Rural Immigration Scenario Planning Workshop

Report on Workshop in Prince George, British Columbia

November 29, 2023

Prepared By:

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary

Historically defined by movement, rural Canada is diverse and movements to and from rural regions, towns, villages, and small cities are often defined by the distinct geographical, economic, and demographic factors of each place. Additionally, international immigration policies have significantly impacted population movements to and from rural and smaller communities both historically and today. More recently, national and provincial immigration and refugee resettlement policies and programs have resulted in an increasing number of newcomers arriving in rural places. Yet, attention to these movements, particularly the movement of migrants and refugees to rural areas, remains largely understudied and the impacts of such movements are not well understood.

Funded by a Connection Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), this project brings people together through a set of interactive workshops across Canada to discuss questions of rural-urban mobility, migration and resettlement, and the realities of life in rural and smaller communities. The objective of this project is to build collaborative conversations between diverse groups of people. This report documents the workshop held in Prince George, British Columbia, which brought together a small group of 12 scholars, resettlement and immigration workers, relevant practitioners, and others working on topics of rural migration in Northern British Columbia and the surrounding region. Together, participants were guided through a scenario planning exercise which was focused on exploring the current realities and future possibilities of rural migration. Facilitators took participants through four sessions centred around the four key questions that structure this report, followed by a closing plenary: Where do we want to go? How do we get there? What are we missing? What are the trends and patterns that shape rural immigration? Participant responses and discussions to each question are documented in the report below.

Overall, participants emphasized that immigration can meaningfully benefit both immigrants and rural communities. However, current gaps in resource and service availability (ranging from affordable housing and childcare, to language classes and financial services) pose additional challenges for rural communities. To ensure that communities can adequately support immigrant populations, the participants made a wide range of observations and recommendations in the workshop.

Project Introduction

Living rurally in Canada has historically been defined by movement. Young people often leave home to access education and employment opportunities in larger centres, immigrants arrive from other parts of the world, seniors often seek to remain, and young families come and go (Moazzami 2015). The decline of rural Canada has changed what it means to live well in rural places has shifted as the reality of living rurally has changed across economic, social, and cultural dimensions. Today, rural places are described as "failing" and are characterized by declining and aging populations, few services, and limited economic opportunities. Yet, despite the challenges, people, including immigrants and refugees, continue to choose to live, work, and play in rural places, while others will visit, and some will return (CRRF 2021; 2015).

Newcomers in rural Canada face many of the same challenges as other rural residents, like limited access to broadband, few services, and a lack of public transportation. As a result, newcomers face the intersectional marginalization of rurality and, often, of other inequalities like racism. Many of the greatest challenges for newcomers in smaller communities – as well as potential solutions to these challenges – are systemic policy issues that extend far beyond immigration policy (Haugen, McNally and Hallstrom 2023). While refugees in particular may experience the implications of inadequate social policies exceptionally acutely, the obstacles they face are symptoms of a larger, more systemic problem. These barriers are the result of a broader policy design across immigration and rural development that hinges upon the principles of minimal disruption and status quo maintenance (Epp 2008; Brodie 1990), and a settlement model that is grounded in rural-urban differentiation.

In response to the challenges that rural populations, including newcomers, face in rural and smaller communities, this project engages with the larger policy, development, and economic forces at the centre of the "rural problematique" (Blake and Nurse 2003) The purpose of this project is to intervene in these systems through the development of a rural policy design for mobility, migration and resettlement that acts as a response to both urban-centrism and rural decline. This project specifically considers if increased and sustained immigration and refugee resettlement to rural areas could be one way to support rural revitalization and enhance the integration experiences of newcomers, amidst an ever-increasing refugee and climate crisis. The **overarching goal** of this project is to capture, understand, and facilitate conversations about population movements more generally, and both domestic and international dimensions of migration and resettlement, to and from rural and smaller places across Canada. More specifically, **the objective** of this project is to examine and understand how expanding immigration and refugee resettlement in rural places could act as a pathway to: (1) revitalize rural communities; (2) provide newcomers with more diverse options for settlement; and (3) grow Canada's immigration program (within a global context of rising human displacement rising). In order to further these goals and objectives, this project reinvests in the study of migration to and from rural Canada through a set of organized workshops and long-lasting outputs. Specifically, this project brings together researchers, scholars, policymakers, and practitioners across the country through a set of facilitated workshops, to explore topics of population movement, mobility, and migration to and from rural places. Beyond fostering dialogue, networks, and knowledge exchange, the purpose of this project is to articulate a rural policy design for mobility, migration and resettlement. Policy design, as defined by Bobrow and Dryzek (1987) is "the design that sits above and before policy making and policy process. Consists of three components: context, values and audience." Considering rural policy design, therefore, means thinking about the context, the values and the audience that do, should, and could inform how we think about and make policy for immigration in Canada.

The workshop in Prince George, BC was held on November 29, 2023. It was the third of four workshops to be held across Canada, and it focused primarily on immigration in rural and remote areas of Northern British Columbia. The following report provides an overview of the discussions at this workshop.

The first workshop was hosted in June 2023 in Lethbridge, Alberta, while the second took place in Antigonish, Nova Scotia in October 2023. A final workshop is planned for February

2024 in Ottawa, Ontario to facilitate a conversation on federal policy and the role of the national and provincial governments in rural policy design. In total, the four workshops will draw together more than 60 people, of varying backgrounds and rural experiences, from across the country. Each workshop will involve a different set of participants from the region where the workshop is hosted.

In each workshop, participants are guided through a scenario planning exercise to explore future possibilities and key drivers of change. Scenario planning enables participants to explore common experiences, consider future goals and pathways to achieve these goals, and identify leverage points. Scenario planning can be compared to planning a road trip, which involves identifying the destination, the means of transportation, and stops along the way, while anticipating factors like weather that might impact the trip. The workshops are structured into four sessions centred around the four key questions that structure this report, followed by a closing plenary: Where do we want to go? How do we get there? What are we missing? What are the trends and patterns that shape rural immigration?

Where do we want to go?

In the first session, participants considered three questions: What are the values that inform your ideal? What do you think immigration should **ideally** look like in your community and region, as well as rural and smaller communities in Canada more broadly? What does immigration currently look like in your community/context?

In addressing the 'ideals' of immigration, the participants discussed several barriers that are preventing this vision. In the following section, the narratives of barriers, needs, and ideals are woven together.

Mapping key ideals

Participants expressed that they would like to see everyone welcomed with equitable terms and opportunities. In Canada, social equity policies do not always apply to the immigration system, which is a tiered system. Ideally, however, all newcomers would have equal access and opportunity for healthcare and education, which may lead to better community-based retention.

Community services

Additional support should also be offered to newcomers based on family structure (i.e., single mothers, families, or children who are sick should receive more support). Basic services such as healthcare, daycare, and education should be expanded for the current population and newcomers. In particular, temporary foreign workers—who are often working for minimum wage and sending money back home to their families—have no access to government relief. There are also fewer spots reserved for temporary foreign workers in English-language programs, which can negatively impact their immigration journey. Ideally, the general staff and financial capacity for organizations to support newcomers should be expanded, and information highlighting services to the community should be available in accessible formats.

In rural and smaller communities more broadly, the participants discussed they would like to see individuals arrive with permanent residency and already be able to seek out work. In reference to earlier conversations around equitable treatment of newcomers, one participant remarked that individuals should not be invited to Canada unless they are properly supported with permanent residency. One participant remarked that temporary foreign workers do not want to be *temporary.* Another participant suggested that a contract could be devised to allow an immigrant to stay in one community for a certain period.

Rural-urban service access

Participants commented that there needs to be improved pathways for finding and accessing the services in the community. The paperwork to apply for permanent residency can be quite daunting, and numerous examinations along the immigration journey can add to the stress. There are also rural and urban differences; for example, testing sites are often too far away from rural areas, and technicalities such as crossing a border or leaving the country to acquire permanent residency can further complicate the process. In Northern BC, there is a gap in settlement services between Prince George and Smithers, BC (roughly 4 hours apart). As such, service providers need to accommodate a large area and resources are limited. One participant offered the opinion that immigration consultants have too much power, which creates an imbalance with their clients. Although Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) has tried to make immigration information accessible, it can still be difficult to navigate and may be overwhelming for individuals.

Transportation was also discussed as a broader topic. The airport in Prince George, BC—the main airport city in the north part of the province—is expensive, so many people do not use it. Instead, they drive to Edmonton (over a 7-hour journey). Many individuals face issues with acquiring a passport as well.

Social and economic needs

The participants identified several social and economic needs of new immigrants in rural and remote settings. General affordability was listed as a key concern, regardless of whether someone arrives as an individual or with a spouse, children, or other family. One participant commented that immigrants need to finance the trip over to Canada, and then upon arrival, individuals are often expected to be financially independent. They stated that this is a missed opportunity to strategically match newcomers with resources or support available in the community. Further, more should be done to integrate community services into assessment processes, in part to connect newcomers with communities that already have appropriate services. There was also general commentary about the need for government action to improve infrastructure that may further support newcomers (i.e., schools, housing, daycare, etc.), especially after Canada's recent commitment to welcome more immigrants.

Service supports

One of the key concerns voiced by participants was understaffed (as many people are only part-time), underfunded, or otherwise limited settlement services in rural and remote areas. Ideally, there would be access to fully sufficient and coordinated support services for new immigrants, ranging from relocation information, visa support, and general migration

services. Participants commented that the settlement process can be held up by language tests or other barriers, and in some cases, individuals are left to find support by themselves.

Job and employability

Participants also discussed the implications of employability and local economies on rural-based immigration. Ideally, new immigrants have access to quality jobs that are suitable to their level of education. While there is often less competition for certain jobs in rural areas, participants commented that, at times, more skilled or specialized positions are only available in urban centres. As such, workshop attendees stated that it is important to better understand and 'match' the work experience of new migrants to the community centres that need them (for example, early childhood education is in high demand, so individuals entering these jobs should be adequately supported).

Credential recognition was also listed as a central concern, leaving many highly skilled professionals working lower-paying jobs. There is the question of consistency among international credential recognition programs; for example, participants observed that the process is less expensive in Alberta or Toronto, so more immigrants are likely to settle in those cities/provinces.

Equity in employability

There are also questions of equity. Participants remarked that it is important that opportunities are provided to all skilled migrants to practice their profession in Canada. The example was given of health professionals and doctors migrating from certain areas of the world (i.e., the United States and South Africa) who may find it easier than others to challenge the exams and start practicing. Expanding access to remote work was mentioned as one possibility to help skilled labourers find work whilst living in smaller, more remote areas.

The participants noted that refugee claimants need more streamlined pathways to employment. Individuals seeking asylum often face long wait periods for work permits, which increases their vulnerability in Canada and may encourage them to perform illegal work to make ends meet. Further, if new immigrants do not have a Permanent Resident Card, they cannot access other employment services (like WorkBC). The participants commented that WorkBC services are different from agencies in other provinces, which may impact individuals' movement across provincial borders.

Participants shared that students should be allowed to work more hours per week (or month) through student visas. [Note that this workshop took place before the recent December 2023 announcement from the federal government to extend the lifted cap on working hours per week for international students.] Other pathways for young people, such as new work permits for the children of immigrants, may also support them in learning English.

Government and policy

On the topic of policy solutions, the participants had several suggestions and comments on government involvement. Firstly, there needs to be improved communication between

provincial and federal governments, and secondly, equitable support should be extended to rural areas to ensure equal access to services among new immigrants.

Participants also called for the removal of the provincial points system, arguing that the process can be discriminatory and overly competitive (i.e., losing points as a single adult, an older adult, or for different qualifications). Rather, there should be an improved assessment system that understands the applicant in a more nuanced way (i.e., what are they strong at, what their family needs, etc.).

Temporary Foreign Worker Program

Moreover, participants called for the removal of the temporary foreign worker program. They commented that people are already using the program as a stepping stone to permanent residency, even if the government assumes they have only landed temporarily. Supporting workers to achieve permanent residency was highlighted by participants, and mentorship programs (among workplace colleagues to help them transition) were identified as possible solutions.

Community, family, and education

Returning to the central question, "*Where do we want to go,*" the participants highlighted the need for family reunification and other aspects of community integration as key goals. Ideally, an educational system would be implemented to help the public understand the benefits (both social and economic) of family reunification. In doing so, participants noted that human capital—and the concept that there is value added by diversifying the community—is important to include in education. Here, the argument was made that not all "benefits" can or should be measured in economic terms. Even so, education can also be used to highlight the economic benefits (e.g., when a family is unified, money stays local rather than being sent back home or grandparents may be able to watch children rather than relying on daycare infrastructure, etc.).

Community development

The ongoing need for community development was also discussed. For example, potlucks are valuable opportunities for people to gather, but they are not always funded sufficiently. Participants highlighted the gendered aspects of community development; gatherings like potlucks often help women who immigrate with their partners or families meet other newcomers.

Sufficient funding is also needed for cultural centres or other communal gathering spaces, both of which were identified as crucial for newcomers to connect with other families. In the workshop, participants noted that an "anchor" is often needed to build a bigger community. Otherwise, and sometimes even so, individuals may face feelings of loneliness.

Cultural context

Lastly, the participants stressed that different cultural contexts shape the needs of newcomers. To understand and accommodate their situations, cases must be evaluated on

an individual basis to understand the different cultural backgrounds of newcomers, match them with communities and services, and build on cultural connections. A meaningful connection to the placement (through housing, previous connection to the community, etc.) is important. It was mentioned that staff must also have access to support and training to better understand and respond to these needs.

Religion and the rural context

Participants commented that some rural communities simply do not have the infrastructure or services that an immigrant family needs to be successful. For example, Williams Lake, British Columbia, does not have a mosque, which has led some skilled professionals (i.e., physicians) to relocate so that they can practice their faith. In some cases, this creates isolation for women and children. Even if a space is available and the local government tries to address or support the issue, there are different logistical needs to consider (such as needing the space at 5 am).

One participant noted that these religious centres can also act as social and community centres, especially for mosques which accommodate people from many different countries or backgrounds. The potential to bridge this gap in services/infrastructure through virtual communities was mentioned, but it was cautioned that programs should consider every person in the family, not just one person's needs.

Local context: rural communities in Northern British Columbia

In this section, we have compiled notes from the workshop that highlight the unique challenges in rural and remote communities (specifically those in Robson Valley and Smithers) in Northern British Columbia.

Robson Valley, BC

Overall, participants noted that there is limited immigration to Robson Valley, BC. There are very few faith facilities or limited structural buildings to accommodate newcomers. The emergence of more suitable housing options is helpful, but Robson Valley is still rarely chosen for placement. Some existing Ukrainian families have sponsored newcomers, and 22 families were placed in the town of Valemount, BC. While there were efforts to foster community (such as potlucks), many of those families dispersed to go to larger city centres.

The participants highlighted that the "North" is a very specific way of life. For those new to Canada, individuals often think of Toronto, Montreal, or Vancouver as the classic Canadian centres. In this sense, it can be quite difficult to imagine a rural lifestyle, especially when the newcomers are not provided any context of the new communities. Participants noted that there is an "identity divide" between how people perceive urban versus rural Canada, and individuals may not understand that there are far fewer people in rural centres.

Regional connections

Regional connections and relationships should also be a focus. Participants suggested that regions be broken down into smaller areas (e.g., School District 57 is too large, which neglects the needs of smaller or more remote places). Plus, while there are lots of resources for immigrants in larger centres like Prince George, BC, other areas like Robson Valley—just a few hours away—are not very culturally diverse. There are some fears about underlying racism in rural areas, and even so, participants commented that racism can be difficult to see or detect. At times, it may be difficult to find or access specific resources; instead, immigrants must often go, learn, ask, and discover resources on their own in rural communities. In response to this, participants noted that 'you can't be a community's best-kept secret.'

Some agencies are also providing immigration support services even without a specific contract for it. Others, like WorkBC, are providing services that may not align with the needs of the community. The participants commented that this may cause immigrants to feel like a 'project.' As such, when the services do not provide personalized support, some may feel frustrated with the process and view it as a waste of their time. Overall, the knowledge base of service providers needs to be built up.

Community services

Mental health services were another topic of discussion. While there is good availability of resources for mental health in Robson Valley, some communities are struggling to service the unhoused population. One participant noted that an over-concentration of resources for unhoused individuals limits the availability of services for others, especially trauma services for newly settled refugees. Proper housing for newcomers was a topic of concern; especially for asylum seekers, as permanent shelter may not be available. Further, while there are many services geared toward women and children, some support programs have restrictions (such as housing for families only, no single individuals, etc.).

Lastly, in 2020, the City of Williams Lake, BC, launched a project to educate local employers on the benefits (and process) of hiring temporary foreign workers (to address a knowledge gap that others highlighted as well). It is available here: [You've Got Talent (williamslake.ca)](). Pages 16-25 are especially relevant, and the booklet serves as an example of using public education to help foster immigration.

Smithers, BC and surrounding areas

The participants then noted that there are limited immigration services in the Northwest of British Columbia, particularly in Smithers, BC. For context, it was shared that temporary foreign workers often work in hospitality sectors, rather than the commercial mining industry. Even more remote regions, like Prince Rupert, BC, host a lot of immigrants, but there are no services to support them. One participant remarked that the funding should target smaller service areas to meet this need.

Local context and concerns

In the past, organizations had more of a 'personal touch' with their clients, although this is increasingly difficult with the larger caseload. The need for connection and community,

however, remains a key component of settling in rural areas. One participant noted that immigrants from Sudan settled in the region over 15 years ago, and they have stayed because they felt a strong connection to the community and cultural groups in the area. These past immigrants now help support other newcomers to the area.

Participants felt as though it is easier to interact with others and integrate into the community when settling in smaller towns. Whether individuals are moving to find work, affordable housing, or follow friends or family, rural communities have advantages for settlement.

Participants commented that, although Canada and the IRCC have welcomed many people, there may not have been adequate preparation for the population increase. In Smithers, it is quite noticeable when someone new arrives in the community (due to size, remoteness, etc.). Even if there are services available, individuals may access them too late or long after arrival since advertising has not been a funding priority. The community has tried matching individuals with the appropriate services, but capacity and funding remain issues. As a Northern community, Smithers is applying for the Local Immigration Partnership (LIP) program, which is typically reserved for larger centres.

How do we get there?

In the second session, participants were asked to reflect on three questions related to the ideals brainstormed in the first session: Who are the primary audiences? What are the common realities of the rural context? What barriers, challenges and roadblocks are preventing local communities from achieving their ideal vision for immigration?

Participants were then asked to distinguish between things that you and/or your local community have influence over and things that you do not, as well as to identify who has control over each issue.

Overall, the participants identified a wide range of barriers to service delivery at the workshop in Prince George. Overall, despite the desire in Canada to encourage immigration, participants reiterated the opinion that the pathways are convoluted and complex.

Primary audiences

The participants brainstormed a variety of primary audiences, ranging from different government levels to the community itself. They thought that the provincial government (including rural entrepreneurial programs) has a large role to play, as does the federal government (especially for medical support and security or background checks). Employers, community groups, existing populations, and professional colleges and regulatory bodies (e.g., colleges of nurses, veterinarians, doctors, etc.) all have a role to play in the immigration process.

The participants also highlighted some concerns with the current system and audiences. They called for more cross-sectoral policy coordination, especially through federal and provincial policies and agencies. Participants offered the opinion that one year of strong support should be provided to newcomers and that narratives of immigration be shifted from victims to

victors to help them seize opportunities. One participant voiced concerns that, otherwise, some immigrants may default to government welfare or financial support.

It was noted that most energy is directed toward finding employment for individuals, rather than building community. The participants commented that future residents of an area should be targeted to give them a say in their community and more information on the area.

Common realities of the rural context

During the workshop, participants identified several realities that impact their community due to their rurality and/or remoteness. A lack of diverse food options was listed as one concern. It can be difficult for newcomers when they cannot buy traditional food or cooking items. Prince George has some more options, but more rural areas are quite limited in what they can offer.

Food security is another issue. Since there are no targeted programs funded by the IRCC or the Province, community organizations are trying to respond, but some people are still struggling. In small centres like Smithers, BC, there is no food bank, and vulnerable clients have limited money left over after expenses or family obligations to feed themselves.

Healthcare and access to services

Access to healthcare services is limited, especially for trauma-informed care and counselling. Moreover, the cost is prohibitive for some clients. Mental health services are also difficult to access in rural areas, in part due to the lack of trauma-informed practitioners. Family reunification can help combat poor mental health, but as stated before, this was observed to be a difficult process.

Since there are not a lot of services available in rural areas, there are good opportunities for immigrants to apply their skills and make economic investments to fill this gap. The participants noted that many immigrants often seek out trade jobs since the skills needed may be more easily transferable or translatable from their previous work.

As noted earlier in the workshop, more education for potential employers is needed. At times, there can be bias in the recruitment process, or some simply do not have time to work through the application process to hire temporary foreign workers. Contract regulations may also restrict some new immigrants or workers from accessing key services.

Further, there is a lack of transportation networks to connect immigrants with local and regional support services. Rural communities are not always affordable to live in, and depending on the community, there can be quite small populations of other immigrants. By contrast, places like Smithers, BC, have a large Ukrainian population due to an active sponsorship group.

Rural-based education

More education is needed to help newcomers understand other realities of living rurally. Many arrive and do not understand the geography of the region or the distances between key services. In some areas, there is a lack of cell service and/or internet. Other more practical conversations, like the use of block heaters, plug-ins, winter tires, or winter clothing also need

to occur. In turn, more education is needed to prevent ignorance, bias, or misunderstanding among current residents about what it means to be a host community for more immigrants.

It was noted that there is inadequate funding for English language services, and while some community groups have tried to informally fill this need, some do not have accreditation. The use of other talk-to-text applications or translation services was proposed to help with this issue.

Housing concerns

Suitable housing is also a concern in some rural communities. Some participants noted that responding to local issues such as homelessness has reduced residents' compassion for other pressing concerns (such as immigration services). Other communities, like Robson Valley, do not face the same local challenges and want to spread the message that they have more capacity to support newcomers. Overall, the participants commented that local issues have been compounding, which makes it difficult to move the dialogue on any particular problem.

Lastly, with such a large caseload for settlement workers in rural areas, compassion fatigue was shared as a common rural reality. Participants commented that immigration workers are becoming burnt out, and some are looking for quick fixes to arising problems rather than comprehensive support for clients.

Barriers, challenges, and roadblocks

Community concerns

The participants identified many potential barriers and roadblocks that are preventing local communities from achieving their ideal vision for immigration. First, they observed that there are considerable bureaucratic restrictions (i.e., red tape like reporting requirements, discrepancy over who manages which issue, etc.) and capacity limits impacting the "ideal" vision for immigration.

There are also issues of licensing (for driver's licenses, for example) and transportation service gaps. While there are some northern services like Ebus, participants noted that better transportation options are needed along the Highway 16 corridor (e.g., Jasper to Prince George to Prince Rupert) and in connection to southern BC transportation networks. As many new immigrants do not have a vehicle soon after arrival, community organizations or rideshare services have been useful (but these are quite limited, especially in some more remote areas). Winter driving conditions, wild animals, or other factors may make driving more difficult. The costly nature of flights from rural and remote areas further limits mobility.

Similar to earlier discussions, the participants shared that each of their communities has unique advantages, needs, and capacities to support newcomers. For example, Mackenzie, BC does not have a housing issue, but there are limited employment opportunities.

Government representation and engagement

First, it was noted that there is inadequate rural representation around decision-making tables, and political ridings in the North are so large that it can be difficult to contact or engage with the officials.

Other necessary infrastructure, like Service Canada agencies, are present in Prince George but not in smaller communities in Northern BC. There are also no Service Canada services on Haida Gwaii, and communication with representatives from other areas can be frustrating.

The participants also noted that there is a common view from the provincial and federal government that Prince George is rural, but they thought that this classification overlooks the needs of *more* rural and remote areas.

Overall, the participants commented that if no funding is in place for service agencies—regardless of location—it can be quite challenging to act on initiatives and deliver an "ideal" vision for immigration services. The scale of impact also makes it more difficult to compete with larger centres (for example, one immigrant success story in a very small community may pale in comparison to hundreds of 'success stories' in cities like Kelowna). For them, this raised the question of how we can better measure success in rural versus urban communities.

Funding, employment, and other considerations

Funding emerged as a significant theme of the 'roadblock' discussion. Participants commented that their services and agencies were underfunded and there is a lack of staff available to support these services. Matching contributions could be a potential solution for some funding issues; for example, if a community member hosts three potlucks and assists with grant applications, there should be a mechanism to quantify that contribution and 'match' it.

Once again, the role of the BC Ministry for Children and Family Development (MCFD) surfaced in the discussions. Participants noted that family support workers are needed in rural communities specifically for rural migration/ immigration issues, which could be an MCFD contract. Further, the participants observed that small municipalities often or always have MCFD contracts, but the same attention is not given to immigration-based contracts.

Online services

The interaction between newcomers, communities, and government agencies was another key theme of the discussion. The Government of Canada website is difficult to navigate, and paperwork can either take too long to process or require coordination with multiple government agencies or departments. Due to this complexity of the immigration system, the participants remarked that some people feel that immigrants "are not worth the hassle." This can be further complicated by workforce permits and coordination with prospective employers. The participants also called for adjustments to the requirements of immigration and workplace permits. When there are changes made, however, the workshops to help understand these changes are often virtual and potential participants (such as immigration support workers) are given short notice to attend. When other changes occurred, such as when the Province of BC changed the rules for labour impact assessments, individuals were kicked out of the system if they were not registered for the portal to hire foreign workers through the employer's standard branch. In addition to the complications this poses for the employment of immigrants, participants stressed that they are concerned about the potential abuse of temporary foreign workers in Canada.

Further, the participants commented that community outreach is a useful tool, highlighting the role that employer outreach officers and citizen outreach officers could play in smaller geographic regions when they work collaboratively between communities.

Students and local concerns

Next, the impacts on international students were discussed. If student visas expire, for example, the student's employment can be impacted by delays in the renewal process. The limits on work hours for international students were highlighted as a barrier, including their personal responsibility to pay for some medical services. The participants noted that international students are shouldering part of the blame for the national housing crisis, which may lead to reduced enrollment and funding.

Other issues, such as high gas and food prices in rural areas, were discussed. One participant commented that access to suitable (and affordable) clothing is a concern, as winter clothing can be difficult to find in rural centres. Active buy-and-sell communities (such as online services like Facebook Marketplace) are quite popular, but newcomers usually are not aware of such options. Facebook groups can also be leveraged to connect newcomers.

Concluding thoughts

Lastly, there were some final extraneous concerns voiced by the participants. For example, third-party recruiters do not necessarily depict life in Canada or rural centres accurately, and some people arrive without any indication of the challenges yet to come. The participants offered the opinion that the process to acquire permanent residency status is too long and that the 10-year minimum to collect Canadian Pension Plan benefits could be considered a barrier for newcomers. Learning the Canadian financial system can be difficult, including the process of acquiring a new credit card. The participants noted that financial literacy should be offered, including material on fraud prevention. Once again, the remoteness of communities was cited as a barrier for some financial services, including any financial vetting obligations. Lastly, it was mentioned that biometric testing for Northern BC residents must be done in Prince George (and appointments are offered with very little notice, resulting in additional personal costs).

Areas of influence

Next, the participants identified a few areas where communities can have more political power or influence and areas where they may not. Notably, they observed that community partners can have influence over strengthening community connections and partnerships (such as LIPs) and in some ways, transportation services, which is a complex web of responsibilities that can be partly supported by the communities themselves. Nevertheless, more funding is needed to support inter-community transportation networks.

However, the participants commented that they do not influence other communities' services (such as language program offerings), the provincial nominee program (PNP), and formal immigration processes. At times, there are opportunities for input, but this avenue for engagement is often limited. The participants noted that while they do not have control over the cost of flights, government subsidization of rural and remote transportation could help to ensure equitable access.

Food security is also an issue largely outside of the communities' control. While some temporary services can be established by local agencies, the issue of food insecurity in the North is longstanding.

Overall, the participants expressed that as members of smaller communities, they feel as though they do not have a lot of influence. In many respects, they do not feel heard on key issues.

What are we missing?

What do we know? What do we not?

For each of the barriers identified in previous discussions, participants were asked to identify the "known" unknowns and the "unknown" unknowns. In response, they posed a series of questions, ranging from how we collect and distribute data on immigrants, international students, and temporary foreign workers; to how we can identify or measure whether international students are impacting the national housing crisis; when migrating, do individuals contact political representatives before reaching out to community service agencies; and finally, how can incorporate more immigration-based statistics in Statistics Canada's census, especially in the context of their placement in rural communities (not just regional areas)?

There are some unknowns when working with multiple agencies to finish paperwork (including the requirement of a form from one department to be used for another). Translators have reportedly been told that they cannot speak on behalf of clients, which has complicated interactions with government agencies.

Communication

Over-reliance on 'checklists' by government agencies and employees further complicates processes, as it does not allow for any "out-of-the-box" thinking. The participants noted that power is often dominated by older white men with more limited perspectives on immigration issues, which can further limit the capacity of community services. Additionally, with the increased use of technology during the COVID-19 crisis, more chatbots are being used to interact with communities. Alternatively, the participants expressed their desire for personal representatives to be deployed across the country to assist with settlement concerns.

Beyond interaction with government services, the participants identified several other unknowns. For example, the protection of newcomers' anonymity is important, yet the process is more difficult in rural areas. Addressing trauma is also very important, including trauma experienced upon arrival.

Employment services and government agencies

Other services and programs—such as WorkBC—should aim to limit the burden on newcomers. The participants noted that strict eligibility requirements and complicated reporting requirements (such as for the housing program through WorkBC) make service

access difficult. The BC PNP was observed to be an unfair system, as it is points-based and assesses people based on their economic potential.

Lastly, the participants highlighted some more universal 'unknowns,' such as the threat of wars or unrest, natural disasters, or changes in regional livability. Shifting government policy, competing interests at different levels of government, and system-level changes (such as updates to National Occupation Classifications (NOC) that require agencies to learn the amended protocols—thus impacting their capacity—and which may impact immigration applications) were all cited as other 'known unknowns.' Ultimately, the participants called for more government consultation is needed with frontline workers and that processes should reflect more knowledge-sharing strategies (rather than merely reporting).

What are the unspoken realities?

At this point in the workshop, the participants were asked to reflect on the unspoken or unrecognized realities of rural immigration. First, it was noted that other community members do not necessarily recognize how immigration supports other needs of the area and community development. They commented that government agencies struggle to see the inequities of the immigration system, referencing the lack of follow-ups with individuals as they work through the process. Retention of new immigrants in rural communities was also cited as a concern, not only due to the high costs associated with settlement but to reduce the administrative labour. The participants also thought that refugees—who may receive social assistance—need greater support to ensure successful, independent settlement.

Further, rural communities often use more traditional metrics to mark program success (i.e., measuring whether the program creates explicit revenue or employment) which may differ from others. Often, these communities have a limited marketing capacity to attract new immigrants, and there are challenges in accessing post-secondary education in proximity to the settlement area. While there have been unique employment partnerships that have arisen in rural communities (such as the former Valemount and College of New Caledonia tourism employment program), this is not always readily available.

Care work and health services

Some concerns with health services, such as the limited capacity to accommodate specific needs (i.e., challenges supporting non-English speaking individuals needing support in assisted living facilities) were mentioned. They cited the challenges of immigrating with a child who has special needs with limited daycare options.

There were a few conversations about the impact of one's age as an immigrant. The participants remarked that it can be more difficult for individuals to settle once they are 40 or 50 years old, especially with the points scale. Even so, if these older residents settle and do not work long enough in Canada to access the Canadian Pension Plan, it may make retirement more precarious. The capacity of other family members—likely immigrant women—to take on additional care roles should be questioned, especially if aging parents have other health needs (such as dementia, Alzheimer's, etc.).

Other approaches to care work were also discussed. For example, one participant proposed that the policy changes to the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) system—which now makes it

easier for housing to be put on farmlands—could create the potential for employment (especially for skilled immigrants settling in the region) to support aging-in-place.

Engagement with Indigenous communities

Lastly, the participants questioned how the immigration process intersects with Truth and Reconciliation in Canada. They observed that new immigrants do not necessarily understand or are not aware of Canada's history with Indigenous peoples, and they suggested that the immigration process directly engages Indigenous communities.

Leadership and attitudes

The workshop participants also noted the demographic of the room, and by extension, the settlement services sector. Although it was coincidental and resulted from a few cancellations, in the end, all the participants were women who worked in the region. They observed that there is often a gendered mismatch in the leadership roles versus the service roles for immigration issues and services. They concluded that the role of gender should be emphasized in the entire immigration process, as older men often hold positions of power and younger women are expected to present innovative solutions.

Lastly, the participants reflected on some general attitudes toward immigration. They saw general biases, ignorance, or misinformation perpetuated through fake news outlets that can lead to harmful assumptions or fearmongering. They noted that Canada should address the unequal values system that has manifested in communities (i.e., valuing doctors or lawyers over hospitality workers).

Trends and Conclusions

Trends in rural immigration

The participants were asked to identify some trends they have observed over time in rural immigration. Overall, they observed that immigration is increasing (and they do not see a need to limit the number of annual immigrants). They noted that there is a great influx of immigrants from India and there is a mental health crisis emerging among both adults and children fleeing crises such as Syria, Ukraine, or Gaza. One participant also cautioned against rising conflicts between immigrants and other citizens (citing tensions in Germany).

The impacts of climate change and extreme weather events (such as wildfires, droughts, and increased flooding) will continue impacting jobs and people's desire to settle in Canada. Other industries are also facing uncertainties, such as mining or logging, which impacts jobs and the appeal of living in rural areas. Further, raising housing, gas, and food prices can be barriers for newcomers.

Benefits of smaller centres

Nevertheless, the participants thought that it is often easier to integrate into smaller communities, where people are more aware of the available services and can assist newcomers. The smaller centres may also be less overwhelming. Due to this, some participants observed a trend of newcomers settling in smaller centres, moving away to a

larger city, and then coming back to more rural areas because they find it more welcoming or supportive.

The participants also shared a variety of employment trends that they have observed. These include the ongoing needs for agricultural workers; living allowances being offered to help fill job vacancies, then not awarding the positions; and failing to capitalize on existing talent (credential recognition) rather than recruiting new talent (i.e., doctors from South Africa, etc.). There is also the question of public perception; as one participant noted, the individuals that we help are the ones that we *see* need help. The media may influence this, thereby influencing who we *should* be helping.

Lastly, a barrier which further exacerbates these trends is funding. As mentioned throughout this report, participants remarked that 'patchwork' funding often focuses on programs and not on operational costs. Both are needed to ensure settlement services can be provided successfully.

Closing plenary

In the final session of the workshop, participants identified a variety of solutions and strategies to address some of the challenges presented throughout the workshop. First, the need for more education around these issues resurfaced as a key strategy. The participants commented that it is important for the existing community to understand that newcomers are not taking their jobs. They proposed more education for community members to understand the difference between immigrants and refugees. While these groups often have some similar needs, the participants stressed that they are not in the same migrant category.

Research and international students

Support for international students was also listed as a key priority. The participants commented that limits on work hours per week for students should be lifted, and credit recognition for post-secondary schools should be strengthened so students can transfer and finish their program. The participants also noted that research—such as this project—can be a valuable tool to carry these ideas to policymakers. The gathering, collecting, and reporting of information through post-secondary institutions can help transmit these ideas to policymakers. Otherwise, the participants remarked that they do not have time to do this work through their regular jobs.

They also noted it is important to recognize and identify the rural wealth in areas accepting newcomers. Service areas should be broken into smaller regions, and it is important to recognize the increased capacity in areas that do not already have 'compassion fatigue' from responding to other social issues.

Value statements

The 'unsaid' problems also need to be addressed, such as the temporary foreign worker program (which is called temporary, but in practice, is often not). They noted that equity for newcomers can lead to equity for everyone and that we need to acknowledge that when policy discussions occur, they are impacting real people with real lives.

In terms of employment and the economy, the participants commented that we need to value all jobs equally. There is a lot of uncertainty for people held up in the immigration process,

and when trying to fill employment gaps, the needs of both employers and immigrant workers must be considered.

Calls to action

Lastly, participants remarked that it is important for government agencies and services to respond to challenges. There should be places where immigrants can go for housing and to find community, and while needs are of equal importance wherever an immigrant settles, the accessibility of services is often unequal. Provincial and federal governments should work together and break down silos, and the role of the Ministry of Children and Family Development in immigration matters should be considered.

Next Steps

The workshop in Prince George, British Columbia was the third of four workshops to be held across rural Canada as part of this project. The last workshop will take place in Ottawa, Ontario on February 20, 2024. Bringing together researchers, scholars, policymakers, resettlement and immigration workers, relevant practitioners, and local decision-makers in these workshops, we have and will: (1) Build collaborative conversations around migration and mobility in rural areas; and (2) Explore how population movements, refugee resettlement, and immigration manifest in local realities.

The event held in Ottawa will focus specifically on the policy audience. Policymakers and relevant academics will be invited to participate in a scenario-planning workshop to hear about the findings and feedback from the other events and consider the policy implications of the project overall. Individual reports have been generated from each workshop, and a final summary document will bring all the information and insights gained throughout the workshops together after the Ottawa workshop.

By bringing these groups together through knowledge-sharing and priority-setting workshops, this project facilitates a more nuanced understanding of rural-urban population movements in Canada within a broader context of rural decline and ever-growing human displacement globally. The current context of rising forced displacement means that these conversations are particularly timely and significant. As the international community grapples with rising refugee flows and increased population movements across the globe in response to conflicts and climate change, understanding rural-urban dynamics and experiences of such movements at the local level is important nationally, but also globally.

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