

SUMMARY OF RURAL WORKSHOPS

Moving In, Moving On & Moving Up: Examining Population Movements to and from Rural Canada

Based on workshops held in Lethbridge, AB,
Antigonish, NS, and Prince George, BC

February 20, 2024

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Canada



the Prentice Institute
for Global Population and Economy

University of
Lethbridge



Introduction & Background

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 (Moazzami 2015; Reimer & Bollman 2010).

International immigration policies have significantly impacted populations movements to and from rural and smaller communities, both historically and today. National and provincial immigration and refugee resettlement policies and programs have resulted in newcomers arriving and settling in small cities, towns, villages, and rural regions across the country (Dennler 2022). Yet, attention to these movements remains largely understudied and the impacts of such movements are not well understood (Haugen, McNally, & Hallstrom 2023).

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- Dennler, K. (2022). Making rural immigration work: Settlement services in small and rural communities. The Conference Board of Canada.
 - Haugen, S., McNally, R., and Hallstrom, LK. 2023. "An Evaluation of Policy Responses to Refugee Resettlement in Rural Canada." *The Journal of Rural and Community Development* 18 (2): 105-118.
 - Moazzami, B. 2015. "Strengthening Rural Canada: Fewer and Older: Population and Demographic Challenges Across Rural Canada." Decoda Literacy Solutions.
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SUMMARY

Funded in part by a Connections Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), this project brought settlement workers and relevant practitioners together through a set of workshops across rural Canada to discuss questions of rural-urban mobility, migration and resettlement, and the realities of life in rural and smaller communities.

The workshops took place in:

01. Lethbridge, Alberta
on June 23, 2023

02. Antigonish, Nova Scotia
on October 18, 2023

03. Prince George, British Columbia
on November 29, 2023

Key Messages from the Workshops: Overall, participants emphasized that immigration can meaningfully benefit both newcomers and rural communities. They stressed the need to shift Canada’s approach to immigration from a transactional and siloed approach to a relational and holistic approach that considers the interconnections with community development. The participants argued that a people-centred approach, that values newcomers and their families for more than their economic contributions, should be central to immigration policy and process.

Consistent Results: Participants frequently cited inadequate funding for programs, local community resistance, or compassion fatigue among settlement workers as key barriers to their work. They stressed the importance of recognizing the “rural wealth” of different regions, while also working to address common challenges faced by rural and remote areas.

01. LETHBRIDGE, AB

Participant reflections

What do you think immigration should ideally look like in your community and region?

- Proactive, thoughtful approaches
- Collaboration between services, communities, and levels of government
- Flexible and adaptable systems
- Equity between different newcomer groups
- Valuing newcomers beyond their economic contributions
- Meaningful employment opportunities
- Transparency with newcomers about the rural realities
- Adequate housing and services
- Sense of belonging and long-term retention

What barriers to this vision exist in the rural context?

- Inadequate or missing data
- Lack of knowledge and resistance to immigration among community members
- Service gaps
- Lack of language interpretation services
- Jurisdictional challenges
- Limited staff capacities in rural contexts

01. LETHBRIDGE, AB

What is missing from the conversation on rural migration?

- Long-term view of immigration and population growth
 - Supporting multi-generational immigration
 - Considerations of population growth
 - Extending access to settlement services beyond the first year after arrival
- Rural transportation networks
- Diverse political representation
- Strategies to address cultural differences

What are the trends and patterns that have been observed in the Lethbridge-area?

- Canada's immigration system remains economically-driven
 - There is a focus on immigration from recurring countries/ communities
 - Human aspects of immigration are neglected
- Greater political interest in rural immigration
- Ongoing housing shortages
- Integration of newcomers in academic institutions (through upgrading, credential recognition, etc.)

01. LETHBRIDGE, AB

Strategies for the future

The participants recommended a range of strategies for future investment in rural immigration. For a more comprehensive overview, please reference the Lethbridge report.

01. Shift from a transactional and siloed approach to a more relational and holistic one

E.g., address disconnects between federal and provincial policy, re-examine the 'temporary' label of various programs, etc.

03. Engage the post-secondary sector

E.g., offer greater support for international students

02. Reconsider the meaning of 'success'

E.g., reconsider quantitative reporting measures in a rural context

04. Promote community buy-in

E.g., communicate the positive benefits of immigration with communities

02. ANTIGONISH, NS

Participant reflections

What do you think immigration should ideally look like in your community and region?

- Diverse, healthy communities
 - Strong sense of community
 - Dignified lives, with access to essential services (i.e., housing, employment, transportation, etc.)
- Equitable resource access
- Long-term retention
- Reduction of human suffering
- Reframing of immigrants and refugees as assets to the community

What barriers to this vision exist in the rural context?

- Lack of language classes and language interpretation services
- High costs of daycare services
- Inadequate spaces to practice faith
- Cultural differences
- Different degrees of eligibility for programs and supports
- Burnout among service providers
- Lack of affordable housing

02. ANTIGONISH, NS

What is missing from the conversation on rural migration?

- Rural communities are changing (politically, socially, economically), in part due to immigration
- The need for Canada-based education for newcomers (e.g., on Indigenous reconciliation efforts)
- Recognition of cultural differences
- Adequate and appropriate support for mental health and trauma

What are the trends and patterns that have been observed in the Antigonish-area?

- Much of the work in supporting newcomers is 'downloaded' on to community organizations
- The ongoing need for diverse representation in community organizations and municipal government
- Ongoing underfunding of programs and jurisdictional challenges
- Reductions in program capacity (leading to long wait times, etc.)

02. ANTIGONISH, NS

Strategies for the future

The participants recommended a range of strategies for future investment in rural immigration. For a more comprehensive overview, please reference the Antigonish report.

01. Update and streamline federal policy

E.g., revise eligibility criteria, draft needs-based changes, etc.

03. Fund 'community navigators'

E.g., streamline access to settlement services within rural communities

02. Consider the role of storytelling

E.g., listen and respond to the stories from immigrants directly

04. Address issues of affordable housing

E.g., ensure *affordable* housing is connected to transportation networks

03. PRINCE GEORGE, BC

Participant reflections

What do you think immigration should ideally look like in your community and region?

- Equitable support for newcomers
- Expanded access to settlement services for temporary foreign workers
- Connecting rural-urban service networks (e.g., for access to healthcare, airports, federal service agencies, etc.)
- Family reunification
- Strong sense of community (through potlucks, events, etc.)

**For an in-depth exploration of regional challenges in Robson Valley, BC and Smithers, BC, please reference pages 9-10 of the Prince George report.*

What needs exist in your rural communities?

- Social and economic needs of immigrants
 - Desire for an integration of assessment services with the locally-available community services
- Jobs and employability concerns
 - Need for credential recognition and skills-based 'matching' of newcomers with community job market needs
 - Ensure equity in access to employment programs
- Streamlined policy strategies
 - Participants called for the removal of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program
- Access to suitable places of worship rurally

03. PRINCE GEORGE, BC

What is missing from the conversation on rural migration?

- Common realities of rural and remote areas (including lack of food diversity; access to suitable, trauma-informed care; etc.)
- The need for education on how to live in rural areas (e.g., the use of practical tools, like block heaters, or the limited access to internet connection)
- Access to suitable housing
- Compassion fatigue among settlement workers
- Over-reliance on 'checklists' by government agencies, rather than recognizing unique circumstances
- The representation of female service providers, but lack of equitable gender representation in leadership roles

What are some barriers to the ideal-level of service delivery that have been observed in the Prince George-area?

- Bureaucratic restrictions (like reporting requirements)
- Transportation service gaps
- Inadequate rural representation in government
 - Insufficient government infrastructure in rural areas (e.g., vast distances between Service Canada agencies)
- Underfunding of programs
- Difficulty navigating online service programs
- Unaffordable local services (like gas, food, and clothing, etc.)

03. PRINCE GEORGE, BC

What are some trends and patterns that have been observed in the Prince George-area?

- Uncertainty in immigration patterns (due to climate change, war and peace, etc.)
- Newcomers are seeking out smaller centers (for the sense of community, increased assistance, etc.)
- Inadequate support for agricultural workers
- Failures to capitalize on existing talent (through lack of credential recognition)
- Inadequate “patchwork” funding

What are some final reflections on migration in the context of Northern British Columbia?

- More support is needed for international students
- Research projects can be a tool for community engagement
- ‘Rural wealth’ should be recognized and utilized
- Ongoing need for equity amongst newcomers
- Need more streamlined immigration processes
- Develop more integrated settlement service programs

CONCLUSIONS

We hope this summary of the three workshops has been useful in understanding the context of immigration in rural areas across Canada. For more information, please reference our full-length reports.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to reach out to the Prentice Institute:

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