

# Supporting Canada's COVID-19 resilience and recovery through robust immigration policy and programs

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## Abstract

Canada has been seen globally as a leader in immigration and integration policies and programs and as an attractive and welcoming country for immigrants, refugees, temporary foreign workers, and international students. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed some of the strengths of Canada's immigration system, as well as some of the fault lines that have been developing over the last few years. In this article we provide an overview of Canada's immigration system prior to the pandemic, discuss the system's weaknesses and vulnerabilities revealed by the pandemic, and explore a post-COVID-19 immigration vision. Over the next three years, the Government of Canada intends to bring over 1.2 million new permanent residents to Canada. In addition, Canada will continue to accept many international students, refugee claimants, and temporary foreign workers for temporary residence here. The importance of immigration for Canada will continue to grow and be an integral component of the country's post-COVID-19 recovery. To succeed, it is essential to take stock, to re-evaluate Canada's immigration and integration policies and programs, and to expand Canada's global leadership in this area. The authors offer insights and over 80 recommendations to reinvigorate and optimize Canada's immigration program over the next decade and beyond.

**Key words:** immigration, immigration policy, COVID-19, pandemic, settlement, permanent residence, immigrants, refugees, temporary foreign workers

## Introduction

Canada has been seen globally as a leader in immigration policy and programs and as an attractive and welcoming country for immigrants, refugees, temporary foreign workers, and international students (Dickson 2020; Esipova et al. 2020). Prior to the pandemic, it was one of the few countries planning increases in its selection of immigrants in the economic, family, and humanitarian streams. There is also a clear pathway to citizenship for permanent residents of Canada. Immigrants and refugees are seen as “citizens in waiting” with an expectation that most will become citizens after

| List of Abbreviations                                |   |
|--|---|
| AIPP: Atlantic Immigration Pilot Program             | NOC: National Occupational Classification                                   |
| BVOR: blended visa office-referred refugee           | OFC: Ontario Fairness Commissioner  |
| CBSA: Canada Border Services Agency                  | PNP: Provincial Nominee Program   |
| CMAs: Census Metropolitan Areas                      | PPE: personal protective equipment  |
| FMCs: Francophone minority communities               | PRRA: pre-removal risk assessment   |
| GAR: government-assisted refugee                     | PSR: privately sponsored refugee  |
| GRSI: Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative          | RAP: Resettlement Assistance Program  |
| IEHPs: internationally educated health professionals | RCMP : Royal Canadian Mounted Police  |
| IFH: interim federal health                          | RIFs: Réseaux en immigration francophone (Francophone immigration networks) |
| IMP: International Mobility Program                  | RNIP: Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot                                  |
| IRB: Immigration and Refugee Board                   | RPD: Refugee Protection Division  |
| IRCC: Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada   | STCA: Safe Third Country Agreement  |
| LINC: Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada   | TFW: temporary foreign worker   |
| LIPs: Local Immigration Partnerships                 | TFWP: Temporary Foreign Worker Program                                      |
| LTC: long-term care                                  | UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees                        |
| MNP: Municipal Nominee Program                       | VAC: Visa Application Centre  |
| NGO: non-governmental organization                   | WHO: World Health Organization  |

fulfilling some basic requirements to demonstrate their integration. In addition, Canada is seen as a leader in its population’s expressed positive attitudes toward immigrants, with many Canadians seeing this as a defining feature of what it means to be Canadian. Canada has also been seen as a leader in providing supports for the settlement and integration of newcomers, with significant government investment in settlement services, language training, and employment programs, and a network of experienced immigrant serving agencies across the country.

Strong immigration to Canada is an objective of the government in response to demographic, shorter-term labour market, longer-term economic, and regional development needs ([Government of Canada 2020b](#)). Canada’s economic future and its population maintenance and growth are highly dependent on immigration. Canadians’ fertility rates are low, the population is aging, and certain regions are seeing population decline. In addition, in terms of the economic need for immigration, there are labour shortages, skill shortages, and, arguably, a lack of innovation, with many smaller communities particularly in need of revitalization. The Canadian public generally acknowledges these challenges and supports immigration as an important tool to support Canada’s sustainability, well-being, and economic growth. This is further reflected and supported by all major political parties in Canada, which is unique in comparison to most other immigrant receiving countries worldwide.

Despite its many strengths, some fault lines in Canada’s immigration system have become apparent in recent years and have been highlighted and accentuated by the pandemic. These include aspects of both Canada’s immigration policies and our ability to support the settlement and integration of immigrants in Canada. To provide context, we begin this report by describing immigration to

Canada prior to the pandemic, and the policies and programs in place to support immigrant selection, settlement, and integration. We then discuss the vulnerabilities highlighted by COVID-19, and provide recommendations for action to fulfill the potential of Canada's immigration system as a model for supporting nation building and future prosperity. To paint a broad portrait of Canada's immigration and integration policies and programs, we tend to take a national perspective, though we discuss specific provincial/territorial and municipal issues where relevant. In doing so, we acknowledge that there are certain aspects of this complex field that for the most part are beyond the scope of this briefing, such as border security, inadmissibility, and enforcement.

## The prepandemic context

### Immigration policy

#### Immigration levels plan

On 12 March 2020, just four days before the federal government closed Canadian borders to all but essential travel and imposed COVID-19 related restrictions, the Minister of Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship announced the government's plan for immigration levels for 2020–2022 ([Government of Canada 2020p](#)). Canada would welcome 341 000 new permanent residents in 2020, 351 000 in 2021, and 361 000 in 2022. In 2019, Canada welcomed 341 180 permanent residents, the second consecutive year that Canada admitted more than 300 000 permanent residents. Before 2018, the last time Canada welcomed more than 300 000 permanent residents was in 1912.

The March 12 announcement indicated that over the coming three years, the overall numbers would increase in two major categories of immigration (i.e., economic, refugees and protected persons) but not in the family class (see [Government of Canada 2020p](#)). The economic class would increase from 57.4% to 60.4% of all admissions over the next three years, refugees and protected persons would remain fairly constant at 14.6% of all admissions, and the family class would decline from 26.7% in 2020 to 25.2% in 2022.

#### Economic immigration

In recent years, Canada has introduced many changes to its economic immigration programs, which admit approximately 60% of all immigrants to Canada. Through the Express Entry system, a strong focus is placed on human capital (education, language, age, and work experience in skilled occupations, particularly in Canada) as well as a job offer in Canada, for all principal applicants in the economic programs ([Government of Canada 2018](#)). The higher the education, particularly if it was obtained in Canada, and the more years practicing a profession, the more likely is admission to Canada based on the points assigned. However, this does not always result in positive outcomes after arrival. As discussed in more detail shortly, education and work experience achieved abroad are not always recognized by professional regulatory bodies or by employers, and many highly skilled immigrants are under-employed or unemployed at higher rates than their born-in-Canada counterparts. At the same time, many applicants deemed medium- and lower-skilled with less human capital are ineligible to apply or are unsuccessful in their applications for immigration, even if there is a demand for their skills in certain areas, such as the hospitality, tourism, food processing, agriculture, health, and service sectors. Express Entry has also been promoted as superior to the system it replaced because it would render decisions with much greater celerity. Indeed, processing times dropped from years to a few months in the year when Express Entry was introduced, but recent prepandemic data suggest that processing is slowing down and failing to meet the government's own targets ([Allen 2021](#)).

It is also the case that some provincial nominee programs have recently been expanded and federal pilot programs were introduced to address regional or sectoral needs, including the Atlantic Immigration Pilot Program (AIPP), the Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot (RNIP), the Agri-Food Immigration Pilot, the Home Child Care Provider and the Home Support Worker pilots ([Government of Canada 2020b](#)). However, even these programs have entry requirements which may exclude people with lower education and language skills. Canada has made a commitment to introduce a new Municipal Nominee Program (MNP) to encourage more regionalization, but specific details have yet to be announced.

Many of these pilots were introduced to focus on specific regional or sectoral needs that were not being adequately addressed in the main Express Entry programs and processes. Once evaluated, it would be beneficial to learn from these pilots and build the success factors into the mainstream immigration programs.

There have been a number of concerns raised about the immigration application process itself. First, the application process for the various economic immigration programs has become increasingly complex with more streams and pilots being offered. As a result, it has become more difficult for potential immigrants to determine which of the Express Entry programs, myriad of provincial nominee programs, and pilots are best suited to their circumstances and offer the best chance of success. This has led many potential immigrants and temporary entrants to seek advice from third party consultants, some of whom are very expensive but not necessarily well informed. Streamlining and simplification of the process would be very welcome. Second, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) has entered into contractual agreements with third party for-profit Visa Application Centres (VACs) to assist in the initial receipt and processing of immigration applications. Concerns have been raised about the security and confidentiality of information submitted to these centres by potential immigrants. This became a particular concern when it came to light that one VAC was owned by a Chinese police organization ([Vanderklippe and Chase 2021](#)). Greater care should be taken to assess the bona fides and trustworthiness of any third parties contracted by IRCC. Third, IRCC is beginning to use Artificial Intelligence to evaluate eligibility for certain visa applications. Depending on how and when it is used, this could raise a number of ethical and legal concerns about the lack of human judgement and discretion to be applied in the assessment of applications ([Molnar and Gill 2018](#)). All of these operational concerns regarding the application process merit further discussion.

### Family reunification

Canada sees family reunification as an important pillar in its immigration program. However, some aspects of the family class are seen as problematic ([Root et al. 2014](#)). For example, the target for admissions is always much lower than the demand, particularly for parents and grandparents. The selection of parents and grandparents has oscillated between a lottery system in which selection is random and a selection system based on who gets their application in first, either online or in-person. In addition, the definition of “family” for immigration purposes is perceived by some as being too narrow, not taking into account cultural differences in who constitutes a family member. Finally, some claim that the program does not adequately recognize the social and economic benefits of family reunification ([Bragg and Wong 2016](#); [Bélanger and Candiz 2020](#)). For example, parents and grandparents may provide economic resources to their children and grandchildren, and family members may provide other forms of economic support, including through childcare and other unpaid labour. In addition, family members may provide support in the integration process. Indeed, research indicates that immigrants who arrive with family are more likely to stay in Atlantic Canada than those who do not ([Ramos and Bennett 2019](#)).

## Refugees

Canada's immigration policies also recognize its international humanitarian obligations in its refugee determination and refugee resettlement programs. Canada is seen as a global leader in refugee policy and resettlement from abroad, including the admission of special need refugees referred by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and assisted by the government (government-assisted refugees: GARs), and refugees sponsored by ordinary Canadians or community organizations (privately-sponsored refugees: PSRs, blended visa office-referred refugees: BVORs). The notion of "additionality" is a key principal of the Private Sponsorship program and stakeholders want to ensure that any privately sponsored refugees are over and above the number committed to by the Government of Canada for GARs ([Canadian Council for Refugees 2020](#)). Of special note is the fact that GARs are the only permanent residents that are selected and supported to come to this country by the Canadian government.

The election of the Liberal government in late 2015 amid the escalation of the Syrian crisis prompted a dramatic resurgence of refugee resettlement at levels unseen in decades. The Liberal government had made an election promise to resettle 25 000 Syrian refugees as GARs within a few months of the election ([Hamilton et al. 2020](#)). Across the country, Canadians also embarked on private sponsorship, whereby groups of citizens undertook to provide income support and settlement assistance for the first year to PSRs. In addition, a relatively new category of resettled refugees, BVORs, matched UNHCR-referred refugees with private sponsors, so that the federal government and sponsorship groups share the cost of income support for the first year.

After the initial investment in rapid refugee resettlement in late 2015 and early 2016, the pace of resettlement slowed and the government imposed caps and quotas on refugee numbers and regions of origin. The time from initial identification to screening, to approval and travel to Canada was lengthy, involving months to years depending on source region. In addition, initial sponsorships spawned subsequent sponsorship applications for other refugees, including extended family members of those resettled initially. By the end of 2019, resettlement numbers were still high, with more than 30 000 refugees resettled in Canada in 2019 ([Government of Canada 2020b](#)).

Canada has also played a leading role in the development of the Global Compact on Refugees and wants to honour its commitments as a signatory. As part of this commitment, to increase the number of resettled refugees coming to Canada each year, Canada has introduced the Economic Mobility Pathways Project for skilled refugees to be selected as economic immigrants ([Government of Canada 2020t](#)). Refugees selected through this pathway are in addition to the agreed intake of GARs and PSRs.

## Francophone immigration

The Francophone Immigration Strategy released in 2019 set out a target that, by 2023, 4.4% of immigrants settling outside of Quebec would be French-speaking ([Government of Canada 2019c](#)). Over the last few years, the percentage of French-speaking immigrants has been gradually increasing, with support from initiatives such as changes to Express Entry to assign more points to those with French language skills, enhanced promotion and recruitment of French-speaking immigrants, a more inclusive definition of French-speaking immigrants, and the Mobilité Francophone stream of the International Mobility Program (IMP), which enables French-speaking foreign nationals to gain Canadian work experience, thus helping them to qualify for permanent residence. In 2019, the percentage of immigrants settling outside of Quebec who were French-speaking was 2.8% ([Government of Canada 2020b](#)).

## Regionalization

Regional immigration programs aim to attract immigrants to areas beyond Canada's major metropolises. The settlement of immigrants in Canada has been primarily urban and there is a need to rebalance Canada's population and widen the distribution of the benefits of immigration. Within Canada's provinces, most immigrants prefer to settle in large metropolitan areas, such as Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver, and their surrounding communities (Drolet and Teixeira 2020). In 2019, 56% of new permanent residents settled in Canada's three gateway cities (Government of Canada 2020r), and while approximately 60% of the Canadian-born population resides in Canada's Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs; Statistics Canada 2018), over 90% of new permanent residents settled in these areas in 2019 (Government of Canada 2020r). Many small cities and rural areas, such as those in Atlantic Canada and Northern Ontario, are experiencing a vicious cycle of declining economic prospects and population decline (Esses and Carter 2019). Immigration to communities outside of Canada's CMAs could bolster local and regional economies, and newcomers bring with them new and diverse ideas and the prospect of population renewal.

To this end, Canada's approach has been moving in the direction of decentralizing some aspects of immigration selection from federal to provincial/territorial and municipal governments, and to devolve immigration responsibilities from state to non-state actors (Dobrowolsky 2011). Regional immigration programs focus primarily on economic rationales, emphasizing high- or intermediate-skilled individuals. These policies and programs empower local communities in the immigrant attraction and settlement process and allow employers in smaller communities to use international recruitment to alleviate acute labour shortages.

The main examples of these programs are the Provincial Nominee Programs (PNPs) that give provinces/territories the ability to select and settle immigrants according to their own labour market needs. PNPs vary, offering different streams that target different groups (e.g., high-skilled workers, semi-skilled workers, entrepreneurs, and international students), and provinces/territories establish their own criteria for nomination. Combined, the 13 provinces and territories have more than 70 nomination streams. The programs have been successful, with the majority of provincial nominees remaining in the province/territory in which they arrived, able to find stable employment and experiencing increasing earnings over time (Government of Canada 2017b; Heidinger and Cotter 2020). However, there is significant variation in retention rates by region. The PNPs had a target of 61 000 admissions in 2019 and, prior to COVID-19, were expected to welcome 71 000 new immigrants per year by 2021. Programs such as the AIPP, the RNIP, and the MNP are meant to complement the PNPs and further decentralize the immigration process.

Retention of provincial nominees has been lower historically in Atlantic Canada, with retention rates for all immigrants arriving in the Atlantic provinces falling significantly between 2007 and 2017 (Heidinger and Cotter 2020). The AIPP was designed to address this challenge. It was launched in 2017 as one of the pillars of the Atlantic Growth Strategy with an allocation of 2000 spaces per year. As of December 2019, 5590 newcomers had arrived through the pilot program, with the majority arriving in 2019 (Government of Canada 2020g). Through the AIPP, immigrants arrive in the region with job offers and an individualized settlement plan for themselves and their families. The program has been successful in assisting employers to fill labour market gaps, particularly in technical and trade occupations (National Occupational Classification (NOC) B) and intermediate level occupations (NOC C) (Government of Canada 2020g). The success of the program depends on close cooperation between employers and local immigrant serving agencies. The program appears to have addressed the retention issue as the majority of AIPP newcomers remained in Atlantic Canada after their first year (Government of Canada 2020g). The AIPP was recently expanded and made permanent and will now have a minimum of 5000 spaces per year. The expanded program has streams



for high-skilled individuals, intermediate-skilled individuals, and international students. In January 2019, following up on the success of the AIPP, the federal government announced the RNIP. Eleven communities were selected, with each allocated a maximum of 100 recommendations for the first year. Five of the 11 pilot communities had launched their programs prior to the onset of the pandemic. In October 2019, the government proposed the MNP, with a minimum of 5000 spaces per year, to further distribute immigrants across Canada and empower local communities, Chambers of Commerce, and local labour councils to directly sponsor new immigrants for permanent residence ([Government of Canada 2019d](#)). Although the federal government has announced limited details thus far, the program is expected to work via employer sponsorship.

### Two-step immigration process

It is important to note that not all the permanent residents described above would be arriving directly from abroad. Many are those who initially arrived in Canada as high-skilled temporary foreign workers (TFW) in the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) or the IMP, as international students, or as refugee claimants whose asylum claim has been accepted by the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) and then made the transition to permanent residence from within Canada through one of the existing pathways to that status.

This “two-step” immigration process is a growing phenomenon, especially for three groups of temporary entrants: international students who stay in Canada on post graduate work permits after completing their studies, high-skilled individuals in the TFWP, and temporary entrants in the IMP, which allows certain categories of people to work anywhere they can find a job without requiring the hiring employer to receive a positive Labour Market Impact Assessment indicating that there is no one available to do the work ([Ellermann and Gorokhovskaia 2020](#)). Indeed, among economic principal applicants in the 2018 landing cohort, 59% had prior Canadian work experience, compared to just 12% of the 2000 landing cohort ([Hou et al. 2020b](#)). Recent studies by Statistics Canada have identified the pros and cons of two-step immigration. While those permanent residents who entered Canada first as a high-skilled temporary worker or international student generally have better economic outcomes than immigrants who came directly from abroad, two-step immigration is difficult for many as it often entails possible vulnerability during the first step ([Crossman et al. 2020](#)).

Temporary entrants are not part of the annual immigration levels planning process, and thus there are no target numbers for these entrants. With rising demand, the annual intake of temporary entrants has increased dramatically over the years, and it now significantly exceeds the number of permanent residents admitted annually. In 2019, there were 98 310 work permits issued through the TFWP, 306 797 work permits issued to entrants under the IMP, 402 427 permits issued to international students, and over 64 000 claims for refugee status submitted (allowing temporary residence and work permits), for a total of over 871 500 temporary entrants to Canada with permission to work ([Government of Canada 2020b](#)). That is more than 2.5 times the number of permanent residents admitted in 2019. The increase in the IMP is particularly problematic, given that there is no labour market test, little tracking or monitoring, and very little data about its participants.

### International students

As of December 2019, there were more than 642 000 international students in Canada, a 185% increase since 2010 ([CBIE 2020](#)). This is the largest number in Canadian history and this number made Canada the third-ranked study destination in the world for attracting international students ([El-Assal 2020](#)). The Government of Canada has supported this trend and is committed to attracting more international students. According to the International Education Strategy (2019–2024), the Canadian Government plans to spend approximately \$24.1 million supplemental over 5 years and \$5.4 million ongoing to attract students from a wider diversity of countries to study in Canada

([Government of Canada 2019a](#)). In 2019, the Canadian Government also announced plans to spend \$5 million over 5 years to offer additional scholarships for international students to study in Canada ([Government of Canada 2019a](#)).

A major reason for the Government of Canada's interest in attracting international students is that these students are seen as an attractive source of skilled migrants, with many international students studying at the postsecondary level ([CBIE 2020](#)). International students "are relatively young, are proficient in at least one official language, have Canadian educational qualifications and can help address this country's current and pending labour market needs, particularly for highly skilled workers" ([Government of Canada 2019a](#), p. 5). The ability to retain international students as permanent residents and skilled workers is seen as especially critical for regions with a declining labour force. By retaining international students, these regions can rely on a new source of highly skilled labour able to contribute to the regions' growth and prosperity. This view of international students as an ideal source of skilled immigrants was supported by policy changes designed to ease international students' transition to permanent residency. These changes included increasing the allowable number of hours of paid work for international students, increasing the length of post-graduation work permits, and allocating extra points for international students under Express Entry ([Government of Canada 2017c, 2019f](#)). International students are eligible for more than 80 economic class immigration streams ([El-Assal 2020](#)), including PNPs developed specifically for international students (e.g., Ontario does not require international MA and PhD graduates to have a job offer to be eligible for the PNP; [Government of Ontario 2019](#)). Indeed, in 2018, 53 700 former international students became permanent residents in Canada ([Government of Canada 2019a](#)).

Despite this drive to recruit and retain international students as permanent residents, these students are not eligible for settlement services funded by the federal government at a time when they may need them most. Instead, they are excluded from receiving these services while they are studying in Canada as temporary residents, though supports are, at times, provided through provincial/territorial funding and at postsecondary institutions. This delay in receiving settlement services can affect former international students' ability to settle and integrate into Canadian society.

The distribution of international students is concentrated in Canada, with Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver hosting over half of the international students studying in Canada and approximately 80% of international students enrolled at universities and colleges in Ontario, British Columbia, and Quebec ([Statistics Canada 2019](#); [Hango 2020](#)). Smaller centres, such as those in Atlantic Canada, are also seeing a rise in the number of international students, but face challenges in getting those students to stay and transition to permanent residency. Universities and colleges play a key role in the economic and social prosperity of many small urban centres and rural communities and they are key in the attraction and retention of international students as permanent residents.

International students provide a significant capital injection into Canada's post-secondary education sector, which in 2015 moved into the position of receiving a minority of its funding from public sources, transforming the higher education sector from publicly funded to "publicly aided" ([Usher 2019](#)). Universities and colleges have closed this funding gap by attracting higher fee-paying international students, with fees nearly 4 times higher than those charged to domestic students ([Charles and Øverlid 2020](#)). These fees provided an additional \$3.25 billion to the sector in 2016–2017 compared to 10 years earlier, and resulted in some cases where international student fees provide greater funds than those from provincial grants ([Usher 2019](#)). The growth in private for-profit colleges whose revenue may be largely derived from the recruitment of high fee-paying international students and whose quality of education may be questionable is a problem that needs to be monitored in Canada ([Tomlinson 2019](#)). In addition, the demand for international students driven by the economic concerns of postsecondary institutions, and the increasing selection of former



international students as permanent residents, means that these institutions may have an untoward influence on Canada's immigration streams.

Local communities where international students reside also benefit culturally and economically from their presence. For example, a study in Peterborough, Ontario, indicated that international students contribute \$38 000 per student a year to the local economy (Call 2020). It is estimated that international students in Canada spent \$21.6 billion on tuition, accommodation and other expenses in 2018, and the government has stated that "educational expenditures by international students have a greater impact on Canada's economy than exports of auto parts, lumber, or aircraft (Government of Canada 2019a).

### TFWs and agricultural workers

Because most economic immigration programs for permanent residence put such a premium on high human capital, many employers in need of workers who do not meet these criteria resort to hiring staff under the TFWP, even if the work is ongoing and not at all temporary (Ellermann and Gorokhovskaia 2020). In 2017, there were approximately 550 000 TFWs in Canada (Lu 2020). The TFWP includes the most vulnerable workers deemed low-skilled, like those working in agriculture, caregiving, and parts of the service sector. For example, Canada has had a permanent labour shortage in the agricultural and food processing sectors for decades. As a result, from meat processing plants in Alberta to farms in Southwestern Ontario and Prince Edward Island, Canada admits thousands of TFWs who spend up to eight months a year in small towns and rural areas, many without a clear path to permanent residency.

The TFW Program is responsive to employer demand ("privatized and uncapped"), and most often the work permits are employer specific, increasing the risk of exploitation. There is little proactive monitoring to ensure employer compliance and worker safety, and TFWs are not eligible for federally funded settlement services. Canada has created a bifurcated migration system with high-skilled migrants becoming permanent residents, and migrants deemed lower-skilled becoming permanently temporary (Ellermann and Gorokhovskaia 2020). While the TFWP was originally designed to address short-term labour market needs, it now acts as a disincentive to address longer-term labour market needs and increase productivity and innovation in various sectors. Easy access to TFWs may suppress wages and working conditions; prevent investment in infrastructure, technology, and training; and may prevent the active recruitment of under-represented groups in Canada's workforce (Brochu et al. 2016).

In 2018, TFWs accounted for 20% of total employment in the agricultural sector, amounting to approximately 55 000 jobs (Statistics Canada 2020a). While 3846 farms employed at least one TFW, 68.4% were employed by large farms with gross receipts of \$2 million or more. The workers came from approximately 100 countries, including Mexico (51%), Guatemala (20%), and Jamaica (18%). In 2019, most of the temporary workers on farms were in Ontario (42.6%), Quebec (27.3%), British Columbia (20.3%), Alberta (3.9%), and Nova Scotia (2.6%) (Falconer 2020).

Many agricultural workers come to Canada for up to eight months under the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program, created over fifty years ago in 1966 (Alboim and Cohl 2020). In 2019, a total of 46 707 positions were approved under that program, of which 12 858 were from participating Caribbean countries, with the rest from Mexico. Bilateral agreements between Canada and the sending countries are a hallmark of this stream. Others, from approximately 100 countries, come for up to two years under the Temporary Foreign Worker Agricultural Stream (Alboim and Cohl 2020). Both streams involve employer-specific work permits and no pathway to permanent residency.

## Refugee claimants

Claims for refugee protection are adjudicated by the independent, quasi-judicial Refugee Protection Division (RPD) of the IRB. Eligible refugee claimants may obtain work permits and access to federally funded health care while awaiting resolution of their asylum hearings. From 2005, the Canada–US Safe Third Country Agreement (STCA) disqualified refugee claimants seeking entry at the Canada–US border from claiming refugee protection in Canada. Under the STCA, with some exceptions, refugee claimants could no longer enter Canada through a designated port of entry at the US border for purposes of seeking asylum and vice versa. Because the south–north movement of refugee claimants had long exceeded the north–south movement, one purpose of the STCA was to reduce the number of refugee claimants entering Canada. However, avoidance of Canada’s international legal obligations under the *UN Refugee Convention* is not a lawful objective, and the STCA was framed as “help[ing] both governments better manage access to the refugee system in each country for people crossing the Canada–US land border” ([Government of Canada 2020e](#)). For pragmatic and logistical reasons, the STCA did not alter the status quo at airports, marine ports, or inland. When the STCA was debated, parliamentarians were warned of the risk that it would push Canada-bound refugee claimants who had been entering at ports of entry to seek alternative, irregular, and dangerous routes between border posts.

That risk did not materialize in significant irregular entries for a dozen years, and statistics are not publicly available. But within six months of US President Trump’s inauguration, accompanied by intensified xenophobic rhetoric, as well as anti-immigrant and refugee policies and practices, the number of refugee claimants entering Canada overland between designated ports of entry on the Canada–US border increased rapidly. In a widely reported case, some border crossers traversing the Manitoba border in late winter got frostbite and lost fingers. A woman died from exposure. By 2018, the vast majority of irregular entrants crossed from New York into Quebec at Roxham Road, formerly the site of an official border crossing. It is not an offense under Canadian immigration law to enter Canada between designated ports of entry, as long as one presents oneself to immigration authorities without delay. As a result, border crossers would cross Roxham Road in broad daylight into the chilly embrace of RCMP officers who would immediately apprehend and hand them over to immigration authorities, whereupon they would make refugee claims. In 2017, the number of irregular entrants making refugee claims was approximately 18 000; this grew to over 20 000 in 2018 and declined to about 16 000 in 2019 ([IRB 2020](#)).

From a practical perspective, these irregular entries swelled a large backlog of undecided refugee claims before the IRB. Politically, the irregular border crossers attracted widespread media attention, criticism from opposition politicians, and public controversy. Vilification of border crossers as “illegal” immigrants, coded racist invective, depiction of the border as “out of control,” allegations that the Prime Minister was responsible for inviting irregular border crossers with his tweets, and calls to close the “loophole” that enabled border crossers to enter ensued more or less predictably.

The most obvious means of halting irregular entry would be to simply suspend or terminate the STCA, whereupon refugee claimants would simply approach a designated port-of-entry to make their asylum claims. But the STCA was predicated on the goal of reducing the number of refugee claimants able to access Canada’s refugee determination system, and so the practical concern was that enabling refugee claimants to approach the Canadian border safely and in an orderly fashion might ultimately lead to an increase in numbers. In addition, a constitutional challenge to the STCA was commenced in 2018, and the Canadian government was defending it in court. While some politicians and pundits called for the extension and enforcement of the STCA across the full length of the territorial border, this was wildly unfeasible, insofar as the Canada–US border stretches for 7000 km. The reason why irregular border crossers clustered at Roxham Road (and were hyper-visible and easily apprehended)

was precisely because the STCA did not apply to them. If it did, they would have been diverted into more surreptitious and hazardous routes of entry that required facilitation. This, in turn, would have amounted to a job creation program for smugglers. Once inside Canada, it would have been virtually impossible to prove that a refugee claimant entered irregularly from the United States.

In 2019, the government incorporated amendments to the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* into an omnibus *Budget Implementation Act*. Under the new provisions, refugee claimants arriving in Canada who had claimed refugee protection in one of the “Five Eyes” countries (the United States, United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Australia, with whom Canada shares an intelligence agreement) are denied access to the regular refugee determination process before an independent tribunal. Instead, they are relegated to an abbreviated process (Pre-Removal Risk Assessment (PRRA)) before a non-independent public servant. This new process applies to all refugee claimants, regardless of mode of entry, and regardless of whether their refugee claim was actually adjudicated in the Five Eyes country. If the PRRA is rejected, under the new process claimants would be returned to their country of nationality.

### Migrant detention

Canada uses migrant detention less often than most other states. In 2018–2019, the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) detained an average of 342 people each day. The average length of detention was almost two weeks, but the median length of detention was a day, suggesting that a small number of non-citizens are detained for extraordinarily long periods of time (Silverman 2020). Most are detained at the “back end” (prior to removal from Canada), rather than upon arrival into Canada. Although s. 55 of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act authorizes detention on several grounds, about 85% of individuals are detained on the basis that they are “unlikely to appear” for a hearing. Non-citizens may be detained in immigration detention facilities (which IRCC labels immigration holding centres), or in provincial jails.

Although numbers are relatively small, the process for detention review was subject to a scathing independent audit in 2018 (Laird 2018) that revealed patterns of arbitrariness, lack of accountability, and absence of procedural fairness at the Immigration Division of the IRB, the tribunal tasked with regular reviews of ongoing detention. The legislation places no firm outer limits on the length of detention, thereby enabling indeterminate detention of some non-citizens. This exacerbates concerns about the state’s (illicit) use of detention for punitive purposes. In addition, members of the Immigration Division interpreted their own jurisdiction to preclude attention to conditions of detention as a relevant consideration in deciding whether to order release.

Since 2017, various reforms have been undertaken with respect to the immigration detention regime that addressed the detention of children and the availability of alternatives to detention. Concerns about indeterminate detention, the punitive use of immigration detention, and the failure of the Immigration Division to address conditions of detention remain ongoing issues and have generated legal challenges. At present, the appellants in the Federal Court of Appeal decision in *Brown v. Canada*, 2020 FCA 130 (Brown v. Canada 2020), are seeking leave to appeal to the Supreme Court of Canada.

## The settlement and integration of immigrants and refugees

### The underutilization of immigrants’ skills

We have all heard the stories: the immigrant taxi driver who was a brain surgeon before his migration, the office cleaner who was a cancer researcher before she came to Canada. These are not just stories, though; they represent losses: social, cultural, emotional, and economic losses. For example, in

analysing census data taking into account a wide variety of factors including education level (higher for immigrants than native born) and ability to access high-skilled professional and managerial occupations (lower for immigrants than native born), [Reitz et al. \(2014\)](#) estimated earnings loss due to immigrant skills underutilization (employment in occupations below those at which comparably qualified native-born individuals are working). These analyses indicate that skilled immigrants lose over \$11 billion annually in earnings because their credentials are not fully recognized, resulting in lost tax revenues for the country as whole.

In the decades before the pandemic, skilled immigrants in Canada were more likely to be unemployed or underemployed compared with those born and trained in Canada, working in jobs that underutilize their skills, education, and previous work experience ([Reitz et al. 2014](#)), despite the increasing selectivity of immigration policy and concomitant rise in immigrant human capital. This has been evident since the 1970s, and foreign credential validation issues are seen as one of the reasons for this outcome ([Reitz 2001](#)), with racial and religious prejudice also playing a role ([Esses 2021](#)).

Occupational regulation represents a major labour market barrier. There are different degrees of assessment applied to professional occupations. Registration involves candidates providing information on their background and being included on a list. Certification grants some kind of title to those who meet minimum criteria. These two types of assessment may not be needed to work in the relevant occupation and represent a “regulatory light touch” ([Sweetman et al. 2015](#)). Requirements for licensure, on the other hand, are more stringent and involve some kind of educational standard, professional experience, an examination, an ethical or moral test, and citizenship/residency and, in some cases, minimum language fluency. Professional groups provide self-regulation within a legislated mandate, and they represent various trade-offs. Professional regulatory bodies can convey information about the minimum quality of expert services and protect public safety, but they also risk monopoly power that can exact a social cost to society because they restrict the number of available professionals and increase the costs of their services. Licensing is exclusionary because only those with the license may perform the task or possess the title ([Sweetman et al. 2015](#)). The fact that skilled immigrants may receive points for professional degrees in the application process but are then unable to practice in their professions upon arrival in Canada seems contradictory. Immigrants are not always aware of the regulations and barriers to employment prior to their arrival in Canada, which can lead to unrealistic expectations about employment prospects in Canada and inevitable frustration and disappointment ([Reitz et al. 2014](#)). To attempt to remedy this situation, there are numerous sources of information available to potential immigrants provided by the federal, provincial/territorial, and municipal governments, as well as by specific occupational regulatory bodies and immigrant-serving agencies.

The issue of exclusionary practices has been addressed through various federal and provincial/territorial government commitments (see [Government of Canada 2016](#)). In Ontario, the *Fair Access to Regulated Professions Act* (2006) was passed, including the creation of the Ontario Fairness Commissioner (OFC; [Türegün 2017](#)). The OFC oversees the work of 42 regulatory bodies and 22 trades in Ontario, and is mandated to hold professional regulatory bodies to account for how they process international applicants. OFC assesses the processes used to evaluate the credentials of international applicants applying to practice the profession and have their credentials recognised. OFC stipulates that testing should be fair, transparent, and objective, and that fees charged to applicants should be only cost recovery. In many cases, the work of the OFC has resulted in novel approaches to improve the credential assessment process. Other provinces have also addressed the issue of international applicants seeking to enter regulated professions in a variety of ways. Nonetheless, there is still much work to do in this area. For example, the 2018–2019 OFC annual report ([Government of Ontario 2019](#)) indicated that although improvements have been made over

time, 40% of the professional regulatory bodies were still not meeting their legislated requirements, with 30% requiring some form of prior Canadian work experience for registration without explaining why this experience is necessary.

### Health care workers

In Canada, immigrants comprise 25.5% of the health care and social assistance sectors (Kim 2020). Between 1996 and 2016, the proportion of immigrants in the occupations of nurse aide, orderly, and patient service associate rose from 22% to 36% (Turcotte and Savage 2020). Across Canada, the share of immigrants in these three occupational groups ranges provincially from 2.9% in Newfoundland and Labrador to 51.6% in Alberta, and is more concentrated in Canada's largest cities, ranging from 47.8% in Montreal and 52% in Ottawa–Gatineau to 70.5% in Calgary, 71.7% in Vancouver, and 78.7% in Toronto. The majority (often around 80%) are women and include an overrepresentation of Black and Filipino ethno-national communities. For example, Black women represent 26% of immigrants in the care aide occupational group, as opposed to <4% of all immigrant workers in other occupations. The occupation also includes a fairly highly educated group of workers, with 45% of the most recent immigrants in these occupations having at least a bachelor's degree. Of those recent immigrants with a bachelor's degree, 44% had completed their degree in a health-related field and of these two-thirds had a nursing degree (Turcotte and Savage 2020).

The deskilling of immigrants in health-related occupations is particularly noteworthy, given that in the third quarter of 2019, about 40 300 jobs in health occupations were unfilled in Canada (Hou and Schimmele 2020), with foreign-educated immigrants over-represented in the adults with a health-related education whose skills were being under-utilized (Hou and Schimmele 2020). If these skills are not used, they may become obsolete over time, necessitating additional training.

Transitions between national labour markets for migrant health workers are marked by regulatory barriers that exact costs, especially problems in assessing the equivalency of foreign credentials (Sweetman et al. 2015) and the risks of credential devaluation that may be related to the process of assessment (Baumann and Blythe 2008; Bourgeault et al. 2010). In the case of internationally educated physicians, for some there is an additional barrier of having to hold a residency position in Canada prior to receiving their medical licence, which can prove quite difficult. For example, in 2018, the Canadian Residency Matching Service reported that about 77% of international medical graduates who participated in the full match process were unable to obtain a residency position, compared with approximately 6% of Canadian medical graduates (Rahman 2019).

Scholars have begun to examine these transfer losses as evidence of an emerging global pattern of effective labor export and have interpreted it as a new form of unequal exchange (Valiani 2011; Wise and Covarrubia 2012). Local workforce hierarchies are also imbued with culturally and politically charged issues of identity, difference, and inequality. The intersectional relevance of these distinctions in the field of health work, which represents deeply intimate body work, is immense. Key to this issue is the nonrecognition of overseas qualifications and experience from certain countries and unfamiliar schools, seen as one of the most critical skilled immigration issues of the current period (Cameron et al. 2019).

### Public attitudes

Canadians have generally been viewed as having some of the most positive attitudes toward immigrants and immigration in the world. This is supported by the results of cross-national surveys of immigration attitudes. For example, in a 2019 survey of 145 countries, Canada ranked as the most accepting country for immigrants on Gallup's Migrant Acceptance Index (Esipova et al. 2020). This index includes questions as to whether immigrants living in their country, becoming their neighbours,



and marrying into their families are good or bad things. Similarly, a 2018 Pew Research Center survey of attitudes in 18 immigrant-receiving countries found that Canada was at the top of the list in terms of seeing immigrants as making the country stronger because of their work and talent, rather than as a burden on the country because they take jobs and social benefits (Gonzalez-Barrera and Connor 2019). Attitudes toward immigrants and immigration in Canada have evolved since the 1970s, with more and more Canadians disagreeing that immigration levels in Canada are too high. Indeed, as of the turn of the century, more Canadians disagree than agree with this statement (Adams 2019). These effects are attributable to the fact that many Canadians believe that the economic impact of immigration is positive, and that multiculturalism and diversity are defining aspects of what makes Canada unique (Adams 2019). They are also due to Canadians' perceptions of immigrants as part of the national in-group and as supporting common goals for the betterment of the nation as a whole, in line with much of the public discourse on immigration and multiculturalism in Canada (Esses et al. 2006).

It should be noted, however, that these attitudes are not uniformly positive and that differences exist as a function of personal characteristics of responders and the immigrant groups in question. For example, Canadians who are less educated, those living outside of urban areas, and those on the ideological right tend to be less accepting of immigrants in general (Gonzalez-Barrera and Connor 2019; Esipova et al. 2020). It is also the case that although attitudes toward economic immigrants tend to be positive, attitudes toward refugees and refugee claimants have varied considerably over time, depending on contextual factors. For example, although attitudes toward refugees were quite favorable at the peak of the Liberal Trudeau government's 2015–2016 welcome of Syrian refugees, there was some evidence of a rise in negative attitudes in subsequent years, perhaps because of the highly publicized irregular entry to Canada of refugee claimants from the United States (Vomiero and Russell 2019). Indeed, public support for immigration policies has been shown to be influenced by belief in the integrity of the system, with messaging about bogus refugee claimants cheating the system causing reduced support for Canada's refugee policy and increased dehumanization of refugees (Esses 2021).

In addition, a 2019 EKOS survey found evidence of a rise in the belief that there are too many visible minority immigrants coming to Canada, with 69% of Conservative supporters expressing this view compared to 15% of Liberals (EKOS 2019). Of note, in 2013 this divide across Liberal and Conservative supporters was much smaller, with 34% of Liberals and 47% of Conservatives agreeing that there are too many visible minority immigrants coming to Canada. While some view this rising polarization as evidence of "ordered populism emerging in Canada" (EKOS 2019), others suggest that Canada is relatively immune to the populism evident in other countries (Adams 2019).

One group that has been stigmatized throughout Canadian history is Chinese immigrants. In his examination of the legal, institutional, and societal exclusion of Chinese people in Canadian history, Li (1988, p. 20) points out that "[V]irtually every conceivable social evil was blamed on the [sic] them, including epidemics, overcrowding, prostitution, opium-smoking, and corruption." The long history of exclusion and stereotyping explains why many preconceived and negative ideas about Asians are deeply entrenched in the Canadian population. Prejudices against Asians remain internalized in many Canadians and have the potential (as they did in the past) to resurface in times of crisis.

### Settlement sector

Canada's settlement sector is a unique sector that dates back over 75 years, providing services to newcomers to Canada to help them settle and integrate into their new country and supporting the development of welcoming communities for diverse Canadians. There are currently over 500 settlement service providers across Canada (not including Quebec), with immigration to and within



Quebec managed separately through the Canada–Quebec Accord (Koltermann and Scott 2020). Although most settlement service providers are not-for-profit registered charities, some services are offered through public institutions like schools and colleges. Immigrant serving agencies hold specialized knowledge not easily replicated by the public and private sector, given their expertise in working with recently arrived newcomer families (Burststein 2010). Immigrant serving agencies are often also at the forefront of welcoming and building more inclusive local communities, with the settlement sector rooted in local communities across Canada. Immigrant serving agencies' mandates go beyond newcomer settlement service offerings to encompass civic engagement, social planning, collaborative research, anti-racism work, and representation on local and regional organizations, such as police boards (Burststein 2010). Sector employees tend to consist primarily of racialized women (many of whom immigrated to Canada) and, despite their level of expertise, compensation, health benefits and pension offerings often lag behind most other social service sectors (Koltermann and Scott 2018).

Immigrant serving agencies are driven by innovation, flexibility, responsiveness and their ability to quickly pivot their capacity when called upon (Burststein 2010). Operation Syrian Refugees is an example of how the settlement sector's core values, expertise, and capacity were thoroughly tested when the Government requested the sector to welcome and support an unprecedented 25 000 Syrian GARs within 4 months—a key and vital contribution to what is seen as an overall successful humanitarian resettlement operation (Government of Canada 2019g). Canada's settlement sector is unique in the world and is often sought out by other states and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for its innovative and promising integration practices and program models, but also for the collaborative working relationship between the sector and the federal government (e.g., IRCC; Kim 2018).

In 2020–2021, IRCC's national settlement program budget stands at \$824 727 955, not including funds earmarked through the Canada–Quebec Accord (IRCC NHQ 2020 communication to National Settlement and Integration Council members). The National Funding Formula is the tool that is used to allocate IRCC funding to its four regional offices and, from there, to local service providers through periodic national calls for proposals. Funding allocations to each IRCC region are based on a rolling average of permanent resident landings in each province and territory over the previous 3-year period. The National Funding Formula allocation also takes into consideration factors such as the number of refugee landings in each province/territory.

Immigrant serving agencies are funded primarily through IRCC contribution agreements, which restrict program eligibility to permanent residents. While IRCC provides the bulk of settlement funding, over the years many agencies have diversified their funding sources through provincial/territorial and municipal government contributions, community foundations, private sector funding, and self-generated funding through social enterprises. These diverse funding sources have allowed agencies in some regions to expand their service offerings and target client groups, including some temporary residents, such as international students, temporary foreign workers, and refugee claimants, as well as naturalized citizens (Burststein 2010). Given the increasing proportion of temporary residents who eventually become permanent residents through the two-step immigration process, providing them with some presettlement services early in their habitation in Canada may provide many downstream benefits as well as ensure that there is a pan-Canadian safety net for temporary residents.

Pre-COVID-19 settlement services were organized into five primary national program areas, with some regional variations. These areas include Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC), which accounts for approximately 60% of the national budget, with the remaining 40% consisting of multilingual settlement supports, Canada Connects (programs that match immigrants with longer-term Canadian residents through volunteer mentorships), employment services, and the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) GARs (with the term resettlement used in this context because refugees are often coming from a location outside of their home country, in which they

sought protection). Regardless of where immigrants or refugees land in Canada, they can expect, by and large, the same range of core settlement support areas that follow national standards ([Government of Canada 2019e](#)). Pre-COVID-19, an overarching approach was that the vast majority of settlement supports were delivered in-person, in offices, through face-to-face individual and group-based offerings.

Immigrating to Canada, whether by choice or because of persecution, is a significant life-changing decision. Generally speaking, the settlement sector felt that immigrants and refugees should begin their orientation to Canada prior to arrival in this country, ideally with a strong link between pre- and post-arrival supports. In 1998, the International Organization for Migration launched the Canadian Orientation Abroad program specifically targeting resettled refugees, as well as some immigrants in 40 different countries. Since 1998, several other organizations funded by IRCC have offered a mix of in-person and online pre-arrival services in regions/countries that reflect significant immigrant source countries to Canada, as well as specific occupations ([Government of Canada 2019b](#)). Pre-arrival services presently target resettled refugees, and economic and family class immigrants, as well as some international students. In recent years, some immigrant serving agencies have also expanded into offering hybrid pre-arrival services with orientation on a specific region of Canada.

LINC has the purpose of language acquisition through a settlement lens. Eligible newcomers' language abilities are generally assessed in-person using a national testing standard (except in some rural or smaller centres where an online standard assessment is offered) and, based on the language level outcome, are able to register for free language classes based on availability. Some LINC providers offer in-person day care and preschool instruction for children of parents attending classes, which is critically important to ensure a higher degree of participation for lone parent families and immigrant mothers.

Settlement supports to newcomers are provided in their language of choice by bilingual, bicultural staff, who may have been former immigrants and refugees themselves, or through staff with interpreter support. Service offerings often begin with a needs/asset assessment exercise, followed by the provision of settlement information and orientation, and links, if necessary, to specialized supports through referral services. Immigrants often find it difficult to find the information they need to settle and integrate into Canadian society, and these services fill that gap. Support services are offered to newcomers to ensure service accessibility, such as bus tickets, child care, and interpretation supports. Besides these settlement supports offered within immigrant serving agencies, Canada also has the Settlement Workers in Schools program, a school-based program offering similar supports that target newcomer students and their parents. In addition, some immigrant serving agencies work with multi-barrier at risk newcomer populations through a specialized settlement case management approach, whereby trained staff work with at risk families for 12–18 months. Relatedly, Canada Connects encompasses various activities, including the engagement of longer-term Canadian residents as trained volunteers or settlement/employment mentors who are matched with recently arrived newcomers to support their settlement process. In-person field trips and English conversation circles supported by volunteers are other examples of how immigrant serving agencies engage civil society and local residents.

Most immigrant serving agencies, through both IRCC and other funding sources, offer a range of in-person, one-on-one, and group activities to assist newcomers in their employment search to secure their first job in Canada. These in-person services include such things as career exploration, resume building support, and practising interviewing skills, as well as understanding the re/certification process necessary with occupation-specific regulatory bodies. Some agencies also offer in-person classroom project-based training courses that combine language acquisition, technical training, and

internships/practicums related to specific labour market shortages/industries. Most service providers have employer engagement outreach/supports that match newcomers with employer needs.

Underlying the main service areas, and with the understanding that a one-size approach does not work for all immigrant populations, immigrant serving agencies also have in place targeted in-person specialized programming based on gender (LGBTQ+, women), age (children, youth, young adults, and seniors), and immigration categories (refugees) ([Government of Canada 2019b](#)). At times, specialized programming has also been created for particular cohorts of refugees (e.g., Yazidis).

There are currently 44 immigrant serving agencies who are also subcontracted by IRCC and the Province of Quebec to deliver Canada's national refugee resettlement scheme, known as the RAP for GARs (IRCC NHQ 2020 communication to National RAP Working Group members). RAP has its own IRCC funding envelope and separate Treasury Board terms and conditions. RAP service providers provide essential in-person first language resettlement supports to GARs. RAP essential in-person services include domestic airport arrival assistance, temporary accommodation either in a specialized reception centre or commercial accommodation, first language orientation to local services, life skills supports, assistance with completing mandatory government applications (e.g., health coverage, social insurance number), assistance in accessing federal income support (similar to provincial and territorial income support rates), and links to a variety of other supports. RAP agency staff also help GARs to secure stable rental housing and link them to the other settlement services outlined previously.

Local Immigration Partnerships (LIPs) and Réseaux en immigration francophone (RIFs) involve collaborative governance arrangements among multiple stakeholders, including immigrant serving agencies, mainstream organizations, public institutions, and municipal governments. These local or regional planning tables are designed to improve service coordination and immigrant integration outcomes, and undertake different activities with the goal of building more welcoming and inclusive receiving communities, such as developing anti-racism campaigns, establishing multi-year strategic integration plans, leading research initiatives, and public education. Many are also involved in the attraction of immigrants to their communities. LIPs and RIFs have been established across the country, primarily led by immigrant serving agencies or municipalities. They further highlight the diverse roles that immigrant serving agencies play within their communities.

The Settlement Sector, as part of the newcomer settlement and integration process, has for many years embraced the importance of reconciliation with Canada's First Peoples. In response to the 2012 Truth and Reconciliation Commission's recommendations 93 and 94 ([Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2012](#)), the sector recognizes its responsibility to help educate and orient newcomers to Indigenous Peoples of Canada. Numerous innovative, collaborative, and promising practices began prior to the Commission Calls to Action but have since expanded in communities across Canada, through various activities, field trips, settlement and language programming. One example is the Immigrant Services Society of BC initiative whereby an Indigenous film maker along with an Indigenous Educator/Writer were commissioned to create a video and study guide capturing "welcome" to immigrant and refugee newcomers by Indigenous representatives from across the country ([ISSofBC 2020a](#)). Additionally, the video and study guide highlights key concepts and historical events that Indigenous People feel are essential for newcomers to learn. This particular tool is meant to begin the education process and act as a jumping off point for newcomers to further explore and increase their own knowledge of Indigenous Peoples of Canada.

In sum, Canada's settlement sector pre-COVID-19 was characterized by primarily not-for-profit registered charities offering permanent residents, and some temporary residents in some regions (funded by some provincial/territorial government contributions), a variety of settlement services

through in-person services, programs, classes, and activities, as well as taking leadership roles within their local communities on issues of anti-racism, social inclusion, equity, and civic engagement ([Government of Canada 2019b](#)). While settlement services pre-COVID-19 were delivered primarily in-person, some immigrant serving agencies also had embarked some years ago on digital transformation, offering some limited online services and LINC classes, but this was an exception within the sector.

## Pandemic impact: vulnerabilities revealed and recommendations for action

The pandemic affected virtually everyone's mobility within Canada and across borders. Emergency Orders authorized under the *Quarantine Act* restricted admission of foreign nationals in all categories—economic, family, refugees and refugee claimants, TFWs, international students, and visitors. But successive Emergency Orders also disrupted the migration hierarchy embedded in Canadian public policy and discourse. The exceptions to exclusion did not necessarily correspond to those non-citizens who, prepandemic, were valued more highly by the immigration system. The Emergency Orders also differentiated between entrants from the United States and from all other foreign countries ([Hiebert 2020](#); [Macklin 2020](#)). The fact that the people and forms of labour considered essential under COVID-19 did not map neatly onto Canada's migration hierarchy of value invites critical reflection on the hierarchy's validity beyond the circumstances of the pandemic.

The pandemic shone a light on what we already knew, highlighted areas of concern that were under the surface, and brought new issues to the forefront. Canada's immigration system has many strengths. However, the pandemic highlighted a number of areas for improvement. We learned who Canada's essential workers are, how many of them are temporary foreign workers, and how undervalued and insecure they are despite our dependence on them. We learned how skewed our immigration system is towards high human capital, despite the fact that many of our labour shortages and essential workers are in occupations deemed lower-skilled. We learned that immigrants with different skillsets, including family members who do unpaid care work, are valuable and that barriers to employment commensurate to skills need to be addressed. We learned how barriers to licensure prevented many internationally educated health professionals from contributing to the fight against COVID-19 when their skills and expertise could have really helped. We learned that the STCA is a problem, and that we really need to pay attention to detention practices. We learned that there is a need for more stable services in French, and communications in at least both official languages across the country. We learned about the differential impact of the virus dependent on individuals' income, race, immigrant status, gender, and age, and that we need to deal more decisively with racism when it arises. We also learned that different sectors and regions were affected differently.

## Immigration policy

### Immigration levels and admissions

In late March 2020, just days after the federal government had announced its targets for immigration levels for 2020–2022, Canada closed its borders to all classes of immigrants (economic, family, and refugee and protected persons), all visitors, and all temporary entrants except those with pre-existing visas and those whose entry was deemed to be essential ([Government of Canada 2020d](#)). The latter group included temporary agricultural workers and those who work in the health sector. Canadian visa officers abroad were repatriated, and no new processing was undertaken outside Canada. As discussed below, since that time, processing of some permanent and temporary residents has restarted.

The impact on immigrant admissions has been dramatic. The targets for admission in 2020 were not met in any of the three permanent resident categories. According to IRCC data, between January and September 2020, approximately 143 500 new permanent residents were welcomed to Canada, compared to 264 000 in the same months of 2019. The total for all of 2020 was 184 370, compared to the total of 341 000 in 2019 and targeted for 2020 (El-Assal 2021). This is a shortfall of 46%. It is not as drastic, however, as that of other countries, with Australia anticipating an 85% decrease in migration in the 2020–2021 fiscal year compared to 2018–2019 (Truu 2020).

On 30 October 2020 the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship announced new targets for permanent resident admissions to Canada for 2021–2023 including 401 000 permanent residents in 2021, 411 000 in 2022, and 421 000 in 2023. The previous plan set targets of 351 000 in 2021 and 361 000 in 2022. The Minister acknowledged the need to increase these targets from those announced in March 2020 to make up the shortfall that resulted from the pandemic. He cited Canada's demographic needs as a result of our aging population and low fertility rates, and our need for immigrants to fill labour and skill shortages, and to contribute to Canada's economic recovery, regional growth, and innovation agenda. Admission targets were established for each category for each of three years (Government of Canada 2020q).

Highlights of the plan include:

- A focus on economic growth, with close to 60% of admissions to come from the Economic Class
- A continued focus on community-driven approaches to address diverse labour and demographic needs across the country
- Additional points for French-speaking candidates under Express Entry, to promote the growth of Francophone communities outside of Quebec
- A commitment to admit up to 500 refugees over the next 2 years through the Economic Mobility Pathways Project (in which skilled refugees are selected as economic immigrants, increasing the total number of refugees coming to Canada)
- A pathway to permanent residency for eligible refugee claimants who were working on the front lines of the pandemic, providing direct care to patients in health-care institutions, between 13 March and 14 August 2020

It will be essential to make up the shortfall in immigrant admissions during 2020 by increasing admissions in all immigrant classes over the next few years to achieve Canada's short- and long-term objectives. This will contribute to Canada's economic recovery, ensure population growth, address labour and skill shortages in regions and sectors, respond to the pent-up demand for family reunification, and honour Canada's international commitments to refugee resettlement. To do so, adequate resources must be allocated both in Canada and abroad to ensure the expeditious processing of increased applications in all immigration classes and temporary entrant categories. On 13 February 2021, IRCC demonstrated one strategy it will be using to meet economic immigrant targets. More than five times the number of invitations to apply for permanent residence were issued to candidates in the Express Entry pool compared to the numbers invited in draws prior to the pandemic (Lundy and McMahon 2021). This draw was specifically focused on those in the Canadian Experience Class, which includes TFWs and international students, with the government indicating that 90% are already living in Canada. Resources and personnel to assure the timely processing of these applications will be required. In addition, planning and streamlined processes will be necessary in advance of the opening up of Canada's borders to respond quickly to an increased number of immigrant applications from abroad, increased requests for refugee resettlement by the UNHCR,

increased employer demand for temporary workers, and an increased number of applications from international students.

It is also the case that permanent resident admission criteria should be reviewed for economic entrants under Express Entry, PNPs, and all pilots to ensure that they can better respond to the range of labour market and demographic needs across the country beyond those requiring high human capital. This review should take into account that:

- More of our recent highly skilled immigrants are under- or unemployed compared to Canadian born individuals with the same level of education
- Many high skilled jobs can now be done remotely
- Our economy needs workers at all points on the skill continuum (C and D NOC codes too)
- We need people who will stay and contribute to Canada across the country and not just in major urban centres

Currently the Minister of Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship tables in the House of Commons each year an Annual Report update and revised three-year targets for permanent resident categories only. However, this report tells a narrow story of overall immigration to Canada, missing some fundamental aspects. We suggest that the annual plan include target ranges (not quotas) for temporary to permanent resident conversions by temporary resident categories, as well as three-year projections for the TFWP, the IMP, the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program, international students, and refugee claimants. By combining both permanent and temporary resident numbers in the Annual Report to Parliament, Canadians will have a much clearer and accurate understanding of the country's overall annual projections for entrants to Canada.

While continuing increases in permanent and temporary arrivals are primarily under the control of the federal government, it is the provinces and territorial governments (and municipal governments) who are at the forefront of newcomer welcoming, settlement, and local integration processes. Thus, we urge provincial and territorial governments to develop their own multi-year immigration plans with such elements as forecasting permanent and temporary resident landings, demographic shifts, and settlement patterns, along with labour market needs within different regions, to help civil society, public institutions like education and health, employers, and businesses to better plan for accelerated resident levels, moving from a reactive to proactive planning process (see also [Tanweer 2021](#)).

#### *Recommendations<sup>1</sup>*

We recommend that the federal and provincial/territorial governments:

1. Allocate additional resources to the processing of applications in all immigration classes and temporary entrant categories, both in Canada and abroad, to ensure that targets are met
2. Review permanent resident admission criteria for economic entrants under Express Entry, PNPs, and all pilots to ensure that they can better respond to the range of labour market and demographic needs across the country beyond those requiring high human capital
3. Include in the Annual Report to Parliament target ranges for temporary to permanent resident conversions by temporary resident categories, as well as three-year projections for the TFWP, the IMP, the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program, international students, and refugee claimants
4. Develop provincial and territorial multi-year immigration plans including forecasting permanent and temporary resident admissions, demographic shifts, and settlement patterns

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<sup>1</sup>To view the full list of recommendations made in this paper, please see [Supplementary Material 1](#).



### Family reunification

The border closures have also had a significant impact on those in Canada striving to be reunited with family members through family sponsorship. Processing of applications has been slowed, with family sponsorship down 78% in the second quarter of 2020 compared to the same period in 2019 (Thevenot 2020). During this time, there was considerable media attention on the hardships experienced by spouses and partners who were separated (e.g., Kindleman 2020). In October 2020, the federal government announced a new process for the admission to Canada of extended family members, including those who have been in an exclusive dating relationship for at least one year (Government of Canada 2020i). In addition, more staff have been deployed to process spousal sponsorship applications, with close to 15 000 spousal applications approved in the fourth quarter of 2020 (Keung 2021b).

With limited childcare and the glaring deficits in long-term care, the problematic nature of limited spots for families to sponsor parents and grandparents has become more apparent (see also Zou and Fang 2017). Canadians are quite supportive of family sponsorship at this time, with 36% of respondents to a recent survey indicating that family members of those in Canada should be given priority (Thevenot 2020).

There is a rationale and support from Canadians for increasing the percentage of immigrants who are admitted each year through the family class of immigration, including parents and grandparents, and it is also time to consider expanding the definition of family members. The importance of family supports became especially salient during the pandemic, including to care for sick and elderly relatives rather than placing them in long-term care facilities. Family members—including parents and grandparents, as well as extended family members (e.g., brothers and sisters)—are also needed to provide childcare and eldercare so that immigrant workers can contribute to Canada's economic recovery. These family members can also be sources of mutual financial support during periods of job loss and economic recovery.

#### *Recommendation<sup>1</sup>*

We recommend that the federal government:

1. Increase the percentage of immigrants admitted through the family class of immigration, including parents and grandparents, and review the definition of family members for possible expansion

### Francophone immigration

Francophone immigration to Canada seems to have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. For example, in the second quarter of 2020, the number of French-speaking permanent residents who landed in Ontario decreased by close to 70% compared to 2019, whereas the overall number of permanent residents who landed in Ontario decreased by 62% (Chabannes 2020). It seems that a number of approved French-speaking immigrants were stuck in their countries of origin and saw their visas expire. For example, the Visa Bureau of Dakar (which deals with all the visas for West Africa, mainly Francophone), had trouble extending visas like other bureaus did (Chabannes 2020).

The pandemic highlighted again the many shortcomings of the Official Languages Act. Urgent messages were published only in English; rules were put aside in the labelling of dangerous products. That is, the crisis was used to justify infringements to the Official Languages Act in the name of urgency. In fact, because of this unprecedented health crisis, French-speaking people were especially in need of information provided in French. This issue disproportionately affected Francophone newcomers, who are more likely to not speak English (at all or well) in comparison to French-speaking, Canadian-born individuals in minority settings who are almost all fully bilingual.

Grassroots initiatives and organizations stepped in to provide services to French-speaking immigrants who arrived during the pandemic and could not access any funded services or support from public agencies (difficult to reach, functioning slowly and remotely). This was, for instance, the case of the Sudbury Ivoirian Association, which is usually an association organizing social events for the Sudbury Ivoirian community, but which, during the pandemic, transformed itself into a service provider for newcomers (Senga 2020).

Francophone (and bilingual) universities and colleges outside of Quebec have been very active, and successful, in the last few years in attracting international students. The hope is that these potential future citizens will stay, work and have a family in Francophone Minority Communities (FMCs). It will therefore be essential to support these efforts through such strategies as funding supports for universities that are working to attract Francophone international students, and for communities that are seeking to be welcoming and have these international students settle in FMCs. International students are key drivers of demographic and economic growth and will be important for Canada's post-pandemic recovery, and Francophone immigrants will need to be a key consideration in these efforts.

Francophone immigration to FMCs will benefit from the prompt and successful implementation of an MNP as many FMCs are concentrated in small- and medium-size cities in remote regions. The advantages will be three-fold: increase Francophone immigration, increase regionalization, and answer labour shortages.

Several pilot projects launched by IRCC are directly relevant to Francophone immigration (the Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot—key for Northern Ontario Francophone communities; the Atlantic Immigration Pilot—key for all the Acadian communities). The Province of Ontario also launched the Regional immigration pilot targeting Cornwall, Chatham-Kent, Belleville, and Quinte West in which a sizable number of French-speakers live. The impacts of the pandemic will have to be considered when these pilots are assessed. The evaluation of programs such as Welcoming Francophone Communities will also need to take into consideration that the implementation of many measures was delayed because of the pandemic. In the same fashion, we expect that the settlement outcomes will not be as positive as targeted because of the pandemic.

Shortcomings in providing urgent information in French became salient during the pandemic and this should not be overlooked. We should not wait for the next emergency to determine how information in both official languages can be provided, but instead put into place a strategy now that can be implemented immediately when the need arises. That is, resources for translation and information provision in both official languages should be available at all times.

It is also the case that French-speaking service providers for newcomers require additional support. The recommendations for the settlement sector provided in other sections of this report apply equally, if not more so, to French service providers who worry that austerity measures to solve the deficit will lead to cuts in Francophone services when they are most needed for those recovering from the consequences of the pandemic.

#### *Recommendations<sup>1</sup>*

We recommend that the federal and provincial/territorial governments:

1. Consider Francophone minority communities in the implementation of the MNP
2. Provide targeted funding for Francophone universities and colleges outside of Quebec (and Francophone minority communities) to attract and retain Francophone international students

3. Develop a central repository of public health and emergency information in both official languages that can be a ready source of information for settlement agencies, Réseaux en immigration francophone and Local Immigration Partnerships to access and disseminate when needed
4. Take into account constraints driven by the pandemic when immigration pilots taking place at this time and Francophone immigration targets are being evaluated

### Regionalization

The pandemic has exacerbated the challenges faced by newcomers in small urban centres and rural communities while simultaneously highlighting the advantages to migrating outside of Canada's largest metropolitan areas. These smaller communities often lack the full range of services catering to newcomers that you would find in larger urban areas (Patel et al. 2019). The support provided by immigrant-serving agencies is more critical in smaller centres and rural areas due to the lack of existing immigrant populations typically found in larger urban centres. In these communities, immigrant-serving agencies have been key in keeping immigrants informed about the spread of COVID-19, changes to public health regulations, and how they might access government services and financial assistance. These agencies face a heavier burden during the pandemic as other supports such as those provided by voluntary organizations and extra-curricular activities are limited or shut down. During the pandemic, rural immigrant-serving agencies experienced disruptions and challenges to their own service delivery (Helps et al. 2020). Compared to larger agencies, it has been more difficult for smaller immigrant-serving agencies, such as those in rural communities, to make the shift due to smaller capacity and less access to technology (Shields and Abu Alrob 2020). Although IRCC and provincial/territorial governments have shown patience and flexibility, these agencies face the threat of reduced funding due to lower client numbers resulting from the slowdown of the immigration process and the "artificial suppression of demand" due to public health measures (Helps et al. 2020; Shields and Abu Alrob 2020, p. 24). While remote provision of services removes some geographic barriers to access, access is limited by regional differences in connectivity, differences in access to technology, differences in digital literacy, and language barriers.

The pandemic has forced immigrant-serving agencies to be more creative and innovative in service delivery. Agencies are finding innovative ways to bridge the geographical distance between small, mid-sized, and large cities, and are providing a hybrid of in-person and online services (Nguyen 2020). The pivoting of settlement services from in-person to online creates opportunity for wider access to services, particularly multilingual service access. However, immigrant-serving agencies in smaller communities have had a more difficult time in adapting to the changes demanded by COVID-19. These changes require additional resources as well as professional development for staff at smaller immigrant-serving agencies. Given the digital divide in Canada and the disparities in digital literacy, immigrant-serving agencies will need to maintain hybrid service delivery—combining virtual with in-person options. Therefore, increased investments in immigrant-serving agencies in small urban centres and rural communities and increased support for community volunteer groups are needed.

Access to reliable broadband is key to attraction and retention efforts for small towns and rural communities. The digital divide—the fact that cable and fibre-optic internet access is not universally available across Canada and that some low-income households have limited access to technology—affects access to settlement services, the ability to work remotely, and access to educational services. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted Canada's digital divide and reinforced the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunication Commission's (CRTC) 2016 proclamation that broadband internet is essential. Rural customers often rely on cellular networks to get online and cellular access is very expensive. Of those living in rural communities, only 40.8% have access to unlimited broadband

at 50/10 Mbps, compared to 85.7% across Canada (CRTC 2020). During the pandemic, limited access to broadband internet has increased newcomers' feelings of isolation and made it difficult to switch to remote work (Helps et al. 2020). On 9 November 2020, the federal government launched the Universal Broadband Fund with the goal of connecting 98% of Canadians to high-speed internet by 2026 and the remainder by 2030 (CBC News 2020). For many newcomers in small towns and rural communities, these investments in Canada's communication infrastructure cannot come soon enough.

Although the government has brought forward the timelines of its connectivity strategy, it still needs to establish national minimum levels for internet service providers in terms of speed and data usage, removing this disadvantage for small and rural communities. In addition, the government has left the decision of which communities are upgraded first in the hands of those providing internet services, as they will be the ones applying to the fund (CBC News 2020). The government should be the one setting the priorities based on need instead of leaving it to internet service providers who will inevitably prioritize communities based on profitability.

For newcomers in rural communities, the lack of public transportation also contributes to social isolation and reduced access to employment, health care, social services, and religious or cultural supports (Helps et al. 2020). Rural areas are notoriously underserved with respect to health care services, and this is exacerbated by the need for culturally appropriate care. In the past, female migrants in rural areas have reported challenges with social isolation (Pahwa et al. 2012; Sethi 2013; Patel et al. 2019). Combining this with the disproportionate social and economic consequences of COVID-19 on women suggests that immigrant women in rural communities may face significant pressures and mental health challenges during the pandemic (Scott 2020; Wenham et al. 2020).

Immigrant women in rural and northern communities have also faced additional challenges during the pandemic with respect to seeking assistance to address the increased risk of intimate partner violence (Moffitt et al. 2020). Historically, women in rural areas have experienced the highest overall rates of intimate partner violence (Burczycka 2019), and during the pandemic immigrants were more than twice as likely to express concerns about the impact of COVID-19 on violence in the home compared to the Canadian-born (Turcotte and Hango 2020). At the same time, access to supports, such as shelters or transition houses, is more challenging in small and rural communities (Moffitt et al. 2020). Federal and provincial/territorial governments should designate funding to assist immigrant-serving agencies in collaborating with community organizations to improve access to multilingual and culturally appropriate supports for immigrant women in rural communities (e.g., emergency shelters, mental health services) and to raise awareness about the availability of shelters and other alternative housing resources. Provincial/territorial governments could assist with the collaboration between shelters and local hotels, such as designing protocols to improve safety.

Recognizing that international students in smaller communities do not have the same community supports and networks available to them and are more dependent on their colleges and universities for support, special funds should be earmarked for these colleges and universities to bolster their supports for international students.

On the positive side, the prevalence in smaller urban centres and rural areas of more detached homes and fewer high-rise apartment buildings, and better housing outcomes for immigrants in terms of suitability and affordability, contrasts with immigrant housing outcomes in larger urban centres where immigrants are more likely to live in overcrowded housing (Guttmann et al. 2020; Shields and Abu Alrob 2020). Living in neighbourhoods with lower household densities is associated with lower rates of COVID-19 positivity for immigrants, refugees, and other newcomers (Guttmann et al. 2020). For example, during the first wave in Ontario, the low-density Northwestern Health Unit and

the Porcupine Health Unit regions had some of the highest proportions of immigrants and refugees tested for COVID-19 (6.7%–8%); however, they had the lowest positivity rates (~0%) for COVID-19 among immigrants and refugees tested in the province (Guttmann et al. 2020).

There have also been regional disparities in the economic effects of COVID-19 and the recovery has been uneven (Conference Board of Canada 2020a). In particular, the Atlantic Provinces and Manitoba fared better during the first wave and were expected to have smaller declines in economic activity due to lower case loads (Conference Board of Canada 2020a). The second wave has flattened the pace of the recovery, with localized and regional shutdowns taking place in provinces such as Manitoba and Saskatchewan that were less impacted during the first wave (Conference Board of Canada 2020b). In September 2020, employment was relatively closer to pre-COVID-19 levels in Manitoba and New Brunswick, compared to Ontario and British Columbia (Statistics Canada 2020d). In Ontario and British Columbia, smaller centres and rural areas have fared better in terms of employment compared to the provinces' largest urban centres (Finlayson 2020; Labour Market Group 2020a). For example, Northeastern Ontario experienced lower unemployment rates, fewer job losses, and maintained higher levels of employment during the lockdown period than Ontario as a whole (Labour Market Group 2020b). In British Columbia, where smaller communities have a proportionally larger public sector footprint and where manufacturing, forestry, mining, oil and gas, and agriculture contribute significantly, employment rebounded more quickly in comparison to Metro Vancouver (Finlayson 2020). Overall, economic conditions have been generally more favourable for immigrants in smaller urban centres and rural communities. Meanwhile, for these small municipalities and townships, the pandemic strengthened the need for immigration to fill chronic labour shortages, expand the tax base, improve resiliency, and support social programs as smaller municipalities and townships face larger deficits and growing debt.

According to the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, Marco Mendicino, COVID-19 has disproportionately disrupted immigration to the Atlantic Provinces and northern and rural Canada (Keung 2020). Between March and August 2020, admissions of permanent residents to Atlantic Canada were down 61% from the same period in 2019 (Government of Canada 2020r). The majority of these admissions were economic class, with greater declines for the admission of refugees and protected persons. For Newfoundland and Nova Scotia, the resettlement of refugees and protected persons stopped in April 2020 and did not resume until August 2020 with a few urgent cases (Government of Canada 2020r). Atlantic Canada experienced a proportionally greater decline (84%) in the resettlement of refugees and protected persons between March and August 2020, compared to Ontario, Quebec, and British Columbia (Government of Canada 2020r).

The pandemic not only slowed down the AIPP, it also affected the RNIP. All 11 communities participating in the RNIP have launched their programs, with six launched during the pandemic. The pandemic was responsible for delays in the launch of programs in North Bay, Ontario, and Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. With travel restrictions still in place, the participating communities started with candidates who are already in Canada and have full-time employment in high-demand areas. Communities such as Timmins, Ontario, are accepting applications from local candidates including TFWs and international students. In December 2020, IRCC relaxed work experience requirements for RNIP candidates. Candidates will no longer be required to obtain eligible work experience over a continuous period of time, ensuring that candidates are not penalized for short breaks in their employment history including pandemic-related work interruptions (Government of Canada 2020o). In addition, in recognition of the processing delays due to the pandemic, IRCC implemented a temporary measure allowing RNIP candidates to apply for work permits while awaiting a decision on their permanent residency applications (Government of Canada 2020o). Despite delays in immigration processing due to COVID-19, early reports are that the RNIP is working as intended,

addressing chronic labour vacancies in communities such as Brandon, Manitoba, and Thunder Bay, Ontario ([Net News Ledger 2020](#); [Trudel 2020](#)). Expansion of the RNIP to a wider number of communities should be part of a toolkit of policies to promote migration to small urban centres and rural areas that includes funding for research, partnerships between employers and settlement organizations, and community coordination efforts.

This is an opportunity for the greater promotion of smaller jurisdictions, especially those that fared well during COVID-19, to newcomers. Federal and provincial/territorial governments should highlight the resiliency of such communities, their lower population densities, affordable housing, and lower cost of living. The federal government should continue refugee dispersal efforts, providing resources to encourage more private sponsorships in smaller communities, as privately sponsored refugees are more likely to remain in their initial destination ([Kaida et al. 2020](#)). IRCC should collaborate with civil society groups in smaller communities to sponsor refugees from regions of the world highly impacted by the pandemic.

LIPs and RIFs serving small urban centres and rural communities are essential to fostering positive public attitudes toward and correcting misconceptions about immigration. As part of their main role in overseeing settlement strategies and welcoming and inclusive communities, LIPs and RIFs, with the support of IRCC, should engage in public campaigns:

- to raise awareness about the contributions of immigrant entrepreneurs as job creators and inform residents that immigrant entrepreneurs come from all admission categories
- to raise the profile of the essential work being done by immigrants and TFWs in their communities, particularly during the pandemic (e.g., health care, long-term care, agri-food sector)
- to make clear to members of these communities that immigrants being fast-tracked through the RNIP and other programs are filling long-existing skill gaps and are not in competition for the same jobs as Canadians who find themselves unemployed during the pandemic

#### *Recommendations<sup>1</sup>*

We recommend that the federal and provincial/territorial governments:

1. As a component of professional development, provide targeted funding for digital literacy training and digital equipment upgrading to settlement service providers, including those serving smaller, rural and remote communities
2. Set guidelines for increasing universal broadband connectivity, taking into account the needs of smaller, rural, and remote communities (rather than the business models of internet providers)
3. Within a broader gender-responsive COVID-19 recovery plan, provide targeted funding for supporting immigrant women impacted by social isolation and increased risk of family violence during the pandemic, including in smaller, rural, and remote communities
4. Provide targeted funding for universities and colleges in smaller, rural, and remote communities to support international students during the pandemic and recovery
5. Encourage LIPs and RIFs to develop public campaigns to promote smaller jurisdictions to newcomers that highlight the advantages these communities have manifested during the pandemic, the contributions of immigrants during the pandemic, the contributions of immigrant entrepreneurs to rebuilding the economy post-COVID-19, and the fact that immigrants fill long-existing skills gaps and contribute to the economy (rather than competing for jobs)
6. Encourage more private sponsorships in smaller communities, as privately sponsored refugees are more likely to remain in their initial destination
7. Take into account constraints driven by the pandemic when immigration pilots taking place at this time are being evaluated (e.g., RNIP)



## Two-step immigration

It was largely those with previous experience in Canada who were processed as new permanent residents from within Canada during the 2020 pandemic period, either through PNPs, Express Entry, or the economic pilots. This included primarily those who came to Canada before the pandemic under the IMP, the high-skilled TFWP, and those international students who stayed in Canada after completing their education here to work on Post Graduate Work Permits. From January 2018 to September 2020, the highest processing of temporary residents to permanent residents occurred in June 2020, with close to 68% of permanent resident landings that month accounted for by temporary residents already in Canada ([Hiebert 2020](#)).

While this two-stage immigration process is allowing some people already in Canada temporarily to transition to permanent residence if they meet existing program criteria, others are excluded if they do not meet the human capital (primarily language and education requirements) and NOC O, A, and B requirements (managerial, professional, and high-skilled occupations; [Ellermann and Gorokhovskaia 2020](#)). There were few transition opportunities for essential workers with precarious status, such as TFWs deemed lower-skilled, agricultural workers in the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program or in the Agricultural TFWP, thereby increasing their vulnerability. One positive exception to this has been the decision of the federal government to put into place a transition plan for some refugee claimants who worked in the health sector during the pandemic.

Temporary admissions under the IMP, TFWP, and International Student Programs also declined significantly during COVID-19. This has not only had an impact on the labour supply in certain sectors and regions, as well as the financial health of our post-secondary educational institutions and the communities in which they are located, but will also affect the available pool for future permanent residents. That inventory of temporary entrants in Canada eligible for permanent residence may soon be exhausted, without new entrants or changes in admission criteria.

It is essential that more opportunities be created for one-step immigration for those who currently enter Canada under temporary categories so that applicants are selected with their families as permanent residents from the outset and with all concomitant rights and access to services. Although two-step immigration may have its advantages in terms of short-term economic benefits, there are real costs on the social integration side of the equation. Temporary entrants are ineligible for federally funded settlement and language training services when they need them most to settle and integrate. They often are separated from their families for long periods of time, which hampers their social integration. They often send money to their families left behind, leaving less to invest in their lives in Canada. Their temporary status and the resulting insecurity make them more vulnerable and less committed to their local communities. All this despite the fact that they are contributing economically to fill ongoing labour market and demographic needs. As the pandemic has highlighted, these individuals are contributing to Canada and a good source of permanent residents, which can be optimized by providing opportunities for permanent residency and its benefits earlier in their time in Canada.

## Recommendations<sup>1</sup>

We recommend that the federal and provincial/territorial governments:

1. Provide more one-step and two-step pathways to permanent residency under the different immigration streams and through modifications to existing programs for those who currently enter Canada under temporary categories, particularly those in essential occupations (e.g., agricultural workers)
2. Increase eligibility for some federally funded settlement services to include temporary entrants in their first step toward two-step immigration

## International students

The pandemic has had a profound impact on international students who were already in Canada when the border closures began and on those who planned to travel to Canada to study subsequent to that time. For those in Canada, the pandemic has meant loss of income from part-time jobs due to shutdowns and separations of unknown duration from family members due to the border closures (Kamil 2020). In addition, some have not been eligible for emergency social and financial relief (Cullen 2020). By June, a survey conducted by World Education Services found that 26% of international students reported losing their primary source of income and 34% reported finding it difficult to afford rent or utilities (Atlin 2020). High levels of stress, anxiety, and uncertainty have resulted (Firang 2020). The vulnerabilities caused by a lack of federally funded settlement supports for international students have become especially apparent.

For those who had not yet traveled to Canada to begin their studies, the border closures and delays in permit application processing meant that their ability to enter the country to begin their studies was hampered. Up until October 2020, only international students from the United States and those who had study permits issued before 18 March 2020 were allowed to enter the country, while the remainder were prohibited from entry or subject to ambiguous guidelines that granted wide discretion to border officials. In early October, the government announced a new plan that allows all eligible international students to enter Canada after October 20 if the institution at which they will be studying has a recognized COVID-19 readiness plan in place (Government of Canada 2020f). Overall, in 2020, the enrollment of international students in post-secondary education was reduced close to 32% (Keung 2021a).

The government has tried to alleviate some of the challenges international students have faced (Government of Canada 2020h). For international students in Canada, the regulations for eligibility for a post-graduation work permit have been loosened and, during the summer of 2020, some international students were permitted to work more than 20 hours per week off-campus. Students who are completing courses online from outside of the country and have applied for a study permit may still be eligible to obtain post-graduation work permits based on this time of study, depending on the nature of their program of study. Most recently, the government also announced that former international students in Canada who hold post-graduation work permits that are about to expire or have expired can apply for another open work permit, allowing them to remain in Canada for an additional 18 months to try to find jobs (Government of Canada 2021c). Post-graduation work permits are important for international students because many of the paths to permanent residency require work experience in Canada as part of the eligibility criteria.

During the pandemic, advocacy networks have raised the concerns of international students who are facing financial challenges due to the loss of part-time work. Many have also faced challenges in renewing their study permits (which are necessary to keep their social insurance numbers active). In addition, some international students find their private health insurance offers poor access to health care, especially mental health counselling. As well, the visa restrictions linked to changing institutions of study have created barriers for some international students whose approved learning institution closed due to the pandemic (OCASI 2020).

The pandemic has also revealed the fragility of the post-secondary education sector's dependence on funding from international students through tuition, residence fees, and other revenues (see also forthcoming RSC briefing on Investing in a Better Future: Higher Education and Post-COVID Canada). New study permits for foreign students decreased by 58% in June to August 2020, compared to the same period of 2019 (Statistics Canada 2020b). Although some universities have not anticipated drops in enrollment in the 2020–2021 year, overall, colleges and universities are expecting large

financial losses, possibly in the billions of dollars, because of some drops in enrollment, reductions in residence fees, and other revenue losses (Friesen 2020). A recent report by Statistics Canada (2020b) projects losses to universities of \$377 million to \$3.4 billion during the 2020–2021 academic year, depending on the size of the reduction of international student enrollments. Colleges may be especially vulnerable to these reductions because their shorter programs result in more student turn-over. In June 2020, the president of Colleges and Institutes Canada indicated that analyses suggested \$1.8 billion to \$3.5 billion in lost revenue to colleges, depending on the length and severity of the pandemic (Friesen 2020). This dependency on international students and the high tuition fees they pay will need to be alleviated by provincial governments providing sufficient funding to colleges and universities, on the one hand, and placing caps on the tuition costs for international students, on the other hand.

Post-secondary institutions have especially large impacts in smaller communities and international students contribute significantly to many small urban and rural economies. In addition, these students represent potential immigrants and are key to filling labour market gaps in smaller communities, as many remain in the community after graduation (Gordon 2020). The pandemic demonstrated that international students are not just important to universities in Canada's largest provinces and urban areas. For example, an economic impact assessment conducted by the Northern Policy Institute estimates that a 20% decrease in international students in Northern Ontario's post-secondary institutions would result in an estimated \$23 million in lost tuition revenues and an estimated \$20 million loss in contributions to their communities (Hagar 2020). Indeed, though the pandemic-related reduction in the number of international students attending Laurentian University is not the central cause of its recent filing for creditor protection, the thwarted dependency on international students has certainly contributed to the university's financial woes (Yakabuski 2021).

Historically, Manitoba and Atlantic Canada have high international student populations on a per capita basis, an indication of their social, cultural, and economic importance. In Atlantic Canada, the enrolment of full-time visa students declined 6.6% year-over-year as travel restrictions and visa processing delays prevented many international students from entering Canada (Association of Atlantic Universities 2020). The decline in international students was less pronounced in Manitoba, as universities in the province experienced smaller percentage declines in study permits issued year-over-year compared to universities in Ontario, British Columbia, and Quebec (Government of Canada 2020s). The lifting of travel restrictions for international students in October 2020 likely particularly benefitted rural colleges, where there are often not enough domestic students to fill classes (Lim 2020). Among international students who were already in Canada and remained during the pandemic, there were reports of students in smaller communities facing not only the challenges experienced by international students in larger communities, but also the additional challenge of accessing stable internet connections to access course materials and complete online examinations.

Given the vulnerabilities revealed by the pandemic and the importance of international students as future permanent residents, it is important that eligibility for federally funded settlement services be expanded so that international students are eligible for some of these supports—such as information and orientation, Canada Connects, and mental health and well-being services—upon their arrival in Canada. Temporary residents already in Canada, of whom many are international students, have constituted the majority of individuals processed as new permanent residents during the pandemic, and may continue to be so for the foreseeable future. Thus, providing international students with needed services as soon as they arrive in Canada is an especially pressing issue. If we wish to continue to benefit from the skills of international students as future permanent residents, it will also be

important to allow them to renew post-graduate work permits during post-COVID-19 recovery, as has been allowed during the depressed COVID-19 job market.

#### *Recommendations<sup>1</sup>*

We recommend that the federal and provincial/territorial governments:

1. Allow international students to renew post-graduate work permits during the period of post-COVID economic recovery
2. Pilot an expansion of universal health care coverage to include international students
3. Provide sufficient funding to colleges and universities, on the one hand, and place caps on the tuition costs for international students, on the other hand
4. Increase eligibility for some federally funded settlement services to include international students

#### *Temporary foreign workers*

While some high-skilled immigrant and TFWs already in Canada before the pandemic had secure employment and were able to transition to remote work, others faced precarious employment and precarious access to health care, particularly migrant workers in the agri-food sector (Doyle 2020; Helps et al. 2020). TFWs were initially barred from entry at the onset of the pandemic. However, some TFWs were exempted from the travel restrictions to Canada if they were to fill essential roles in certain sectors. As a result, the drop in those issued a work permit in 2020 under various TFW programs was only 10% (Keung 2021a). Those allowed entry were subject to 14 days of self-isolation and eligible for sick pay during this period. Some TFWs are eligible for paid leave, but this is not guaranteed and depends on the province/territory. Many TFWs have health coverage tied to a specific employer and if laid off for any reason, including illness, they may lose their health coverage, and some may avoid accessing health care for fear of being deported (Doyle 2020). In addition, TFWs already in Canada were granted additional time for renewals and extensions.

The pandemic has changed the way we define essential and high-demand occupations. More pathways to permanent residence status should be developed for TFWs at all points of the continuum, especially in essential occupations, so that we reduce our dependency on vulnerable TFWs to do essential work. Current pathways for temporary entrants to permanent residence through Express Entry generally require high levels of human capital in NOC O, A, and B occupations. Although some PNPs and economic pilots allow for the transition to permanent residency for NOC C and D occupations, they all still require high school graduation and language levels beyond what many TFWs have. This results in a permanent underclass of temporary workers, with all its vulnerabilities, ineligible to transition to permanent resident status. TFWs who transition to permanent residence will need specialized settlement supports since they are less likely than other migrant groups to have built extensive support networks.

The federal and provincial/territorial governments should increase financial and medical support for TFWs, given the precarious nature of their employment and access to health care. These governments could even go further by permanently expanding universal health care coverage so that people have access regardless of their immigration status and location in Canada. This would alleviate concerns for TFWs who often have their health care tied to specific employers. In addition, like international students, we recommend that eligibility for federally funded settlement services be expanded so that TFWs are eligible for some of these supports.

### Recommendations<sup>1</sup>

We recommend that the federal and provincial/territorial governments:

1. Develop more pathways to permanent residence for temporary foreign workers, particularly those in high demand and essential occupations
2. Provide targeted settlement funding for supporting TFWs who transition to permanent residence
3. Pilot an expansion of universal health care coverage to include temporary foreign workers
4. Increase eligibility for some federally funded settlement services to include temporary foreign workers

### Agricultural workers

The COVID-19 pandemic has illuminated realities that have existed for a long time with regard to the essential nature of agricultural work in Canada and our reliance on migrant workers (see also forthcoming RSC briefing on migrant workers). Early in the pandemic, employers of agricultural TFWs faced significant barriers to recruitment, threatening Canada's food security. However, even though our borders were closed in March 2020, agricultural workers from Mexico, Guatemala, Jamaica, and elsewhere have been admitted due to their essential role in ensuring Canadian food security.

The pandemic has also reinforced the vulnerabilities and insecurity of these essential workers. Even with the added threat of COVID-19, inspections of their housing and working conditions have been inadequate, leading to the spread of this highly contagious and deadly virus ([Alboim and Cohl 2020](#)). Despite spending a period of mandatory quarantine upon their entry to Canada, many temporary agricultural workers have been put at high risk of contracting and then contributing to the further spread of COVID-19 due to crowded conditions and restrictive policies that jeopardize their safety. Without the possibility of proper distancing or protective equipment, and the pressure on some asymptomatic COVID-19 positive workers to continue working, disastrous outcomes have ensued for their fellow workers and community spread. This has included many outbreaks, including at a meat-processing plant in High River, Alberta, and farms in Windsor-Essex and Chatham-Kent, Ontario, that demonstrate that the long-standing problem of poor working conditions for migrant workers still needs to be addressed. There have been more than a thousand identified COVID-19 cases in the agri-food sector, and the death of three migrant workers ([Weikle 2020](#)).

Foreign agricultural workers have employer-specific work permits. This means that their status in Canada is dependent on working for the employer that brought them here. Unlike permanent residents or people with other types of work permits (such as international students or refugee claimants), these agricultural workers lack the ability to move easily from one employer to another. If they choose to leave their original employer, they would be in breach of their work permit and subject to deportation unless they find another employer who has received authorization from the federal government to hire them. In theory, an open-work permit (meaning that they are not restricted to work for a particular employer) is available, but only if a worker in an abusive situation successfully lodges a formal complaint about his or her employer to the federal government, which is a rare occurrence. Workers are unlikely to take the risk of lodging a complaint when they lack permanent residency status; have limited rights, security and support; depend on their jobs to send money back home; are subject to deportation if they leave or are fired from their jobs; and would likely not be called back for work in Canada the following season. This leaves workers open to potential exploitation, abuse, and dangerous work and living environments with no real recourse.

The risks are exacerbated by minimal government enforcement. There are very few random, proactive spot-checks without prior notice to the employer. Too often, inspections are conducted by telephone instead of through rigorous, on-site visits. Part of the problem is the lack of accountability inherent in various federal departments, provincial/territorial ministries, and municipal public health bodies, each having a role to play, with little coordination among them. In any event, there are relatively few national standards to enforce, and limited protections under provincial/territorial labour laws, for this essential and vulnerable population.

On 31 July 2020, the federal government announced a \$58.6 million investment to safeguard the health and safety of temporary agricultural workers from COVID-19. These funds were to be allocated for outreach to workers primarily by the Migrant Worker Support Network, increasing inspections, improving living quarters and emergency housing, and for personal protective equipment (PPE) and sanitary stations ([Government of Canada 2020k](#)). These are welcome initiatives, but only go so far in addressing the issues. For example, although \$16.2 million of the \$58.6 million dollar investment is slated for strengthening the inspection regime by federal officials, there are few details about whether this infusion of funds will rectify fundamental flaws in the current approach to inspections. This builds on federal funds announced in April 2020 toward increasing health and safety protections for workers and employees in the agri-food sector, specifically to support mandatory quarantine measures ([Government of Canada 2020n](#)). At the Pathways to Prosperity National Conference in November 2020, the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship indicated that a total of over 100 million dollars had been allocated during COVID-19 toward these issues.

Although agricultural work requires skill, it is not recognized as highly skilled labour for immigration purposes. Therefore, foreign agricultural workers do not generally qualify for entry to Canada as permanent residents under the existing economic programs. They come to Canada on a temporary basis and must leave when their work permits expire, even though individuals in the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program may be called back year after year, and those who work in non-seasonal occupations may have work permits valid for up to two years.

Much of the vulnerability associated with temporary worker status would be removed if agricultural workers had a viable path to permanent residency. Upon receipt of permanent residency, they could move to another employer or complain about mistreatment without it affecting their status in Canada. As permanent residents, their continued residence in Canada would not be dependent on employers, and they would be on a path to citizenship. Additionally, they could sponsor their families to join them in Canada, which would strengthen their ties to the community, growing the population of rural parts of Canada.

The Agri-Food Pilot, a three-year pilot which began in May 2020, represents an opportunity for 2750 temporary agricultural workers to become permanent residents under the economic immigration class ([Government of Canada 2020b](#)). To apply, individuals require eligible Canadian work experience and a full-time, non-seasonal job offer from a Canadian employer in eligible industries and occupations (e.g., meat processing, mushroom and greenhouse production, and livestock-raising industries; [Government of Canada 2020c](#)). The Agri-Food Pilot offers a possible pathway to Canadian permanent residency for very limited numbers, and in practice the standards for language (level 4 in reading, writing, speaking, and listening) and education (a high school diploma) are too high for many agricultural workers to meet.

Our recommendations for agricultural workers include selecting more agricultural workers as permanent residents and increasing protection for agricultural workers who continue to enter Canada as TFWs (see also [Alboim and Cohl 2020](#)).



We urge IRCC to select more agricultural workers as permanent residents. This would receive support from the Canadian population, as a recent survey found that 81% of Canadians would support pathways to citizenship or permanent residency for TFWs who are interested in remaining in Canada (Nanos 2020). This removes much of the vulnerability associated with temporary status. These workers would then immediately have more rights in Canada and would not feel compelled to tolerate unsafe working and living conditions because of the risk of deportation if they complain. Much of the work done by these individuals (e.g., animal production, food product processing and manufacturing, greenhouse, nursery, floriculture, and mushroom production) takes place on a year-round basis and, thus, having an agricultural workforce made up of mainly permanent, rather than temporary, residents would be more efficient. A stable workforce would benefit employers who would avoid the need for annual expenditures on recruitment, labour market impact assessments, transportation, and training. An important additional benefit of permanent resident agricultural workers is that families could come to Canada together, facilitating integration into their new communities rather than social isolation. Permanent resident agricultural workers settling with their families in rural communities would have the benefit of contributing to the vibrancy and viability of smaller centres and rural areas facing decline.

We recommend building a three-pronged agricultural stream into the new MNP being developed by the Government of Canada, in which communities of various sizes will be able to sponsor permanent economic immigrants to respond to local economic and demographic needs. A community-wide approach should be employed. Employers and the rural municipality would identify their needs for agricultural workers and population growth. Local stakeholders would develop and implement plans to welcome and support clusters of nominees and their families. LIPs could play an important role here. The three prongs would be as follows:

1. Start with temporary agricultural workers already in Canada as potential nominees because these individuals have demonstrable skills and work experience, and many may be interested in the opportunity to settle in Canada. Once selected as nominees, they would be joined by their families.
2. Conduct a wider search in countries with a significant agricultural base to identify clusters of nominees abroad. These workers would then come to Canada as permanent residents with their families.
3. Select refugees with agricultural experience as municipal nominees. This would also aid in providing durable solutions for refugees identified by the United Nations Refugee Agency, in addition to those selected separately through Canada's humanitarian refugee resettlement stream. It is also consistent with Canada's commitment as a signatory to the Global Compact on Refugees in terms of providing labour mobility opportunities for refugees with skills that are needed in the receiving region. Clusters of refugee families with agricultural backgrounds would be selected for the new MNP, preferably from the same world region. This would improve the integration and retention of refugee families in rural areas and facilitate the provision of targeted settlement services. This process will need to involve all three levels of government, employers, relevant organizations abroad and in Canada, as well as the UN Refugee Agency.

In addition to the introduction of an agricultural stream in the MNP, a review of all existing programs and pilot projects should be undertaken to identify modifications that would enhance or provide new pathways to permanent residency for our essential agricultural workforce. Possible pilot projects to review include the Agri-Food Pilot, the RNIP, and the AIPP.

Canada will still need some temporary agricultural workers, especially for truly seasonal work, and some agricultural workers may prefer a more temporary situation. Temporary agricultural workers also need better protection. Indeed, a survey conducted in November 2020 (Nanos 2020) found that

79% of Canadians agree or somewhat agree that temporary agricultural workers “should be entitled to the same benefits and protections as any other worker, including health care, workers’ compensation, the provincial minimum wage, and job protection.”

#### *Recommendations<sup>1</sup>*

We recommend that the federal and provincial/territorial governments:

1. Introduce a three-pronged agricultural stream within the MNP, including selecting temporary agricultural workers already in Canada, searching for clusters of nominees in countries with significant agricultural bases, and selecting refugees with agricultural experience
2. Review all existing economic programs and pilot projects to identify ways to enhance or provide new pathways to permanent residency for agricultural workers
3. Issue sector-specific (rather than the current employer-specific) permits that allow temporary agricultural workers to work for any employer within the sector
4. Implement a consultative process led by the federal government and with provinces/territories, municipal bodies, employers, and workers to develop national standards for health and safety and employment conditions for temporary agricultural workers, similar to what they are undertaking now to develop national housing standards. Clear roles, responsibilities, and accountabilities should be developed to improve coordination and enforcement among government bodies.
5. Incorporate adherence to national standards of safe conditions and fair compensation into the Labour Market Impact Assessments that employers must obtain from the federal government before being allowed to hire temporary agricultural workers from abroad
6. Create a rigorous, strategic, coordinated on-site inspection process for housing and working conditions for temporary agricultural workers to ensure their safety and fair treatment. This would involve proactive monitoring of housing and work sites without advance notice to the employer to ensure compliance with national standards and related requirements of all levels of government.
7. Provide access to federally funded information and support services to temporary agricultural workers who need to know their rights, including how to apply for permanent residency
8. Pilot an expansion of universal health care coverage to include temporary agricultural workers

#### Resettled refugees and refugee claimants

Restrictions imposed due to COVID-19 affected refugees selected from abroad for resettlement, refugee claimants attempting to reach Canada, and refugee claimants already in Canada. Canada anticipated resettling approximately 30 000 refugees in 2020. On 17 March 2020; however, the International Organization for Migration and the UNHCR announced a suspension of global refugee resettlement due to the pandemic (UNHCR 2020). Refugee resettlement resumed in June 2020, with quarantine requirements in place. As of November 2020, the government indicated that it was resettling about 250 refugees per week, with approximately 9000 refugees arriving in Canada in 2020 (Dickson 2021). In terms of private sponsorship of refugees, only those privately sponsored refugees with visas issued as of 18 March 2020 have been permitted to travel. Some Canadians involved in private sponsorship of refugees continue to support the program and advocate for resettlement travel as essential. Sponsors supporting refugees who arrived before the pandemic must, of course, deal with the additional challenges around settlement and integration and access to services at a time when services may be primarily online.

Canada has been praised by the UNHCR for its approach to refugee resettlement for refugees selected from abroad during the pandemic. For example, the UNHCR’s Canadian representative indicated

that Canada was one of the few countries to accept emergency cases at the height of the pandemic and has been scaling up since then in terms of the number of refugees it has been resettling in Canada (Levitz 2020). Minister Mendicino's spokesperson indicated that processing is also increasing, with almost six times as many refugee cases processed at the end of 2020 in comparison to a similar period in the previous year (Levitz 2020). In 2020, Canada was responsible for almost 40% of the refugees resettled worldwide (UNHCR 2021).

While we support the target of 22 500 for private refugee sponsorship spaces in each of the next three years, we would like IRCC to commit to increasing the GAR target currently at 12 500 in each of the next three years to match the target for PSRs. As stated, the PSR program was established on the principle of additionality, over and above the government's resettlement scheme. Canada's refugee resettlement program has lost track of this underlying principle, with privately sponsored refugees now representing two-thirds of Canada's annual resettled refugee admissions (Government of Canada 2021a). To achieve the targets, we recommend that refugee processing continue to be scaled up, with additional funding allocated.

The government provides refugees with a repayable no interest loan to cover air travel from their country of asylum to their final destination in Canada. Although this loan has a repayment rate of around 90%, it puts undue financial burden on vulnerable, at-risk refugee families. Given the fact that GARs are selected for resettlement using a special need lens, it makes no sense for them to be burdened upon arrival in Canada with a repayable loan of up to \$10 000, nor for private sponsors to incur these additional costs above their one-year financial commitment. We thus recommend that air travel for refugees coming to Canada be covered by the Government of Canada, as it was for the Syrian refugees brought to Canada in 2015–2016.

Canada's approach to refugee claimants continues to be a point of contention. In the early days of the COVID-19 border closure, the government announced that migrants entering irregularly (mainly at Roxham Road) who claimed refugee status would be subject to the same two-week quarantine applicable to other people entering Canada from abroad. On 20 March 2020, Prime Minister Trudeau announced that all refugee claimants, regardless of entry route, would be barred access to Canada. In light of the stringent restrictions on air travel and entry by people who were neither citizens nor permanent residents, the number of refugee claimants arriving by air had already plummeted. Those seeking entry at a Port of Entry under one of the STCA exceptions were turned away and required to "wait" in the United States for an appointment to seek entry into Canada at some future date. Similarly, the government also negotiated an arrangement with the United States in which refugee claimants entering irregularly at Roxham Road would also be deflected back to US immigration enforcement posted at the border crossing, ostensibly with the possibility of entering at a later date. These "direct backs" from official ports of entry and from unofficial border crossings drew on Canadian practice prior to the 2005 STCA. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights ruled that Canada's "direct back" policy violated the Organization of American States' *American Declaration on the Rights of Man* and the *UN Refugee Convention*.

On 20 April 2020, the Prime Minister restored the status quo ante for refugee claimants who qualified under one of the exceptions to the STCA but retained the deflection of those crossing at Roxham Road. As Rehaag et al. (2020) observed, just as Canada used 9/11 to its advantage to press the United States to enter the Canada–US STCA, so too has it used the pandemic to further block the entry of refugee claimants from the United States who, owing to the STCA, cross irregularly (but not unlawfully) between ports of entry. Turning back refugee claimants entering at Roxham Road in the name of public health carries two risks. The first is that desperate refugee claimants must avoid a relatively safe and visible entry route and opt instead for more clandestine and dangerous pathways, with potentially injurious or lethal consequences. Relatedly, blocking safe entry routes that refugee

claimants can navigate on their own incentivizes people smuggling. Smugglers emerge where refugee claimants must cross borders clandestinely to access protection.

In July 2020, the Federal Court ruled that the Canada–US STCA breached the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* by deflecting refugee claimants back into a system that inter alia subjects them to a detention regime that violates basic human rights norms. The Canadian government responded by appealing the decision. The Federal Court of Appeal granted a motion by the government to stay the enforcement of (withdraw) the Federal Court decision until the Federal Court of Appeal hears the appeal. That appeal is scheduled to be heard in February 2021. The Federal Court of Appeal allowed the government’s appeal on narrow grounds unrelated to the merits of the challenge (*Canada (Citizenship and Immigration) v. Canadian Council for Refugees*, 2021 FCA 72 (15 April 2021)). The civil society and individual applicants who brought the constitutional challenge have sought leave to appeal to the Supreme Court of Canada.

For refugee claimants in Canada, refugee status determination at the IRB was suspended at the outset of the pandemic. Application processing and virtual hearings slowly resumed in late July and early August 2020, and the IRB adopted various measures to manage their inventory. Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada gradually resumed some in-person services by appointment in September 2020, which in turn was critical to refugee claimants obtaining work permits, and access to health care and other social services.

Along with migrant workers in the agri-food industry and health care sectors, refugee claimants were significantly represented among the thousands of precarious non-citizens employed in low-wage, high risk “essential” work on the front line in the pandemic. Advocacy groups across Canada lobbied hard to encourage the government to recognize the extraordinary contribution of precarious status migrants during the pandemic, who were both performing essential work and enduring working conditions that increased their risk of contracting COVID-19.

In mid-August 2020, the federal government announced that refugee claimants working in the health care sector in direct contact with patients would be granted access to permanent resident status. The federal Immigration Minister praised these refugee claimants as demonstrating “a uniquely Canadian quality in that they were looking out for others.” There was, of course, some irony to rewarding refugee claimants for their performance of “Canadianness” when, in many cases, they were performing work that Canadians would not do. But more significant was the exclusion of other essential services that also exposed workers to heightened risk of infection but did not involve direct contact with the sick or elderly. These included security, cleaning, and food preparation, both inside and outside of health care facilities. It emerged soon after the program announcement that, while the federal government and other provinces/territories were open to a wider scope of eligibility, at least for refugee claimants, the Quebec government strongly opposed it ([Gruda 2020](#)).

Four months after the program was announced, the government released details and opened the program for receipt of applications as of 14 December 2020 ([Government of Canada 2020m](#)). Eligibility is confined to those refugee claimants eligible for referral to the RPD of the IRB. Without detracting from the enormous benefit this will confer on those who meet the program criteria, it is important to note that the initiative is restricted to a subset of precarious migrants (refugee claimants), and only a sub-category of refugee claimants within that subset (eligible for referral to the RPD) who work in a single sphere of essential services (health care) and perform specific tasks (direct patient contact). A Quebec journalist estimated that the proposed measure would probably benefit no more than a thousand people in that province ([Gruda 2020](#)).

We recommend that, in light of the vulnerabilities revealed by COVID-19, refugee claimants entering Canada from the United States at unauthorized border crossings be subject to the quarantine requirements in place until March 2020, rather than being returned to the United States. In addition, the Canada–US STCA should be suspended. The STCA is the major cause of irregular entry to Canada (as “regular” entry of refugee claimants from the United States is blocked), and thus if Canada wishes to resolve the problem of irregular migration, suspending the STCA will do just that.

It is also the case that because the United States is easier to reach than Canada, Canada-bound refugee claimants must often pass through the United States, whereas the converse is not true. This is the most cogent explanation for why the flow of refugee claimants from the United States to Canada has historically exceeded the flow in the opposite direction. As a result, Canada receives fewer refugee claimants relative to the United States, which is the antithesis of a “fair” system of responsibility sharing. In addition, the deficiencies of the US asylum system also mean that deflecting refugee claimants back to the United States makes Canada complicit in human rights violations committed against them in the United States, which in turn puts Canada in breach of the *Charter* and Canada’s international human rights obligations.

Like international students and temporary foreign workers, we recommend that eligibility for federally funded settlement services be expanded so that refugee claimants are eligible for some of these supports. We also recommend that the path to permanence that the government put into place for refugee claimants working in the health care sector in direct contact with patients be extended to include all those engaged in “essential work” since March 2020. All precarious migrants engaged in “essential work” merit recognition of their contributions no less than those who are included in the current program.

#### *Recommendations<sup>1</sup>*

We recommend that the federal government:

1. Commit to increasing the government-assisted refugees target in each of the next three years to match or exceed the target for PSRs
2. Affirm that refugees admitted as economic immigrants under diverse pathways do not count toward refugee admission targets
3. Scale up processing of refugees for resettlement and allocate additional funding to ensure that the target for resettled refugees in 2021 is achieved
4. Waive the repayable loan to refugees to cover their transportation to Canada
5. Suspend the Canada–US STCA
6. Admit refugee claimants entering Canada from the US at unauthorized border crossing, with quarantine requirements in place
7. Increase eligibility for some federally funded settlement services to include refugee claimants
8. Expand pathways to permanence for all refugee claimants engaged in essential work during the pandemic

#### *Migrant detention and deportation*

According to international law and the Minister of Public Safety, immigration detention should always be a “measure of last resort, used only in limited circumstances and only after alternatives to detention are first considered” (CBC News 2020). According to an exploratory study by legal scholars Arbel and Joeck (2021), the first three months of COVID-19 witnessed a significant change in

detention review practices by the Immigration Division of the IRB. About 85% of migrant detention is predicated on flight risk, namely the claim that individuals will be unlikely to appear for proceedings or removal. Prior to COVID-19, the Immigration Division interpreted their jurisdiction narrowly and consistently refused to consider the location or conditions of confinement in determining whether to continue detention or order release. This effectively precluded detainees “from raising concerns where conditions of confinement pose a threat to their safety or wellbeing” (Arbel and Joeck 2021, p. 2). In a sample of cases examined from mid-March to mid-May 2020, several Immigration Division members reversed previous practice and demonstrated a willingness to consider the risk of COVID-19 as a condition of detention that was a relevant factor favouring release. This shift was publicly validated by IRB management (Arbel and Joeck 2021). As a result, it appears that the Immigration Division was able to locate adequate alternatives to detention for people whom they would previously have kept in detention. As of November 2020, the daily average number of people detained in immigration detention facilities was 41, or 12% of the daily average for fiscal year 2019 (342); 94 immigration detainees remain confined in provincial jails. There have been no reported adverse impacts on public safety or the administration of the migration system. Two provisional conclusions may be drawn: first, conditions of confinement are indeed within the jurisdiction of the Immigration Division to consider; second, detention of migrants has been dramatically overused. Non-custodial alternatives are available and adequate. Having said that, commentators have also been critical of the overuse of electronic monitoring bracelets that subject migrants to constant surveillance (Lukacs 2020). Less intrusive monitoring methods are available and should be the first recourse.

In November 2020, the CBSA announced the resumption of deportations, and there is evidence suggesting that it continued deportations even during a declared moratorium from March until December 2020. More than 12 000 people were deported in 2020, an increase of 875 over the previous year (Paperny 2021). This includes 8215 administrative removals—people who decided to leave on their own—compared to 1657 in 2019. Even subtracting these numbers, the data show that thousands were deported against their will. The Canadian government has urged Canadians not to travel outside Canada, has blocked the entry of refugee claimants, and has restricted access to Canada by foreign nationals, all in the name of preventing the spread of COVID-19. Deporting individuals to other states puts the individuals at risk, and endangers public health and safety in the destination country. It is arbitrary and unjustifiable.

COVID-19 has now set a precedent in terms of conditions of detention being considered relevant under s. 278 of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations, and we encourage the Immigration Division to formalize this consideration of confinement conditions in detention review. It would also be useful to monitor and analyze the outcomes of detainees released after March 2020 to determine their compliance with conditions of release, and for whom and under what conditions compliance occurred. These analyses will allow a reconsideration of the overall use of migrant detention, a more nuanced use of detention, and align actual detention practices with the principle affirmed by Public Safety Minister Blair that it should only be used as a last resort (Bureau 2020). The impact of the use of electronic monitoring bracelets should also be analysed so that they are not made a routine condition of release, but are only used when evidence suggests they are necessary. Because this report is being written in the midst of the pandemic, it is also important to urge that deportations cease for as long as Canadian government discourages Canadians from traveling outside Canada.



### Recommendations<sup>1</sup>

We recommend that the federal government:

1. Formalize consideration of confinement conditions in migrant detention reviews
2. Conduct an analysis of the outcomes of migrant detainees released after March 2020 to determine their compliance with conditions of release
3. Conduct an evaluation of the impact of the use of electronic monitoring bracelets for migrant detainees after March 2020

## The settlement and integration of immigrants and refugees

The economic impact of the pandemic on immigrants and the potential for long-term scarring

In the early months of the pandemic, recent immigrants (who landed within the last 10 years) were more likely to lose their jobs compared to the Canadian born ([Hou et al. 2020a](#)). Female recent immigrants were especially affected, with almost 20% of those employed in March 2020 not employed in April 2020 (compared to approximately 13% of Canadian-born women). During the partial recovery after April 2020, recent immigrants, especially recent immigrant women, also had lower rates of transition (back) to employment than the Canadian born ([Hou et al. 2020a](#)). As of November 2020, immigrants who had landed within the last five years had an unemployment rate of 11.6%, and those who had landed 5–10 years ago had an unemployment rate of 10.2%, compared to 7.6% for the Canadian born ([Statistics Canada 2020c](#)). This has meant that recent immigrants have been adversely impacted by the pandemic in their daily lives.

It seems likely that immigrants entering the job market in Canada during the period of post-pandemic recovery will similarly experience difficulties. It is expected that the recovery of the Canadian economy will be “slow and choppy,” with unemployment rates forecast to stay above prepandemic levels until at least 2023 ([Ghosh 2020](#)). This is of concern because there is a risk that periods of unemployment and low earnings early on can have long-term scarring effects on immigrants’ future job prospects, including labour force participation and salary ([Arulampalam et al. 2001](#); [Bivens 2014](#)). Two types of scarring have been identified—productivity scarring in which skills depreciate and signal scarring in which employers use employment history and periods of unemployment as a signal to screen potential hires ([Bivens 2014](#)). Both are likely to influence long-term labour force participation and job quality. This scarring would come on top of the deskilling immigrants tend to experience in general due to a lack of recognition of their credentials in Canada, leading to lower economic and psychological well-being of immigrants and downstream effects on their families and children. It would also undermine the value of policies designed to attract immigrants to Canada and utilize their skills ([Esses 2021](#)).

It is essential that Canada continues to admit significant numbers of immigrants and refugees in all categories to achieve its short- and longer-term economic, demographic, social, and humanitarian objectives. At the same time, it will be important to develop and implement interventions to prevent and mitigate the potential long-term scarring impacts.

We recommend targeted funding for employment training/supports for newcomers impacted during the pandemic and those coming in during the post-pandemic economic recovery period. It is important to recognize the greater barriers immigrants have faced during the pandemic/global recession and provide targeted services to combat deskilling. Training and adjustment programs should be developed to prevent and counter scarring effects that may occur. This may include employer incentives for on-site training, up-skilling, and retraining, targeted services to combat

deskilling, and bridge training and laddering programs toward the recognition of foreign qualifications. There are growing labour and skill shortages in certain occupations and sectors for which newcomers could be trained or retrained. Employers, colleges and universities, regulatory bodies, and community-based training organizations should collaborate to develop appropriate programs for newcomers to fill these gaps. It will also be important to fund additional settlement programs for immigrants who have experienced job loss during the pandemic. These would include encouraging immigrants to stay involved in the labour market by participating in mentorship programs that build their social capital, finding volunteer opportunities that build their Canadian experience and decrease signal scarring, and other settlement supports.

Public education in Canada has been an extraordinarily effective instrument for the integration of immigrant children. Learning Canada's official languages by interacting socially with their Canadian-born peers in the classroom, lunchroom, and school yard, and through extracurricular activities held at schools, have all had a lasting, positive impact on children's successful integration. Disruptions in their education due to closed schools, the social distancing required in schools, the cancelation of extracurricular activities, and the reliance on online learning may have long lasting impacts on children's language acquisition, educational achievement, socialization, and integration (see [Rani 2020](#)). The potential scarring of immigrant and refugee children will therefore also have to be addressed. Additional settlement workers in schools, homework clubs, and extracurricular supports will all be required.

#### *Recommendations*<sup>1</sup>

We recommend that the federal and provincial/territorial governments:

1. Within the context of programs designed to address economic scarring among the general population, provide targeted funding for employment training/supports for newcomers impacted during the pandemic and those coming in during the post-pandemic economic recovery period to combat deskilling and to prevent and counter scarring effects that may occur (e.g., employer incentives for onsite training and retraining, bridge training and laddering programs, mentorship programs and volunteer opportunities)
2. Provide targeted funding for remedial initiatives for immigrant and refugee children impacted by the pandemic (e.g., additional settlement workers in schools, homework clubs)

#### Health care workers

COVID-19 has exacerbated existing inequalities and vulnerabilities evident in the provision of care. One of these is what the World Health Organization (WHO) has identified as a "care paradox," wherein migrant women work to fulfill the growing need for care workers in high-income and middle-income nations and strengthen weak health systems, while often lacking adequate health services themselves ([Hennebry and Walton-Roberts 2019](#)). This paradox is highlighted in the challenging role visible minority and migrant women play as health workers and care providers in long-term care (LTC) homes, with the latter typically working in lower-paid positions deemed "low-skilled," while actually performing complex and essential services for vulnerable populations ([Browne and Braun 2008](#)). In Canada, up to 50% of LTC caregivers in certain provinces were not born in Canada ([Estabrooks et al. 2015](#)).

The pandemic has exposed Canada's immense dependence on migrants, including refugee claimants, in providing care to the sick and elderly, and the risks that these individuals face in their daily work. During the pandemic, this has meant increased exposure to COVID-19. This is particularly the case for health care workers and care aides working in LTC facilities, which have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19. A recent report found that in Ontario, employment as a health care worker accounted for a disproportionate number of cases of COVID-19 in immigrants and refugees, with

women and those from the Philippines, Jamaica, and Nigeria especially likely to be affected. As of September 2020, of all women infected with COVID-19 in Ontario, just over one-third were health care workers, and almost half of those are immigrants and refugees (Guttmann et al. 2020). In addition, a report released in October 2020 showed that among individuals living in the most ethnically diverse neighbourhoods (25% and over visible minorities) compared to the least ethnically diverse neighbourhoods (<1% visible minorities) across Canada, COVID-19 infection rates were three times higher and COVID-19 related deaths were two times higher (Subedi et al. 2020).

It is also the case that many immigrants in health-related occupations have experienced deskilling in that foreign-educated immigrants are over-represented in those with a health-related education whose skills are being under-utilized (Hou and Schimmele 2020). With the urgent need for health workers to be mobilized for testing, tracking, and provision of health services during the pandemic, it is time for provincial/territorial governments to revisit the need to more fully use the skills of health care professional immigrants who are here but not working in the professions for which they were trained. As suggested by Kim (2020), with respect to internationally educated health professionals (IEHPs) in Ontario, “Ontario’s IEHPs represent a major untapped resource that can, and should, play an important role in supplementing and complementing our health care capacity not only during this crisis but beyond.”

To more fully incorporate internationally educated health care professional immigrants and refugees into the Canadian labour market, a multi-pronged approach will be required. First, it will be necessary to review career progression pathways available to those who enter the care sector. Data indicate that Canada benefits from highly skilled immigrants who are employed as care aides in LTC facilities, but pathways for these workers to progress through the ranks into higher cadres of health work are limited. It will also be important to reduce the costs for relicensing, provide additional spots for medical residencies, and increase the availability of bridging programs for nurses and other health care workers (Kim 2020). These bridging programs should receive stable long-term funding and quality clinical placements should be facilitated to be maximally effective (Sattler et al. 2015). Employers, including provincial/territorial governments, must also be drawn more fully into workforce planning, which includes assessing how immigrant workers enter the health care professions. At a higher level, the work of oversight bodies, such as the OFC, should be enhanced, and similar agencies in other provinces/territories should be promoted and included in a coordinated network of national promising practices in the incorporation of skilled immigrants, including those working in health care. Canada’s position as an immigrant-receiving country with a universal health care system and a commitment to a multilateral governance system and sustainable development goals creates an important platform to demonstrate promising practices in health workforce planning and integration, including how immigrant skills can be better utilized and more effectively integrated in the health care and social care systems.

#### *Recommendations<sup>1</sup>*

We recommend that the federal and provincial/territorial governments:

1. Provide stable funding for bridging programs for nurses and other internationally trained health care workers
2. Review career progression pathways for internationally educated health care professionals, reduce costs for relicensing, and encourage additional spots for medical residencies and clinical placements

3. Enhance the work of oversight bodies (e.g., Fairness Commissions) and develop national promising practices for the incorporation of skilled immigrants in health care
4. Include employers (including federal, provincial/territorial, and municipal governments) in workforce planning and addressing how immigrant workers can enter or re-enter health professions

### Public attitudes

To date, public opinion surveys on how Canadians' attitudes toward immigrants, refugees, and immigration have been impacted by the pandemic have revealed conflicting findings. On the one hand, the findings of a telephone survey conducted in September 2020 by the Environics Institute for Survey Research (Neuman 2020) suggest that Canadians have become even more supportive of immigrants and refugees over the past year. Environics states that most Canadians are comfortable with current immigration levels, see immigration as making Canada better, and that immigrants are viewed as good for the economy. Similarly, Jedwab (2020) found that most Canadians agree that immigrants will help Canada's long-term economic recovery from COVID-19.

On the other hand, other research indicates that, as a result of conditions created by the pandemic, Canadians may not be as welcoming to immigrants as they have been in the past (Newbold 2020). In a survey conducted in August 2020, about 20% of respondents indicated that their attitudes toward immigration have hardened since the pandemic began (though the majority said their attitudes had not changed). When asked about post-pandemic immigration levels, the majority of respondents said the number of new immigrants to Canada should be reduced, and only about one in five respondents said immigration should be a key component of Canada's economic recovery strategy (Newbold 2020).

It is difficult to interpret these conflicting findings, and neither survey tried to assess factors that contribute to these attitudes. In fact, evidence suggests that COVID-19 may create conditions that will lead certain people to hold more negative attitudes toward immigrants and immigration. Of note, research suggests that generalized feelings of threat (Murray and Marx 2013) and feelings of a lack of control (Harell et al. 2017)—both of which may be heightened during the pandemic—predict negative attitudes toward immigrants.

Anti-immigrant attitudes can also increase when people feel a heightened sense of threat to their personal health, whether the health threat is directly linked to immigrants or not (Faulkner et al. 2004). There has been some public discussion of how immigrants and refugees have had higher rates of COVID-19 due to their work in health care and other frontline positions (e.g., immigrants and refugees represented nearly 44% of Ontario's COVID-19 cases in the first half of 2020; Guttmann et al. 2020). Depending on how this information is presented and interpreted, it may inadvertently increase perceptions of health threat from immigrants and refugees, rather than highlighting their many contributions, ironically promoting anti-immigrant attitudes.

In addition, the pandemic has increased Canadians' feelings of economic and cultural threats that may lead to anti-immigrant attitudes (Esses 2021). For example, these threats may be rooted in perceptions of economic challenges arising from the pandemic, and beliefs that immigrants may compete with Canadian-born citizens for access to employment opportunities, social services, and the like. These economic concerns are likely to extend to the period post-COVID-19, when economic recovery may take some time and unemployment levels may remain high. Moreover, COVID-19 may heighten perceptions of cultural threat, such as beliefs that different cultural practices (such as attending in-person religious services or the foods that people eat) are sources for COVID-19 transmission. COVID-19 also has the potential to increase authoritarianism, both through the rise of authoritarian

leaders and by increasing citizens' own authoritarianism tendencies (Asbrock and Fritzsche 2013; Hogg and Adelman 2013). Both of these forms of authoritarianism may reduce public support for immigration.

A representative survey conducted in Canada and the United States in August 2020 tested some of these predictions (Esses et al. 2021). Results indicated that Canadians who reported greater concern about the effects of the pandemic on their personal financial situation and on the Canadian economy were more likely to indicate that there is too much immigration to Canada. These perceptions of personal and national economic threat also predicted negative attitudes toward immigrants on some measures. In contrast, perceptions of personal health threat generally did not predict attitudes toward immigration to Canada or toward immigrants, and perceptions of national health threat predicted disagreement with the statement that there is too much immigration to Canada and more positive attitudes toward immigrants.

Some theorists (e.g., Dennison and Geddes 2020) argue that COVID-19 will direct citizens' attention away from immigration as they prioritize rebuilding their economy and concerns related to education and health care. As a result, immigration "debates" may be out of the public eye, and attitudes toward immigrants may remain favourable (Dennison and Geddes 2020). However, these other priorities and concerns may also increase anti-immigration attitudes, particularly if immigrants are seen as competing for scarce resources, such as jobs, as has been claimed by the Premier of Alberta (Johnson 2020).

When we turn to examining immigrants' experiences of racism during the pandemic—"CoronaRacism" (International Organization for Migration 2020)—a clear picture emerges. Data collected from respondents across Canada in June 2020 revealed that immigrants were significantly more likely (42%) than the Canadian-born population (9%) to indicate that they feared COVID-19 related stigmatization (specifically, being the target of unwanted or intimidating acts or behaviours) because of their racial identity (Hango 2020). Relatedly, when it comes to visible minorities more broadly, data collected by Statistics Canada in May 2020 showed that, in the context of COVID-19, visible minorities, in particular Asian and Black respondents "perceived more frequent race-based harassment or attacks and felt these incidents had increased since the start of COVID-19" (Heidinger and Cotter 2020, p. 4).

After COVID-19 appeared in Canada, the Angus Reid Institute surveyed Canadians of Chinese ethnicity (over half of whom were born outside Canada) to learn more about their experiences with racism and discrimination (Korzinski 2020). About one-third of respondents indicated that they have been made to feel like they threaten the health and safety of others. About two-thirds of respondents felt that representations of Asians in the news (e.g., Trump referring to COVID-19 as the "China Virus") have led to negative views of Chinese people, and one-quarter of respondents felt like they had been frequently treated with less respect than other people. An alarming 30% reported having been personally threatened or intimidated (Korzinski 2020). These findings were triangulated by Statistics Canada (2020a) and by the Centre for Research-Action on Race Relations who reported an increase in racist behaviours in Montreal against people perceived as Chinese; these acts included "vandalism, hate speech online, assaults and physical intimidation" (McDevitt 2020). The situation prompted Montreal's City Council to adopt, unanimously, a motion denouncing "acts of hate, racism, and violence directed towards persons of diverse Asian origins" (Center for Research-Action on Race Relations 2020b) and community organizations to produce safety tips tool boxes in Mandarin (Center for Research-Action on Race Relations 2020a).

In addition to increased racism and violence against persons of Asian origin, Canada has seen a rise in Islamophobia (Al-Qazzaz 2020). Violence against Muslim individuals and mosques has occurred across the country, including in Vancouver, Montreal, London, Toronto, and Edmonton (Al-Qazzaz 2020). For instance, the Muslim Association of Canada's Toronto Masjid facilities were

attacked six times in three months in the summer of 2020 (Al-Qazzaz 2020). Then, beginning around December 2020, hate crimes against Muslims dramatically increased in Edmonton, Alberta. In several instances, these attacks were perpetrated against Black Muslim women wearing hijabs (Short 2020). Police in Edmonton have already pressed charges against at least one individual, and the National Council of Canadian Muslims (n.d.) has called for more police action—and the creation of a bipartisan provincial–municipal committee—to address racist and Islamophobic street harassment in Edmonton.

Evidence suggests that the pandemic has created conditions that call for increased vigilance about public attitudes toward immigrants and immigration in Canada. To ensure that Canada is a welcoming country for immigrants, a two-pronged approach is recommended. First, we must actively work toward developing a robust data collection and dissemination plan. Second, we should proactively engage in efforts to improve public attitudes while reducing the racism that immigrants experience. It will also be useful to track and seek to improve attitudes toward temporary residents, given their importance to the functioning of Canada's economy and the food security of our country, and their increasing selection as permanent residents in Canada.

IRCC collected robust data during the Syrian Refugee Resettlement Initiative and shared those data with the general public, as well as with local, national, and international organizations. This transparent, timely sharing of information was carefully used by academics, politicians, the popular media, and other key stakeholders to engage in balanced reporting—as opposed to divisive, populist rhetoric—about the opportunities and challenges associated with this resettlement initiative (Hamilton et al. 2020). A similar approach should be used when monitoring public attitudes toward immigrants, temporary residents, and immigration during and after the pandemic.

To this end, it will be essential to fund a working group tasked with regularly monitoring Canadians' attitudes toward immigration and immigrants/temporary residents during and after the pandemic using a longitudinal, multi-method approach. Specifically, it will be important to examine how public attitudes are influenced by the ups and downs of the pandemic (i.e., open phases vs. more restrictive, lockdown phases), as well as the various phases of the post-pandemic recovery period. In addition to directly measuring public attitudes from coast to coast, surveys should also assess the factors that may influence public attitudes, including perceptions of threat, lack of control, and authoritarianism tendencies. These data should be collected in a way that facilitates direct comparisons over time, and that allow for proactive strategies to be developed to counteract negative attitudes and perceptions that arise, as discussed below.

It will be equally important to examine immigrants' and temporary residents' perceptions of public attitudes and experiences of racism and discrimination during and after the pandemic. Of note, careful attention should be paid to racism reported by individuals with Chinese ethnicity. It is vital that we engage in efforts to systematically collect, monitor, interpret, and share disaggregated data on immigrants' and temporary residents' experiences of racism and discrimination. Monitoring both public attitudes and immigrants'/temporary residents' perceptions and experiences will provide a wealth of information about when and where public attitude interventions may be needed.

Relatedly, when it comes to the importance of robust and transparent data, public health officials are encouraged to collect, monitor, interpret, and share robust data on COVID-19 testing, infection, and hospitalization rates, systematically examining the role of ethnicity, gender, immigration status, and other vulnerabilities as part of broader health equity plans. Academics and advocates have been urging public health officials to collect these data since early on in the pandemic (Field and Quon 2020) but have faced mixed support, including active resistance (see Jelowicki 2020 regarding resistance in Quebec). Early analyses suggest that immigrants and some temporary resident groups



have disproportionately high COVID-19 infection rates. Although these infection rate disparities may be a function of structural racism, they also have the potential to create anti-immigrant attitudes and negative attitudes toward temporary residents by creating disease concerns. This can be avoided if public health officials, politicians, and the popular media provide accurate information about why COVID-19 rates are higher for racialized and immigrant/temporary resident groups. For instance, stakeholders should highlight structural inequities that put these groups at risk, such as a greater likelihood of being employed in occupations where physical distancing is impossible (e.g., warehouses, meat processing facilities). In addition to providing accurate, balanced information about immigration status and COVID-19 infection rates, it will be important for the government and other stakeholders (e.g., mainstream media) to remain vigilant about the circulation of fake news on social media, particularly news that presents immigrants and temporary residents as vectors of disease.

There are several additional ways in which stakeholders can proactively engage in efforts to improve public attitudes toward immigrants and temporary residents in Canada. Politicians and the media will play an important role in this regard. Research suggests that the beliefs espoused by the government in power influence public opinions of immigrants (Gaucher et al. 2018). Thus, it will be important for politicians to frame immigration and temporary resident programs in terms of the many long-term benefits for Canada, as Immigration Minister Mendicino did when announcing the revised immigration levels plan (2021–2023) in November 2020. Political discourse that emphasizes the importance of immigrants and temporary residents to Canada's immediate and long-term response to the pandemic will also help to keep negative attitudes at bay. For instance, politicians can choose to highlight the essential role that immigrants and TFWs have played in the response to COVID-19 through their work as personal support workers in LTC facilities, and employees in food processing plants that are vital to minimizing disruptions to the supply chain (see Immigration Matters: Government of Canada 2020a). At the same time, it will be important to balance these discussions of Canada's economic recovery strategy with a discussion of our humanitarian commitments to refugees and refugee claimants.

In addition, with plans for increased landings in the next few years, it will be important to invest in Canada's processing capacity to keep the public—including private sponsors, prospective employers, and sponsoring family members—engaged and supportive of immigration and Canada competitive as the post-COVID-19 world opens up. Increased refugee inland determination capacity would also accelerate landings, as would amnesty for those residing in Canada with irregular status.

Finally, IRCC should continue to fund and encourage LIPs and RIFs to develop multi-year anti-racism strategic plans and activities. These should take place in concert with provincial/territorial governments so as to better coordinate and reduce any potential duplication while strengthening and expanding LIPs and RIFs across Canada. In addition, IRCC is encouraged to continue to fund and expand settlement programs that foster positive relations between immigrants/temporary residents and members of the receiving community (e.g., Community Connections programs, mentorship programs, and the like). Extant evidence suggests that intergroup contact, under the right conditions, fosters positive attitudes (Dovidio et al. 2017). Although the pandemic has made it difficult to engage in face-to-face contact, it will be important for the settlement sector to build innovative programs that create opportunities for positive virtual contact between these groups and receiving community members.

#### *Recommendations<sup>1</sup>*

We recommend that the federal and provincial/territorial governments:

1. Fund a working group to regularly monitor Canadians' attitudes toward immigrants, temporary residents, and immigration, and drivers of these attitudes, during the pandemic and

post-pandemic recovery period. This group should also examine immigrants' and temporary residents' perceptions of public attitudes and experiences of racism and discrimination.

2. Develop a national strategy for collaboration and sharing of information regarding promising practices for combatting the racism and discrimination experienced by immigrants and temporary residents
3. Collect, monitor, interpret, and share robust data on COVID-19 testing, infection, and hospitalization rates, systematically examining the role of race, ethnicity, gender, immigration status, and other vulnerabilities
4. Provide accurate information about why COVID-19 rates are higher for racialized and immigrant/temporary resident groups, including highlighting structural inequities that put these groups at risk
5. Frame immigration and temporary resident programs to Canadians in terms of the many long-term benefits for Canada, especially with respect to the importance of immigrants/temporary residents to Canada's immediate and long-term response to the pandemic (e.g., health care, agricultural work)
6. Continue to fund and encourage LIPs and RIFs to develop multi-year anti-racism strategic plans and activities
7. Continue to fund and expand settlement programs that foster positive relations between immigrants/temporary residents and members of the receiving community (e.g., Canada Connects programs and mentorship programs), as well as supporting innovation in developing programs that support positive virtual contact between immigrants/temporary residents and members of the receiving society

### Settlement sector

On 2 April 2020, services to newcomers were deemed an essential service by the federal government, followed thereafter by provincial/territorial governments ([Government of Canada 2020l](#)). This designation meant that program funding to the settlement sector was assured and thus reduced the need for employee lay-offs. As provincial/territorial health-mandated lockdowns occurred across Canada, it quickly became apparent that the settlement service delivery approach would have to change to a safer delivery model for clients and staff alike. Within weeks, with the support of IRCC, settlement sector service providers quickly pivoted to primarily online, virtual, and telephone outreach supports and class offerings. Most organizations temporarily closed their doors to walk-in clients, triaged their client rosters according to their vulnerabilities, and reached out to those deemed most vulnerable first, to ensure newcomers understood the health and safety requirements, where to get up to date COVID-19 information, and other essential information (e.g., [ISSofBC 2020b](#)). Need and asset assessments were conducted inclusive of needs for food, medications, availability and access to communications technology, and digital literacy skills. Immigrant-serving agencies were able to arrange to address these needs through their deep community connections with food banks, schools, community foundations, the United Way, refurbished technology programs, and other community partners. LINC classes moved to online platforms and settlement clients were contacted by telephone, text, various messaging apps, and email.

The RAP and specifically GAR arrivals were put on hold from March to July, except for a small number of urgent protection cases ([UNHCR 2020](#)). GARs who were in temporary accommodation at the time of the country-wide lock down were informed of the emerging situation and in-person services were altered to address public health directives and evolving guidelines. PSR arrivals were also put on hold. As of late March 2020, 7500 resettled refugees (GARs and PSRs) with permanent resident status were stranded abroad unable to fly to Canada. RAP agencies and Sponsorship Agreement

Holders throughout the system quickly developed, and shared with each other, the information needed to make a swift and safe pivot to new models of delivering essential services.

In the face of COVID-19, a number of key issues surfaced for both newcomers and immigrant serving agencies.

#### *Newcomers*

These issues intersect and interrelate to create a complexity of effects on newcomers. The settlement and integration process has been delayed as services such as LINC classes were suspended temporarily and then morphed to hybrid delivery models that demanded equipment, connectivity, and teacher/student digital literacy. This affected immigrants and refugees differently—those with the necessary access and means were able to shift quickly but those without access and means faced more significant challenges (Condo 2020), thus exacerbating already significant vulnerabilities.

Newcomers, whether refugees or immigrants, experienced, on the whole, inequitable access to up-to-date health advisories and information on income supports available through different levels of government. In the immediate crisis, there was no centralized source of health information in multiple languages and accessible formats about what was going on, rules, and how to access government resources. The federal and provincial/territorial governments latterly began to post some multiple language information. Many immigrant-serving agencies reached out to their client bases to ensure they had good information and guidance.

Some newcomer populations, specifically smaller ethno-cultural communities speaking languages of lesser diffusion, faced additional risks and vulnerabilities. Lone parent families, such as refugee mothers with multiple children at home from school and limited access to the usual supports of settlement and community services, as well as disproportionate job losses and loss of income, faced additional challenges in terms of social isolation, fear, and anxiety. For many newcomers, especially those who speak languages spoken by few others in the community, daily attendance in an in-person language class is one of the few opportunities to make connections and friends.

For newcomer families at risk of family violence, the conditions of lockdown and social distancing built on untreated premigration trauma, family separation, and concerns for family members in COVID-19 hotspots abroad to exacerbate incidents of violence and abuse within the household (Condo 2020). These conditions included living in cramped, inadequate multi-generational housing with children home from childcare and school, concern with possible job loss and income loss, and a feeling of lack of control. Counselling programs and transition houses have consequently reported increased demand for services.

Many recently arrived immigrant and refugee families who are in the process of establishing roots in this country as future Canadians often must juggle more than one low income job and must access food banks and other food security programs to augment their basic needs. Some schools that normally provided school lunches to children from low-income families continued to provide meals through a pick-up or delivery system. Food banks have reported a rise in usage during the COVID-19 period. This reveals how many immigrant and refugee families need to rely on such services to put food on the table.

As discussed above, immigrants and refugees have been overrepresented in frontline essential service employment positions, like grocery and warehouse workers, LTC aides, cleaners, support workers in LTC facilities, meat plant, and agricultural workers. By the nature of the working conditions, having to work more than one job, likely with different employers, being physically close to co-workers, patients, or the public in enclosed spaces, and needing to rely on public transportation to get to and

from work, newcomers' exposure to the virus was much more likely than for workers who could perform their roles from home or in more isolated circumstances (Guttmann et al. 2020).

Temporary residents, such as TFWs, refugee claimants, international students, as well as undocumented migrants, also faced additional risks and challenges by the nature of their legal status and, thus, inability to seek support from the many immigrant-serving agencies primarily funded by IRCC who had to follow restrictive program eligibility guidelines (Government of Canada 2019b). The lack of support services to temporary residents, in addition to some employer abuse, inadequate housing, and other challenges, clearly highlight the need to revisit Canada's support for these newcomer populations. This is further brought home by the fact that, to try to meet its targets, IRCC has been sourcing many new permanent residents from the pool of temporary residents already in Canada.

The rise in reports of racist incidents, particularly anti-Asian racism and Islamophobia, but also racism against immigrants in general, meant immigrant-serving organizations were fielding complaints and providing support to victims, as well as to their staff, about how to deal with these occurrences.

#### *Immigrant serving agencies*

As immigrant-serving agencies pivoted to online delivery of services, inadequate or outdated technology tools and infrastructure were revealed. Outdated computers needed to be replaced and computers without microphones and cameras had to be refitted. Immigrant-serving agencies had to provide equipment and training to staff to work from home. Staff working from home were variously equipped and sometimes not at all, so organizations had to fill the gaps. Most immigrant-serving agency staff were not equipped to work from home, not having access to computers where they could ensure security and privacy of client information or sufficient bandwidth for various software conferencing platforms. Staff needed training and they needed support to manage working from home during the pandemic crisis. Many were dealing with their own competing demands—children home from childcare, school, university, and work; inadequate workspaces; and family members affected by health or employment issues. They were not “working from home” but “at their homes, in a crisis, trying to work.” Immigrant-serving agencies also had to address the demands of converting offices and classroom spaces to meet the health and safety requirements in their provinces/territories. Managing productivity and morale were also challenging.

As the health system was working hard to source PPE, the settlement sector was finding it challenging to both find and afford PPE for staff and clients. Both federal and provincial/territorial governments had deemed workers working with immigrants and refugees essential, but their PPE distribution systems were not focused on distribution to immigrant-serving agencies. Eventually some PPE was sourced and distributed from IRCC national headquarters to the different regions for RAP service providers, while greater flexibility within funding agreements allowed service providers to purchase their own PPE, including plexiglass installations.

The massive confusion experienced by non-English and non-French speaking newcomers trying to access various federal and provincial/territorial COVID-19 emergency benefits showed the significant challenges in navigating the complexity of our current federal and provincial/territorial approach. Thus, the Government of Canada, working with the provinces and territories, should develop, implement and evaluate the outcomes of universal basic income pilots that include newcomers residing in different regions.

The settlement sector also saw the impact on recently arrived immigrant and refugee families of struggles experienced in accessing affordable housing during the pandemic (like most low-income

Canadians). They saw and heard from newcomers about their precarious housing situations, multiple family members living in small quarters during the pandemic, and the risk of homelessness due to job loss, increased costs, availability of affordable housing, and risk of eviction. With the Government of Canada's higher targets for immigration levels likely for the foreseeable future, we desperately need more lower-cost housing options across the country and a review of shelter allowance rates for newcomers. Newly arrived and lower-income immigrant and refugees who are just starting their settlement process, and the agencies helping them, face significant challenges in securing stable and adequate housing, regardless of where they reside/operate in Canada.

Post *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act*, GARs continue to be selected based on special need criteria, including survivors of torture and other premigration atrocities. Mental health issues have significantly increased among newcomer populations, including refugees, during the pandemic. Under the Interim Federal Health (IFH) program, resettled refugees are eligible for some formal clinical interventions within their first year in Canada; however, many times mental health issues do not tend to surface until subsequent years. Thus, we recommend establishing a national settlement trauma informed clinical mental health program, available in multiple languages, that specifically targets refugee newcomers within their first five years in Canada.

Additionally, during COVID-19, resettlement assistance service providers working with GARs faced significant challenges in accessing health care and disability support in many destination communities. People with significant need for home care lost the service, it was harder to set up care that was needed, and urgent and complex health needs were not addressed. The IFH program is not meeting new and expanding unique GAR needs, as was especially salient during the pandemic, and the IRCC special case consideration process does not adequately address the situation. Thus, we recommend that IRCC review IFH coverage and the eligibility timeframe, as well as current RAP income support rates to adequately support complex special need GAR cases.

To address the elevated incidents of family violence among newcomers during the pandemic, it would also be useful for IRCC to collaborate with the settlement sector to develop settlement-informed multilingual domestic violence supports. This should include a national sector capacity building approach between IRCC and the sector with the creation of training and tools to increase settlement staff ability to appropriately support newcomers experiencing family and domestic violence.

The sector has also witnessed firsthand the impact of racist attacks during the pandemic, particularly on Black and Asian newcomers. Anti-racism tools and training should be developed by IRCC in partnership with the sector, as the sector has an important role to play in combatting the racism and discrimination experienced by immigrants. LIPs and RIFs have certainly taken up this challenge with a wide variety of strategies being developed to counteract the racism and discrimination evident in their communities and regions. A national strategy for collaboration and sharing of information will be beneficial in this regard. As part of a national anti-racism, multi-pronged approach, the Government of Canada must consider funding to ethno-specific organizations, specifically those representing Black Canadians, naturalized citizens, and newcomers from various ethnic backgrounds. Efforts need to be made to increase these agencies' capacity to provide designated community space, public education and engagement, community development, and other targeted supports.

Pre-COVID-19, and further highlighted during COVID-19, were the fragmented supports delivered by immigrant-serving agencies to some temporary residents in some regions of Canada. The settlement sector saw an increased number of inquiries from temporary residents (e.g., temporary foreign workers), which underscores their vulnerability with respect to their status. Given that there is an increasing trend of temporary residents within the country being approved for permanent residency, it is especially important that they receive supports when they are needed. Thus, IRCC should expand

temporary residents' (e.g., TFWs, international students, refugee claimants) eligibility for some funded settlement programs so that a national safety net is provided for temporary residents while their status is temporary, and those who are accepted for permanent residency hit the ground running. In addition, with projected higher immigration levels for the foreseeable future, provincial and territorial governments should develop their own 3–5 year immigration plans to better ascertain future likely trends, settlement patterns, specific immigration levels, and categories so that civil society and institutions can better prepare for future demographic transformations.

While this briefing does not focus on obtaining citizenship and the citizenship process, the settlement sector is actively involved in educating and supporting permanent residents to apply for and obtain their citizenship. The clear legislative pathway allowing permanent residents to obtain citizenship is unique among many immigrant-receiving countries. Permanent residents who have been physically present in Canada for at least 1095 days in the past five years are able to seek citizenship in this country (Harris 2017). However, some newcomers face significant challenges in meeting the minimum language requirements (Canadian Language Benchmark 4) for those between 18 and 54 years old. The disruption of the lockdown and pivoting to online language classes has further impacted some newcomers on their pathway to citizenship. On the other hand, the sector has also welcomed online citizenship tests and ceremonies in response to the pandemic that have created the opportunity for newcomers, particularly those in smaller centres, to be able to participate remotely (Government of Canada 2021b). IRCC should consider maintaining online tests and ceremonies as this resolves an important equity issue for newcomers residing in smaller, rural and remote communities, who have had to wait longer periods of time to take the test and attend the ceremony than newcomers in urban centres. Lastly, while the settlement sector applauds the updating of the citizenship guide and the oath, the guide updates on Indigenous Peoples of Canada appear to fall short of recognizing the Truth and Reconciliation Call for Action, specifically recommendations 93 and 94 (Alhmedi 2021). The settlement sector's work to increase the awareness of newcomers to Canada's First Peoples remains of paramount importance as we help support and educate future Canadians.

One of the major lessons from the pandemic is the impact of the digital divide, with immigrants who were able to use technology less impacted by the pandemic than those who could not. This is one of our greatest challenges in Canadian society, impacting various citizens including particular at risk marginalized newcomer populations. The digital divide for newcomers must be addressed through a multi-pronged approach. Working with the settlement sector, IRCC should design a multi-level national plan to support at-risk newcomer populations with low digital literacy and no access to technology. This plan should ensure that targeted national settlement core program funding includes digital literacy supports in all program areas, from language programs to first language supports.

The need for the settlement sector to pivot to virtual online service delivery during the spring 2020 national lockdown highlighted the fact that service providers had antiquated computers and other tech equipment which, due to resource limitations, had not been replaced for a number of years, or lacked basic equipment, such as staff cell phones, to be able to deliver remote services. It is anticipated that the post-COVID-19 service delivery approach will involve a continuing hybrid approach within the sector. Some newcomers have made it clear that they would be happy to continue to access only virtual online services, whereas others require some in-person services. Thus, IRCC should create a national technology capital replacement budget or mechanism to ensure current service providers have the capacity to continue and expand a hybrid service delivery approach post-COVID-19. We also recommend that IRCC work with the sector to address remote service privacy and confidentiality issues, staff training needs, and other requirements of a hybrid service delivery model. The Settlement



and Technology Task group supported by the Department, as well as the recent technology-related service providers survey undertaken by IRCC, is an encouraging starting point.

With advancements in technology and the challenges of digital literacy among some newcomer populations settling both in urban and smaller centres, the Government of Canada, settlement sector, and telecommunication companies should explore ways to ensure that newcomers have the capacity to access multilingual information and support online or by phone (e.g., cell phones issued at a low cost to resettled refugees). Imagine the possibilities inherent in a multilingual settlement telephone helpline for an entire province, staffed by trained settlement workers from various providers, who offer over the phone information and orientation and service linking for primarily, but not exclusively, low digital literate newcomers, regardless of their legal status. Imagine recently arrived newcomers being able to call one telephone number to receive the support they need or to link them to their local immigrant-serving agency.

While we recognize the importance to maintain Canada's official bilingualism policy, COVID-19 and the issuance of public health guidelines and updates highlighted the inability to reach all citizens, specifically those that do not speak one of Canada's two official languages. An all-of-government study is required to determine how best to ensure key emergency information is communicated in various immigrant and refugee languages, including to those newcomers who are illiterate and those who are members of smaller ethno-cultural communities speaking languages of lesser diffusion. The need for a centralized repository for emergency health-related information and information on related restrictions and rules in multiple languages and accessible formats has become salient. We recommend that such a repository and a system for populating and disseminating it be put into place now in a proactive fashion, rather than waiting to react to the next national emergency.

While acknowledging that IRCC introduced some funding flexibility to contracted service providers during COVID-19, and understanding the need to ensure accountability for public funds, it is clear that further work can build on what we have learned during this time to develop permanent changes within funding agreements. The ability to transfer unexpended revenue from one fiscal year to another within the life of a contribution agreement, and the continued disconnecting of administrative fees from both program delivery and capital assets would be advantageous to both the Department and the sector. It is also the case that federal settlement service funding to each province and territory is allocated according to IRCC's National Funding Formula, based on a backward looking three year rolling average of the numbers of permanent resident landings in each province and territory, with additional funding for the number of resettled refugees. As immigration landings have been trending up, there has been a lag in the capacity of services to meet the up-trending service demands. In 2020, and likely 2021, the number of permanent resident landings will be greatly reduced by COVID-19 related travel restrictions and IRCC processing slowdowns, which could result in a precipitous drop in funding to the settlement sector beginning in April 2022. IRCC should review the National Funding Formula to be more forward thinking and ensure that the settlement sector can flourish and optimally meet growing service demands.

Do space and geography still matter to the settlement sector post-COVID-19? Yes, but the acceleration of settlement service delivery to online and telephone services are and will have far-reaching implications. Although the LINC program is a settlement-informed language program that is often augmented by local community orientations/field trips, if higher level classes can successfully be delivered remotely online to newcomers with digital literacy and access to technology, why couldn't a LINC provider offer online classes beyond their current geographical location, for example, to newcomers living in multiple cities or even to newcomers living in an entire province or even to permanent residents overseas prior to arrival in Canada? The provision of online first language orientation workshops through Zoom or other platforms could also be delivered over a larger region

than was previously delivered through an office in a specific city. Why couldn't that same workshop be taped and placed on a YouTube channel to be watched by newcomers at a time convenient to them? This innovation is already occurring in some regions of the country, but IRCC and the settlement sector must explore ways to expand the capacity of self-service newcomer client portals.

Through client need and asset assessments undertaken during COVID-19, some agencies have predicted that up to one-quarter of their current clients are completely comfortable continuing to access only online services and see little reason to seek in-person services (see also [ISSofBC 2020b](#)). If this does in fact reflect a future trend, it will likely mean service providers having to rethink future needs for lease spaces. It is highly likely that settlement sector staff will continue to work both from home and the office, with established in-person appointments. Drop-in clients, a frequent occurrence of the past, will likely end as a practise and be replaced by prescheduled appointments in most cases.

With post-COVID-19 economic recovery likely to take some time, and a substantial national budget deficit, regardless of higher immigration levels, will IRCC continue to fund all current service providers? Is the future likely to see mergers, an increased likelihood of agency closures, more hub and spoke type models for larger geographic regions, and the growth and expansion of larger service providers that have more capacity and resources to manage the disruptive transformations underway? As well, with online service demands, increased service accessibility, including through technology, and the ability to offer services 7 days a week and beyond traditional core office hours, could the settlement sector see higher service utilization rates? IRCC website inquiries about local settlement services in November 2020 compared to November 2019 showed an increase in traffic of 30%.

The settlement sector post-COVID-19 will continue to play a vitally important leadership role in nation building, promoting social cohesion, and helping to build more welcoming and inclusive communities across Canada, while enhancing the settlement outcomes of future Canadians. The sector will also face many new opportunities and challenges that will be influenced by accelerated immigration targets and landings, technology, the potential of hybrid service approaches, and the continued need to be responsive, flexible, and innovative.

### *Recommendations<sup>1</sup>*

We recommend that the federal and provincial/territorial governments:

1. Within a broader social policy agenda, develop, implement and evaluate the outcomes of universal basic income pilots that include newcomers residing in different regions
2. Within a broader social policy agenda, develop more low-cost housing options that include newcomers across the country
3. Review shelter allowance rates for newcomers
4. Pilot an expansion of universal health care coverage to include temporary foreign workers, international students, and refugee claimants
5. Review Interim Federal Health coverage and the eligibility timeframe for refugees, and current RAP income support rates to adequately support complex, special need GAR cases
6. Establish a national settlement trauma informed clinical mental health program, in multiple languages, that specifically targets refugee newcomers within their first five years in Canada
7. Within a broader gender-responsive COVID-19 plan, provide targeted funding for supporting immigrant women impacted by social isolation and increased risk of family violence during the pandemic (including in smaller, rural, and remote communities)
8. Develop settlement-informed multilingual domestic violence supports

9. Develop a central repository of public health and emergency information in multiple languages that can be a ready source of information for settlement agencies, LIPs and RIFs to access and disseminate when the need may arise
10. Explore ways to ensure that newcomers have the capacity to access multilingual information and support online or by phone, including expanding self-service newcomer client portals
11. Provide funding to ethno-specific organizations to increase their capacity to provide designated community space, public education and engagement, community development, and other targeted supports to immigrants/temporary residents and racialized minorities
12. Increase eligibility for some federally funded settlement services to include international students, temporary foreign workers, and refugee claimants
13. Provide targeted settlement funding for supporting temporary entrants who transition to permanent residence
14. Maintain online citizenship testing and ceremonies as a complement to those that are in person
15. Review settlement funding allocation models and procedures based on what we have learned during the pandemic
16. Design a multi-level national plan to support at-risk populations including newcomers with low digital literacy and limited access to technology to ensure that targeted national settlement core program funding includes digital literacy supports in all program areas
17. Create a national technology capital replacement budget or mechanism to ensure current settlement service providers have the capacity to continue and expand a hybrid service delivery approach post-COVID
18. As a component of professional development, provide targeted funding for digital literacy training to settlement service providers, including those serving smaller, rural and remote communities

### Canada's global leadership in immigration policies and programs

Canada's immigration programs and policies are seen as innovative global promising practices. Canada's immigration programs are ultimately about nation building. While other countries confront rising anti-immigrant/refugee sentiments, nationalism, racism and xenophobia, Canadians' public support and favorable perceptions of immigration are seen as an exception, and the relative success of Canada's immigration is framed by a series of promising practices (Hiebert 2016). Canada stands out because of a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to immigration, which includes all levels of government (for example the PNP, planned MNP), employers, and civil society in selection and settlement policy. It also stands out because of neutral narratives around immigration and somewhat of a firewall between debates on immigration and security concerns. The Government of Canada has also done a good job of communicating to the public the demographic and economic implications of Canada's low fertility rates and thus the need for immigration. Finally, Canada's selection system has been relatively successful in maintaining diverse flows in terms of immigrant streams and geographic origins, reinforcing the positive Canadian narrative about immigration (Hiebert 2016).

Besides Canada's exceptional position in terms of public support for immigration, Canada's global leadership on the matter of immigration has also been discernible in the process of drafting and securing the Global Compacts on Refugees and Migration, which were agreed to by the UN General Assembly in December 2018 (Milner 2020; IOM 2021). Canada provided leadership on the process of drafting the compacts and demonstrated commitment to the global refugee regime through

financial contribution to the UNHCR, diplomatic guidance, and active refugee resettlement. Most recently, this has been manifested through resettling over 25 000 Syrian refugees in 2015, and the diplomatic leadership displayed in the Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative, which provided an innovative refugee resettlement model internationally, as well as an ongoing vibrant humanitarian commitment to resettle over 30 000 refugees annually.

In short, because of Canada's managed and orderly selection and processing of permanent residents, defined pathways to citizenship, the well-established role of NGOs and civil society in supporting newcomer settlement and integration, and Canada's independent administrative tribunal (IRB) that reviews refugee claimant claims and appeals, Canada remains at the forefront of immigration, settlement and integration models and approaches worldwide.

Nevertheless, against this largely exceptional model and position within the global community, there are growing debates among Canadians on ethical aspects of our current system. These include:

- The fact that more than twice as many people enter Canada every year as temporary residents than as permanent residents. Most of these temporary residents have no pathway to permanent residence.
- The fact that the number of privately sponsored refugees has recently become double the number of GARs, raising concerns of a downloading of the government's commitment to the global refugee regime to civil society
- Employers' and educational institutions' growing influence in the selection of Canada's future citizens despite their primarily economic self-interest rather than nation-building objectives
- Canada's focus on the admission of highly skilled immigrants at the potential cost of other countries' brain drain
- The increasing use of two-step immigration while not providing adequate supports to those in Canada during the first step of their lives in Canada
- The continuing dependence on seasonal agricultural workers and other TFWs to fill essential, ongoing jobs without viable opportunities for them to become permanent residents
- The persistent underutilization of immigrant skills after being selected on the basis of their education, skills and language abilities, leading to a waste of human capital

The global consequences of Canada's dependence on international migrants and the underutilization of their skills are particularly important to consider in terms of health care. In 2018, 8.5% of Canada's nurses and 26.4% of physicians were internationally trained. This supply is sometimes at the expense of source regions, typically lower-income nations that experience out-migration as a form of brain drain. Canada owes a responsibility to the global community to ameliorate the consequences of this labour mobility, and moreover, is well positioned to offer leadership in the area of developing global health workforce strategies for integrated health and care provision through fora such as the Global Health Assembly, and attention to global agendas on nursing and other health sector workers (WHO 2020). The significance of gender with regard to health workers suggests an area that clearly aligns with Canada's commitment to gender sensitivity and Feminist Foreign Policy (Government of Canada 2017a).

To continue to fulfill its potential as a world leader in immigration programs and policies, the ethical questions surrounding aspects of the programs and policies will need to be addressed. This will require deliberations among all levels of government, taking into account their impact not only on Canada and Canadians, but on the source countries of the people who seek to make Canada their home. Some of these ethical issues have arisen piecemeal over time in response to specific demands

and issues. We are gratified to see that some of these issues have been discussed in the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship's supplementary mandate letter ([Government of Canada 2021d](#)). However, it is time to reset and re-evaluate Canada's immigration program and policies as a package, rather than as individual components.

As noted earlier in this briefing, public opinion on immigration can vary greatly across the country and over time, influenced by many factors, including regional economic needs, the political discourse of the day, unemployment rates, media stories, social media, humanitarian crises abroad, and perceived local integration and social cohesion. The federal and provincial governments need to engage in a public education program to educate the public about key aspects of Canada's immigration and integration policies and programs, as well as inform Canadians about the value of, and requirement for, significant immigration to ensure our prosperous future as a nation. Increased information about the objectives and impacts of current immigration policies and programs would result in a more informed public. Only then can there be a more inclusive, informed, and vibrant public consultation on how future immigration policies and programs may need to evolve to address our changing demographic, economic, labour market, social, and humanitarian needs as a nation. If we agree that immigration is about nation building, and against a backdrop of accelerated arrivals and demographic shifts in Canadian society, it is imperative that IRCC engages with more residents on creating and understanding what the vision for immigration in Canada is for the next decade and beyond. This will be one of the most vitally important discussions in our lifetime. We therefore recommend a public education program followed by a comprehensive review, whether in the form of a Royal Commission, task force or other mechanism, to engage Canadians in a discussion of the future of immigration to Canada, and a recalibration of its policies and programs to meet Canada's current and future needs and its global responsibilities.

These decisions about Canada's immigration programs and policies should be matched by modelling and promoting positive behaviours on the international stage. For example, Canada should continue to display leadership on the Global Compacts, promoting alternative pathways for increasing global resettlement numbers (e.g., PSRs; economic mobility pathways for skilled refugees). Canada's federal, territorial, and provincial governments can play a stronger role in the World Health Assembly with regard to The Global Strategy on Human Resources for Health: Workforce 2030 Agenda ([WHO 2016](#)).

In this context, it will be important for Canada to enhance its commitment to the WHO Global Code of Practice on the International Recruitment of Health Personnel ([WHO 2010](#)) through renewed engagement with bilateral agreements that promote fair migration ideals. One key issue of complexity that emerges in developing nations is brain drain and its relationship to critical shortages of skilled health care workers in sending nations and in receiving nations concerns about the level and quality of training that foreign-trained workers receive ([Breining-Kaufmann et al. 2003](#)). The brain drain issue can be addressed through the creation of voluntary codes with regard to the recruitment and international migration of health workers to reduce recruitment from regions facing severe health worker shortages. A main motivation for these voluntary codes is a desire for transnational social justice because the brain drain of health workers represents an inequitable distribution of training investments made by the sending region. However, in some cases out-migration is promoted by sending nations as a form of labour export policy ([Rodriguez 2010](#)). In light of this reality, the language of ethical recruitment codes and labour agreements speaks not of compensation for the sending region, but the idea of seeking "mutuality" through the migration process ([Connell and Buchan 2011](#)). This mutuality approach could include the use of health trade service agreements and training exchanges to compensate sending regions ([Stilwell et al. 2004](#)). Delivering training can address both the brain

drain and quality of training issue, and examples of this do exist in current bilateral health worker agreements ([Breining-Kaufmann et al. 2003](#); [Dhillon et al. 2010](#)).

More generally, we encourage all levels of government and those who provide occupational regulation to expand their focus on the workplace integration of immigrants so that their contributions are used to their full potential “to help the Canadian economy recover from COVID-19 [and] drive future growth” ([Government of Canada 2020](#)).

### *Recommendations<sup>1</sup>*

We recommend that the federal and provincial/territorial governments:

1. Establish a public education program on immigration, followed by a comprehensive review, whether in the form of a Royal Commission, task force or other mechanism, to engage Canadians in a discussion of the future of immigration to Canada and a recalibration of its policies and programs to meet Canada’s own current and future needs and its global responsibilities
2. Continue to display leadership on the Global Compacts on Refugees and Migration, promoting creative pathways for increasing global resettlement numbers
3. Enhance Canada’s commitment to the WHO Global Code of Practice on the International Recruitment of Health Personnel through renewed engagement with bilateral agreements that promote fair migration ideals
4. Build strong partnerships between the Canadian health care sector and education providers in other countries, and support capacity building in sending nations’ health care education
5. Establish a coordinated network of national promising practices in the incorporation of skilled immigrants in the workplace that allow them to apply their knowledge, skills, and talents to the fullest

## Conclusion

This briefing has highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of Canada’s immigration policies and programs as revealed by COVID-19. The importance of immigration for Canada will continue to grow and be an integral component of the country’s post-COVID-19 recovery. It is time to re-evaluate Canada’s immigration policies and programs, and to expand Canada’s leadership on immigration on the world stage. The authors offer insights and recommendations to reinvigorate and optimize Canada’s immigration program over the next decade and beyond.

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## Author contributions

VE, JM, NA, NB, CF, LH, AL, AM, and MW-R conceived and designed the study. VE, JM, NA, NB, CF, LH, AL, AM, and MW-R performed the experiments/collected the data. VE, JM, NA, NB, CF, LH, AL, AM, and MW-R analyzed and interpreted the data. VE, JM, NA, NB, CF, LH, AL, AM,



and MW-R contributed resources. VE, JM, NA, NB, CF, LH, AL, AM, and MW-R drafted or revised the manuscript.

## Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

## Data availability statement

All relevant data are within the paper.

## Supplementary material

The following Supplementary Material is available with the article through the journal website at doi:[10.1139/facets-2021-0014](https://doi.org/10.1139/facets-2021-0014).

Supplementary Material 1

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