

# Summary Report

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



### Prepared by

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**the Prentice Institute**  
for Global Population and Economy

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Social Sciences and Humanities  
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en  
sciences humaines du Canada

**Canada**



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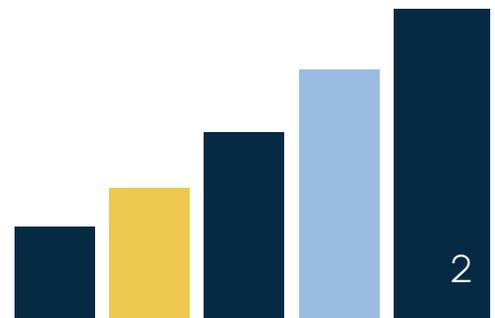
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# Executive Summary

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 have resulted in an increasing number of newcomers arriving in rural places.

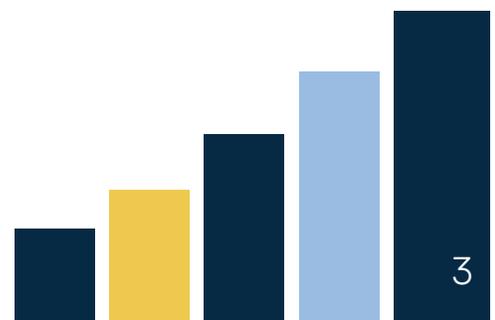
Yet, attention to these movements, particularly the movement of migrants and refugees to rural areas, remains largely understudied and the impacts of such movements are not well understood. This project addresses this knowledge gap.

Funded in part by a Connections Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), this project brought 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 was to build collaborative conversations between diverse groups of people.

This report documents the findings from 4 workshops held in:

- Lethbridge, Alberta
- Antigonish, Nova Scotia
- Prince George, British Columbia
- Ottawa, Ontario

The first 3 workshops brought together small groups of scholars, resettlement and immigration workers, relevant practitioners, and others working on topics of rural migration.





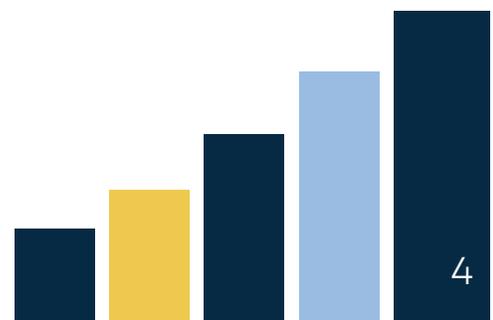
Workshop participants were guided through a scenario planning exercise which focused on exploring the current realities and future possibilities of rural migration.

Overall, participants emphasized that immigration can meaningfully benefit both immigrants and rural communities. However, participants stressed the need to shift Canada's approach to immigration from a transactional and siloed approach to a relational and holistic one that considers the interconnections with community development. Participants argued that a people-centred approach, that values migrants and their families for more than their economic contributions, should be central to immigration policy and processes. Ideally, participants wanted an equitable immigration system that would serve and value all newcomers, regardless of their immigration pathway or permanent residence status.

Participants frequently cited inadequate funding for programs, local community resistance, and compassion fatigue among settlement workers and volunteers as key barriers to their work. They stressed the importance of recognizing the benefits of living rurally, while also working to address common challenges faced by rural and remote areas, such as a lack of public transportation and language services.

The last workshop was held in Ottawa as a way to facilitate a conversation on federal policy and the role of the national and provincial governments in rural immigration policy. These participants emphasized the economic contributions of newcomers and focused on existing immigration pathways rather than disrupting the system or advocating for change.

In conclusion, we outline what a people-centred, equity-based model for rural migration policy could look like in Canada.





# Executive Summary

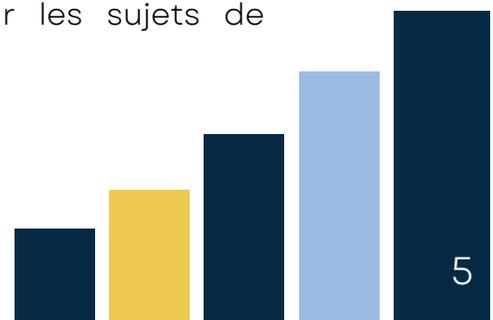
Défini historiquement par le mouvement, le Canada rural est divers. Les mouvements en direction et originaires des régions, villages et petites villes sont souvent définies par les caractéristiques géographiques, économiques et démographiques de chaque lieu. De plus, les politiques d'immigration internationale ont impacté les mouvements de populations en direction et originaires des communautés rurales et plus petites, historiquement et aujourd'hui. Plus récemment, le résultat des politiques d'immigration et de réinstallation des réfugiés, nationales et provinciales, c'est une augmentation du numéro de nouveaux arrivants qui arrivent dans des lieux ruraux. Cependant, il manque des études et de connaissances au sujet de ces mouvements, en particulier le mouvement des migrants et des réfugiés vers des destinations rurales. Ce projet fait face à cet écart de connaissances.

Financé en partie par une Subvention Connexion du Conseil de recherches en sciences humaines du Canada (CRSH), ce projet a réuni des personnes ensemble par une série d'ateliers interactifs à travers le Canada pour discuter des questions de mobilité rural-urbain, la migration, la réinstallation des réfugiés et les réalités de la vie dans les communautés rurales et plus petites. L'objectif de ce projet c'était de gérer des conversations collaboratives entre des personnes diverses.

Ce rapport décrit les résultats de quatre ateliers en :

- Lethbridge, Alberta
- Antigonish, Nouvelle-Écosse
- Prince George, Colombie-Britannique
- Ottawa, Ontario

Les trois premiers ateliers ont rassemblé de petits groupes d'académiques, de personnes qui travaillent dans le secteur de l'immigration et de la réinstallation des réfugiés, de praticiens dans le secteur et d'autres personnes qui travaillent sur les sujets de migration vers des destinations rurales.

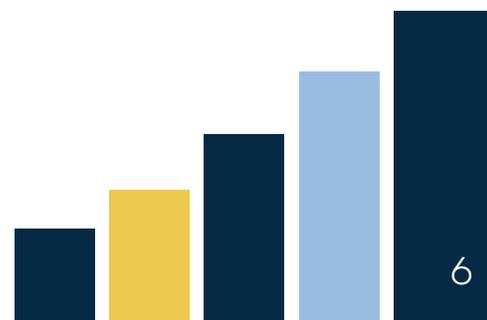




Les participants dans les ateliers ont pris part à un exercice guidé sur la création de scénarios qui concentrait sur les réalités actuelles et les possibilités futures de la migration rurale. Dans l'ensemble, les participants ont souligné que l'immigration peut bénéficier aux immigrants et aux communautés rurales. Pourtant, les participants ont souligné l'importance de changer l'approche du Canada envers l'immigration d'une approche transactionnelle et isolée à une approche relationnelle et holistique qui considère les liens avec le développement communautaire. Les participants ont affirmé qu'une approche centrée sur les personnes – une approche qui estime la valeur des migrants et de leurs familles en plus que leurs contributions économiques – devrait être centrale dans les politiques et procédures d'immigration. Idéalement, les participants ont exprimé le désir pour un système d'immigration équitable qui servirait et qui accorderait l'importance à tous les nouveaux arrivants, peu importe leur programme d'immigration ou leur statut comme résident permanent.

Les participants ont fréquemment cité le financement inadéquat pour les programmes, la résistance dans la communauté locale et la fatigue de compassion parmi les travailleurs d'établissement et les bénévoles comme les obstacles majeurs à leur travail. Ils ont souligné l'importance de reconnaître les avantages de vivre dans un milieu rural, tout en faisant face aux défis communs des régions rurales et isolées, par exemple un manque de transports publics et de services d'apprentissage de langue.

Nous avons tenu le dernier atelier à Ottawa pour faciliter une conversation à propos de la politique fédérale, du rôle du gouvernement fédéral et du rôle des gouvernements provinciaux dans la politique d'immigration rurale. Ces participants ont souligné les contributions économiques de nouveaux arrivants et se sont concentrés sur les programmes d'immigration actuels, plutôt que bouleverser le système ou de promouvoir les changements. En conclusion, nous présentons ce qui pourrait être un modèle équitable et centré sur les personnes pour la politique de migration rurale au Canada.



# Meet the Team



## **STACEY HAUGEN, MA**

### COLLABORATOR

Stacey Haugen is a Research Associate at the Prentice Institute for Global Population and Economy at the University of Lethbridge, and a Doctoral Candidate at the University of Alberta in the Political Science Department. Stacey's research expertise focuses on rural refugee resettlement and integration. Her dissertation explores the role of storytelling in refugee research and considers the potential of alternative research methods in the field of forced migration.



## **LARS HALLSTRÖM, PHD**

### PRINCIPLE INVESTIGATOR

Dr. Hallström is the Director of the Prentice Institute for Global Population and Economy, and a faculty member of the Political Science Department at the University of Lethbridge. He began his academic career at St. Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia as a professor of political science and Canada Research Chair in Public Policy and Governance. Dr. Hallström joined the University of Alberta in 2009 and was the first director of the Alberta Centre for Sustainable Rural Communities until December 2020.



## **SYDNEY WHITING**

### RESEARCH ASSISTANT

Sydney Whiting is a Research Assistant at the Prentice Institute for Global Population and Economy, and an undergraduate student in Political Science at the University of Lethbridge. She has experience in political organizing, communications, and policy advocacy at national and international forums, including as the Canadian representative for Peace and Security at the 2023 G7 Youth Summit in Japan.



## **RACHEL MCNALLY, MA**

### RESEARCH ASSISTANT

Rachel McNally is a Research Assistant at the Prentice Institute and a PhD Candidate in the Department of Political Science at Carleton University. Her research focuses on refugee resettlement policy, refugee sponsorship programs in Canada, and UNHCR's approach to resettlement for refugees with disabilities. She is also the Project Editor-in-Chief for the Local Engagement Refugee Research Network.



# Introduction & Background

This project reinvests in the study of migration to and from rural Canada through a set of facilitated workshops.

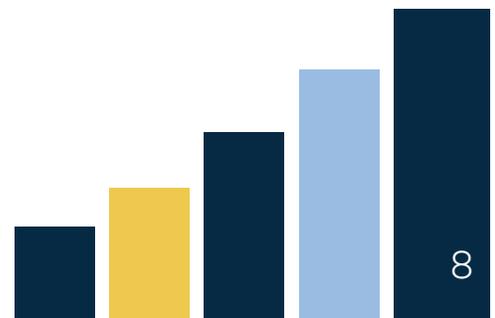
Specifically, this project brought together researchers, scholars, policy-makers, and practitioners across the country to explore topics of population movement, mobility, and migration to and from rural places.

Beyond fostering dialogue, networks, and knowledge-exchange, the purpose of this project was to articulate a rural policy design for mobility, migration and resettlement, which requires thinking about the context, values and audience that do, should, and could inform how we think about and make policy for immigration in Canada.

**Project Goal:** 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.

**Project Objective:** 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).

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.**”





# Movements in & out of Rural Canada

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 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 et al. 2023).

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.

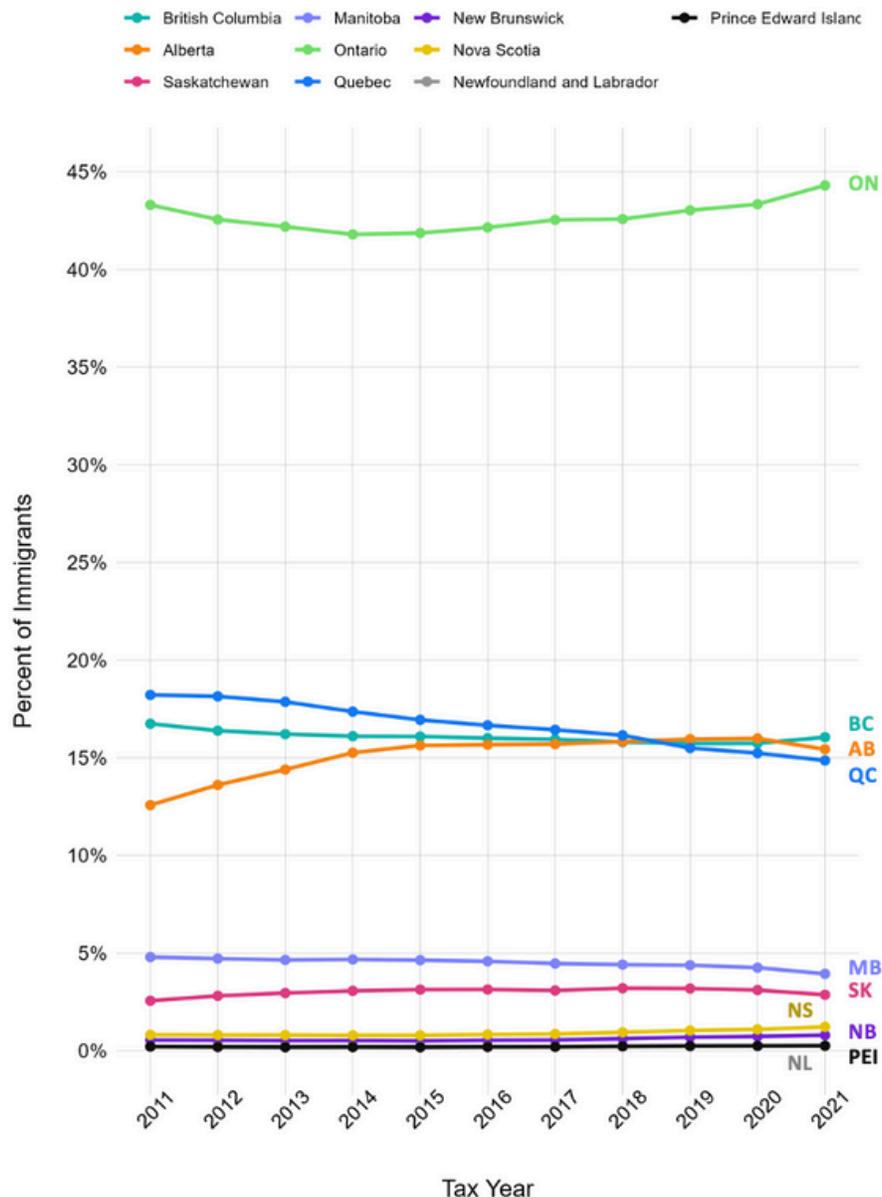


# What does the Data tell us?

The image below shows us how immigrants are distributed across the country, by province. The province with the highest number of newcomers is Ontario, followed by British Columbia, Alberta and Quebec. The image here shows us how immigrants are distributed across the country, by province. While the majority of immigrants continue to settle in Canada’s 3 biggest cities, the share of immigrants settling in Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver has started to decline, “falling from approximately 73-75% in the 1990s and early 2000s, to 56% in 2016 to 53.4% in 2021” (Haugen et al. 2024). Increasingly, newcomers are settling in smaller communities. Immigration in BC and Alberta is further explored below, as workshops were conducted in these provinces.

## Distribution of immigrants in Canada by province of residence, 2011-2021

Of all immigrants in Canada, the percentage that live in each province.

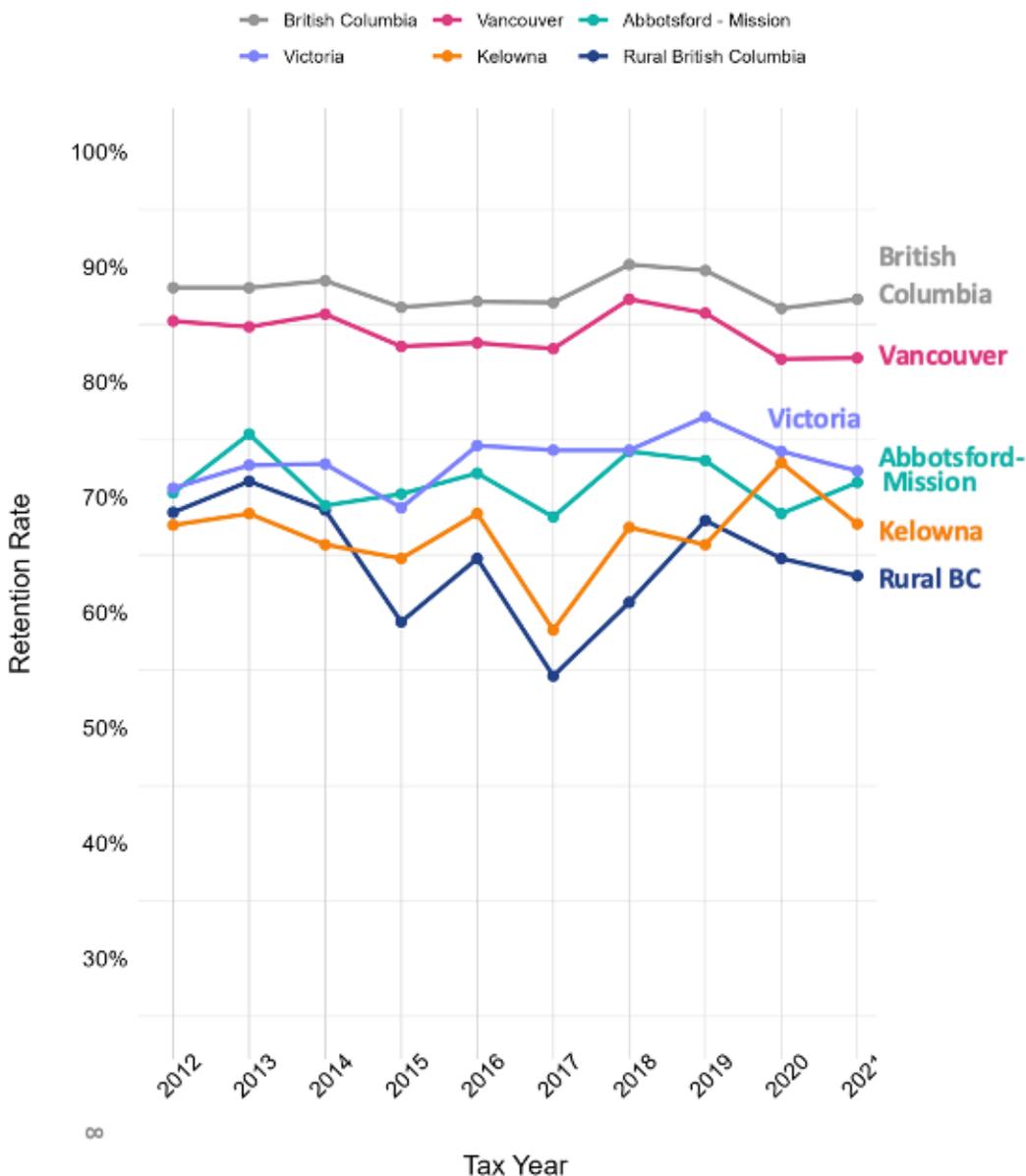


# Immigrant Retention in BC

Retention rates of immigrants outside of Canada’s largest cities give us some insight on where immigrants are settling, and if they are staying in rural and smaller places. The British Columbia data demonstrates that while immigrants are more likely to stay in bigger centres overall, this varies depending on the year, and overall, retention is still quite high in rural BC.

## Five-year retention rate for immigrants in British Columbia by CMA, 2012-2021

The proportion of immigrants who have remained in their intended destination for 5 years since admission by census metropolitan area (CMA).

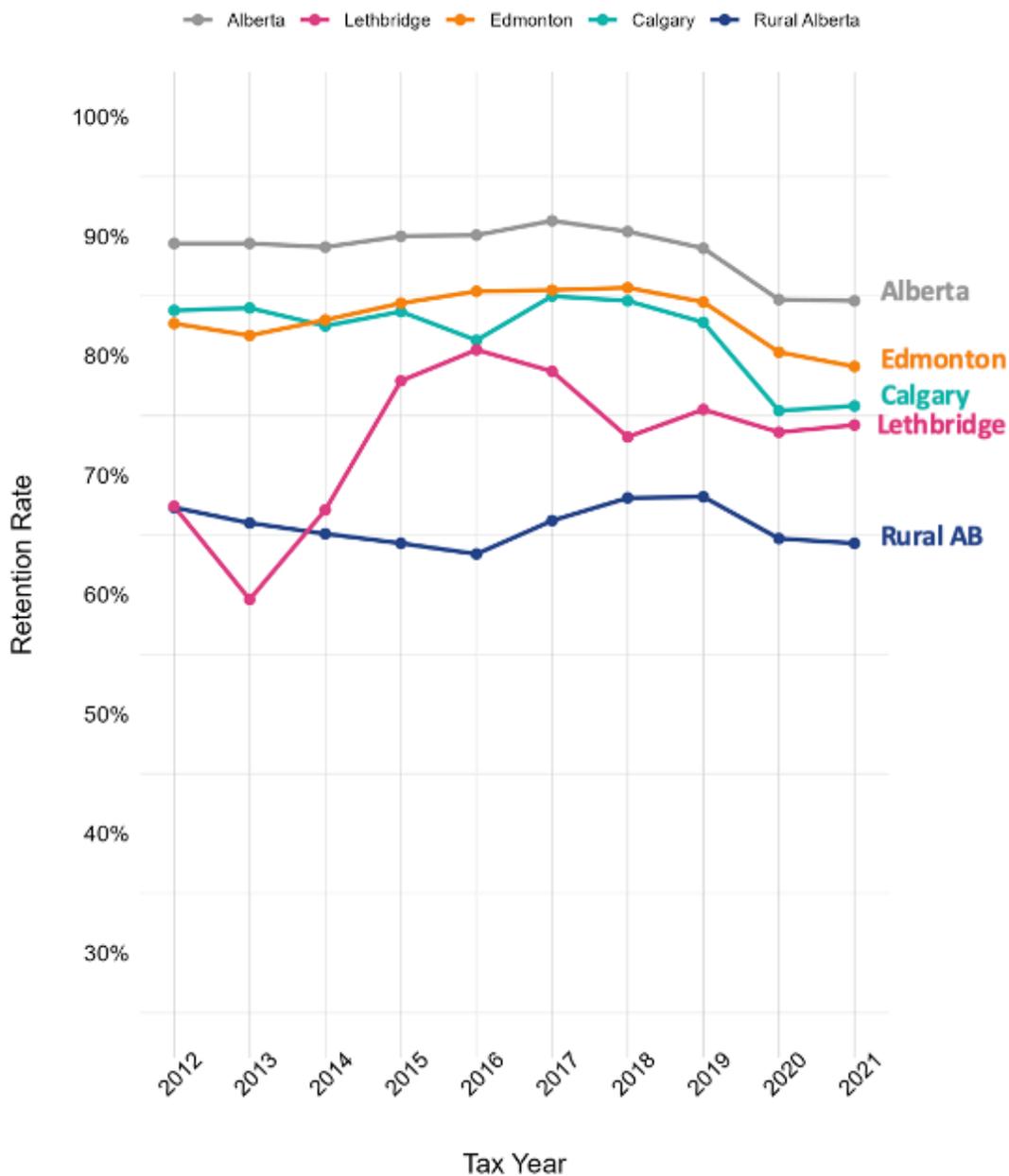


# Immigrant Retention in Alberta

The Alberta data similarly demonstrates that while immigrants are more likely to stay in bigger centres overall, this varies depending on the year, and overall, retention is still over 50% in rural Alberta as well.

## Five-year retention rate for immigrants in Alberta by CMA, 2012-2021

The proportion of immigrants who have remained in their intended destination for 5 years since admission by census metropolitan area (CMA).



# What is Scenario Planning?

In each workshop, participants were 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 results of each workshop are explored in detail below. Each workshop was structured into four sessions centred around four key themes and guiding questions:



1

## **Determine the Destination: Where do we want to go?**

What is the ideal scenario? What are the values that inform your ideal? What do you think immigration should ideally look like in your community and region, as well in Canada more broadly?

2

## **Pick the Route: How do we get there?**

How could we achieve our ideal? 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?

3

## **Consider the Possible Obstacles: What are we missing?**

What are the known unknowns? And the unknown unknowns? What are the things people are not thinking of when talking about rural immigration? What are the unspoken realities?

4

## **What are the trends and patterns that could impact our trip?**

What are the trends in rural immigration? Where do the barriers (identified previously) fit within these trends? Where do these trends take immigration?



# Lethbridge, AB Workshop

The first workshop was held in Lethbridge, Alberta on June 23, 2023, and focused primarily on immigration in Alberta outside of Calgary and Edmonton. 21 individuals attended from southern Alberta and into southern Saskatchewan and British Columbia.



## WHERE DO WE WANT TO GO?

Participants agreed that immigrants often come to Canada to seek **safety** and **a better life**. Ideally, immigration can benefit both immigrants and rural communities.

An ideal approach to immigration would be:

- **Proactive, thoughtful, and intentional:** Funding frameworks and immigration policies should anticipate newcomer needs and help communities prepare for the arrival of newcomers, rather than playing catch up after people arrive.
- **Collaborative:** A collaborative approach would involve effective communication, coordination, and collaboration between different services, agencies, communities, and levels of government.
- **Flexible and adaptive:** Rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, a flexible and adaptive system would serve the specific and diverse needs of all newcomers and communities, rural or urban.
- **Equitable:** All immigrants, regardless of their race, ethnicity, national origin, or immigration stream would receive timely access to services and equitable treatment within the system. Governments and employers would find ways to recognize the credentials of newcomers so that they can work in their fields of training and experience.
- **Holistic:** The immigration system and employers would recognize the diversity of benefits and talents that newcomers and their families bring to communities, beyond their economic contributions.
- **Transparent:** Immigration strategies should be transparent about rural realities and challenges inherent in rural places so that newcomers know what to expect.
- **Supportive:** Immigrants would have access to affordable housing options, comprehensive health care, child care, and other social services, and feel a sense of belonging in their new community.

# 2

## HOW DO WE GET THERE?

**Primary Audiences:** Participants agreed that a broad range of actors should be involved in the immigration system, including newcomers, policy-makers, municipalities, employers, business owners, housing developers, schools, and Local Immigration Partnerships.

**Common Realities:** Participants remarked that rural areas are inherently small, meaning that there is a lack of scale for both funding and expertise. Common challenges identified by participants included a lack of housing and access to interpreters, particularly in healthcare settings, and the presence of racism and discrimination in their communities.

A number of key **Barriers** were identified:

- **Missing data:** Participants identified missing data as a barrier to understanding the realities of immigration and to addressing resistance to immigration.
- **Lack of knowledge:** Education is needed to: Address resistance to immigration; Build awareness of the benefits of immigration; Counter misunderstandings regarding newcomers and the immigration system; and, Remind communities of their own immigration histories.
- **Service gaps:** Participants noted several significant service gaps, especially regarding language training, health care, transportation, housing, and interpretation.
- **Jurisdictional challenges:** In some cases, jurisdiction is unclear, while in other cases there is a “not my problem” attitude that prevails as governments avoid taking an active role. Funding is often lacking for municipal or more local efforts to support newcomers.
- **Capacity challenges:** Participants highlighted significant capacity challenges related to recruiting, welcoming, and supporting newcomers.

### PARTICIPANT EXAMPLE:

Alberta’s Rural Renewal Stream requires municipalities to review immigration applications, which can mean one municipal staff member reviewing over 1,000 applications. Given this volume of applications, it is not possible for municipalities to coach applicants on how to put together a strong application. **Despite governments saying that rural immigration is important, that rhetoric is not always matched with resources.** This capacity challenge is compounded by the complexity of the immigration system, with many pathways that can be difficult to understand for everyone, including those working in the sector.



# 3

## WHAT ARE WE MISSING?

Participants identified several themes that they felt were not adequately discussed in current conversations around rural immigration.

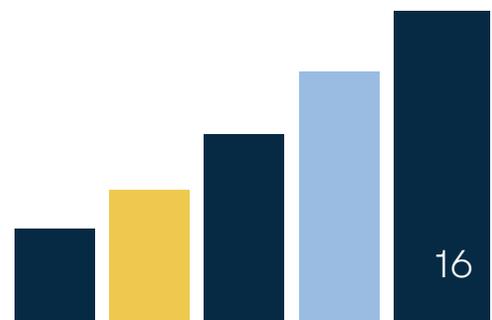
**A Long-Term View:** Participants felt that discussions around immigration would benefit from a longer-term vision of immigration and population growth. This vision could consider the long-term benefits of immigration across multiple generations, countering a deficit-based paradigm. Long-term planning is needed to help certain groups of newcomers (such as displaced Ukrainians) become permanent residents. A longer-term vision could also plan for the implications of population growth. In particular, participants noted that the health care system and schools need more capacity to accommodate growing populations.

**Political Structures:** Participants lamented the lack of representation of diverse community demographics within community leadership structures and limited political will to learn about and champion immigration. It is also important to acknowledge that there are often informal groups in rural communities who are highly influential and may be resistant to change.

**Cultural Differences:** Challenges related to cultural differences and culture shock are not adequately discussed, such as language barriers, different cultural perspectives on mental health, cultural and gender norms in the workplace, expectations around speaking English, and eye contact norms.

**Geopolitics:** Participants wondered how geopolitics would continue to impact immigration trends. For example, participants observed differences in the amount of time it takes to process applications from different countries based on security or geopolitical considerations related to specific countries. Participants also expressed concern about the growing worldwide populist backlash against immigration.

**Race, Ethnicity and Religion:** Communities often have different openness to newcomers of different races and religions, and religious groups operate their own internal welfare systems that benefit people of that religion but are not universally accessible.





# 4

## WHAT ARE THE TRENDS AND PATTERNS?

Participants explained that it can be difficult to identify trends since no single actor is responsible for collecting data on rural immigration and there is a lack of capacity to analyze immigration data.

**Global Trends:** Mobility around the world is increasing, as more people travel and move to different places. Immigration will continue to be a part of life. While globalization means that people will have greater exposure to different cultures, participants expressed concern about the politicization of immigration and the weaponization of immigrants for political agendas.

**Canadian Policy Trends:** Immigration has been a key component of Canada's history and an increasing number of immigrants are coming to Canada each year. Overall, Canada's immigration system remains economically driven, which motivates an increasing number of economic immigrants and international students. Participants expressed concern that the near-exclusive focus on economically-driven migration is leaving out the human aspect of migration and other forms of immigration like family reunification.

**Growing Interest in Rural Immigration:** There is a growing political interest in rural immigration, which is tied to a push to create viable rural communities amid population decline. Despite the increased political interest, there are questions over whether immigrants want to go to rural communities, whether the infrastructure is adequate, whether rural communities see immigration as a solution for their problems, and whether these new policies understand rural contexts. Some policies bring immigrants to rural areas but fail to address why young people leave rural areas and do not return. At the same time, there is a growing emphasis on social resiliency, community, and mutual aid.

## CLOSING PLENARY

Participants advocated for a number of changes to the immigration system:

1. Shifting from a transactional and siloed approach to immigration to one that is relational, holistic, and people-centred.
2. Reconsidering the meaning of "success" beyond quantitative measures.
3. Engaging post-secondary institutions in order to support immigration pathways for international students.
4. Promoting community buy-in by highlighting the benefits of immigration and emphasizing the practical challenges related to shrinking populations.



# Antigonish, NS Workshop

The second workshop was held in Antigonish, Nova Scotia on October 18, 2023 and focused primarily on immigration in rural Nova Scotia (outside of Halifax) and Cape Breton. 9 individuals attended.

## 1

### WHERE DO WE WANT TO GO?

Participants stated that diverse, healthy, and inclusive communities are needed to foster a sense of belonging among newcomers. Everyone deserves to feel **safe** and **accepted** in their community.

An ideal approach to immigration would value and support:

- **Diverse and healthy communities:** A healthy and inclusive community respects all humans as equals, creates shared opportunities within the community to support well-being, accepts and promotes diversity, and fosters a sense of belonging among everyone, including newcomers. The participants remarked that if newcomers do not feel welcomed, they will likely leave to find a sense of community elsewhere.
- **Equal access to resources:** All newcomers should feel safe and have equal access to economic opportunities, housing, employment, transportation, and social services in their new community. This should be true for all immigrants, regardless of immigration stream or temporary or permanent residency status.
- **Well-being and dignity:** Participants spoke of the importance of sharing wealth in communities and ensuring that newcomers have access to a wide variety of resources and services. The system should promote the well-being and dignity of newcomers, by viewing them as assets to the country, and working to reduce human suffering.

“ *we cannot welcome immigrants and then condemn them to poverty*  
- Workshop Participant ”



## 2

### HOW DO WE GET THERE?

The participants identified a number of key barriers to achieving their ideal system of immigration, including:

- **Inadequate community services:** A lack of language classes and English literacy supports were identified as central concerns. Limited affordable childcare options were also identified as a barrier for adults to access services such as job training. Difficulties accessing spaces for newcomers to practice their faith was also identified as a barrier.
- **Challenges related to cultural differences:** Participants remarked that Canadian culture is very individualistic and there are differences in the spaces for social gathering and community that can impact a newcomer's sense of belonging.
- **Eligibility requirements for services and support:** There is limited support available to temporary foreign workers, who are not eligible for the same programs as other newcomers. Differences in eligibility, when combined with differences in jurisdiction for service providers, complicate the process.
- **Burnout among service providers:** Burnout among service providers was identified as a key barrier, especially for services run by volunteers. Expectations from funding departments are also very high and burdensome, and volunteer groups may not have access to anyone who can help them navigate the programs.
- **Lack of affordable housing:** Housing was identified as a significant barrier. Participants added that rhetoric around housing scarcity (i.e., sayings such as, "international students are taking all the housing") has caused some groups in society to be at odds with each other.

## 3

### WHAT ARE WE MISSING?

Participants identified several themes that they felt were not adequately discussed in current conversations around rural immigration, including:

- The existing infrastructure and services are inadequate to support increasing immigration and population growth.
- As scarcity (of housing, services, resources, etc.) continues in Canada, racist and unwelcoming attitudes toward newcomers could increase.
- Despite extensive immigration in some rural areas, such as Antigonish, policymakers continue to assume that immigration is an urban phenomenon.
- Immigration needs to be part of the ongoing work of reconciliation with Indigenous communities.

# 4

## WHAT ARE THE TRENDS AND PATTERNS?

As Canada's population ages, there is a need to attract more young people through immigration pathways. If a newcomer likes the community where they initially settle, they will likely attract their networks to the same area.

**Government vs. Community Supports:** Participants raised concerns about the funding of services and the sustainability of current models. When governments 'download' the responsibility of immigrant services to sub-national levels of government, they often offload the work to community organizations (which are often run by volunteers).

**Underfunding of programs and services:** A "neo-liberal shift" in immigration policies and practices has resulted in continued underfunding of programs, ongoing jurisdictional challenges and confusion, and increasing reductions in programmatic capacities.

**Diverse Representation:** As immigration continues, the increased diversity of communities needs to be represented on community boards, groups, and among volunteers. However, this is currently not the case. Given that settlement services are the first point of contact for many immigrants, the municipalities (and other organizations) collaborating with these services also need to be more inclusive.



## CLOSING PLENARY

Participants advocated for a number of changes or ways to move forward:

1. Changes to federal policy: All immigrants, regardless of their immigration stream or permanent residence status, should be able to access settlement services. The immigration must be more flexible, adaptive and responsive to current and changing needs and trends.
2. The power of storytelling: Storytelling could help change the public perception of immigration.
3. Adequate infrastructure: Affordable housing options and accessible public transportation networks are needed to support newcomers.



# Prince George, BC Workshop

The third workshop was held in Prince George, British Columbia on November 29, 2023, and focused primarily on immigration in rural and remote areas of Northern British Columbia. 12 individuals attended.



## WHERE DO WE WANT TO GO?

Participants stated that all newcomers should be welcomed to Canada on equal terms, and with **equitable** access to services and opportunities.

An ideal approach to immigration would value and support:

- **Adequate and Equitable Community Services:** Basic services such as healthcare, daycare, housing, and education should be expanded for the current population and available for all newcomers. Settlement services should be accessible to everyone, regardless of immigration stream or permanency status, and the organizations serving newcomers should have the financial and human resources they need.
- **Equitable and Accessible Immigration Streams:** All newcomers should arrive with permanent residency and be able to seek out work and access services. Newcomers should not be invited to Canada unless they are properly supported with permanent residency. The immigration system should be easy to access and navigate, thus reducing the need for immigration consultants. The points system should be removed and replaced with a more holistic and nuanced assessment of individuals.
- **Well-Funded Settlement Services across Canada:** All new immigrants should have access to sufficient support services, ranging from relocation information, visa support, and language testing, regardless of where they arrive and settle, whether urban or rural.
- **Quality Employment Opportunities:** New immigrants should have access to quality jobs that are suitable to their level of education and credentials.
- **Holistic Measures of Success:** Not all benefits of immigration can or should be measured in economic terms. For example, family reunification offers many benefits to newcomers and host communities and should be prioritized.



- **Holistic Understanding of Community Development:** Economic success is only one aspect of community development. Cultural centres, including religious spaces such as mosques, communal gathering spaces, and community activities, such as potlucks, are important and are needed to foster a sense of belonging among all citizens, including newcomers.

## REGIONAL EXAMPLE:

There are limited immigration services in the Northwest of British Columbia. However, remote regions, such as Prince Rupert, BC, host a large number of immigrants, including temporary foreign workers. Yet, there are no services to support them. In this context, some agencies are providing support services to newcomers in the absence of adequate funding or a sufficient mandate. Government funding should target smaller areas to meet this need.

## 2

### HOW DO WE GET THERE?

**Primary Audiences:** Participants identified that a variety of actors are involved in the immigration process, including: provincial and federal governments, communities, employers, community groups, existing populations, and professional colleges and regulatory bodies.

**Common Realities:** In rural and remote areas, there is often a lack of diverse and affordable food options, and food security is a significant issue. Access to healthcare services is limited, especially for trauma-informed care and counselling (and if it is available, it is costly and inaccessible). Vast geographical distances make accessing services difficult, especially if individuals do not have a personal vehicle.

A number of key **Barriers** were identified:

- **Employer Biases:** Biases in the hiring and recruitment process can create barriers to employment for newcomers.
- **Complicated Systems:** Confusing and complicated immigration systems can make hiring newcomers difficult for employers. Government websites are difficult to navigate, and paperwork can either take too long to process or require coordination with multiple agencies or departments. Due to this complexity of the immigration system, some employers feel that hiring immigrants “is not worth the hassle.”



- **Lack of Public Transportation:** A lack of transportation networks makes it difficult for immigrants to connect with and access local and regional support services.
- **Lack of Knowledge of Life in Rural and Remote Places:** More education is needed to help newcomers understand the realities of living rurally and in the North, which can include large geographic distances and a lack of cellphone service and broadband.
- **Compassion Fatigue and Burnout of Settlement Workers:** Large caseloads, inadequate funding, and a lack of other support services in the area have made compassion fatigue and burnout a common reality among settlement workers in rural and remote settings.
- **Under Representation:** There are few representatives from rural and remote places at decision-making tables. This results in a limited understanding of the realities of life in these spaces. For example, participants shared that there is a common view from the provincial and federal government that Prince George is rural, but this classification overlooks the needs of more rural and remote areas. When there are opportunities for input into larger systems, these avenues for engagement are often limited and organizations and individuals working with newcomers in rural and remote places feel **unseen** and **unheard**.
- **Lack of Funding:** Organizations and agencies in rural places are underfunded and there is a lack of staff available to support these services.
- **Affordability:** The high price of gas and food in the North creates a barrier for the settlement and retention of newcomers.

# 3

## WHAT ARE WE MISSING?

Participants identified several themes that they felt were not adequately discussed in current conversations around rural immigration, including:

- An over-reliance on checklists and chatbots by government agencies and employees further complicates processes, as it does not allow for any out-of-the-box thinking or problem-solving.
- In some cases, the protection of newcomers' anonymity is important, but this is much more difficult in rural and remote areas.
- Strict eligibility requirements and complicated reporting requirements make it difficult for newcomers to access services.
- Government agencies struggle to see the inequities of the immigration system, which is apparent on-the-ground.



- The immigration process should intersect with Truth and Reconciliation processes in Canada.
- There is a gendered mismatch in the leadership roles versus the service roles for immigration issues and services. Participants commented that the role of gender should be emphasized in the entire immigration process, as older men often hold positions of power and younger women (who often work in the service sector) are expected to present innovative solutions.
- Biases, ignorance, or misinformation are perpetuated through fake news outlets that can lead to harmful assumptions or fear-mongering in communities. Participants suggested that Canada should address the prevalence of fake news and the unequal value system that has manifested in communities (i.e., valuing doctors or lawyers over hospitality workers).

## 4

### WHAT ARE THE TRENDS AND PATTERNS?

Participants observed that immigration is increasing in Canada and they do not see a need to limit the number of immigrants. However, adequate services are needed to meet the needs of all newcomers settling here.

**Climate Change:** Participants raised concerns about the increasing impacts of climate change and extreme weather events (such as wildfires and droughts) in their region that are impacting jobs and people’s desire to settle in Canada.

**Benefits of Smaller Centres:** Participants indicated that it may be easier to integrate into smaller communities, where people are more aware of the available services and can assist newcomers. Some participants observed a trend of newcomers returning to smaller places after moving away to the city because they found rural places to be more supportive and welcoming.

### CLOSING PLENARY

Participants emphasized a number of key themes including:

1. **Equity** should be the cornerstone of the immigration system: Participants wanted to abolish the temporary foreign worker program, as the program is already being used as a stepping stone to permanent residency. Equity for newcomers can lead to equity for everyone in society, and decision-makers need to recognize that program inequities impact real people with real lives.
2. The importance of **rural research**: The gathering, collecting, and reporting of information through post-secondary institutions can help transmit the ideas, concerns, and inputs of rural communities to policymakers.
3. **Education** is needed to combat misinformation and biases concerning newcomers (such as immigrants taking jobs away from Canadians) in society.
4. Decision-makers need to recognize the **benefits of rural places** and not just the challenges and deficits.

# Ottawa, ON Workshop

The fourth and final workshop was held in Ottawa, Ontario at the National Arts Centre (NAC) on February 20, 2024. The intent of the Ottawa event was to facilitate a conversation on government policy and the role of the national and provincial governments in rural policy design. At this event, we brought together a diverse group of individuals who are involved, in some capacity, in the design of the immigration system. Relevant individuals were invited from various federal and provincial government departments, nonprofit organizations, national think tanks, academia, and international organizations. 22 individuals attended.\*

Attendants were invited to hear about the results and feedback gathered from the other three workshops, and to consider and workshop the policy implications of the project through a scenario-planning exercise.



\*over 70 individuals invited



# 1

## WHERE DO WE WANT TO GO?

Participants argued that newcomers value a sense of **security, predictability, stability**, and overall **confidence** within the immigration system and their new community.

An ideal approach to immigration would value and support:

- **Predictability & Transparency:** Newcomers should receive as much information about their new community in Canada as possible before their arrival to ensure realistic expectations and transparency, and to possibly improve retention. Online profiles of towns and cities could be created for immigrants to ‘preview’ the area before settling.
- **Accessibility:** The immigration system is complex. When the Canadian government offers a new immigration pathway, there should be adequate services to support both the newcomers who arrive through that pathway and the communities hosting these individuals.
- **Integration:** New immigrants must be integrated within the community, and localized support like job search assistance can help with integration.
- **Safety & Security:** Newcomers must feel safe to practice their religion, dress how they like, and express who they are wherever they settle.
- **Community Preparedness:** Host communities should be prepared to welcome newcomers. There should be some level of economic growth in communities accepting newcomers, and a range of local amenities, supports (such as language classes) and infrastructure (access to healthcare and education).

# 2

## HOW DO WE GET THERE?

**Primary Audiences:** Participants identified that a variety of actors are involved in the immigration process including: health providers, community members, employers and others within the private sector, faith-based organizations, municipal government, and industry.

A number of key **Barriers** were identified:

- **Cost of Living:** The high cost of living and a lack of housing in Canada can be a challenge for new immigrants.
- **Political Barriers:** Tension between the political arm of government and public servants, and political will of different levels of government, can create barriers and complexities within the immigration system.

- **Canadian Norms and Work Experience:** Different societal norms and expectations exist within the Canadian context that newcomers need to learn in order to avoid frustration or confrontation. Canadian work experience is often needed to obtain a job in Canada, which can be particularly challenging for newcomers, and not all employers offer the same integration supports to their new employees.
- **Assumptions held by Policymakers:** Sometimes policymakers view rural and smaller communities as less progressive, less welcoming, or less desirable, when in fact none of those beliefs may be true.
- **The Municipal Role in the Immigration Process:** Small municipalities, which are often expected to take on and implement new immigration pathways or programs, do not often have the experience, capacity, or funds required to take on these tasks.

# 3

## WHAT ARE WE MISSING?

Participants identified several themes that they felt were not adequately discussed in current conversations around rural immigration including:

- Attitudes within rural communities, and within the Canadian context overall, can be a key ‘unknown’ in conversations about immigration. It can be difficult to measure how **welcoming** a community may be, and as such, expectations about rural settlement should be tempered.
- The **politicization of immigration** and resettlement policies has created spaces of anti-immigration rhetoric. Referencing movements such as the ‘freedom truck convoy,’ participants suggested that we don’t know how much of this rhetoric is brewing under the surface, and how having a platform will change and possibly exacerbate these sentiments.
- Participants also asked about “the role of **Indigenous engagement** within rural immigration?” and suggested that we cannot discuss rural immigration without considering and including Indigenous communities.

Before the final plenary discussion, a presentation on the findings from the previous workshops was provided to participants. This was an opportunity to bridge the gap between the local, rural perspectives and the urban policymaker and academic perspectives that were represented at the Ottawa workshop.





# 4

## WHAT ARE THE TRENDS AND PATTERNS?

Participants observed that people still want to live in rural and smaller places, but more should be done to make this option viable for everyone.

**Community Development:** Investments in high-speed internet and local economic development; the creation of systematic, “one-stop” settlement services; and improved intergovernmental collaboration (including in areas of selection, policy, and services) would support rural revitalization efforts. To support rural immigration pathways, emphasis should be placed on formalizing and supporting existing social and family pathways for newcomers, the marketability of smaller and rural communities, and engagement with municipal immigration programs.

**Employment and the Economy:** Participants emphasized that employment is integral to, and possibly the starting point of, the immigration system, as many immigrants will not settle or stay in a community if they cannot find work. Immigration is needed to address labour shortages in Canada, and more could be done to match newcomers with employers.

**Local Challenges:** Regional collaboration between rural municipalities could help address some of the challenges facing smaller places. Some participants suggested that more power should be devolved from the federal government to regions, giving them more control over immigration into their province, municipality, or rural community.

## CLOSING PLENARY

Participants emphasized a number of key themes including:

1. **Collaboration:** Participants highlighted the importance of collaboration between rural communities and non-competitive relationships. They reiterated the value of locally based champions and the importance of systematic solutions and strategies for these issues.
2. The importance of **bottom-up approaches:** Some participants argued for increased devolution of from the federal government to local levels of government. Additionally, local success stories—such as the Syrian family business, Peace by Chocolate, based in rural Nova Scotia—should be widely celebrated and shared.
3. Increased access to information and **credible data:** Canadian research infrastructure should be expanded (in part to better understand rural and urban migration trends) and access to data should be improved. This information can help communities understand immigration patterns.

# Conclusion

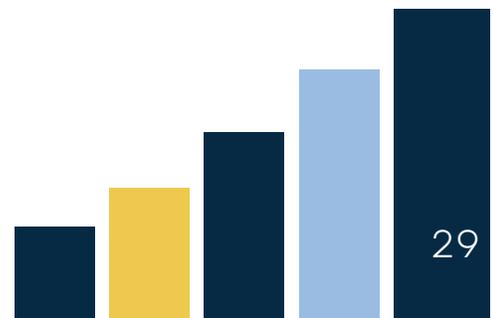
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Overall, participants in the rural areas commented on the importance of safety; the necessity of collaboration between communities, governments, agencies, and service providers; the need for flexible and adaptive systems; and the desire to create communities of belonging, which are more than just welcoming spaces.

Another key value was equity. On the ground, settlement workers, volunteers, municipal workers, and service providers see a lot of inequity in the immigration system, particularly with the focus on economic immigration. They observed these trends within the points system—which rewards age and skills—and through the inequity between the different streams of immigration (such as the differences between resettled refugees, economic immigrants, foreign temporary workers, etc.) and different cultural or origin communities of migrants. Additionally, participants identified that they are working within a fragmented system. Many felt as though they are constantly attempting to adapt rigid and reactive funding contracts and models, and jurisdictional barriers, to the changing local context, while being directly faced with the human cost of this fragmentation.

As a general trend, it was observed that immigrants (including foreign temporary workers) often show up in local communities and settlement offices looking for assistance. Knowing that these individuals may have nowhere else to go, settlement workers or other community members try to assist them even without the resources, jurisdiction, extra support, or other community services necessary (especially in very small communities). This leads to high rates of burnout and disillusionment among those working in the immigration system who are encountering the human cost of broken and inadequate systems. It is clear that these issues are grounded in a system largely focused on economic production and potential, rather than on the needs of people.

In contrast, the Ottawa participants emphasized the importance of employment for newcomers and the use of the immigration system to address labour shortages and boost Canada's economy. They largely focused on how the system could be used more efficiently by municipalities, employers and industry. The devolution of immigration to local, municipal governments was also mentioned.



# A Rural Policy Design for Migration & Mobility

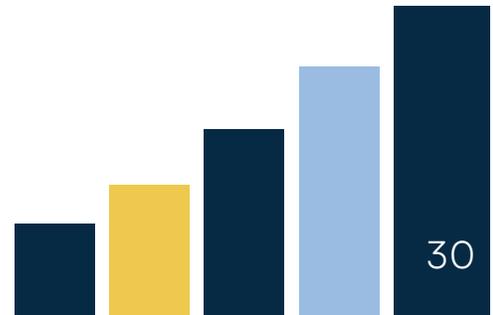
Drawing on the findings from the workshops, we put forward a rural policy design for migration and mobility that is people-centered. A people-centered model is founded on the values of equity and belonging, and the principle of universality in social policy. This model requires a complete re-imagining of Canada's immigration system. Currently, Canada's transactional immigration model, which primarily values the success of the country's economy, overwhelmingly utilizes and rewards migrants based on their economic potential and ability to fill gaps in the labour market (Government of Canada 2023).

Advocating and implementing equitable systems for the most vulnerable individuals, such as foreign temporary workers, promotes equity for everyone in our society. Overwhelmingly, social programs and policies in Canada are predicated on the citizenship and residency status of the individual, which can leave immigrants, particularly those coming under 'temporary' pathways, vulnerable and excluded (to varying extents) from social systems such as healthcare services, old age security, and family benefits (Smith-Carrier 2019).

**“welcoming is being invited to the party and  
belonging is being asked to dance  
- workshop participant”**

Supporting and treating all migrants as whole persons will better support social cohesion and inclusion throughout Canadian society as:

- bringing immigrant families together and prioritizing family reunification strengthens the resiliency of newcomers and increases retention rates;
- improving services in rural and smaller places benefits both newcomers and current residents;
- expanding funding mandates allows all newcomers to benefit from settlement services, such as language programs, which enhance integration, while also preventing burnout and compassion fatigue among settlement staff; and,
- valuing newcomers beyond their economic abilities promotes belonging and inclusion for everyone, and recognizes that thriving communities are built on more than just economic capital (Flora et al. 2018).

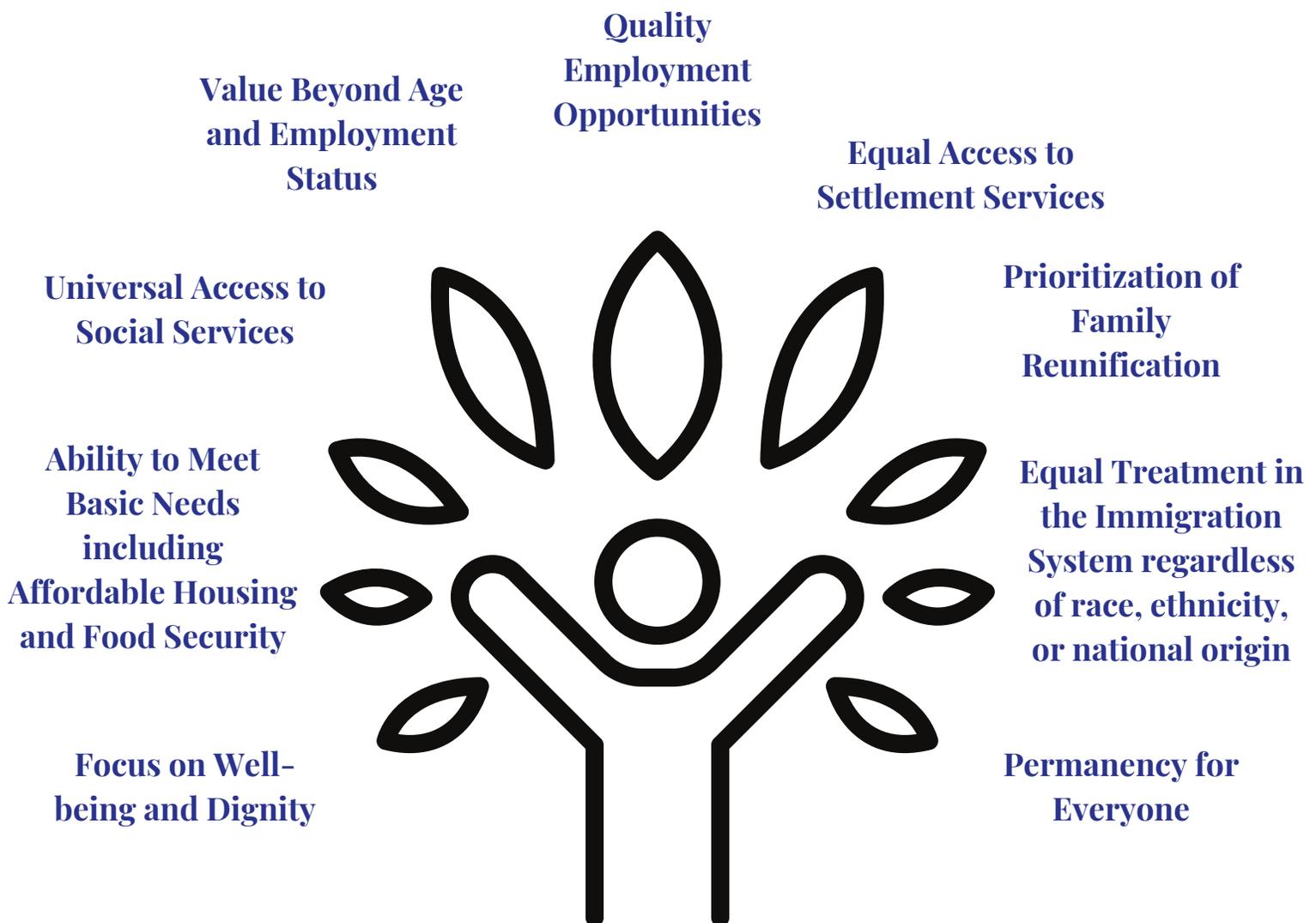


# A People-Centered Model

A People-Centered model of immigration would be holistic in its approach to immigration pathways, migrant inclusion and integration, and community development. Settlement service models would be:

- **proactive**, by anticipating newcomer needs rather than responding retroactively;
- **adaptive** to local contexts and communities (whether urban or rural); and,
- **collaborative**, across agencies, service providers, and levels of government.

Immigration systems would value permanence, family reunification, holistic community development, and treat all newcomers with dignity and respect. The image below imagines what such a people-centered model could look like.



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