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Promoting Welcoming Communities in Canada



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Promouvoir des communautés accueillantes au Canada

Understanding Attitudes toward Immigrants and Immigration in Smaller Canadian Communities

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Context

- Canada has a long tradition of welcoming immigrants:
 - Since the 1990s, Canada has admitted over 200,000 immigrants annually on average (Statistics Canada, 2016).
 - In 2022 and 2023, the government announced plans to progressively increase annual immigrant admissions, targeting 500,000 new immigrants by 2025 and stabilizing at this level from 2026 to focus on successful integration and labour market support (IRCC, 2022, 2023).
 - In 2022, Canada welcomed 437,180 immigrants, and this number rose to 471,771 in 2023 (Statistics Canada, 2023, 2024).

Context

- Immigrants have traditionally settled in major urban centres such as Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver, though their share in these cities decreased from 2016 to 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2022).
- Smaller Canadian communities face challenges in attracting and retaining immigrants while dealing with labor shortages, outmigration, declining birthrates, and aging populations (e.g., Esses and Adegbembo, 2022; IRCC, 2020).
- Regionalization programs such as the Atlantic Immigration Program, and the Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot are designed to encourage immigration to these smaller communities.

Context

- For the successful regionalization of immigration, community leaders and employers need to use these programs and actively create welcoming communities that attract and retain immigrants (Esses and Carter 2019; Esses et al., 2023).
- Positive attitudes toward immigrants and immigration among the established community are a key component; they influence immigrant well-being, key aspects of integration such as employment and housing, and social cohesion (Esses et al., 2023).
- There is limited information on attitudes towards immigrants and immigration in smaller communities in Canada. What evidence there is available suggests that attitudes may be less favourable in smaller communities than in Canada's large metropolises (e.g., Environics Institute, 2022).

Research Questions

- How do residents in smaller Canadian communities view the impact of immigrants on their community? Do they believe that immigration to their community should be encouraged?
- -What role do perceptions of control over local immigration, and frequency and quality of contact with immigrants play in predicting these attitudes?
- Do demographic characteristics of respondents also play a role?
- How welcoming do residents think their communities are to diverse immigrants, and what factors predict these attitudes?

Method

- Field Dates: June 10 - August 28, 2022
- Representative samples (age, gender) of approximately 400 respondents in each of 11 communities ($n = 4390$)

Community	Pop.	Immigrants	Community	Pop.	Immigrants
Kamloops, BC	114,142	10%	Saint-Hyacinthe, QC	59,980	7%
Wood Buffalo, AB	73,837	21%	Bathurst, NB	31,387	2%
Prince Albert, SK	45,718	9%	Cape Breton, NS	98,318	2%
Brandon, MB	54,268	17%	Charlottetown, PEI	78,858	11%
Greater Sudbury, ON	170,605	6%	St. John's, NL	212,579	5%
Thunder Bay, ON	123,258	8%			

Source: Census 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2022)

Attitudes toward Immigrants and Immigration

- **Respondents answered the following questions:**
 - “Do you think immigrants in [name of community] are having a positive or negative impact on your community?” (1 = very negative to 7 = very positive)
 - “Do you agree or disagree that immigration to [name of community] should be encouraged?” (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree)
- **Across communities, respondents on average reported that...**
 - immigrants have a positive impact on their community
(Mean = 5.41, Range: 5.08 in Greater Sudbury to 6.02 in St. John’s)
 - immigration to their community should be encouraged
(Mean = 5.36, Range: 5.07 in Charlottetown to 5.96 in St. John’s)

Attitudes toward Immigrants and Immigration

- Respondents who indicated that immigrants have a positive or negative impact on their community were asked to describe **in what ways immigrants have a [positive/negative] impact** on their community.
- There were 3118 positive and 391 negative open-ended responses across communities.
- Coding Procedure for Determining Themes:
 - Independent review and coding of responses by three research assistants.
 - Inter-rater reliability was very high (95%).

Positive Impact of Immigrants on Local Community

The top two positive themes across all communities were:

- **Multiculturalism / Diversity of Perspectives**

(Range: 38% in Cape Breton to 61% in Charlottetown)

E.g., *“As a relatively insulated community, introducing multiculturalism to the community provides more information and understanding of the whole world.”*

- **Filling of Labour Shortages**

(Range: 28% in Greater Sudbury to 50% in Saint-Hyacinthe)

E.g., *“There is a huge labour shortage, in all areas of employment, especially in health care. I wish there was a way to fast track doctors and nurses to qualify them for work in Canada.”*

Positive Impact of Immigrants on Local Community

Other positive themes included:

- **Positive Impact on the Economy**

E.g., *“They are the force or engine that drives the economy of Brandon and this country.”*

- **Positive Characteristics of Immigrants**

E.g., *“I see many smart and hardworking people who want to give back to the community. They are going to higher education to be doctors, and social workers, to generally give back to Canada.”*

Positive Impact of Immigrants on Local Community

Other positive themes included:

- **Diversity in Arts and Culture**

E.g., *“The cultural diversity of our community has increased. Restaurants and social variety of our region has increased. The arts have been revitalized.”*

- **Positive Contribution to the Community**

E.g., *“They volunteer at food banks and churches which is very much appreciated especially with an aging population.”*

- **Population Growth**

E.g., *“The city has felt like it is dying for a very long time to me. More people coming means it will be around longer.”*

Negative Impact of Immigrants on Local Community

The top two negative themes in each community were more varied across communities:

- **Failure to Adopt and Respect the Canadian Lifestyle / Erosion of Canadian Values and Morals**

(Top theme in 7 communities, ranging between 22%-34%)

E.g., *“Weakening of Canadian and Christian values in the school systems, weakening of mainstream culture, forced indoctrination of ‘others’ values, beliefs, religions, language.”*

- **Negative Impact on the Labour Market**

(Top theme in 7 communities, ranging between 22%-48%)

E.g., *“They are taking away jobs from people who have been born and raised here and cannot find a job because there are so few available.”*

Negative Impact of Immigrants on Local Community

The top two negative themes in each community were more varied:

- **Contribution to Housing Crisis**

(Top theme in Charlottetown, 67%, Cape Breton, 31%, and St. John's, 22%)

E.g., *“There seems to be an influx of immigration here for the past few years and we are having a housing crisis plus our economy is bad. They rent and wreck the places they are in. Serious garbage issues.”*

- **Overly Rapid Population Increase**

(Top theme in Charlottetown, 29%, Cape Breton, 28%, and St. John's, 28%)

E.g., *“Just way too many. We are not used to this.”*

Negative Impact of Immigrants on Local Community

The top two negative themes in each community were more varied:

- **Increase in Crime**

(Top theme in Wood Buffalo, 41%, and Kamloops, 26%)

E.g., *“It appears that drug related crime has increased dramatically and more times than not the ones charged have a new Canadian name attached to it.”*

- **Reaping Government Benefits**

(Top theme in Kamloops, 26%, St. John’s, 22%, and Saint-Hyacinthe, 17%)

E.g., *“They have more benefits and programs in our community than our own children and families.”*

Negative Impact of Immigrants on Local Community

The top two negative themes in each community were more varied:

- **Insufficient English/French Language Skills**

(Top theme in Brandon, 28%, Bathurst, 22%, and Saint-Hyacinthe, 17%)

E.g., *“Language barrier online and in person is extremely difficult, especially in the medical field and other “helping” professions. Even ordering a coffee is difficult.”*

Negative Impact of Immigrants on Local Community

Other negative themes included:

- **Negative Characteristics of Immigrants**

E.g., *“They tend to be ungrateful for the opportunity this country has given them. Their attitude is what can Canada do for me not how could I thank this country for their generosity.”*

- **Unskilled Labourers**

E.g., *“They work for less pay and how can you prove that they have the education that they say they do?”*

Negative Impact of Immigrants on Local Community

Other negative themes included:

- **Taking over Businesses**

E.g., *“They are buying all of are stores, gas station, apartment, etc. ... and having all the Canadian lose there jobs so they can hire there own.”*

- **Negative Impact on Education**

E.g., *“They are increasing costs for education because the children need ESL teaching. ESL students take up the teacher and educational assignments time.”*

Predicting Attitudes toward Immigrants and Immigration

Our research explored the role of several factors in predicting attitudes toward immigrants and immigration:

- **Perceived Control Over Local Immigration:** How much control do you think that people in [name of community] have over...
 - the number of immigrants who are coming to live there?”
 - the type of immigrants who are coming to live there?”
- Scale: 1 = no control at all to 7 = a great deal of control

Predicting Attitudes toward Immigrants and Immigration

- **Frequency of Contact with Immigrants:**
 - How often do you interact with immigrants in [name of community]?
Options included: daily, at least once a week, at least once a month, a few times a year, and never.
- **Quality of Contact with Immigrants:**
 - When you interact with immigrants in [name of community], does the contact with them typically feel friendly or unfriendly?
Scale: 1 = very unfriendly to 7 = very friendly
- **Demographics:** Age, Gender, Ethnicity, Immigrant Status, Highest Education Level, and Household Income Before Taxes

Perceived Control: Findings

Respondents reported overall low levels of perceived control over local immigration:

- Control over the number of immigrants:
 - Mean = 2.52, Range: 2.18 in Thunder Bay to 2.98 in St. John's
- Control over the type of immigrants:
 - Mean = 2.43, Range: 2.09 in Thunder Bay to 2.79 in Saint-Hyacinthe

Frequency and Quality of Contact: Findings

- Daily contact with immigrants varied significantly across communities, ranging from 28.5% in Bathurst to 78.2% in Wood Buffalo.
- Most respondents in other communities interacted with immigrants at least once a week. However, in Bathurst, Saint-Hyacinthe, Kamloops, and Greater Sudbury, a sizable percentage of respondents reported less frequent interactions, occurring monthly or just a few times a year.
- Respondents in all communities described their contact with immigrants as quite friendly (Mean = 5.85, Range: 5.65 in Charlottetown to 6.16 in St. John's)

Predicting Attitudes: Impact of Immigrants

Respondents were more likely to view immigrants as having a positive impact on their community if they...

- perceived more control over local immigration
- experienced friendlier contact with immigrants

Also, if they...

- were older, female, and foreign-born
- had a university/professional degree (as opposed to high school or less) and household income of \$30,001+ (as opposed to \$30,000 or less)

Predicting Attitudes: Immigration Should Be Encouraged

Respondents were more likely to agree that immigration to their community should be encouraged if they...

- perceived more control over local immigration
- experienced friendlier contact with immigrants

Also, if they...

- were older and foreign-born
- had a university/professional degree (as opposed to high school or less) and household income of \$30,001+ (as opposed to \$30,000 or less)

Welcoming Perceptions

Respondents were also asked how welcoming their communities were:

- Items: People in [name of community] are welcoming of 1) immigrants, 2) immigrants who are not White, and 3) immigrants who are not Christian.

Scale: 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree

- Respondents saw their communities as welcoming of immigrants in general, but as less welcoming of racialized immigrants and of immigrants who are not Christian.

Group	Mean	Range
Immigrants in general	4.87	4.37 (Prince Albert) – 5.26 (St. John's)
Immigrants who are not White	4.63	4.18 (Thunder Bay) – 5.03 (Bathurst)
Immigrants who are not Christian	4.67	4.23 (Prince Albert) – 5.05 (St. John's)

Predicting Welcoming Perceptions

Respondents were more likely to perceive their communities as welcoming to immigrants in general, immigrants who are not White, and immigrants who are not Christian if they...

- perceived more control over local immigration
- experienced friendlier contact with immigrants

Also, across the three measures, if they...

- were older

Noteworthy Findings and Implications

- On average, residents in smaller communities viewed immigrants as having a positive impact on their communities (e.g., filling labour shortages, multiculturalism) and support further immigration.
- However, some viewed the impact of immigrants as negative and mentioned concerns such as the weakening of Canadian values, competition for jobs, exacerbation of the housing crisis, overly rapid population increase, increase in crime, and taking government benefits.
- Residents perceived their communities as being welcoming to immigrants in general, although less so for racialized and non-Christian immigrants.

Noteworthy Findings and Implications

- Feeling a very low level of control over local immigration predicted more negative attitudes toward immigrants and immigration to the community, and less welcoming perceptions. Enhancing community members' involvement in local immigration could improve perceptions and attitudes.
- While frequency of contact did not predict attitudes and welcoming perceptions, quality of contact did, highlighting the need for fostering positive interactions between immigrants and members of the established community.
- Older, foreign-born residents, those with higher education levels and higher incomes tended to hold more positive views. Strategies that address and engage younger, Canadian-born residents, and those with lower education and income levels could help broaden the base of support for immigrants and immigration.

Recommendations

- **Increase residents' perceived control over local immigration:** Implement campaigns and programs that increase the sense of control among residents by...
 - educating them on how existing regionalization programs work
 - involving them more actively in the settlement and integration of newcomers (e.g., community consultations, volunteer programs)
- **Enhance quality of interactions between established residents and newcomers:** Promote community events, such as multicultural fairs and 'Meet Your Neighbour' days, and programs that foster positive contact between newcomers and members of the established community (e.g., community connections, mentorship programs)

Recommendations

- **Adopt a localized approach to...**
 - address specific concerns such as housing and infrastructure needs by engaging local governments, community organizations and other relevant parties
 - debunk local myths about immigrants and immigration through media campaigns with testimonials, success stories and economic data highlighting immigrants' contributions to the local economy, population growth, and socio-cultural landscape
 - specifically target those residents who are most likely to hold negative attitudes toward immigrants and immigration in the community (e.g., social media campaigns targeting young people)

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