

FINAL REPORT
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Newcomer Conversations:

A Check-In During COVID-19



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Introduction

The Cape Breton Local Immigration Partnership (CBLIP) is a collaborative initiative designed to foster welcoming communities that support the full participation of newcomers in the social, economic, political and cultural life of Cape Breton-Unama'ki.

In an effort to better understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on newcomers to Canada living in Cape Breton, the CBLIP consulted with newcomers through an online survey as well as an interactive, online event. In both instances, the aim was to learn more about how the time of COVID-19 is being experienced by newcomers and to explore supports that help – both during the pandemic and beyond – and to share the results with partner organizations to help inform their work.

Methods & Results

Survey

Newcomer Conversations – A Check-In Survey During COVID-19 was an online survey open to newcomers to Cape Breton from May 8 until May 20, 2020. The survey was conducted using the platform Survey Monkey and consisted of 25 questions. Questions were developed in consultation with members of the CBLIP Immigrant Advisory Table. It took participants roughly ten minutes to complete the survey.

Who did we hear from?

There were a total of 79 respondents to the survey. In the first section, participants were asked to provide basic demographic details. Based on the information provided, this is what we know about those who participated:

- Respondents were from 18 different countries of birth. The most common birth countries reported were China, Philippines, and India;
- 81% of respondents live in the CBRM, 8% in Port Hawkesbury, 12% in Inverness, Richmond and Victoria combined;
- The majority - 90% - are between 18 and 44 years of age;
- Respondents have been in Cape Breton for varying lengths of time, 22% have been here for less than one year;
- 60% of respondents are here on study permits, 17% on work permits, 18% are permanent residents, and 5% are citizens;
- 11% live alone;
- 24% live with at least one child or youth; and
- 72% have a university education at the Bachelor level or higher.

How are the respondents experiencing COVID-19?

The number one precaution (86%) that respondents are taking to avoid the transmission of COVID-19 is increasing their physical distance to others. 69% reported that they are wearing protective masks. 65% said they are avoiding public transportation. Some respondents made special mention of the fact that they are limiting their trips, shopping locally more often, and buying food in bulk.

International news sources and social media were the most common places respondents received information about COVID-19. Only 38% said they received information about COVID-19 from local organizations.

On a scale from 1 to 10, respondents were asked how much COVID-19 impacted their life – the average response was 8.2.

The top four areas of life that respondents said have become more difficult than before COVID-19:

- Finding or maintaining work (72%);
- Improving language skills (57%);
- Paying mortgage or rent (54%); and
- Maintaining healthy relationships (53%).

51% of respondents said they have had more difficulty accessing information about immigration and settlement during the pandemic.

Respondents were asked how socially isolated they felt, on a scale from 1 to 10 the average response was 6.8.

70% of newcomers said they felt less connected to their friends in Canada and more than half said they felt less connected to colleagues, classmates and neighbours. 44% said they felt more connected now to their family in other countries than they had before.

38% said that they had been in touch with any of their neighbours during the pandemic.

On a scale from 1 to 10, respondents were asked how worried they were about the pandemic. The average response was 7.7

Three quarters of respondents said that they had experienced anxiety or nervousness during the pandemic.

Top three things that help respondents to feel better during the pandemic:

- Entertainment (watching TV, playing games, etc.) (72%)
- Making themselves busy (e.g. cooking, gardening, etc.) (62%)
- Staying in contact with family and friends (59%)

Regarding community services they have accessed during the pandemic, multiple respondents made specific note of having received food deliveries via the Cape Breton Food Hub.

In terms of supports that are needed, respondents named:

- Access to financial support from the government by international students not eligible for the CERB
- Reduction in tuition fees
- Investments to diversifying and strengthening local food production
- Financial supports for newcomer business owners
- Support in finding employment – particularly jobs that can be worked remotely
- Mental health consultations
- More/quicker/more direct support in navigating the immigration process
- Facilitating access to the biometrics collection process
- More widespread use of face masks in the community
- Initiatives to eliminate racial discrimination

In terms of what they would feel comfortable doing as restrictions are lifted, the percentage of respondents that reported being comfortable with the following activities are as follows:

- using public transportation - 20%
- attending small public gatherings - 21%
- going back to the workplace - 29%
- visiting local businesses - 54%
- getting together with family and friends - 63%

Some examples of things that respondents are doing to help others during this time:

- Increasing access to food:
 - Giving away food to people who need it
 - Growing more food in their garden for friends and neighbours
 - Picking up groceries for neighbours
 - Cooking and baking
- Staying in touch:
 - Reaching out to people who may feel alone
 - Making phone calls and video calls
 - Sharing government updates
- Supporting community health and safety:
 - Staying home as much as possible
 - Helping others to access personal protective equipment (giving it to them or letting them know where to find it)
 - Volunteering at a local hospital
- Offering spiritual and mental health support:
 - Providing moral support to their family
 - Helping with an online mental health group in their community
 - Praying
- Assisting in day-to-day jobs:
 - Helping landlord with work at their house

How is the experience of students different from that of other newcomers?

Given that approximately 60% of survey respondents were international students, it is worthwhile exploring some of the ways that the responses of students differed from those of non-students. Some highlights are noted in the following table:

Average Response		
	Students	Non-Students
Rankings in scale based questions:		
On a scale from 1 to 10, how much do the COVID-19 measures impact your life?	8.7	7.3
On a scale from 1 to 10, how socially isolated do you feel now?	7.2	6.4
On a scale from 1 to 10, how worried are you about COVID-19?	7.9	7.4
Percentage agreement with the following statements:		
I am not working because of COVID-19 and am not receiving government support.	39%	25%
During the COVID-19 pandemic, I am having more difficulty paying rent or mortgage than before.	70%	30%
During the COVID-19 pandemic, I am having more difficulty improving language skills than before.	81%	25%
During the COVID-19 pandemic, I am having more difficulty accessing information about immigration and settlement than before.	60%	38%
During COVID-19, I feel less connected with friends in Canada than before.	88%	46%
I have been in touch with neighbours during COVID-19.	24%	58%
I have had challenges with anxiety or nervousness during the pandemic.	79%	68%
I am likely to be very uncomfortable with using public transportation when restrictions are lifted.	25%	17%

Online Event

Newcomer Conversations – A Check-In During COVID-19 was held on May 15, 2020 from 4:00 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. via the online conferencing platform, Zoom. During the session, foreign-born residents of Cape Breton were asked to share their experiences during COVID-19, and what supports could be implemented to help. Approximately 20 newcomers attended the event.

The event began in a large group format and then switched to small group conversations hosted by members of the CBLIP Immigrant Advisory Table – who are themselves newcomers to Cape Breton.

Before breaking into small groups, participants were asked to respond to three short polls via Slido (a Q&A and polling online platform). The poll questions and their responses are below.

What is one word that represents your personal experience during COVID-19?



Please select the three areas that you believe present the most significant challenges for newcomers in Cape Breton during COVID-19:

1. Finding or maintaining employment (87%)
2. Paying mortgage or rent (53%)
3. Accessing immigration-related information (47%)
4. Caring for children (33%)
5. Maintaining healthy relationships (27%)
6. Accessing transportation (27%)
7. Accessing food (20%)
8. Accessing medical care (20%)
9. Improving language skills (20%)

What is a specific program or service that you believe would help newcomers in Cape Breton right now?

- “Virtual newcomers networking”
- “ONE helpline concerning questions about immigration”
- “More information about jobs”
- “Work-related skills upgrade”
- “Navigate to find work”
- “Online job skills training for specific opening positions that are friendly to international people”
- “Home office job opportunities”
- “Jobs information”
- “Check ins from community members”
- “Health issues”
- “Career advice from people in different industries”

Participants also put forward the following questions via Slido and in the Zoom chat:

- “How to get more recruitment information?”
- “What support is available for international students?”
- “Is it possible to get a work permit without the biometrics data? It is not possible to do Biometrics at the moment, Service Canada Offices are closed.”
- “Is it possible to work without the medical exam necessary for certain professions like ECE? There is no possibility to do the x-ray or blood test at the moment.”

While the event was not designed as a platform for answering questions – but rather for collecting thoughts, concerns and ideas – it is useful to note that questions like the above are pressing for newcomers at the moment. During the event, organizers referred participants to the following sites for additional information:

• **Information for Foreign Workers and Students:**

<https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/coronavirus-covid19/visitors-foreign-workers-students.html>

• **Information on Biometrics:**

<https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/coronavirus-covid19/biometrics.html>

• **Cape Breton Partnership: COVID-19 Resources:**

<https://capebretonpartnership.com/covid-19-resources/>

• **Immigration specific resources on COVID-19 Resources Page:**

<https://capebretonpartnership.com/covid-19-resources/immigration-resources/>

Following the polls, participants were randomly divided into small groups using the Zoom ‘Breakout Rooms’ feature. Each small group had a volunteer facilitator from the CBLIP Immigrant Advisory Table. CBLIP staff worked with facilitators prior to the event to ensure clarity in roles and consistency in approaches. Facilitators guided the conversations, encouraged participation, and recorded notes from the discussions in their group.

The groups discussed two key questions:

“What challenges are we facing?” **and** “What supports could make this easier?”

The notes received by CBLIP staff from the small group facilitators have been grouped into ten main areas of concern in the table below:

Area of Concern	Description of Challenges
Employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A lot of people lost their jobs due to COVID-19. A lot of newcomers (international students and temporary workers) require jobs in NOC B to transition to Permanent Residency • It's difficult to find a job and the job opportunities are limited. • There is difficulty in maintaining work/life balance when working at home • Jobs are often not posted online and are filled by people who are known to the employers. In some cases, the qualified person doesn't have a chance as it is not a fair competition. In some cases, the highly-educated people are denied even entry level jobs • Even volunteer work is not available to newcomers or is difficult to access, particularly during the pandemic
Financial Wellbeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of financial support for International students
Social & Cultural Connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some newcomers have no family or friends to relate to during these times.
Childcare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It's a challenge to organize kids' online learning and work at same time
Immigration Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To get their medical done as a requirement of job • To get biometrics done to start working • Feeling of being stuck as they can't go back to their home country • Restriction of one year work experience in order to qualify for the Atlantic Immigration Pilot • Job issues because of eligibility • Restrictions for resident status for applying summer jobs
Transportation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transportation services are very limited
Housing & Accommodation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For residential or business purposes; a lot of newcomers are having a hard time finding appropriate housing
Health Care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health care access is limited, it's hard to get an appointment with a doctor
International Student Supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenges with quality and timeliness of responses from post-secondary institutions • Financial difficulties - especially for students who are not eligible for financial support from the Canadian government, but are still paying triple the tuition fees • Challenges surrounding quality of e-learning opportunities • Work term as a part of studies is no longer mandatory because of COVID-19
General Access to Information	

What Newcomers Say Would Help

- There was a discussion that employees from CB like to hire people that they know. One of the suggestions was to have online “meet and greet” with employers who are hiring and newcomers who are looking for jobs. In that way, the newcomers will be able to network with people who are hiring and employers will get to know the newcomer on a deeper level
 - Employment match program
 - Cape Breton Partnership job board
 - Online Training (Language, Cultural Training, Software)
 - Networking
 - Providing information to newcomers interested in entrepreneurship
-
- Entertainment workshop
 - Reaching out – People in the position to should reach out to other newcomers
 - Book clubs
 - Platform to share stories and ideas
 - Social activities
 - Historical teachings to newcomers about Cape Breton
 - Online cultural training
-
- To start a helpline (in -person) specifically for newcomers in Cape Breton for smooth communication and to get answers to immigration-related questions.
 - Lifting of restrictions for students/recent graduates applying for jobs
-
- Emergency funding for International students
 - Virtual consultation: Have 2-3 hrs. open each day for students
 - E-learning support
-
- Explanation of rights
 - Explanation of programs available



Reflections

Several key themes emerged through this consultation:

Based on the survey results in particular, it is clear that international students are reporting greater challenges in nearly every area, when compared to the newcomer population as a whole. The experience of international students is unique.

The challenges surrounding finding and maintaining employment were consistently at the top of the list among the concerns shared. There were also several ideas generated around programs that could help in this area – these related to online networking, targeted skills training, or the development of tools like a job board (currently being developed by the Cape Breton Partnership). There was also a great deal of discussion throughout the consultation related to social isolation. Where newcomers are already at higher risk for being socially isolated, COVID-19 has exacerbated this issue. Creative ideas to help address the challenges of social isolation emerged, like ‘buddy’ programs to match newcomers with community volunteers for regular phone calls.

It is important to note that, without data for comparison to the Cape Breton population as a whole, it remains difficult to know how much the experience of newcomers varies from the experiences of other Cape Bretoners during this time. However, the hope is that this consultation effort has illuminated the concerns and ideas of newcomers during this unprecedented time – whether those concerns are exclusive to newcomers or not.

Next Steps

This report is being shared with all CBLIP members as well as other local organizations and decision-makers in order to better inform their efforts to support newcomers both during and after this pandemic.

The CBLIP implements its Strategic Plan through thematic working groups focused on the following areas:

- Raising Awareness
- Welcoming Communities
- Improving Coordination
- Language
- Employment

The CBLIP working groups will each explore how the content of this report may help to inform their work and better focus their efforts on the unique needs of newcomers in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The report will be reviewed and applied to the action plans of each working group, as applicable, over the coming months.

Appendix



Newcomer Conversations: A Check-In Survey during COVID-19

Welcome

You are about to participate in a short survey coordinated by the Cape Breton Local Immigration Partnership to better understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on newcomers to Canada who are living in Cape Breton. The survey will take about 10 minutes to complete.

The aim of this survey is to learn more about how this time is experienced by newcomers and what helps them cope. We will share what we learn in order to inform local organizations and decisionmakers about how they might be able to better support newcomers both during and after this pandemic.

Your responses will be kept confidential and will not be linked to your identity.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this survey, please contact Kailea Pedley at local.immigration@capebretonpartnership.com or 902 258 7331. For information and resources related to COVID-19, please visit the Cape Breton Partnership's COVID-19 Resource Page.

Thank you for your participation!



Newcomer Conversations: A Check-In Survey during COVID-19

About You

1. Where do you live in Cape Breton?

- Cape Breton Regional Municipality
- Inverness County
- Richmond County
- Victoria County
- Town of Port Hawkesbury

2. What is your age?

- Under 18
- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65+

3. How long have you been living in Canada?

- Less than one year
- 1-2 years
- 3-4 years
- 5 or more years

4. What is your country of birth?

5. What is your immigration status in Canada?

- I am a Canadian citizen
 - I am a permanent resident
 - I am a refugee claimant
 - I am here on a study permit
 - I am here on a work permit
 - Other (please specify)
-

6. With how many other people do you live?

- None (I live alone)
- One other person
- Two other people
- Three other people
- Four other people
- Five or more other people

7. How many children and youth (0 to 18 years) are living with you?

- None
- One
- Two
- Three
- Four
- Five or more

8. What is your highest level of education?

- Secondary (high) school diploma or equivalency certificate
 - Apprenticeship or trades certificate or diploma
 - College or other non-university certificate or diploma
 - University certificate or diploma below bachelor level
 - University certificate, diploma or degree at bachelor level or above
 - No certificate, diploma or degree
 - Other (please specify)
-



Newcomer Conversations: A Check-In Survey during COVID-19

Life During COVID-19

9. What precautions are you taking to avoid transmitting COVID-19? (Please check all that apply)

- Increased hand-washing/use of hand sanitizer
- Increased physical distance from others
- Wearing protective masks
- Avoiding public transportation
- Avoiding leaving residence
- Other (please specify)

10. Where do you get information about COVID-19? (Please check all that apply)

- Canadian news sources (e.g. TV, radio, website)
- International news sources (e.g. TV, radio, website)
- Local organizations
- Social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp, WeChat, etc.)
- Friends and family
- Other (please specify)

11. On a scale from 1 to 10, how much do the COVID-19 measures impact your life?

- 1 (not at all)
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10 (very much)

12. Which of these options best describes your current work situation?

- I am continuing to go out to work as I normally do
- I have been directed to work remotely from home.
- I am not working because of COVID-19 and am receiving government support
- I am not working because of COVID-19 and am not receiving government support
- I was already unemployed prior to COVID-19 and continue to be unemployed
- Other (please specify)

13. During the COVID-19 pandemic, do you experience more/less difficulty in the following areas of life than before?

	More difficult than before	Same as before	Less difficult than before	Not applicable
Paying mortgage or rent	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Finding or maintaining work	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Accessing food	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Accessing medical care	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Maintaining healthy relationships	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Caring for children	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Improving language skills	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Accessing transportation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

14. During COVID-19, have you had more difficulty in accessing information regarding immigration and settlement?

- Yes
- No
- I haven't had a need to access this kind of information

15. On a scale from 1 to 10, how socially isolated do you feel now?

- 1 (not at all)
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10 (extremely)

16. During COVID-19, do you feel more/less connected with the following people in your life than before?

	Less connected	No difference	More connected	Not applicable
The people in your household	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Family in Canada	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Family in other countries	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Friends in Canada	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Friends in other countries	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Colleagues/classmates	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Neighbours	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

17. Have you been in touch with any of your neighbours during COVID-19?

- Yes
 No

18. On a scale from 1 to 10, how worried are you about COVID-19?

- 1 (not at all worried) 2 3 4 5
 6 7 8 9 10 (very worried)

19. Have you had challenges with any of the following during the pandemic? (Please check all that apply)

- Difficulty sleeping
 Sadness
 Irritability
 Mood swings
 Anxiety or nervousness
 Other (please specify)

The Province of Nova Scotia has reminded residents that it has set up a number of supports for those who are struggling in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and the events that occurred in northern and central Nova Scotia over the weekend of April 18 and 19, 2020. If you have mental health or addiction-related concern for yourself or someone else, please reach out for support:

- The Provincial Mental Health Crisis Line is available 24/7, by calling toll-free 1-888-429-8167.
- Residents can self-refer to Community Mental Health and Addictions clinics, Withdrawal Management Services, or Opioid Replacement and Treatment Program, by calling (toll-free) 1-855-922-1122, weekdays 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.
- A Kids Help Phone counsellor is available 24/7 at 1-800-668-6868.
- Further resources and information can be found at <http://www.nshealth.ca/mental-health-addictions>.

20. What helps you feel better during COVID-19? (please check all that apply)

- Seeking information
 Making myself busy (e.g. cooking, gardening, etc.)
 Being active (e.g. exercising at home, going for walks, etc.)
 Entertainment (e.g. watching TV, playing games, etc.)
 Staying in contact with family and friends
 Meditation and/or prayer
 Taking precautions (e.g. washing hands, social distancing, etc.)
 Seeking help from professionals (e.g. therapists, medical doctors, religious leaders, etc.)
 Self-medicating
 Trying not to think about it
 Thinking about the good that might come out of this time
 Thinking about past experiences that can help me through this time
 Volunteering to help others
 Other (please specify)

21. Have you accessed services from any community organizations during COVID-19? Please tell us about your experience.

22. What additional supports could help you in the present situation?

23. How likely are you to feel comfortable with the following areas of re-engagement when restrictions are lifted?

	Very comfortable	Fairly comfortable	Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable	Fairly uncomfortable	Very uncomfortable
Using public transportation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Going back to the workplace	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Getting together with friends and family	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Attending small public gatherings	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Attending large public gatherings	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Visiting local businesses	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Having children go back to school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

24. If you are finding ways to help others during this time, could you describe what you are doing?

25. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about?

26. If you would like to be kept up to date with future news and events from the Cape Breton Partnership, please enter your email address here.

**Thank you so much for taking the time to share your experiences in this survey.
Your participation is very much appreciated.**



Contact

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this report, please contact:

CBLIP Program Manager, Kailea Pedley at:
local.immigration@capebretonpartnership.com
or **902-258-7331**.

For information and resources related to COVID-19, please visit the Cape Breton Partnership's COVID-19 Resource Page at:
capebretonpartnership.com/covid-19-resources

To learn more about the Cape Breton Local Immigration Partnership, please visit:
www.newtcapebreton.com



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