



Research and Policy Briefs Series

From Immigrant-Friendly to Immigrant-Competent: Improving the Immigrant “Dating Game” of Smaller Communities

By Marc Valade, Ryerson University

Summary

A healthy Canadian economy needs all of its rural regions to be dynamic places to live and work. However, because of a steady demographic downturn that affects numerous industries, the ability of many rural and remote areas to maintain their economic liveliness is seriously hampered. Immigration could help reverse this trend, but immigrants to Canada have mainly settled in the bigger cities. The 'dating game' is therefore not easy for rural communities as they must become more desirable to foreign-born Canadians and newcomers and thus better able to actively 'court' them to come and stay.

This policy brief draws on my doctoral research, which studies how stakeholders in two smaller cities, Brandon, MB and Rimouski, QC, mobilized their capacity to implement immigrant attraction and retention strategies. The case studies build on in-depth interviews, network data, archival sources, and census data. Preliminary findings reveal three intertwined conditions for smaller communities to become more immigrant-competent: Municipal-backed leadership, employer engagement, and a continuum of immigrant-aware services. To help optimize these and operationalize an attraction strategy in the context of existing policies, the active collaboration of immigration and labour officials is paramount. This brief provides settlement practitioners, community stakeholders, and policy-makers timely insight into smaller communities' capacity in immigrant attraction.

Introduction

To maintain a healthy economy, Canada needs all of its regions effectively developing to be dynamic places to live and work. However, the economic liveliness of many rural and remote areas is seriously hampered by demographic challenges (Valade 2016). Such decaying rural regions can influence the well-being of everyone, even those living in bigger cities. Why? Because natural resources are the backbone of their exports and 27 percent of the national GDP comes from rural areas (FCM 2018). Therefore, healthy rural regions would benefit not only those who live there, but also those sectors of the economy based on transformation and innovation.

Immigration has become the main population driver in Canada, raising the proportion of foreign-born residents close to 22 percent, as estimated by the 2016 Census. Despite this flow, eight out of ten immigrants – foreign-born residents or naturalized – live in the ten biggest cities and surrounding areas (Statistics Canada 2017) where they find varied opportunities, a broad array of services, and the comforting presence of ethnic communities. Immigrants benefit from mobility rights, as all Canadians do, and can choose their preferred place to live and thrive, but, as is the case for most Canadians dwelling in large cities, immigrants are reluctant to settle in smaller

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centres because they are at higher risk of isolation and lack of support. Although some smaller communities have been successful in attracting and settling immigrants, many struggle to reverse demographic decline, despite efforts to appear more "welcoming" (Tibe Bonifacio and Drolet 2017). Successes are inconsistent, in fact, and no cookie-cutter approach seems to apply.

Policy approaches

Eager to get more involved in population growth, provinces and territories have been given options to select immigrants based on their economic needs, such as through Provincial Nominee Programs or a higher devolution in Quebec. Provincial policies often supplement federally funded settlement support, language courses, labour market orientation, and labour placement services. Few provinces and territories, though, have significantly influenced population decline in smaller and remote centres with these tools alone.

Recent pilot programs launched by the federal government, which includes one in the Atlantic region in 2017 and one in rural and northern communities west of Quebec in 2019, emphasize partnerships between employers or economic development organizations and settlement service providers prior to selecting international migrants and committing to actively support their adaptation and social integration. Monitoring retention outcomes associated with these programs will tell whether the approach is effective in small centres. While these are admittedly a step in the right direction, I contend that retention rates in the longer term will hinge on more wholesome community approaches, as discussed below.

As positions have become more difficult to fill in local industries and services, many community stakeholders feel the urge to proactively entice immigrants to make the move toward their small towns (Kukushkin 2009; Caldwell et al. 2017). Local stakeholders often try out initiatives and assess what works in their context. Activities they use for that purpose comprise marketing campaigns, websites, labour-to-employer matching platforms, career fairs, and others. Too often, however, this energy is deployed in vain as it lacks a connecting thread or a master strategy that binds stakeholders together.

The Puzzle

Immigrant attraction and retention in smaller communities is like a large puzzle missing some key pieces, and part of the solution comes down to a 'dating game' between a community and the immigrants who are being 'wooded'. Local stakeholders must learn which aspects of their community may be desirable to prospective immigrants. Desirable characteristics can include the liveliness of a community's economic sectors, its population's attitude towards newcomers, the responsiveness of its settlement and public services, whether it has a family-oriented quality of life, and the availability of education opportunities. There are many features to attend to in order to offer what immigrants may seek.

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Newcomers may bring different values and cultures, equipped with varied language fluency, and motivated by diverse goals, which can include wanting to give their children the best and seeing their work experience and education valued. Community stakeholders must then search for potential 'matches' and their transferable skill levels, pinpointing which profiles could thrive in their particular environment. They must also approach prospective immigrants where they are, which could be abroad or in nearby big cities, and propose a move to their community. It is not an easy task, especially considering that knowledge about immigrants' challenges, interests, dreams, and trajectories is lagging in many of these communities for lack of experience and outlook on cultural diversity.

Research

What if local stakeholders could better prepare and strategize on these issues? This question raises the topic of the effectiveness of collaboration on policy matters in smaller communities.

My ongoing doctoral research aims to unearth factors conducive to local stakeholders' capacity to address their population challenges through immigrant attraction. I adopt a multiple case study approach to acquire qualitative, network, and census data to answer the research question. I interviewed 35 individuals involved in community networks on immigrant attraction in two cities – Brandon, Manitoba, and Rimouski, Quebec – both of which accommodate populations of over 50,000. These communities lie approximately 225 km from a big city.

Data from these cases present a convergence of factors pertaining to political vision and leadership, networking and learning capacity, employers' engagement in immigrant hiring and workplace integration, coordination of settlement services, and dynamic connections with provincial and federal programs.

Findings

Local stakeholders can learn the 'dating game' by questioning their current knowledge on the subject, by welcoming expertise on immigrants' trajectories and expectations, and by promoting and coordinating the implementation of key attractive features that stress the need for all community members to embrace the change brought about by cultural diversity. Three conditions stand out to ensure optimal attraction strategy-making:

- i. **A loud and clear policy vision on immigrant attraction and settlement stated by municipal council.** This translates into consistent means and stable competent leadership to coordinate stakeholders, acquire and share knowledge on the matter, follow up on actions on a priority basis, evaluate outcomes, and build communication strategies.

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- ii. **A direct involvement of major local employers in diversity-aware HR practices and immigrant hiring.** These practices must be overt and effective in the sense that outcomes must speak for themselves, as (un)satisfied immigrant employees, permanent or temporary residents alike, promote their treatment by word of mouth.
- iii. **A unified coordination of immigrant welcoming services, touching a broad array of needs,** such as personalized settlement services, industry-aware language courses, competence-matching systems with employers, family-oriented health and social services, housing, transportation, education, childcare, municipal services, sports, and culture. Immigrants themselves should be given a voice on providers' boards amidst this development of services or through cultural councils.

Additionally, one key factor intervenes in optimizing the alignment of public programs to the above community processes and the subsequent attraction strategy:

- iv. **A constant multi-level collaboration with government representatives.** For instance, provincial agencies can streamline the approval process of immigrant candidates to a community and facilitate their arrival by working closely with federal officials; they can also make sure that labour integration and training programs adapt to smaller centres' reality, such as adopting participation thresholds that are realistic in rural areas.

Implications

For provincial and federal governments

- Immigration to smaller centres should be a ministerial priority, which means getting directly involved with participating communities in attaining the above conditions, including community-specific attraction strategies.
- Without clear managerial support from public executives, the collaboration of civil servants to community efforts in this domain is at risk of remaining symbolic.
- On-the-ground leadership and local ownership of strategy-making processes should be respected. Local stakeholders should be the first actors of their own solutions since it involves a constant and dynamic networking of public officials, local organizations, and employers.

For municipal leadership

- Knowledge acquisition, translation, and sharing on the topic of immigrant attraction should be prioritized. These should come not only from experienced community members and immigrants already living amidst, but also from evidence-based research and other communities involved in similar processes. It is paramount to question assumptions and remain open to learn.

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- Immigrant attraction activities should be integrated in a broader strategy framework involving all key stakeholders, starting with major employers, unions, public service providers, settlement agencies, and governmental officials, especially from immigration and labour departments.
- As a direct interface between newcomers and the community, front-line workers from all public-service outputs should be trained regarding issues of diversity and immigrant adaptation, and understand their role in the overall strategy.
- Participating stakeholders should be regularly monitored over the attainment of the above conditions and the outcomes of their immigrant integration activities.
- The perception of the population regarding changes occurring in the community following the settlement of immigrants should be surveyed at least once a year so as to inform the evolution of local attitudes.

Conclusion

To improve the success of their 'dating game', smaller and remote communities must do more than appear immigrant-friendly; they must 'walk the talk' and become immigrant-competent at all levels of their communities' processes. Employers, along with their current workforce, play a key role by implementing human resource and managerial practices that promote diversity and integration of immigrants. Concurrently, local stakeholders must align their knowledge, discourse, attitudes, practices, and services to make a significant place for newcomers and their families to be contributing members of the community. To achieve this process and the immigrant attraction and retention strategy that builds upon it, unequivocal leadership is critical. For that matter, local officials must wholeheartedly champion the ideal of welcoming change and reassure fellow citizens that what lies ahead is a dynamic future.

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Author's Biography

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