

1.13: SUPPORTING NEWCOMERS AND MIGRANTS IN RURAL CANADA DURING AND AFTER COVID-19

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CANADIAN
RURAL
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RURAL INSIGHTS SERIES: COVID-19

THE INFORMATION INCLUDED HERE IS A SUMMARY OF CURRENT KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE CORONAVIRUS DISEASE (COVID-19) AND ITS IMPLICATIONS IN RURAL CONTEXTS. THE STATE OF KNOWLEDGE WILL EVOLVE AS ADDITIONAL INVESTIGATION AND RESEARCH IS CONDUCTED, SO CONTINUOUS REVIEW OF REPUTABLE SOURCES AND WEBSITES IS ADVISED.

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DISCLAIMER:

The information included here is a summary of current knowledge about COVID-19 and its implications in rural contexts. The state of knowledge will evolve as additional investigation and research is conducted, so continuous review of reputable sources and websites is advised.

This report presents a high-level overview of areas of interest to key stakeholders and members of the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation and should be read as an exploration of challenges and opportunities that communities might consider as they consider their own unique circumstances.

Given the broad nature of the issues considered for this paper, individual communities and/or economic development professionals should take this paper as a preliminary starting point for their own investigations and planning processes. As such, this paper does not constitute specific recommendations for individual communities, and neither the authors nor the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation may be held liable for any actions taken in response to this paper.

ABOUT THE CANADIAN RURAL REVITALIZATION FOUNDATION

The Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation (www.crrf.ca) is a national charity that contributes to the revitalization and sustainability of rural Canada through collaborative research for rural leaders in the community, private sector, and in all levels of government. CRRF works to create credible insights and to improve our understanding of issues and opportunities that are of common interest to rural residents across Canada. Knowledge and better understanding are the fundamental pillars for the welfare of rural communities and environments.

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SUPPORTING NEWCOMERS AND MIGRANTS IN RURAL CANADA DURING AND AFTER COVID-19

KEY MESSAGES

- Immigration to rural areas presents a wide range of concerns that are not necessarily the same as those found in cities. In the context of COVID-19, it is vital to consider the needs of rural newcomers specifically, rather than bundling them together with their urban counterparts.
- Rural immigration and agri-food labour are intrinsically linked. The vulnerability of agricultural migrant and immigrant workers can clearly be seen in outbreaks that have already occurred in these workplaces, with vast implications for Canada's food systems and rural economies. This vulnerability directly transfers to food systems, economic productivity, and rural communities in general.
- Canada's immigration systems have been affected and, in some ways, impeded by COVID-19, causing increased stress for rural newcomers who have less support than those in urban areas.
- Limited/no internet access and smaller support networks make settlement services even more vital to newcomers in rural areas. With in-person service more difficult and in some cases impossible during the pandemic, this may leave some rural newcomers without the help they need during this time.
- Rural settlement service providers are having to respond to the pandemic-related needs of their newcomer clients. Meanwhile, such service providers are experiencing disruptions and challenges to their own service delivery capacity, including those pertaining to funding.

IMPORTANT TERMS

- Newcomer: a person arrived to Canada from another country within the past five years with the intention of residing and/or working
- Immigrant: a person born in another country who now resides permanently in Canada
- Migrant Worker: a person from another country temporarily living and working in Canada through government programs such as the Temporary Foreign Worker Program or with a temporary work permit
- Refugee: a person with recognized refugee status granting them permission to reside and work in Canada

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOVERNMENTS TO PROTECT NEWCOMERS AND MIGRANTS

- Mitigate the negative impact of COVID-19 on Canada's migrant workers through increased financial and medical support.
- Provide help to individuals and families dealing with the effects of disruptions to rural immigration systems with locally-informed strategies.
- Invest in the vital work of settlement service organizations and community volunteer groups to support rural newcomers.
- Assist rural businesses and employers to protect newcomers in the workplace.
- Promote policy, research, and coordination that supports rural immigration during and after COVID-19.

RURAL IMMIGRATION IN CANADA DURING COVID-19

COVID-19 has forced Canadians to have many overdue conversations on topics ranging from the state of long-term care homes to the gendered division of household labour. The pandemic has revealed the need to better understand the roles of newcomers and migrants in rural areas and their implications for rural economies and communities. Immigrants, refugees, and migrant workers in these places fill different kinds of jobs and have access to different levels of services than their urban counterparts, and therefore are affected by COVID-19 in unique ways. This CRRF Rural Insights Series paper presents the current knowledge of how newcomers and migrants are being impacted by the pandemic, the responses of communities, and what this means for our understanding of rural immigration moving forward. Following some background information on rural immigration in Canada, specific areas of focus will be:

- The impact of COVID-19 on employment for newcomers and migrants and their role in rural economies.
- The effects that COVID-19 has had on various immigration systems in Canada and how rural newcomers and migrants may be impacted.
- Disruptions experienced by immigrant service providers in rural areas and how these have changed the ways that they interact with their clients.

Each of these areas will be explored in order to present how COVID-19 has changed the state of rural immigration in Canada and how it has exposed pre-existing vulnerabilities.

BACKGROUND ON IMMIGRATION IN RURAL CANADA

Immigration is often thought of as primarily an urban concern, to the extent that some less familiar with the subject might question the necessity of specifically rural immigration studies at all. It is certainly true that of the hundreds of thousands of newcomers Canada receives every year, the vast majority settle in cities. When using a “rural and small town” definition of places with less than 10,000 people, as we are, with some caveats, for this paper,¹ immigrants approved for permanent residence in rural areas were outnumbered by their urban counterparts by a factor of nearly ten to one between 2011 and 2016.¹ However, that still means that a considerable portion of newcomers make rural places their home, a fact which requires the consideration of policy makers. Moreover,

¹We have chosen this definition and corresponding population size because they are in accordance with immigration statistics used and are accepted within the rural development field. However, our analysis pertains to cities with populations greater than 10,000 people but whose economies are deeply intertwined with rural economies (for example, Brandon, Manitoba and High River, Alberta, both of which have meat processing plants that contain large numbers of newcomer/migrant workers and have been affected by COVID-19 transmission).

thousands of migrants without permanent status reside in rural areas. As we will demonstrate, these individuals play an indispensable role in rural economies and have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19. Additionally, many newcomers – those with permanent residence and those without – settle in cities that have populations greater than 10,000 but are intricately tied to rural economies and do not have the same depth and density of newcomer services as Canada’s larger urban centres.

The opportunities and challenges rural newcomers encounter are in many ways completely different than what they would find in a city. Public transportation is often not available as a means of reaching employment, services, or religious or cultural groups. Internet access is typically more limited, making it more difficult to maintain contact with distant family members. Reduced cultural diversity makes it less likely that they will find groups with which they share religion, traditions, and language. Living in a rural area therefore further complicates many of the common issues faced by newcomers.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the sudden changes being made to policy as well as public life in general (e.g. the limitations placed on government services and public gatherings to allow for social distancing), this understanding of the situation of rural newcomers indicates a need for special attention to the ways they are being impacted. While many of the everyday problems created by the limitations of socially-distanced living can be mitigated through the internet – video calling, for example, can allow people to check in on their relatives, work from home, or have a virtual doctor’s appointment – these solutions are not always available to rural residents who lack broadband access. While many people forced to self-quarantine due to illness or travel can rely on friends or community members to deliver essential items such as groceries, recently arrived rural newcomers frequently lack these connections. It is therefore important to consider how this crisis affects rural newcomers specifically, and what the options are for governments, businesses, and society to mitigate negative impacts.

COVID-19 AND FOREIGN LABOUR IN RURAL CANADA

COVID-19 has had wide-ranging and devastating effects on the Canadian economy and on employment, with almost 2 million jobs disappearing in the month of April before rebounding slightly in May.² While much attention has been paid to job losses in the service sector in mostly urban areas, there is a need for more discussion around the ways that people in rural areas, and particularly newcomers, experience such sudden shifts in the economy. While some immigrants to these areas, particularly those considered “highly-skilled,” have secure jobs, there is an intrinsic connection between rural newcomers and precarious employment, especially in Canada’s agri-food sector.

COVID-19 has brought the relationship between foreign labour and agriculture into focus more than ever before. In mid-March 2020, amid the growing realization that a global pandemic was about to upend virtually every aspect of public life, the federal

government took the unprecedented step of closing Canada's borders to non-essential travel for those without citizenship or permanent resident status. While exceptions were made for international trade and family members of Canadian residents, this decision at first meant that migrant workers were unable to enter the country. These workers come to Canada every year through the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) and Temporary Foreign Worker (TFW) agricultural stream. Collectively, migrant workers filled nearly 55,000 agricultural jobs in 2018, accounting for 20% of the sector's labour force.³ Many of them were scheduled to arrive in the weeks following the virus' rapid spread in early March. The Canadian government eventually made an allowance for migrant workers to enter the country, but by that time international air travel had been steeply reduced, leaving many unable to reach their employers in Canada.⁴ The full economic impact of this disruption to the labour supply is not yet known. However, it is expected to be severe, with farming groups signalling the need for large amounts of federal aid for the sector.⁵

The financial impact on Canadian farmers struggling with the loss of their workforce has been extensively covered in media, but the implications for migrant workers themselves have received comparatively little attention. Those who were unable to reach their place of employment in Canada will incur a massive loss to their household's annual income, as migrant farm workers and their families often rely on income from the SAWP or TFW for basic necessities as well as debt repayment in their home countries. Even workers who did manage to get to Canada have in many cases been delayed by rescheduled flights, resulting in decreased earnings. Given that migrant workers who are not currently residing in Canada would be unable to claim federal aid such as the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), it appears unlikely that many of them have been compensated for their loss of income during the pandemic.

Beyond these financial tolls, it can be expected that those migrants who have arrived to Canada will suffer consequences to their physical and mental health. While migrant farm workers in Canada are legally entitled to public health care, there are numerous obstacles to them receiving it, stemming primarily from the inequality of their relations with employers, who can fire them at will, effectively terminating their ability to earn an income in Canada. This dynamic has been shown to cause workers not to seek treatment for an illness or injury for fear that their employer might send them home.⁶ As a result, workers may avoid seeking medical attention for COVID-19, as it could jeopardize their employment in Canada. The vulnerability of migrant workers' health has already had ramifications in the COVID-19 crisis. An outbreak at a Cargill meat processing facility in Alberta was one of the largest in North America so far and was responsible for at least two deaths. The workforce at this facility is largely comprised of recent immigrants and migrant workers, some of whom have told reporters that they were pressured into remaining at work while sick.⁷ Further outbreaks amongst migrant workers on Ontario farms accounted for a large portion of the province's cases in June and July and have caused at least 3 deaths so far.⁸ One farm saw 199 of the 216 migrants working there test

positive⁹, suggesting that the tight and compromised living conditions often decried by advocates and researchers have placed these workers at particular risk of illness during the pandemic. At the time of writing, Manitobans were monitoring recent cases involving staff at Maple Leaf's pork processing plant in Brandon, which were part of a larger cluster in that city.¹⁰

COVID-19 has impacted newcomers and migrant workers in rural Canada in ways that reflect their vulnerability, but also the vulnerability of the food systems that they are a part of. The disruptions outlined above have already created serious challenges to Canada's food security. Given that they are not included in any of the groups exempted from the initial travel restrictions enacted in March (i.e. Canadian citizens and permanent residents), the labour shortages currently facing the agri-food sector can at least partially be attributed to the temporary status of migrant workers. Some advocacy groups are also arguing that these workers' lack of citizenship or permanent resident status leaves them vulnerable to exploitation and at greater risk from the virus¹¹. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on temporary workers therefore demonstrate the need for a serious national discussion on the effects of temporary status on the workers themselves, as well as Canada's agri-food sector.

The effects of COVID-19 on Canadian agriculture's labour force shows the extent to which the sector relies on foreign labour. With labour shortages in the sector forecasted to grow over the next decade, these workers will likely be required to take on an even greater portion of this work, but still do not receive the same protections as workers with Canadian citizenship or permanent residency. Canada's food systems are therefore compromised during this crisis because of the systemic vulnerability of immigrant and migrant workers, who make up a substantial portion of the overall workforce.

COVID-19 CAUSING DISRUPTIONS TO IMMIGRATION SYSTEMS IN RURAL CANADA

Canada's immigration systems have been severely disrupted by the pandemic. Many of the processes that allow newcomers to live, work, and settle in Canada have slowed or stopped due to the need for social distancing. These disruptions affect multiple types of immigration, from those seeking refuge to family reunification to international students. They also present different implications for newcomers in rural areas.

COVID-19 has halted or slowed many government operations essential to the integration of newcomers, including the processing of refugee claims and refugee sponsorship applications. For refugees in rural areas, as well as their family members, this may prove especially difficult, as they do not have the same support networks, internet access, or services that they would in a city to help them to navigate these changes. Refugees have needs that are overlapping with, but distinct from, those of other types of newcomers.

The possibility of lingering effects of the traumatic events which led them to seek refuge add an extra challenge to integration and the social services to help them through this are often less available in rural areas. The current uncertainty around immigration processes such as refugee claims and sponsorship applications are therefore likely to make rural refugees particularly vulnerable to a variety of challenges including social isolation and poor mental health.

While international students are more commonly thought of in an urban context, some can also be found on rural post-secondary campuses. These students are facing the same pressures as those in cities, including loss of income, closure of school facilities, and the difficult decision of whether to stay in Canada or go home and face the risk of not being able to return in the near future. Once again, however, these students do not have the same access to help as their urban peers. Ongoing difficulties in accessing public transportation due to concerns over safety, as well as the imperative of social distancing, mean that rural international students are even more cut off from cultural groups found in urban areas than ever. This may leave them socially isolated and vulnerable. International students in rural areas will face additional concerns with the start of a new school year in the fall. Poor internet access will hinder the ability of many to participate in remote education. While at some schools there are plans to allow international students to remain in residences, at others they will have to seek off-campus housing for the first time, which is all the more difficult in rural areas with low amounts of rentable housing available.

PROVIDING SETTLEMENT SERVICES TO RURAL NEWCOMERS

Immigrant settlement service providers are an essential support in both urban and rural areas. They help newcomers to access housing and employment, they guide them through complicated bureaucratic processes, and they connect them to networks within their communities. This support is particularly valuable in rural areas, as they typically lack the existing immigrant populations found in cities. With COVID-19 making the in-person provision of these services unsafe, it is to be expected that newcomers in rural areas will face greater difficulty accessing them. Settlement service organizations typically rely heavily on volunteers from their communities. The need to comply with social distancing regulations and the liability involved with asking volunteers to risk infection may mean that these organizations have less help available than normal. While immigrant settlement services can be moved online to a certain extent, poor internet access may make this far more difficult outside of cities. Moreover, for services that must be delivered in-person during this time, rural settlement service providers must cover larger areas using more limited resources than their urban counterparts. It is therefore uncertain to what extent the quality of services delivered to rural newcomers will suffer during this time. Some rural areas do not have local settlement services at all, relying on organizations in regional centres to integrate newcomers. Given the high demand on

their services and the difficulties involved in travelling while social distancing, the ability for these organizations to help rural newcomers is likely diminished.

While it is clear that settlement service providers need additional help during this time, it is also important to highlight some of the innovative ways that they are helping newcomers in rural areas. The Calgary Catholic Immigration Society (CCIS), for example, has developed a crisis response to serve newcomers in rural areas along several lines: Resettlement, Family Violence, Mental Wellness, Health, Housing, Finances, and Food Security.¹² This serves as a reminder of how even settlement service providers with an urban focus can help underserved newcomers by using a 'rural lens' to identify those who would otherwise be forgotten.

In addition to finding new ways to continue their regular activities, settlement service providers have also acted as key distributors of information regarding COVID-19 for newcomers in their areas. This includes communicating public health regulations and guidelines in multiple languages for the safety of their clients. Additionally, they have helped their clients to apply for financial assistance such as employment insurance and the CERB. These services, which add to the already long list of responsibilities of settlement service providers, have been essential to the physical and financial wellbeing of newcomers during the pandemic, particularly those in rural areas where such information is less likely to be available in their native language. These organizations are also struggling to fill in for a wide range of social activities that normally help to integrate newcomer children, such as extracurricular activities like sports, which are now being interrupted due to the pandemic. This will add further responsibilities for settlement service providers who are aware of the crucial role that community activities play in integrating young newcomers.

Settlement service providers, and particularly those in rural areas, will require more funding than ever to meet the demands outlined above. This demand, however, may not be initially obvious to those with decision-making power regarding the distribution of funds within the sector. Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada, for example, makes many funding decisions regarding service providers based on the number of newcomers settling within their geographic area. Given that there has been a temporary reduction in the number of newcomers arriving to Canada during the pandemic, some settlement service providers may actually face a decrease in funding during this period. It is therefore important that funding decisions account for the increased demand on services, particularly in rural areas which face the additional challenges described above.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORTING RURAL IMMIGRATION DURING AND AFTER COVID-19

Governments can take important steps to prevent or mitigate negative impacts of COVID-19 on rural newcomers and migrants. As explained above, the pandemic has had grave implications for the wellbeing of migrant farm workers and those in related food processing industries, the maintenance of rural immigration systems, and the provision of immigrant settlement services. Policy makers can take the following steps to help rural newcomers:

1. Mitigate the negative impact of COVID-19 on Canada's migrant workers

Migrant workers entering Canada through the SAWP, TFW, and on working visas are particularly vulnerable to illness and loss of income due to the precarity of their migration status and the realities of their working conditions, both of which have already contributed to several major outbreaks of COVID-19. Furthermore, this vulnerability in turn makes our agri-food sector and food systems vulnerable. It is therefore imperative that steps be taken to protect these workers from further harm. More specifically, we recommend that governments:

- Ensure compensation for migrant workers who were unable to reach employers in Canada for lost income due to COVID-19, such as through the CERB or other relevant mechanisms.
- Promote government-employer collaboration to improve the conditions of housing for migrant workers, providing them with appropriate space for social distancing.
- Ensure that migrant workers can access financial support should they have to leave a worksite due to an outbreak of COVID-19 or to prevent the further spread of COVID-19 at a worksite.
- Support organizations to continue to develop and disseminate multilingual and culturally effective information about how to reduce the spread of COVID-19.
- Review occupational health and safety guidelines for workplaces - including farms and factories - employing migrant workers during COVID-19 and take steps to ensure compliance on behalf of employers. This includes confidential reporting for migrant workers, annual evaluations of workplaces, and partnerships between employers, health agencies, and governments.

2. Provide help to individuals and families dealing with the effects of disruptions to rural immigration systems

From immigrants and refugees struggling to be reunited with their families to international students facing greater uncertainty about their ability to remain in Canada, newcomers are being affected by policy changes and interruptions to government programming as a result of COVID-19. In rural areas, newcomers face these problems plus the complications that come from a greater distance to services, immigrant communities, and internet access. We should therefore be especially mindful of the impact this may have on their wellbeing. Specifically, we recommend that governments:

- Help communities to explore and better understand the realities of COVID-19 and build locally-based approaches to overcome disruptions.
- Invest in the improvement of internet access in rural areas to facilitate the provision of services and dissemination of information to newcomers and migrants living outside of cities.

3. Help settlement service organizations and community volunteer groups to maintain support for rural newcomers

Rural newcomers depend on settlement service organizations and community volunteer groups to help them with their integration into Canadian society. The realities of rural life create a greater reliance on in-person interaction which has now become difficult and potentially dangerous. Settlement service organizations and community volunteer groups are working to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on their clients but need government support in order to do so. Towards this end, we recommend that governments:

- In consultation with settlement service providers, co-create methods to assess required government support based on the reality of service demands, rather than solely the number of new arrivals.
- Financially invest in organizations serving rural newcomers to fully account for the new ways in which settlement service providers and community volunteer groups are serving newcomers and the community during the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent recovery.
- Support settlement service providers and community volunteer groups with anti-racism initiatives.

4. Rural businesses and employers can help to support newcomers in their area

From employers attempting to prevent outbreaks among migrant workers to local business owners interested in partnering with nearby settlement service providers, there are many ways for the private sector to be proactive in helping newcomers and migrants through the COVID-19 crisis. Businesses in rural areas can:

- Establish clear workplace procedures for reporting illness and injury. Workers, particularly those with temporary status, need to be confident that issues they report to their employer will be attended to by a medical professional and that there will be no repercussions towards them such as termination of their employment and/or repatriation.
- Generate forums for sharing resources and practices to improve workplace health and safety between employers.
- Form relationships with public health organizations to promote good practices, assist with responses to COVID-19, and facilitate the sharing of information.

5. Policy, research, and coordination can support rural immigration during and after COVID-19

Immigration to rural Canada during and after COVID-19 needs to be supported by government policy, academic research, and coordination between various governmental and non-governmental bodies in order to mount informed responses to the many challenges currently faced by newcomers and migrants. To promote such discussions, we recommend that governments:

- Provide support for inter-jurisdictional conversations to examine rural immigration that include newcomers, settlement service providers, community volunteer groups, businesses, labour, and all levels of government.
- Re-evaluate current immigration policies in light of COVID-19. In particular, the immigration status of migrant workers in Canada requires examination given the vulnerabilities made apparent by ongoing events and existing research.
- Increase transparency and access to rural immigration data to facilitate evidence-based decision-making.
- Increase support for new rural immigration research to build prosperous rural economies and communities.

ENDNOTES

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¹² <https://www.ccisab.ca/sa-response.html>

RURAL INSIGHTS SERIES: COVID-19

The information included above represents a summary of current knowledge about COVID-19 and its implications for economic resilience and recovery in rural contexts. The state of knowledge will evolve as additional investigation and research is conducted. Continuous review of reputable sources and websites is advised.

CRRF is producing a series of insight reports on key issues impacting rural communities as they face the challenges of managing the pandemic and look to future recovery. CRRF will be publishing reports through the *Rural Insights Series: COVID-19* on a rolling basis throughout 2020. Topics to be covered by these reports include (but are not limited to):

- Agriculture
- Rural Health
- Well-Being & Mental Health
- Employment & the Labour Force
- Local Economic Development
- Immigration
- Digital Divide
- Gender-Based Implications
- Localism & Supply Chains
- Islands
- Tourism
- Fisheries
- Mining
- Manufacturing
- Drinking Water
- Infrastructure Investment

Please visit www.crrf.ca regularly to access the *Rural Insights Series: COVID-19* as well as updates to emerging research and additional resources on the implications of COVID-19 for rural Canada.