

The AMSSA Info Sheet series has been created to inform and support settlement service providers and key stakeholders across British Columbia. The Info Sheets cover a wide range of topics and highlight important facts and trends from across Canada and BC. Our goal is to assist organizations in navigating the rapidly changing landscape of the BC settlement sector.*

Immigration to Smaller Centres

Immigrant attraction to small communities is a growing reality in Canada. While over 60% of immigrants to Canada still land in one of Canada's three largest cities, a growing proportion of immigrants are moving to smaller centres around the country. This edition of 'Migration Matters' examines the scope of immigration to these regions, and the unique challenges they experience.

Understanding Regional Immigration

Recent demographic trends show that Canada needs new immigrants in order to maintain and grow its population and economy. The attraction of new immigrants, therefore, is increasingly being used by governments as a tool for economic growth.¹

Immigration to small communities, also termed "regional immigration," is encouraged by recent changes in federal and provincial immigration policies, such as the Provincial Nominee Program. Such changes aim to select newcomers for existing labour opportunities, to attract immigrants to areas beyond the major metropolitan areas, and to make the process as fast as possible.²

Immigrants to Canada select where they will settle on the basis of several factors including the presence of family and friends, employment opportunities, lifestyle, and climate.³

Of those who came to British Columbia in 2003, 90% of immigrants chose to reside in Greater Vancouver, with the remaining 10% settling in other locations across the province. By 2013, 14% of immigrants settled outside of Greater Vancouver.⁴

Immigrant Arrivals by District⁵

Regional District	Immigrant Arrivals, 2002-03	Immigrant Arrivals, 2007-08	Immigrant Arrivals, 2013-2014
Cariboo	153 (0.48%)	181 (0.42%)	198 (0.53%)
Kootenay	109 (0.34%)	262 (0.61%)	226 (0.60%)
Mainland / Southwest	29,924 (93.74%)	39,293 (90.91%)	34,176 (91.26%)
Nechako	22 (0.07%)	27 (0.06%)	50 (0.13%)
North Coast	38 (0.12%)	44 (0.10%)	57 (0.15%)
Northeast	33 (0.10%)	68 (0.16%)	122 (0.33%)
Thompson-Okanagan	605 (1.90%)	1210 (2.80%)	857 (2.29%)
Vancouver Island / Coast	1,040 (3.26%)	2,135 (4.94%)	1,765 (4.71%)
TOTAL	31,924 (100%)	43,220 (100%)	37,451 (100%)

Employment is the Key Factor to Immigrant Retention

Despite the success of some regional immigration initiatives, attracting immigrants has proven to be only the first step in settling newcomers. More challenging is the long-term retention of immigrants.

In many smaller communities across Canada, studies have shown that although attraction to an area for immigrant relocation is most often based on connections with family and friends, employment has been shown to be an over-riding factor in the decision to stay in a smaller community.⁶

For new immigrants who move away quickly in the first few years, these immigrants tend to move mainly because of the attraction to areas of higher urban density and greater immigrant density.⁷ The presence of family and friends provides valuable support networks in the early stages of settlement, especially given the economic difficulties facing many immigrants and refugees.⁸

For those who move later on, after a period of resettlement and attempted integration, these immigrants tend to move because of barriers to access to trades and professions in which they were trained.⁹

Seven Challenges of Small-Community Immigration

Seven main challenges resulting from immigration to small communities were identified in a 2013 study on the attraction and retention of immigrants.¹⁰

1. The need to provide settlement and long-term services for new residents
2. A lack of affordable and appropriate housing
3. Inadequate transportation systems
4. A poor supply of suitable employment for dependents and career advancement
5. A lack of cultural amenities
6. New diversity in the schools
7. Local community tolerance

Some of these challenges are faced by all members of the community – not just immigrants – but they can be compounded for newcomers depending on their particular status, experience and access to resources.¹¹

1, 2, 10, 11. Wiginton, L. 'Canada's Decentralised Immigration Policy Through a Local Lens', August 2013. Available at: <http://ow.ly/KLaRT>.

3, 8. Hyndman, J. 'Size Matters: Attracting new Immigrants to Canadian Cities', October 2004. Available at: <http://ow.ly/KLb1u>.

4, 5. BC Statistics, 'BC Regional District Development Region Migration Components', February 2015. Available at: <http://ow.ly/KLbaz>.

6, 7, 9. Ma, M. 'Immigrant Integration in 2nd and 3rd Tier Canadian Communities', January 2010. Available at: <http://ow.ly/KLbk8>.

Key Actors for Immigrant Retention in Small Centres

Three types of local actors play a significant role in the retention of immigrants: municipal governments, employers, and community members.¹²

Municipal governments are important actors in immigrant welcoming, and can have significant influence on the attraction and retention of immigrants. Institutional capacity within these governments is a key determinant of the extent to which they can take steps toward cultivating a more welcoming community.¹³

Employers can play a significant role in the retention of immigrants to smaller centres. Responding primarily when required by policy or driven by market factors, employers have many resources to deploy and should indeed be expected to contribute to immigrant welcoming initiatives, particularly when they are actively recruiting immigrants to the region.¹⁴ The expanded role of employers in the Express Entry program further underlines the growing importance of active employer engagement in immigrant retention.

Community members, including both immigrants and long-term residents, can work to create a community that is inclusive and welcoming to newcomers. Reducing real or perceived instances of discrimination can play a role in retaining immigrants in smaller centres.¹⁵

Recent Research in British Columbia

Immigration Research West recently concluded a study involving 33 smaller centres across Western Canada. A total of 10 communities in British Columbia participated in the study, identifying the following unique rural settlement challenges:¹⁶

- **Geography:** newcomers are widespread; lack of public transport; weather; dense concentration of services
- **Unfamiliar encounter:** influx of ethno-racial newcomers to ethno-racial homogeneous community, intensifying discriminatory experiences.
- **Small agencies:** multiple needs with limited programming and resources; blurred professional boundaries.
- **Economically driven:** low skilled jobs, economic cycle fluctuation, opposite trend of economy and housing cost, high turnover / retention challenges.
- **Rigid eligibility:** an increasing number of temporary residents and secondary migrants (naturalized citizens) who do not qualify to receive federally funded settlement services.

Settlement Advantages of Smaller Centres

Although immigrants to rural regions of British Columbia do experience certain unique challenges, recent research suggests that these immigrants tend to have a higher sense of belonging and lower incidences of discrimination than immigrants living in urban population centres.

According to research from Immigration Research West, 81% of immigrants in rural BC reported to have a 'strong' sense of belonging, compared to only 69% of urban immigrants.¹⁷

In addition, 92% of rural immigrants reported having never experienced discrimination, compared to only 80% of urban immigrants.¹⁸

These findings are supported by service provider reports that suggest that immigrants in rural regions are able to make friends easier and establish deeper connections with their communities.¹⁹

Influx of Temporary Foreign Workers & the Need for Formalized Language Assessments

Due to significant investments in oil and gas facilities, there has been a large influx in the number of Temporary Foreign Workers arriving in some small communities. Service providers have noted a corresponding rise in the number of temporary foreign workers requesting settlement services.²⁰

In several communities, the number of temporary foreign workers accessing services outnumbers the number of permanent residents. For example, one community in northern British Columbia reported that only 20% of their total client base were permanent residents.²¹

This is an issue of concern because following the repatriation of settlement services to the federal government in 2014, temporary foreign workers do not qualify to receive settlement services funded by Citizenship and Immigration Canada. The Province of British Columbia has provided one-time funding to allow several organizations to serve client groups including temporary foreign workers and naturalized citizens. The Province is currently exploring options for a long-term model to support these 'CIC ineligible' clients.²²

Lastly, small BC communities have emphasized the need for greater access to formalized language assessments, both for online training courses such as LINC Home Study, as well as for fulfilling language requirements for citizenship.²³

12, 13, 14, 15. Wiginton, L. 'Canada's Decentralised Immigration Policy Through a Local Lens', August 2013. Available at: <http://ow.ly/KLaRT>.

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17, 18. Wilkinson, L. 'Why don't immigrants in British Columbia feel more 'at home'? Unpacking the settlement experiences of newcomers', Presented at AMSSA E-Symposium, December 2014.

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