

For Immediate Release

Don't Stop Now

How immigration and temporary residency have reversed decades of population decline in Northern Ontario

12 February 2026 – Deaths outweigh births in almost every region of Northern Ontario. Without the recent population increase driven by both immigration and an increase in temporary residents, Northern Ontario would be demographically and economically unsustainable.

These are the findings presented in Northern Policy Institute's most recent Briefing Note on population change.

"While the population of Canada and Ontario doubled over the last 50 years, the story in the regions of Northern Ontario is very different" says report co-author and Institute President Charles Cirtwill. "In the regions closest to Toronto, Northern Ontario grew by almost 60%, just over half the rate for Ontario as a whole. In Northwestern Ontario that 50-year growth number was a little over 10%. In the regions in and around Timmins, Sudbury, and Sault Ste Marie, total population was basically unchanged (despite growth in the cities themselves)."

Given this reality, the report makes two central recommendations:

- Growing permanent immigration and stabilizing temporary resident numbers in Northern Ontario should be the population priorities for the federal and provincial governments.
- Ensuring that every region of Northern Ontario has permanent access to a community driven, local labour market focused immigration program is of paramount importance.

According to Cirtwill, the situation could have been much worse without recent initiatives like the Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot.

"Immigration has been a key factor in a shift from stagnation to growth in Northern Ontario. The impact of federal and provincial efforts to move immigration beyond Canada's largest cities can be seen clearly in the period 2021 through 2025" says Cirtwill. "Without the last five years of growth almost every census district in Northern Ontario would have seen population decline, the only exceptions being in the regions within 4 hours of Toronto."

The report makes a point of differentiating between immigrants (those moving to Canada permanently) and temporary residents (students and temporary workers). Looking at national and provincial trends, the report notes that growth in immigration has been controlled and manageable. Temporary resident numbers, however, skyrocketed after 2021, making some adjustment absolutely necessary.

Nevertheless, the report highlights the positive impacts students and temporary workers have had in Northern Ontario and argues that the cuts in these numbers should have been deeper in Canada's large urban centres and far more limited in rural and northern areas.

The report suggests that:

- The number of temporary residents should quickly be returned to pre-2025 numbers in rural and northern areas. This should be done by monetizing available post-secondary capacity and rebuilding international student numbers. Canadian post-secondary education is an export product, like many other professional services.
- Studying in Canada should not be marketed as a “short-cut” to permanent residency and citizenship. Post-graduate work permits (PGWP) should be geographically constrained and aligned with local labour market needs as part of the permanent immigration process. Furthermore, other temporary workers (not students or those using a PGWP) should be integrated whenever possible into permanent immigration streams.

Want to learn more? Read the report here: <https://www.northernpolicy.ca/dont-stop-now>

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About the Authors:

Charles Cirtwill is the founding President and CEO of Northern Policy Institute (NPI). He joined NPI in September 2013 after twelve years with the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies. An alumnus of Dalhousie University, he earned a BA in Political Science, an LLB, and an MPA focusing on quantitative and qualitative assessment of public policy and programs.

Charles has served on multiple ministerial and regional public policy initiatives. These include the Minister's Northern Transportation Task Force, the CSA Technical Committee on Indicators for Rural Community Well-being, and the Northwestern Ontario Municipal Association Economic Development Working Group. Charles was also heavily involved in the community engagement efforts of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada during the design and implementation of the Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot.

Zhexian Zhu was born in China and holds a bachelor's degree in economics and political science from the University of Alberta, as well as a master's degree in economics from Lakehead University. His research focus has been on Fiscal Policy and Macroeconomics, exploring the complexities of fiscal policy and its impact on the broader economy. His primary research focus is cost-benefit analysis and prioritization of the big ideas included in the 2023 report of the Northern Ontario Transportation Task Force.

About Northern Policy Institute:

Northern Policy Institute is Northern Ontario's independent, evidence-driven think tank. We perform research, analyze data, and disseminate ideas. Our mission is to grow Northern Ontario by supporting evidence-based decision-making through education via direct community engagement.

We believe in partnership, reconciliation, collaboration, communication, and cooperation. Our team seeks to do inclusive research that involves broad engagement and delivers recommendations for specific, measurable action. Our success depends on our partnerships with other entities present in or passionate about Northern Ontario.

Our permanent locations are in Thunder Bay and Timmins. During the summer months, we have satellite offices in other regions of Northern Ontario staffed by teams of Experience North placements. These placements are for university and college students working in your community on issues important to you and your neighbours.