an even number of males and females, and nearly 50% of respondents were born outside Canada. Respondents took 50 to 70 minutes to complete the survey. It is important to note that the survey was conducted before the event of September, 11, 2001.

The questionnaire was designed initially to investigate “the relationship between the leisure routines of young people (aged 14 to 24 years) and both victimization and offending” (Tanner and Wortley 2002, 18), but was broadened to include information about identity, family background, education, employment, fear of crime, and deviant behaviour (including gang activity and drug and alcohol use). Victimization was and remains an understudied subject, despite its importance in youths’ lives and the high rate of harmful and violent incidents found in surveys. Homeless or street youth in particular report high rates of victimization, and frequent violent events (Tanner and Wortley 2002; Gaetz 2004).

The survey contained 371 questions. The first section asked 17 demographic questions to establish “background information,” much of which was used to confirm that the survey population corresponded fairly with general population distribution as
documented by the census. The questionnaire began with the composition of the household, immigration status and language spoken at home, and then, between a question about racial identity and one about ethnic and/or cultural identity, the survey asked, “Do you think of yourself as Canadian?”

Overall, 74.5% of the students responded “yes” to this question. However, there is a sharp distinction between the 56% of immigrants surveyed who said that they thought of themselves as Canadian, and the 91% of those born in Canada who indicated the same. For the immigrant respondents, the amount of time spent in Canada correlates with the likelihood of thinking of oneself as Canadian. Of those who had been in Canada less than two years, only 30% thought of themselves as Canadian (although that is a fairly high number for such a short period of time), compared with 41% of those who had been in Canada between two and five years, 57% of those in Canada between five and ten years, and 73% of those in Canada for ten or more years.

When the immigrant respondents are broken down by their racial/geographical self-identification, the results show significantly different rates of “Canadianness.” Asians and South Asians had the highest rates of thinking of themselves as Canadian, at 64% and 63% respectively. Hispanics, Blacks, Whites and Middle Easterners/West Asians were appreciably less likely to think of themselves this way; indeed, a minority in each of these groups said they saw themselves as Canadian (42%, 44%, 45%, and 46%, respectively). Some of this difference is accounted for by length of time in Canada; however, when this and other variables are controlled, the racial impact is twofold: for Blacks, racial identity was considered a negative factor for self-identification; for South Asians, racial identity was a positive factor. Even more importantly, race is a more
significantly negative factor for Blacks among the Canadian-born than among immigrants.

Among those born in Canada, there are also differences along racial lines. Here the differences among the groups are smaller, but there are two groups with a significantly lower tendency to think of themselves as Canadian. While among South Asians, Hispanics, Asians, and Whites, 90% or more respondents thought of themselves as Canadian, the percentage of Middle Easterners/West Asians who did was 83%, and the percentage of Blacks only 74%. (Note that this survey was conducted before the events of September 11, 2001.) It is noteworthy that almost one in ten of those born in Canada do not feel Canadian. It is particularly striking to see that among Blacks, the rate is one in four, indicating a fairly widespread process of alienation from one’s place of birth.

There are differences in thinking of oneself as Canadian by religious identity as well. Jews are the most likely to think of themselves as Canadian, at 90% of those surveyed. Catholics follow with 80%, other Christians 72%, Hindus 68%, and Muslims 60%. Despite the differences, in each case, a majority self-identify as Canadian and differences are largely accounted for by their correlation to time in Canada. Looking at the native-born, for example, reveals smaller differences among religious groups, with all showing strong rates of thinking of themselves as Canadian, ranging from 85% (Muslims) to 99% (Jews). The same is generally true for length of time spent in Canada, although Catholics and Jews show a stronger tendency, earlier, for thinking of themselves as Canadian.

A more interesting factor, in terms of religion, is degree of religiosity, which appears to have a negative impact on the likelihood of thinking of oneself as Canadian.
Of those who describe themselves as “not at all” religious, 80% think of themselves as Canadian, but this percentage falls steadily to the point at which only 65% of those who consider themselves “very religious” feel the same. The exception is Muslims, where increased religiously positively correlates with the likelihood of feeling Canadian. In this group, only 41% of the “not-at-all” religious think of themselves as Canadian, but this climbs to 60% for the slightly religious, and 64% of the “quite religious.” Muslims who are “very religious” are less likely than the slightly or the “quite religious” to think of themselves as Canadian (52% versus 64%), but still more likely than those who declare themselves to be not at all religious.

The likelihood of thinking of oneself as Canadian is also correlated to perceptions of discrimination. The more strongly respondents agreed that their racial group was discriminated against by the police, by employers, or by educators, the less likely they were to think of themselves as Canadian. The differences were almost as large as between immigrants and non-immigrants.

Those who had experienced violence because of their racial or ethnic background, in that they had been threatened or attacked, were also less likely to think of themselves as Canadian; the more frequently they reported these incidents, the lower the likelihood. Only 56% of those who indicated they had been threatened or attacked three or more times self-identified as Canadian, which is the same response as that of immigrants overall. However, when we controlled for discrimination, Asians and South Asians were the most likely to think of themselves as Canadian – even more so than Whites. Asians and South Asians who believed their groups suffered discrimination were the least likely to think of themselves as Canadian. Interestingly, the impact of racial discrimination had
less effect on Blacks; while it is a factor, it does not fully account for the greater apparent sense of alienation.

**Citizenship and Belonging**

Identification with a nation-state has always been more problematic than nationalist rhetoric purports. On the face of it, there is nothing particularly new about discovering dissent and disjuncture here. Nor is there any great surprise, unfortunately, in detailing beliefs that racial discrimination persists and is an obstacle to fair treatment of certain groups by public officials, in public institutions, and in the labour market. However, what is new and significant here are the extensive documentation of the opinion of youths drawn from the general population (rather than any formal political or social organization) and the distinction between the responses by immigrant and native-born respondents.

The results of the survey clearly indicate that the “rootedness” of time and family are noteworthy as factors in the determination of thinking of oneself as Canadian (and probably more so for these youths, for whom 10 years in Canada means almost their entire lives). However, these are not the only factors, nor perhaps even the most significant. (To be fair, Reitz and Banerjee note a drop in attachment between immigrants and their second-generation children.)

It is the other factors we would like to highlight and discuss here. Addressing these other factors is particularly necessary to move this debate away from the simplistic understanding of diversity as a “problem” derived from immigration and evidence thus of a failure to achieve “successful integration” (which, we fear, usually means assimilation
rather than a broader social transformation). Many studies (and policies) also display limited understandings of diversity as racial/ethnic/cultural – without considering religion, sexuality, class, or ability. These latter categories would (and should) compel us to recognize diversity as a “naturally occurring” phenomenon in Canadian society, not solely an imported by-product of recent immigration. Canadian society has been diverse since its political founding, and we would seek in vain to identify a period in which there was no ethnic/racial discrimination and conflict. Indeed, we should see the present struggle to come to terms with Canada’s diversity as the latest incarnation of a socio-political dynamic that has always been with us.

A lot of work on contemporary national identity is poorly grounded, avoiding the literature on the politics of the nation-state. But it is useful here to revisit the latter work to remind ourselves of the strategic creation of the state and its long-standing use of nationalism to “manage” diversity. Ernest Gellner’s study, Nations and Nationalism (1982), insists that despite active assertions to the contrary, the state invents its nation. It is not the case that the state is the successful political manifestation of coherent national struggle, as partly suggested by studies of separatist movements (Ignatieff 1993) and postcolonial theorists such as Said (1994). Rather, the state, having been brought into existence, finds itself perpetually required to identify its subjects and justify its ability to govern them in order to maintain its legitimacy.

Benedict Anderson (1983) identifies key processes and institutions through which the state officially imagines its nation and governs it, namely the census, the map, and the museum. Linda Colley’s landmark study of the invention of a British identity in the formation of the United Kingdom lays bare both the strategic rationale for such identity
construction and the means by which the compliance and even cooperation of citizens was achieved (Colley 1992). It is, indeed, through this strategic, political process that the institution of citizenship, understood and practised formally and informally, was established. T.H. Marshall’s historical mapping of the emergence of specific citizenship rights similarly unveils the strategic management of the population by the state in the interests of capital, with particular emphasis on the labour force (Marshall 1950). This political economy constitutes the framework of the emergence of the modern nation-state and its institution of citizenship, although this process is frequently obscured by celebratory nationalist narratives.

In the West, we commonly assert that nation-states are based on a liberal political philosophy that privileges and commits itself to human rights. History indicates otherwise. For example, the institution of slavery and the exclusion of women from most political, social, and civil rights reveal not just small inconsistencies between the language of equality and the material reality in which people live; these constitute egregious, even paradoxical, crevasses between what is trumpeted and what is delivered. Isin and Wood have detailed various groups’ struggles to challenge unequal and exclusionary practices of the state and incorporate themselves into the national body, demonstrating that the development of citizenship itself is historically specific and narrowly defined (in terms of race, gender, sexuality, etc.). Following Isin and Wood, the survey results discussed here are not anomalous or even extraordinary, but indicators of the fundamental character of the state and citizenship (Isin and Wood 1999; Wood 2008).

Indeed, in every “Western democracy,” the state has a long history of explicitly racist (sexist, homophobic, and so on) constructions of the nation and its model citizen
These arguments have been made explicitly with reference to Canada as well: for example, scholars such as Harold Cardinal, Alan Cairns, and Anthony Hall have detailed the struggles and contradictions in Canadian policy regarding Aboriginal citizenship (Cardinal 1969; Cairns 2000; Hall 2005). Nandita Sharma has similarly excavated discriminatory policies regarding temporary workers, which she regards as part of a racist national identity construction (Sharma 2006). Charles Taylor’s classic essay on multiculturalism and the politics of recognition begins to acknowledge and address some of these tensions (Taylor 1994), although his essay remains at the discursive level, rather than focusing on the substance of discrimination.

When scholars acknowledge discriminatory practices and experiences, many of them, including Reitz and Banerjee, conclude that social conflict is to be avoided. Thus, “social cohesion” becomes the goal, but with a weak or superficial understanding of what that might mean and what its consequences might entail. Reitz and Banerjee, for example, define social cohesion as follows:

Social cohesion, in this sense, is similar to social capital, which is defined as collective resources that facilitate action. Robert Putnam’s observation that ethnic diversity in the US reduces social capital is thus quite relevant (2003). The significance of inequality for recent immigration in the US underscores its potential role in the analysis and suggests that disentangling the relations of diversity, inequality and social commitments is essential (Letki 2005), since they relate to the strength and resilience of the social fabric. (Reitz and Banerjee 2006, 50-51, note 23).

Others have asserted more directly that social justice should be prioritized over social cohesion, since the latter papers over conflict, rather than addressing it substantively (Bannerjee 2001). Instead, it is argued that agonistic politics should be embraced as
necessary and productive, rather than feared as inherently violent (Isin and Wood 1999; Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

**Conclusion**

The results of the survey counter several explanations commonly proposed to “explain” why racial/ethnic/religious groups, particularly so-called “visible minorities,” “keep to themselves” and appear to “reject” integration. It is not a reluctance to integrate on the part of immigrants in the first instance; results from both the Tanner/Wortley study and the Ethnic Diversity Study indicate a willingness by immigrants to identify as Canadian. This openness is present among some visible minority groups, such as South Asians, who are actually more inclined to think of themselves as Canadian than Whites.

There are many factors associated with the reduced likelihood of thinking of oneself as Canadian – much more than just place of birth or length of residence in Canada. At a minimum, the question of what produces attachment to Canada needs to be taken out of the context of immigration. Even if framed as a “problem,” this question should not be seen as a failure to “properly screen,” nor should analysis result in any form of advice to change immigration and settlement policies. We might even suggest that the most serious issue here has nothing to do with immigration. Instead, we should be quite alarmed at the reluctance of significant percentages of certain populations to identify as Canadian when they are born in Canada. This suggests a profound disconnect within the education system and within Canadian society more broadly.

Geographical analyses of such questions of attachment and belonging indicate intersecting or collapsed scales that should focus our attention on the relationship
between local and national experiences and identities (Wood 2002; Isin 2007), specifically the theory that local experience determines national identity and a broad sense of belonging. Set in the context of the political economy of the nation-state and a theory of the state that recognizes its exclusionary practices as integral to its governance and management of its citizens, the results of the survey suggest the problems lie far from shifting immigration populations or policies. A deeper process of identity construction, with a much longer history is at work. Perhaps the most significant finding is that those who sense the greatest level of unfair treatment are the least likely to self-identify as Canadian. There are many theories as to why groups perceive discrimination; when examined thoroughly, however, the evidence supports the case that discrimination is perceived because discrimination exists.

We recommend turning the investigation away from personalized accounts of self-identification and towards obstacles to inclusion, particularly with respect to the role of public institutions, in light of their capacity to create a collective identity. Systemic (rather than individual) discrimination within public institutions (or those considered to be in practice, which would include the labour market) is more corrosive to one’s sense of belonging than personal encounters, which while poisonous in their own way, can be dismissed as the opinions of the uninformed. In public institutions expectations are highest for equality, fair treatment and access to society’s resources, especially with respect to their role in social mobility. Moreover, these expectations are reasonably placed: ideally, these institutions provide access to collective resources and have the potential to transcend individual bias, discrimination, and racism. The impact of their failure to do so is considerable.
References


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CERIS - The Ontario Metropolis Centre is one of five Canadian Metropolis centres dedicated to ensuring that scientific expertise contributes to the improvement of migration and diversity policy.

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- Canada Economic Development for Quebec Regions (CEDQ)
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- Statistics Canada

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