



NORTHERN
POLICY INSTITUTE

INSTITUT DES POLITIQUES
DU NORD

Giwednong Aakomenjigewin Teg
ᑲ ᐃᑕᑕᑦᐱᑦᐱᑦ ᑭᐅᑦᑕᑦᐱᑦ ᐃᑕᑕᑦᐱᑦ
Institu dPolitik di Nor

Research Report No. 48 | June 2021

Just the Tip of the Iceberg: The First Few Months of the Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot

By: Hilary Hagar

northernpolicy.ca

NPI – Who We Are

President & CEO

Charles Cirtwill

Board of Directors

Pierre Bélanger (Chair)
Florence MacLean
(Vice-Chair Northwest)
Dwayne Nashkawa
(Secretary)
Dr. Brian Tucker (Treasurer)
Charles Cirtwill
(President & CEO)
Suzanne Bélanger-Fontaine

Kim Jo Bliss
Dave Canfield
Harley d'Entremont
Kevin Eshkawkogan
Ralph Falcioni
Pierre Riopel
Alan Spacek
Mariette Sutherland
Dr. Donna Rogers

Advisory Council

Jean Pierre Chabot
(Chair, NPI Advisory Council)
Michael Atkins
Adam Castonguay
Katie Elliot
Shane Fugere
George Graham

Peter Goring
Cheryl Kennelly
Winter Dawn Lipscombe
Dr. George C. Macey
Ogimaa Duke Peltier
Danielle Perras
Bill Spinney

Research Advisory Board

Dr. Heather Hall (Chair,
NPI Research Advisory Board)
Dr. Hugo Asselin
Riley Burton
George Burton
Ken Carter
Sophie Dallaire
Carolyn Hepburn

Dr. Peter Hollings
Brittany Paat
Dr. Barry Prentice
Leata Rigg
Dr. David Robinson
Dr. Lindsay Tedds

Land Acknowledgement

NPI would like to acknowledge the First Peoples on whose traditional territories we live and work. NPI is grateful for the opportunity to have our offices located on these lands and thank all the generations of people who have taken care of this land.

Our main offices:

- Thunder Bay on Robinson-Superior Treaty territory and the land is the traditional territory of the Anishnaabeg and Fort William First Nation.
- Sudbury is on the Robinson-Huron Treaty territory and the land is the traditional territory of the Atikameksheng Anishnaabeg as well as Wahnapiatae First Nation.
- Both are home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples.

We recognize and appreciate the historic connection that Indigenous people have to these territories. We recognize the contributions that they have made in shaping and strengthening these communities, the province and the country as a whole.

This report was made possible through the support of our partner, Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation. Northern Policy Institute expresses great appreciation for their generous support but emphasizes the following: The views expressed in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Institute, its Board of Directors or its supporters. Quotation with appropriate credit is permissible.

Author's calculations are based on data available at the time of publication and are therefore subject to change.

Editor: Mark Campbell

© 2021 Northern Policy Institute
Published by Northern Policy Institute
874 Tungsten St.
Thunder Bay, Ontario P7B 6T6
ISBN: 978-1-990372-10-0

About the Author

Hilary Hagar



Hilary Hagar is originally from Hamilton, ON. A recent graduate from the University of Guelph with a B.A. (Hons) in International Development, Hilary values interdisciplinary approaches and is passionate about community economic development and poverty alleviation. During her undergraduate degree, Hilary completed participatory research in both Cuba and Bolivia. Closer to home, Hilary has also contributed policy debates on issues ranging from greenhouse gas emissions in Ontario agriculture to Inuit nutrition and health. An avid outdoors enthusiast, she spends as much time as possible camping, hiking, and canoeing.

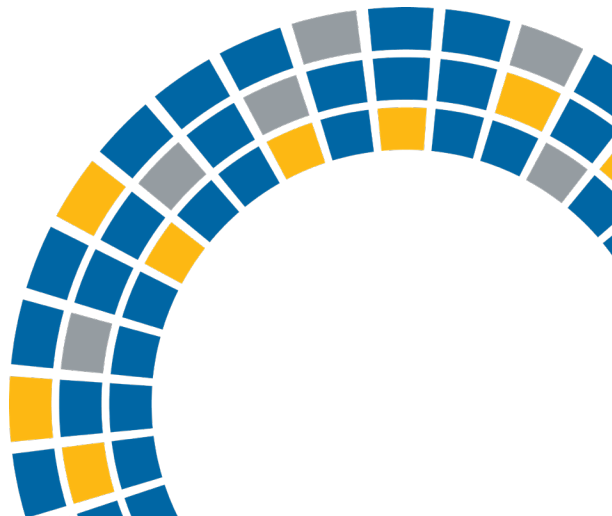
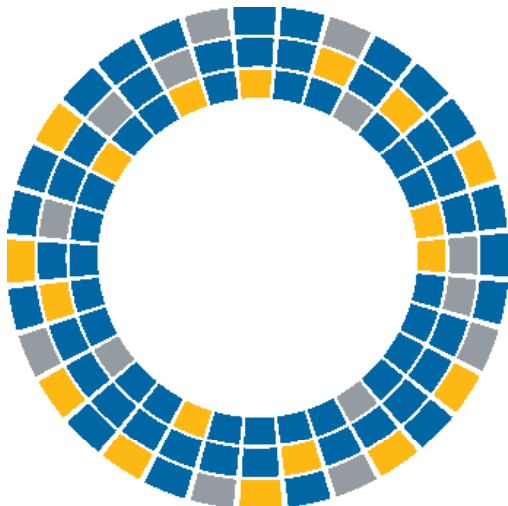
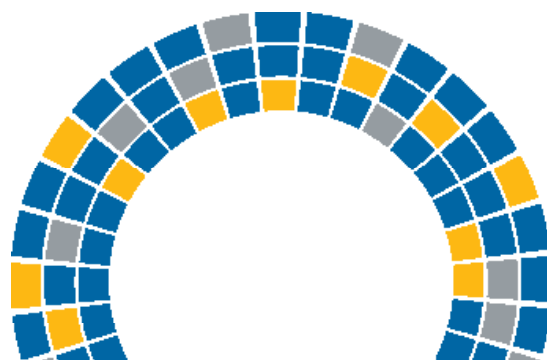


Table of Contents

Executive Summary	5
Introduction	6
Introduction to the RNIP	7
<i>The RNIP process:</i>	8
Methodology	10
Findings.....	11
Community criteria	11
Research themes	12
1. Implications of multilevel governance	12
2. Required community capacity	16
Employer engagement	17
Collaboration with local service provider organizations.....	18
3. Importance of well-defined roles.....	20
4. Welcoming communities	22
Current and future challenges	23
<i>The COVID-19 pandemic</i>	23
<i>Upcoming threats and challenges</i>	24
Conclusion	25
References.....	26



Executive Summary

When it comes to population growth in Northern Ontario, the Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot (RNIP) is a foot in the door. It has presented the communities of Thunder Bay, Timmins, North Bay, Sault Ste. Marie, and Sudbury with challenges and opportunities that will inform community planning and growth on areas such as housing supply, access to cultural food, supports for employers, reconciliation, welcoming neighbourhoods, and more.

Of course, how can we know the depth of RNIP's impacts? What worked and what did not? To answer these questions, Northern Policy Institute (NPI) is measuring and evaluating the pilot from start to post-pilot. As the first in a series of reports, this paper outlines how the RNIP initially unfolded in the five northern communities during the first few months.

Based on online interviews and focus groups involving a total of 48 individuals, several key findings were found.

- 1. Implications of Multilevel Governance:** While the pilot is community-led, communities still operate under federal immigration processes. This set up meant that communities had a steep learning curve on the ins and outs of the federal immigration process. However, as the pilot progressed, knowledge capacity as well as communication between both partners improved.
- 2. Community Capacity:** Alongside the need for continued engagement and support of employers (many of which are small or medium sized in Northern Ontario), collaboration with community organizations needs to be continually nurtured as there was a drop in engagement as the pilot progressed.
- 3. Well-Defined Roles:** Community organizations were not sure of their role in terms of supporting the pilot. Furthermore, there was an instance of government oversight where one agency said communities could apply as a region to be in the pilot while another agency said this was not an option.
- 4. Welcoming Communities:** The general public has not been as engaged with the pilot, which COVID-19 may have influenced. For example, the launch of the pilot occurred as the pandemic started and many were being hit economically.

Based on the findings, there are several recommendations for both the current pilot administrators in Northern Ontario, and future immigration pilots:

1. A standard toolkit for municipalities to help curb the initial learning curve on Canadian immigration processes,
2. Dedicated resources for engagement with employers, community organizations, and the general public.
3. Dedicated resources for welcoming efforts.
4. Clear roles and expectations at the start with partners – government or otherwise – can mitigate confusion down the road.

With the rise of other immigration pilots across Canada, the need for evaluating immigration policy experimentation for evidence-based decision making is important now more than ever.



Introduction

In 2019, the federal government launched the Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot (RNIP), an innovative undertaking to extend the benefits of immigration to Canada's rural and northern communities. The RNIP gives participating communities greater autonomy in deciding their immigration and economic futures by enabling them to select desired newcomers. Eleven communities across Ontario and Western Canada were chosen to participate in this pilot initiative.

This program builds on the successes of the Atlantic Immigration Pilot program (AIP), which was launched in 2017. AIP is designed to increase immigration to the Atlantic Provinces by matching potential newcomers with employers in the region.

The objective of this paper is to assess the start-up stages of the RNIP, with a specific focus on the five Ontario communities that were chosen to participate in the pilot. The purpose is to understand the challenges and successes of the RNIP's initial phases, including the community selection, development, and launch. Factors explored include clarity of communication, effectiveness of engagement, flexibility, and the ability of participating communities to design the program to match their specific immigration requirements, amongst other items. Ultimately, this paper seeks to identify successes that can be expanded upon and items to improve.



Introduction to the RNIP

Over half of Canada's newcomers settle in Toronto, Vancouver, or Montreal (Statistics Canada 2017). Meanwhile, there are regions and communities in Canada that cannot entice enough people to stay, live, and work. Most districts in Northeastern and Northwestern Ontario have aging and declining populations (Zefi 2018). This is a challenge because, as the population ages, there are more dependents (i.e., those over 65 years of age and those 15 and under) and fewer workers supporting the economy. Labour shortages lead to economic instability by curbing future growth, savings, and consumption (Zefi 2018). A declining population also results in increased costs of public services (Esses and Carter 2019).

Provincially, Ontario has attracted the highest number of newcomers, and they accounted for up 26 per cent of its population in 2016 (Esses and Carter 2019). However, newcomers seldomly make it north of Parry Sound. Only 0.7 per cent of the province's newcomers moved to Northern Ontario between 2011 and 2016 (Esses and Carter 2019).

Communities in rural and northern Canada have long been advocating to increase their capacity for decision-making and promoting themselves to newcomers. The National Rural Caucus and Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) began a dialogue on how to develop a pilot in rural areas of Canada. Provincial and regional immigration streams already exist in Canada, such as the Atlantic Immigration Pilot (AIP) in Atlantic Canada. Other examples of decentralization in Canada's immigration system include the Provincial Nominee Program and the Canada-Québec Accord on immigration.

The RNIP is the first program specifically tailored to address rural immigration shortages across Canada. There are 11 pilot communities, which are located in Ontario and Western Canada.

Table 1: 11 RNIP communities

Province	RNIP Community	Population
BC	Vernon	61,344
BC	West Kootenay ¹	106,993
AB	Claresholm	3,780
SK	Moose Jaw	35,053
MB	Altona/Rhineland	10,157
MB	Brandon	58,003
ON	Thunder Bay	121,621
ON	Sault Ste. Marie	78,159
ON	Sudbury	164,689
ON	North Bay	70,378
ON	Timmins	41,788

Source: Statistics Canada Census of Population 2016.

¹ West Kootenay is made up of several small communities. The population is the sum of them.

The pilot is a three-year economic immigration stream that is designed to attract and retain newcomers in rural and northern areas of Canada.² The pilot's objectives are to support the economic development of the local community, test an innovative approach to immigration selection, and improve retention of newcomers by fostering a welcoming community. A unique component of the pilot program is the matching of a newcomer with an established member of the participating community, who acts as a mentor. The IRCC is testing this mentorship component to see if it improves retention. Another important aspect of the program is that each community is assigned a Dedicated Service Channel Officer at the IRCC who provides support and answers questions.

An additional objective of the RNIP is to enhance communication and collaboration between the federal government, communities, and local economic development organizations. The economic development organizations responsible for administering the program in the participating communities also play a key role in creating and maintaining partnerships to achieve settlement and retention goals.

The RNIP process:

The processes of the RNIP are highly innovative and unique. Rather than working within existing immigration streams that often do not meet the labour market needs of rural and northern communities, participating communities are able to choose the occupations they want to target. In addition, communities can select and assess certain newcomer attributes that increase the likelihood that the individuals they attract will stay. These attributes are known as the 'community recommendation criteria.'

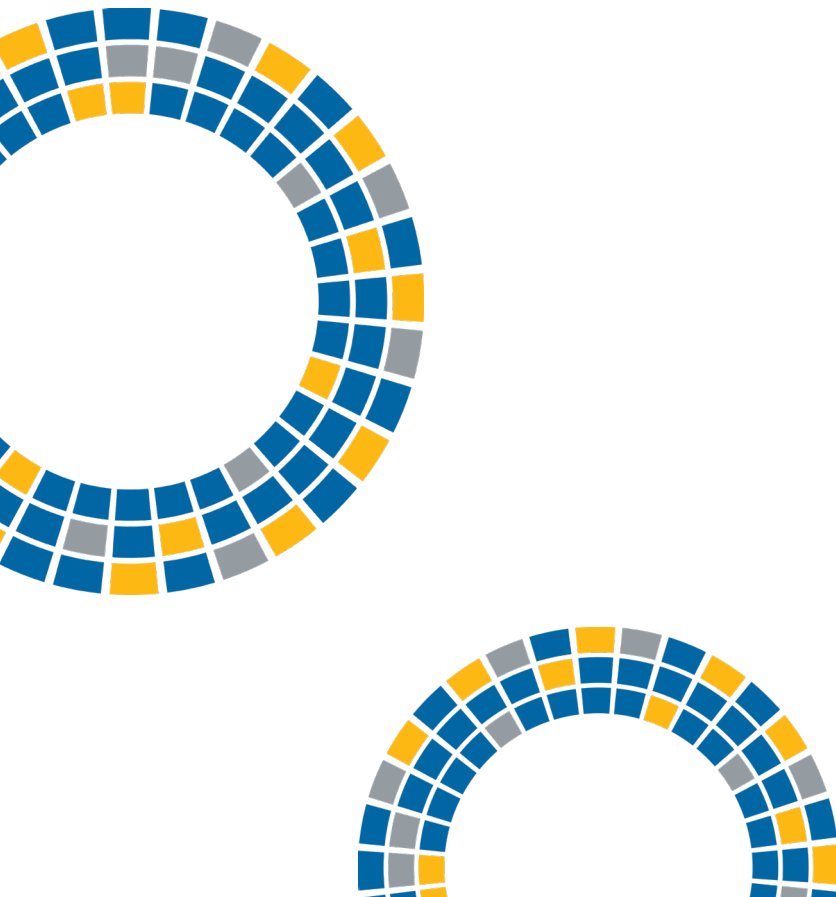
These economic and social integration considerations are equally important to the program's success. IRCC has given participating communities tremendous freedom to make these decisions for themselves, apart from a few federal criteria. Also, these occupations and retention factors are dynamic; communities can change them on an ongoing basis.

Participation in the RNIP is also meant to foster collaboration within the community. Rather than having officers at IRCC assess whether candidates meet the community recommendation criteria, the participating communities assess candidates themselves. In fact, communities are responsible for bringing together a small group of individuals from local economic development organizations to participate in a community recommendation committee and conduct candidate assessments.

Local administrators of the pilot differ by community and they include individuals who are involved in economic development organizations such as Community Futures, municipal branches of economic development, and Chambers of Commerce.

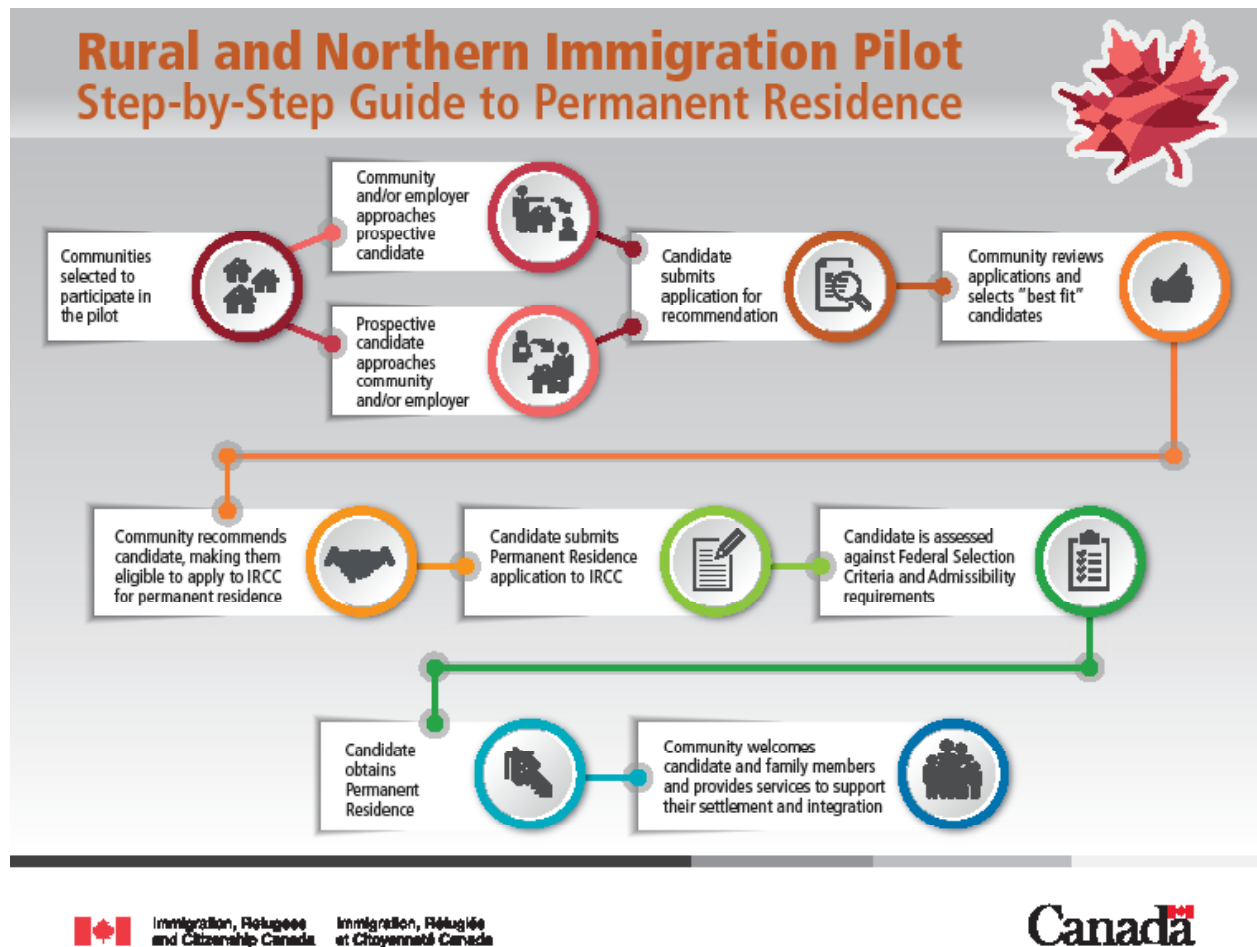
As a pilot, RNIP is meant to identify the most effective selection factors and processes for Canada's rural and northern areas to attract and retain newcomers. The number of permanent residents coming through the program is small, which enables better monitoring of outcomes and improved contact with the newcomers. In the first year, each community can issue a maximum of 100 candidate recommendations.

The following is a graphic depicting the RNIP process from the perspective of the newcomer.



² Economic immigration streams are entry programs for newcomers who are selected based on their ability to contribute to Canada's economy.

Figure 1: RNIP Permanent Resident Process



Source: IRCC.

To be eligible for the RNIP program and subsequently start looking for a job in a participating community, candidates must meet all IRCC eligibility requirements. IRCC has set thresholds for candidate education, language proficiency, work experience, and settlement funds. If the candidate meets these requirements, they can start looking for employment in the community. Candidates who receive a permanent job offer must then secure a community recommendation. Once they have met both criteria, candidates can apply to IRCC under the RNIP. If their application is successful, the candidate and their dependents may relocate to the participating community with temporary permits while they wait for their permanent residency.

Methodology

Online interviews and focus groups were conducted between May and July 2020. In all, 48 individuals provided input. Most interviewees came from the public and non-profit sectors and included individuals from the following entities: immigrant-serving organizations; the federal, provincial, and municipal governments; postsecondary institutions; chambers of commerce; local immigration partnerships; and workforce planning boards. These groups were identified as possessing valuable knowledge about challenges related to newcomer attraction and retention as well as labour force and population challenges. Emphasis was placed on individuals situated in the five communities in Northern Ontario. However, some input was received from other communities participating in the RNIP and from those with experience in rural immigration pilots.

Due to the constraints of COVID-19, interviews and focus groups were conducted online. In keeping with best practices for online focus groups, the groups did not exceed six participants (Forrestal, D'Angelo, Vogel 2015). Additional best practices included slides, monitoring participation, and employing a round-robin discussion technique (Forrestal, D'Angelo, and Vogel 2015). Structured interviews were conducted with the focus groups and the individual interviews were semi-structured. Written notes were taken during individual interviews and audio recordings were made and transcribed for the focus groups. The same researcher conducted the interviews, transcribed the notes, and completed the analysis, which provided many opportunities for them to become familiar with the data.

Next, thematic analysis was undertaken. Themes were actively generated by the researcher and they loosely followed the six phases of thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the researcher familiarized themselves with the data and identified potential items of interest. Next, codes were generated and initial themes were developed. These themes were reviewed and some were omitted or combined. The themes were then named and defined. In reading this report, it is important to understand that qualitative research is not about giving a complete picture of everything discussed. Instead, it is about telling a rich story in relation to the data with the themes that spanned the interviews.

Finally, it is important to note that although the researcher made attempts to get the most comprehensive sample possible, gaps still exist. Regrettably, local employers were not included in the scope of interviewees. Future assessments of the RNIP should make every effort to include feedback from local employers. Additionally, most interviewees were from Northern Ontario and, therefore, these findings may not be applicable to other regions.

It should be noted that these interviews were conducted during the initial phase of the pilot and, as a result, some of the challenges identified by interviewees were subsequently addressed.



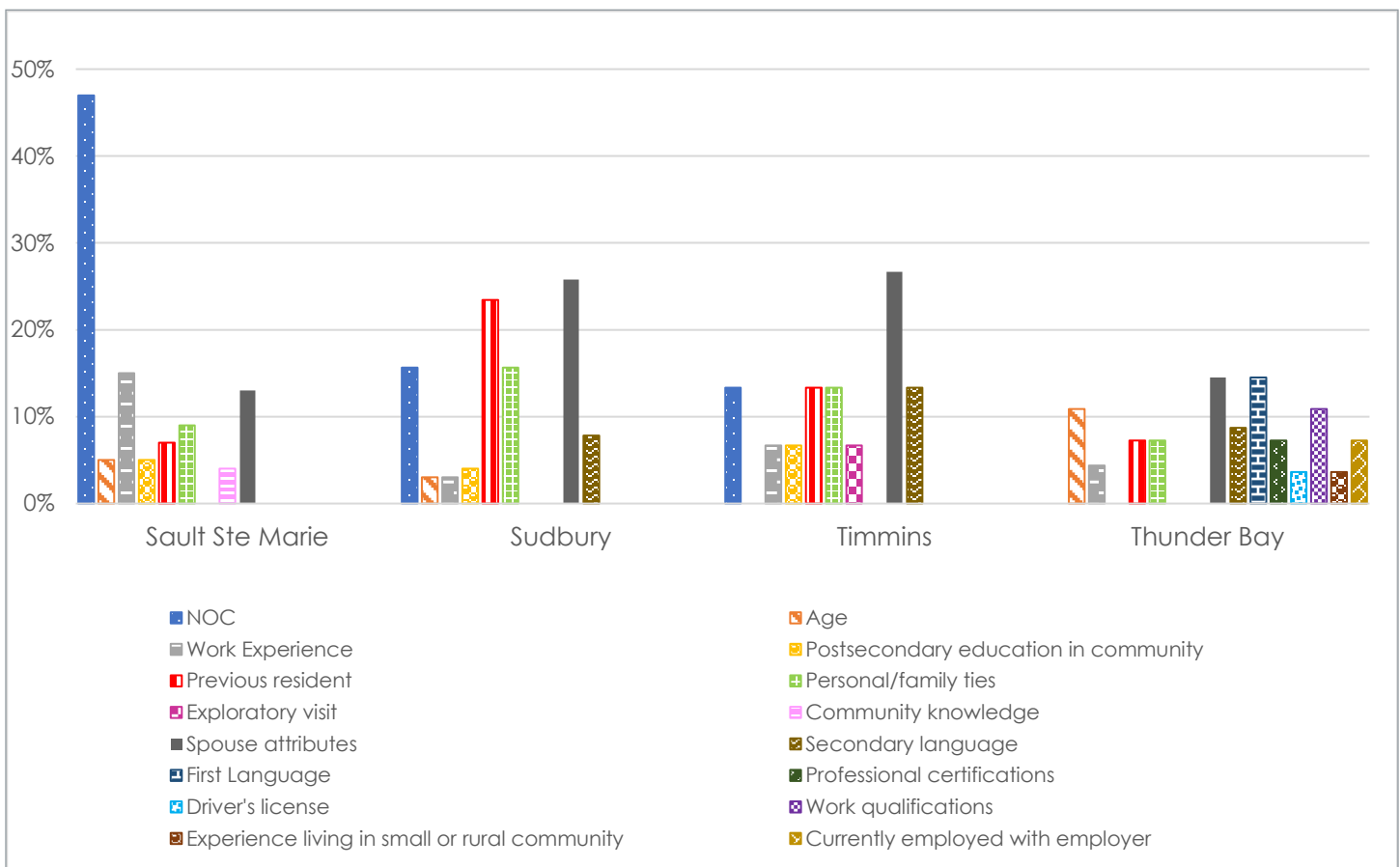
Findings

Community criteria

Information on the community recommendation criteria was compiled from the municipal webpages of the participating communities in June 2020. As noted above, the pilot has considerable flexibility and thus the criteria are subject to change at any time.

The percentages in Figure 2 were calculated by adding together the maximum achievable points that each community allocated to the different candidate assessment categories and then comparing those points to the total points available for the community criteria.

Figure 2. Percentage of total community recommendation criteria points available, by community, by criteria category³

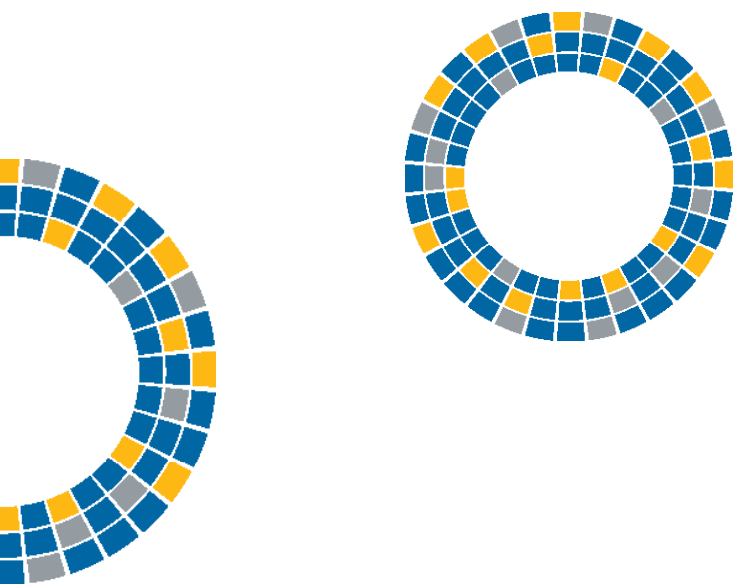


Source: Relevant municipal government websites¹.

³ Please note that North Bay does not appear in the chart because their website was not live when the data was collected. They started a bit later than the other communities.

Communities have prioritized different aspects and attributes in assessing newcomers, as shown above. There are also commonalities in the points systems between what communities are looking for—age, previous work experience, previous residence in the community, personal and family ties to the community—and attributes of the spouse, including the spouse's employment and language skills.

Sault Ste. Marie had placed considerable emphasis on each candidate's National Occupational Classification (NOC).⁴ Sudbury and Timmins gave a significant portion of points to the attributes of the spouse, which may indicate they are looking for families and couples. Thunder Bay has the most indicators, with no single factor worth more than 15 percent of the available points. Figure 2 is not intended to make judgements as to which selection criteria are 'better' or 'worse.' The purpose of the pilot is to experiment with a variety of selection criteria and processes. However, it is important to note that communities are using different selection components and it will be important to assess whether that impacts successful settlement and retention of newcomers over the next few years. Interestingly, although it was not a requirement of the RNIP, all communities developed a points system similar to Express Entry, which is the application process for skilled newcomers who want to permanently settle in Canada.



Research themes

1. Implications of multilevel governance

Jurisdiction of the RNIP is jointly shared between federal government/IRCC and a local economic development organization. Although one objective of the pilot is to assess which immigration processes and approaches work well in rural and northern areas, the federal government did not want to dictate processes to the communities. Instead, the goal is to encourage innovation and creativity. Although there are benefits to this approach, which will be presented later in this section, challenges also arise.

The responsiveness and speed of the government rollout of this project has been applauded by many. However, the speed of the rollout, combined with a federal election in fall 2019, complicated matters for communities. For example, the ministerial instruction for this undertaking was not issued until two months after the pilot was announced. During that time, community administrators were fielding RNIP-related questions and inquiries from potential applicants, employers, and local service providers, but the administrators did not feel equipped to answer them. This was due in part to the fact that communication between IRCC and communities was initially lacking and unclear. Although the pilot had not been officially launched in most communities, the participating communities still had public expectations to meet, which made it difficult to wait for information from the IRCC. The other challenge related to the delay from announcement to the launch of the program was that some interviewees believed the initial public interest generated by the pre-launch hype subsided. However, interviewees acknowledged that not all of the delays related to the program's development and launch could be attributed to the federal government/IRCC, which will be highlighted in later sections.

The lack of communication and information at the outset of the pilot meant that several key elements were unclear. These included eligibility criteria for applicants and eligible community boundaries, as many communities applied with surrounding municipalities. Unfortunately, immigration consultant videos filled the information void with a lot of misinformation, which further complicated the public communication efforts of participating communities. There was also initial confusion among communities and community leaders as to how the pilot worked. For example, was the pilot three years or five? And would the permanent resident spots available be divided evenly amongst the 11 communities?

⁴ The NOC structure categorizes various occupations in Canada (Canada 2020).

Although many interviewees expressed gratitude at being able to influence their own community's future by targeting certain jobs and retention factors, they also noted that immigration involves some strict federal processes, which pose challenges. These federal guidelines and processes are inflexible and not well-known by communities at the time. It was suggested that IRCC could have created and distributed a toolkit with this information in the initial phase of the pilot. This would have saved staff at both IRCC and the pilot administrators time and resources, as there are many items that needed to be addressed by local pilot administrators. Still, interviewees appreciated the flexibility of the pilot, noting that they may have felt unduly constrained by a more refined initiative. However, initial understanding of federal processes among participating communities could have been improved.

Having an individualized, community-based pilot enables participating communities to show their strengths and gain capacity locally. At the same time, all five centres selected in Northern Ontario are not islands. Communities serve as regional hubs in many cases, providing services and amenities not offered in more rural surrounding areas. Many organizations in the participating communities—service providers, service boards, employers, and postsecondary institutions—have regional mandates and operations. Some interviewees expressed concerns that the RNIP was pulling potential newcomers away from smaller surrounding communities that are also desperately in need of population growth. Of course, the federal government did need to draw boundaries to assess a community pilot (Figure 3 and Table 2). However, it was not well understood by IRCC that communities are hubs for a region. Sticking to the boundaries IRCC prescribed has, in some cases, damaged relationships with employers who are not located in pilot program communities but who either conduct business in those communities or may have workers living there.

Figure 3: Boundaries of the five RNIPs in Northern Ontario



Source: Northern Policy Institute Boundary Map.

Table 2: List of census subdivisions included in participating RNIP communities

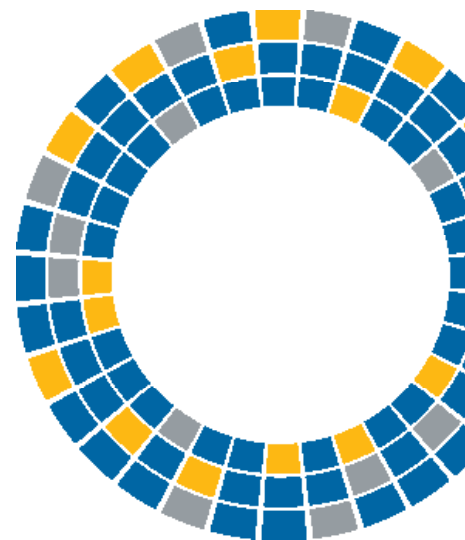
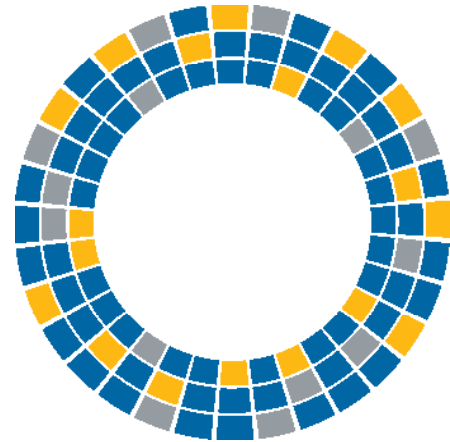
RNIP Community	IRCC descriptions and 2016 populations	Included census subdivisions
Timmins	CA of Timmins (41,788)	
Thunder Bay	CMA of Thunder Bay (121,621)	Thunder Bay Neebing Fort William 52 Oliver Paipoonge Gilles O'Connor Conmee Shuniah
Sault Ste. Marie	CA of Sault Ste. Marie (78,159)	Sault Ste. Marie Macdonald, Meredith, and Aberdeen Additional Garden River 14 Laird Prince Rankin Location 15D
Sudbury	CMA of Greater Sudbury (164,689)	Greater Sudbury Markstay-Warren Whitefish Lake 6 Wahnapitei 11
North Bay	"An area in Ontario bounded by a radius of 45 km centred on latitude 46°18'31.4" North and longitude 79°27'45.4" West."	North Bay CA East Ferris MU Callander MU Powassan MU Bonfield TP Nipissing TP Chisholm TP Nipissing 10 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Part of West Nipissing CSD. Includes communities of West Nipissing, Cache Bay, & Crystal Falls. Part of Nipissing, Unorganized CSD. Includes communities of Tomiko, & Tilden Lake.

Note: A census agglomeration (CA) is an area with at least 10,000 people in its core while a census metropolitan area (CMA) has at least 100,000 people, 50,000 of whom must be in the core. A census subdivision is used to refer to municipalities (Statistics Canada 2018, 2018b).

Source: Government of Canada 2019; 2016 Census of Population.

Despite the aforementioned shortcomings and implementation difficulties, the pilot's innovative approach to program jurisdiction has benefits, specifically in that it increases knowledge and critical thinking about immigration and its processes among participating communities. By enabling communities to learn some things on their own, the pilot has improved their capacity to problem-solve and share information about federal immigration streams. The pilot has also generated an awareness of other immigration pathways. According to interviewees, the training IRCC provided in communities was the formative base for this. Although there has been a steep learning curve on the part of communities and IRCC, the pilot has shown that it is possible for those who have never worked in the complex system of immigration to learn from it. Most interviewees remarked that since the official launch, IRCC has surpassed expectations in its ability to work with communities and allocate resources to assist them. Although communication lagged in the early days of the pilot, recent communication between IRCC and communities has been strong. One interviewee remarked that since they started working remotely, they have been communicating more regularly with IRCC than with some of their local colleagues.

This pilot is an innovative and unusual approach for the federal government to take. It was acknowledged by interviewees that, as a pilot, it is meant to be a platform for experimentation. Communities need to be comfortable with something that is neither fully defined nor refined from the outset. If the numbers of newcomers are low in the first year, that is okay. It is better for each community to have people who stay than it is to fill the 100 spots allotted to them. Lessons from the AIP confirm this. In the first year of that pilot, AIP administrators were strategic in accepting fewer candidates and making sure employers understood the program and the processes. They also wanted to ensure everyone participating in the pilot understood their role.



2. Required community capacity

In many ways, the RNIP downloads federal responsibilities, accountability, and agency to local pilot administrators without any funding or resources to execute the pilot. Immigration is a complicated machine, and communities need to dedicate a considerable amount of support to the RNIP. Those administering the program locally have a lot of responsibilities. In addition to operating the pilot, interviewees explained they also had to promote the program to the public and local employers, respond to tens of thousands of inquiries from applicants, review applications, and coordinate and engage local service providers, amongst other tasks.

It was acknowledged that IRCC worked hard to ensure that communities understood how much work this would be, but it was difficult for communities to grasp this, especially those that are new to immigration. Sometimes, communities did not have staff in place, and it quickly became clear they would need to dedicate staff to the effort. There was more early development required of communities than they initially expected. Communities had to launch at the same time that they applied for funding supports—something a few communities were still waiting on at the time that interviews were conducted.

Staff sizes ranged from one to three employees among communities interviewed. In many cases, interviewees expressed that the work involved in this pilot is too much for one person to handle. There is also training that staff and volunteers must undertake. In some cases, communities and partnering organizations have hired interns to help. Although these short contracts can meet the needs of the three-year pilot, this is not a sustainable solution if communities are committed to engaging local employers and people in immigration in the long term.

IRCC recognizes the commitment communities are making in taking on the RNIP pilot and it has dedicated a support team to assist them. As well, the reporting indicators it selected were intended to be minimal. However, because the pilot is meant to gather insights, granular data collected in consistent ways at the local level is of the utmost importance.

In contrast, the Ontario Regional Immigration Pilot, operated by the province, shifts minimal responsibilities to the participating communities themselves. Essentially, the province is working with local employers and service providers to raise awareness about provincial immigration streams and using the existing provincial nominee program structure. It will be interesting to compare and assess the effectiveness of both approaches once these pilots are completed.



Employer engagement

Capacity must be created amongst participating communities to engage employers. Lessons from the Atlantic Immigration Pilot (AIP) show it is beneficial to have someone locally who can answer immigration-related questions from employers. Another benefit of the AIP is that employers learned that immigration is not as difficult as they had thought it would be.

The economy of Northern Ontario is comprised mainly of small and medium enterprises, most of which do not have the human resources capacity to screen the thousands of applicants generated by a single RNIP job posting. Employers also need assistance to determine whether the RNIP or another immigration pathway is most the appropriate one for them and their candidates' needs, especially if the immigration process is new to them. Furthermore, there is a need to engage employers one-on-one.

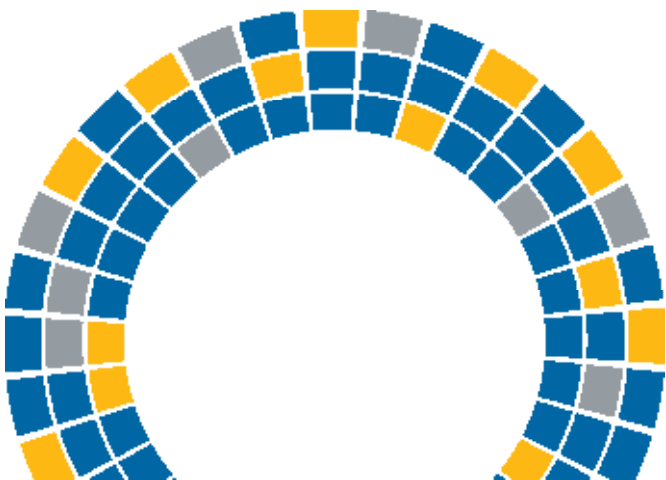
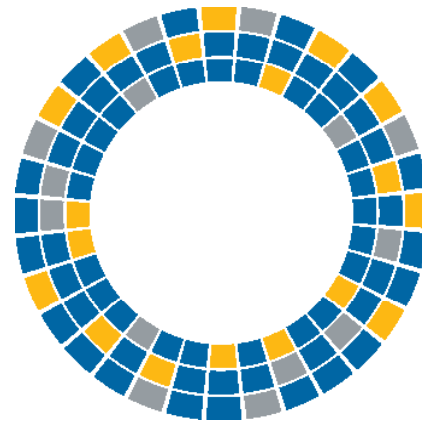
Interviewees from the AIP noted that one benefit of that program was the opportunity to talk with employers about the other immigration streams the provinces offer. It is important to note that even if RNIP coordinators are aware of the other immigration programs, they are not registered immigration consultants, and thus cannot suggest which pathway to use. However, they can present alternatives.

One way for communities to aid employers is to help with pre-screening applicants. For example, one community has an online system for job applications that employers and the community recommendation committee can access in real time. Tools like this can help alleviate the burden associated with the process for employers. Even so, communities should be aware

of the low rates of return in engaging employers in an immigration program like this. An individual may spend hours reaching out to hundreds of employers, but only one or two might follow through. However, this engagement work still needs to be done and any funding for rural employer engagement should not involve arduous or unrealistic deliverables.

Without employer engagement, there could be consequences. Employers could misunderstand the program, which some interviewees indicated has happened. Additionally, employers may not realize what permanent residency means, and that a permanent resident in Canada is legally able to move and work anywhere in the country. The newcomer may choose to change jobs or leave the community, which means the employer will once again have to fill the position. As well, in some communities, employers do not understand that the RNIP is targeting specific occupations. Some interviewees stated that the long wait between the launch and the development of the pilot resulted in a loss of trust in the process for some employers.

Ultimately, if employers are not engaged appropriately and meaningfully, there is a risk that they will see the RNIP as a failed program and be uninterested in considering immigration-based recruitment in the future.



Collaboration with local service provider organizations

It was an expectation of IRCC that pilot administrators in participating communities would be able to excel at collaborating with other relevant organizations in the community. Local administrators also attributed early success of the pilot to the efforts of local organizations. It was noted that this collaboration is an early best practice for the pilot and the key to its continued success.

Most communities have diverse community recommendation committees representing a variety of sectors and expertise. It was noted that having a diverse group can provide more insight into the challenges involved in attracting and retaining newcomers and facilitate explaining things to the public.

While some noted that it is the usual interested individuals and organizations that are involved in the pilot in Northern Ontario, communities outside of the North that have more experience in rural immigration state that one benefit of a community-based program is the opportunity to forge new relationships.

There are also benefits to engaging groups that represent a certain demographic in an immigration pilot such as this. For example, most communities in Northern Ontario have a certain percentage of jobs allocated to bilingual or Francophone newcomers. Working alongside Francophone organizations to identify suitable candidates, employers, and job positions would be beneficial, particularly in promoting the pilot and achieving attraction and retention targets. Some interviewees felt that there is a misunderstanding among communities that including Francophone contributions is an obstacle. In the context of the RNIP, Francophone candidates result in population growth and fill labour gaps. However, the RNIP program is highly dependent on employers and very few are willing to hire French speakers who do not also speak English.

There is a need to keep local individuals and organizations who might be interested in participating in the program informed and engaged. Responsibilities can be shared and RNIP administrators can provide additional supports and programs to external organizations, enabling them to assist the RNIP in communications and engagement. External organizations received extra resources in several communities, which highlights the interest and effort some community members are willing to put into the RNIP. In addition, external organizations can help spread word about the program to community members, newcomers, and political leaders.

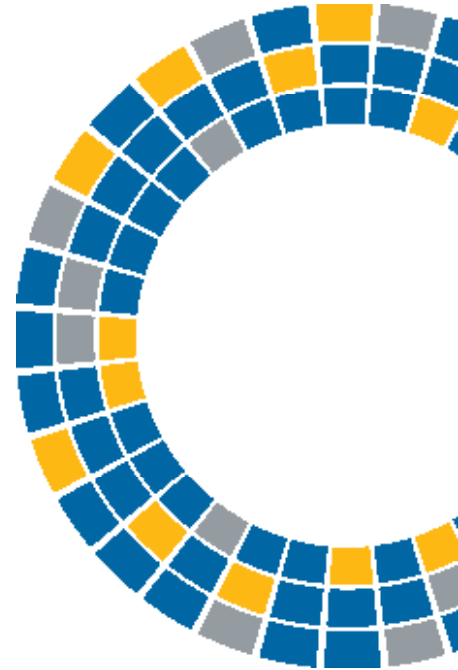
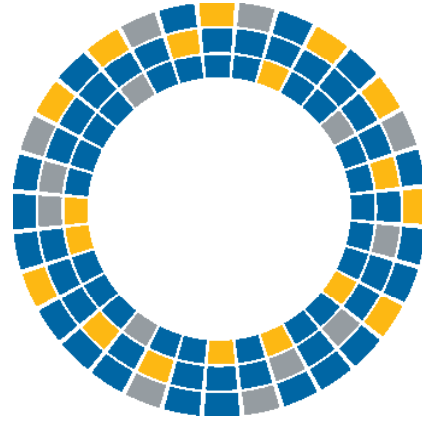
There are also benefits for the external organizations. In many ways, the RNIP has put rural and northern communities on the map internationally. This can generate interest in a community, which potentially means that organizations in that community will experience increased recognition and use of their services. For example, the RNIP has raised awareness of degrees and diplomas that are not typically of interest to international students. Working with the RNIP also raises awareness of the services an organization provides—both to newcomers and other local interested individuals and organizations. For some Local Immigration Partnerships (LIPs), the RNIP has contributed to increased engagement in committees that are focused on immigration in Northern Ontario and more integration of the LIP into other aspects of the community or the municipality. As a result, immigration is no longer a hypothetical point of discussion; the RNIP has made it “real.”

Additionally, organizations involved in IRCC trainings and in the community recommendation committee gain a lot of knowledge about the immigration system. This is knowledge that they can apply to enhance their own work and share with other service provider organizations and employers. When organizations apply for external supports, this means they have more resources—funding and staff—available, which could enhance their local and international recognition.



If the above points are not convincing enough to engage local individuals and organizations in the pilot, then the consequences of disengagement may be more persuasive. If these individuals and organizations are not engaged, they start measuring their involvement and move away from the spirit of collaboration, something noted by several participating communities and organizations. Being disengaged does not stop the influx of questions about the pilot from newcomers and employers. If the individuals administering the pilot locally do not have appropriate information to answer these questions, then there is the danger they will promote the pilot inappropriately or inaccurately. As previously mentioned, many employers have limited time and resources to commit to becoming familiar and competent with an immigration program. When employers contact service provider organizations, they are referred to the administering institution for answers. Interviewees expressed concerns that the employer will not follow-up after making a first attempt with no response. Additionally, in cases where there was less buy-in and engagement, organizations were far less willing to seek additional resources. As for the external organizations, they do not receive the benefits mentioned above if there is no engagement.

In most communities, external organizations indicated that engagement started out strong and then completely dropped off. As noted above, this must be taken seriously because engagement has benefits for both the external organization and administering one.



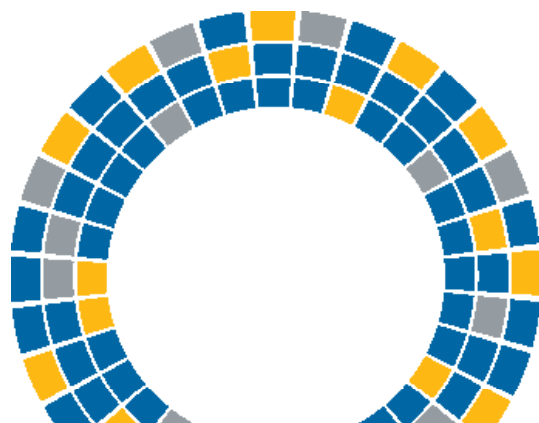
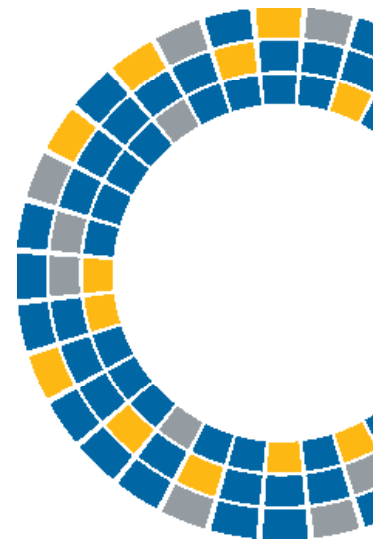
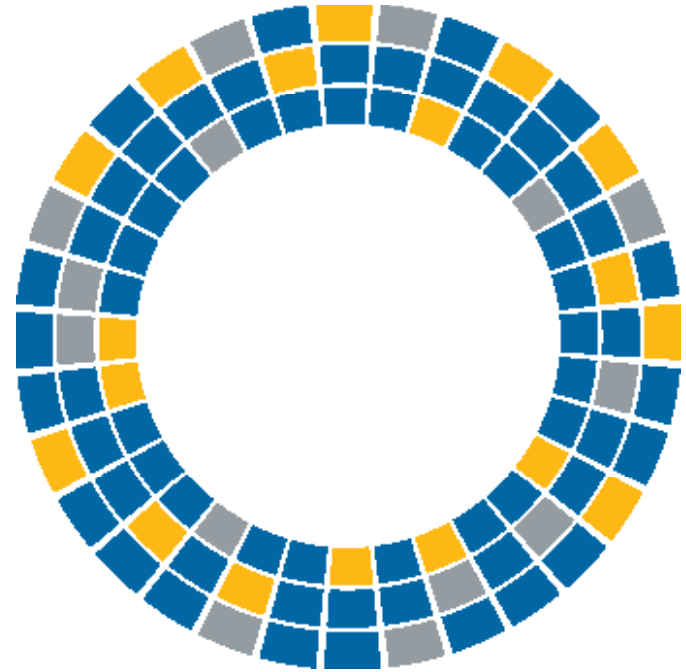
3. Importance of well-defined roles

With any community-based initiative, roles and responsibilities should be clear from the outset. The lack of clarity on how external organizations were expected to influence and support the pilot has left some individuals/organizations discouraged and disengaged.

All communities had some form of engagement with local organizations outside the administering organization—although who was involved and the degree to which these local groups were involved varied from community to community.

There continues to be a lack of clarity among local organizations as to their roles in supporting the pilot. Although some external organizations were able to give considerable input into the community recommendation criteria, some local groups felt that they were excluded and that their concerns were not taken seriously. These interviewees also remarked that communication was strong in the initial stages but less so when community criteria was being developed. Organizations expressed frustration and disappointment as a result. More clarity at the outset as to the external organizations' roles, how they could inform the pilot, how final decisions would be made, what information would be communicated to them, etc., could have helped to avoid this disappointment.

Lack of role clarity and unclear expectations presented challenges for some settlement service provider organizations. Not all local organizations, including the administering organization in some cases, were clear on the services that settlement agencies provide. At initial meetings, some communities were expecting settlement agencies to provide services to RNIP candidates at a level that was above and beyond the services they would typically provide to newcomers. This not only creates a drain of resources for settlement service providers but also the danger of creating two-tiered settlement services, with RNIP newcomers receiving more robust attention and services than those who come through other streams. Aspiring to improve settlement services is not in itself a problem. However, if communities believe that this level of service as represented by RNIP is required to adequately introduce, settle, and retain a newcomer, then it should be provided to all newcomers regardless of their immigration pathway. Yet, this initial conversation has dropped off, leaving settlement services in some communities unclear as to their role and how they are meant to support the pilot. It may be that the conversation has dropped off as the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a lower number of newcomers arriving from abroad, and thus lowered expectations of settlement services among all parties. It should also be noted that the low number of newcomers from abroad could be the result of participating communities focusing on providing recommendations to candidates already living in the community.



Additionally, there were some concerns raised about government oversight and communication. For example, during the initial RNIP application process, communities were told they could apply as a region by one agency but subsequently informed that this approach was not an option by another agency. This meant that many communities had little time to complete the massive application process, assess their readiness to take this on, and, in some instances, decide which organization in their community would take it on.

As a result, it is important to ensure that the roles of and relationships between the agencies involved in the process in Northern Ontario are clearly defined. It should be noted that this challenge is particular to the five Ontario communities and was not identified by interviewees from other participating RNIP communities. This is not to say that the lack of definition was a bad thing, but appropriate guidelines and processes may serve the RNIP positively in the coming years.

Furthermore, the importance of sharing information between communities differed by community. Communities outside of Northern Ontario remarked that they shared processes, things to think about, and presentations with the other participating communities in their province. This level of information sharing was sparsely observed in Northern Ontario. Almost all participating communities indicated that they appreciated having a platform through IRCC to share information and ideas with other communities. Still, problem-solving could be heightened between participating Ontario communities. For example, one RNIP community indicated that it was struggling with the implementation of information systems and technology, but another had a robust system in place that multiple users could access simultaneously.

It was noted by many interviewees across communities that the five Northern Ontario communities are in no way competing for newcomers. The level of interest and inquiries RNIP communities are receiving from newcomers shows that there are more than enough individuals interested in moving to rural Canada. It was suggested that communities should come together and consider what their target market looks like—not only in terms of NOC skills but also in terms of intent to reside. For example, someone who is happy in Timmins may not be happy in Sault Ste. Marie, and someone happy in Thunder Bay may not be happy in North Bay. Finding targeted newcomers and jointly marketing the Northern Ontario RNIP communities could save time and resources that are already scarce.

Enhanced coordination between the Ontario RNIP communities could be advantageous. Given that FedNor is a federal agency with a regional mandate to support the economic development of Ontario's northern regions, it may be well-suited to spearhead this effort in partnership with IRCC.



4. Welcoming communities

Many interviewees spoke about the importance of publicly communicating the benefits of and need for immigration in the community and ensuring that their communities are welcoming. This is a stated goal of the pilot and is an important factor in success and retention. As one interviewee said, "If you don't keep the newcomers, then it's all pointless."

It was acknowledged that the emphasis on being welcoming comes from the program design. Economic integration is weighted equally to retention. Successful communities will need to give considerable attention to both.

The RNIP has the potential to increase tolerance and diversity. In the context of global movements toward more inclusion and diversity, this becomes even more important. Interviewees agree that becoming a welcoming community must go beyond verbiage and slogans; it must be done through actions, including activities, training, and programs that confirm the community is open to diversity. The public needs to be educated on immigration—not just through the RNIP but also other immigration streams. There were concerns raised that misinformation about immigration streams and purposes can fuel unwelcoming behaviours. It was also noted that the COVID-19 pandemic has awakened and could continue to awaken anti-immigration sentiments.

Many interviewees stated that the public was largely unaware of the RNIP. This has been partly by design of the local administrators. They have passed up RNIP-related media opportunities because of the pandemic. Some communities launched just weeks after the pandemic started. Understandably, communities need to be cautious as to how they communicate the pilot to the public as some of the domestic population has recently experienced job loss. However, the program is still active and, with an increase in newcomers to come through the RNIP annually, newcomers may become more common throughout the community. The public needs to better understand the value of immigration to be welcoming.

Some communities have overcome this challenge by focusing on particular NOCs in the media—namely personal support workers. The public response during the pandemic has more been one of gratitude than a 'taking our jobs' sentiment.

Because this is a sensitive issue, especially in light of a changing global economy, communities expressed gratitude that the pilot allows for changes in the targeted occupations. This also means that communities need to be extremely cautious in selecting only occupations that are not being filled by the existing workforce. By targeting in-demand NOCs, communities could potentially decrease the domestic sentiment that newcomers are taking jobs and thus become more welcoming.

Interviewees noted that the RNIP is missing a marketing 'spin.' Many people do not realize that participants in this program could be neighbours who have already been working in the community on temporary status for years. It was suggested that effective and simple marketing efforts could help mitigate the misconception that newcomers will be taking locals' jobs and educate the public on the importance of immigration. Dynamic and engaging formats such as infographics and videos would be best. Interviewees also noted that these types of materials would be useful for applicants and employers to understand the RNIP and its process. According to interviewees, static city websites can be difficult to navigate.

There were also many comments related to racism toward Indigenous peoples and navigating Indigenous-newcomer relations. Almost all these comments came from people in Thunder Bay. It was noted that newcomers are both discriminated against and engaged in discrimination against Indigenous peoples. It was believed that newcomers lack or receive little knowledge about the history of Indigenous peoples and thus adopt a colonial view, resulting in discrimination. Providing training and courses in Indigenous history and reconciliation could benefit newcomers coming to the RNIP communities and the IRCC could consider implementing that at a national level. Communities with experience in municipal-Indigenous relations say that building a relationship takes time. Importantly, when local partners feel that the newcomer-Indigenous relationship is weakening, resources need to be made available as soon as possible to strengthen it again.

It was also expressed that some Indigenous communities are not happy with international workers. However, this does not have to be an either-or approach. Analysis shows that in Northern Ontario, the existing domestic populations (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) are still not enough to meet labour needs (Zefi 2018). However, RNIP communities should also ensure that they are engaging their existing potential labour force to its full potential.

Finally, many interviewees expressed interest in collecting data and information as to how welcome newcomers feel.

Current and future challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic

These themes reflect the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic has complicated the effort among participating communities to achieve immigration goals. No one is to blame for these challenges and they could not have been foreseen. Some of these challenges have been addressed, but it is important to note how they impacted the program. The challenges that persist will require some careful consideration to ensure they do not amount to larger issues.

One challenge is that the pandemic has made community engagement and collaboration more difficult. For example, in-person workshops and events are no longer possible. There were also concerns noted that the priorities of employers and local service providers have shifted to more pressing challenges, which perhaps strengthens the importance of engagement.

There have been impacts on processing applications. For example, some mail couriers abroad are not sending or receiving mail. Additionally, language testing centres and panel physicians were closed.

As noted above, communities delayed the public launch and promotion of RNIP due to the pandemic. The communities are concerned that the RNIP program will not be well received by people living in the communities because many have lost their jobs due to the pandemic. The RNIP administrators worried that people will think that newcomers are taking their jobs. If these concerns persist, they could have negative implications for fostering a welcoming community, which is one of the pilot's objectives.

Furthermore, the pandemic has altered the economy, which has impacts on an economic immigration program. Participating communities indicated they appreciated the built-in flexibility of the program, which enables them to change the occupations they target throughout the year.

The pandemic also means that few newcomers are coming from abroad. Almost all communities interviewed are targeting newcomers already in the community on temporary status. This results in some challenges for balancing retention factors and labour market needs. To be clear, it is not an either-or decision. There are candidates who are already in the community that have the skills to meet the labour market needs and have attributes that make them likely to reside there in the long-term. However, if there were enough people locally who could fill those labour market deficiencies, the pilot would be unnecessary.

Some candidates identified by employers are not scoring well in community recommendation criteria. Many communities allot points for having experiencing living, working, and studying in their community, which should be seen as a positive, not a negative. A recent study indicates having previous job experience in Canada before obtaining permanent residency is a good predictor of having higher employment incidences and earnings, and this has substantial effects even five years after immigration (Hou, Crossman, and Picot 2020). But this means that international RNIP applicants do not score highly.

It also means that, in certain communities, many candidates are former international students. This is



not a challenge in itself; international students know what it is like to live in the community, have recognized educational credentials, have knowledge of an official language, and have familiarity with Canadian culture (Traisnel, Noël, and Deschênes-Thériault 2016). For these reasons, international students are expected to integrate quicker into the labour market and society than other types of newcomers (van Huystee 2011). But RNIP candidates need a permanent job offer of an indeterminate length, which interviewees speculated would be difficult for new graduates to attain. There were also comments that communities often lose international students to job opportunities in bigger centres, which may indicate that these students are being trained in fields where local labour supply is already sufficient or not required.

Looking to international students and temporary foreign workers is a strong pilot strategy for the first year. For several reasons, it is easier to process applications from and retain people already in the community. For example, it is easier for employers to hire international students because foreign credentials are often not recognized or there is a lengthy credential assessment that is required. However, there could be longer-term implications from recruiting RNIP candidates from a small pool of people already in the community on temporary work permits or study permits. Namely, labour gaps could still exist. As well, retaining people who have already lived, worked, and studied in the community will not enhance community capacity and ingenuity in how to attract folks from abroad—something that will be vital to the long-term sustainability of rural communities. Attraction cannot be left to employers and postsecondary institutions. Of course, the international attention that communities have garnered from participating in the pilot should be celebrated, but there is no guarantee that this attention will be sustained at the pilot's conclusion.

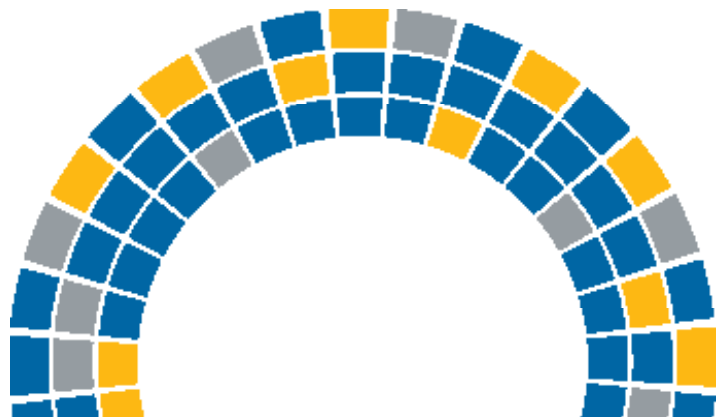
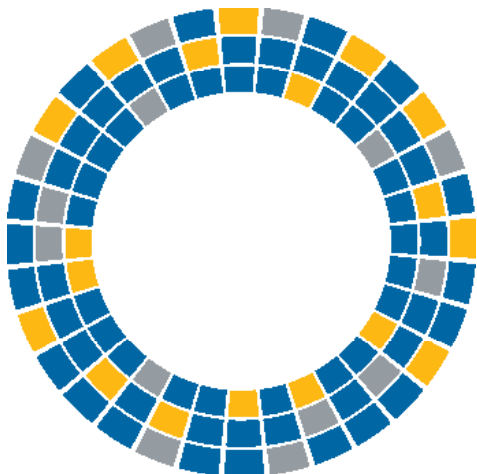
Upcoming threats and challenges

Concerns were expressed that some communities do not have RNIP webpages available in both official languages. There was also concern about how equipped communities are to assess a candidate who applies in French. IRCC and FedNor could provide support in this area.

The capacity of some local administrators is already reaching its maximum in year one. Upcoming challenges could be present in year two. In the second year, the administrators will be responsible for maintaining contact with the year-one candidates as they replicate the year-one groundwork to process year-two applicants. This underlines the importance for engaged community partners who can help with these responsibilities.

Potential recommendations

1. Future immigration pilots that download federal responsibilities should come with a basic toolkit to help communities understand federal immigration processes.
2. Aspects of building community capacity in immigration have been examined. This should be encouraged and expanded.
3. Local administrators need to ensure that they have enough resources to effectively engage employers, external partners, and the public.
4. Informal guidelines and agreements could be established between the administering organization and other local partners. It would be important for future rural pilots to inform external local organizations of their roles and responsibilities from the outset.
5. Communities need to quickly make resources available to ensure that they are welcoming. Actions, not just words, should be taken.



Conclusion

In assessing the initial phases of the RNIP, it is clear there are early successes to celebrate. Communities have built capacity and learned about immigration. The innovation in the RNIP's approach to immigration selection is valued by communities that do not typically receive the benefits of immigration. Rural immigration pilots could enhance success by strengthening their own capacity to deliver the program and engage other local parties and organizations using clear guidelines. Communities should also commit time and effort to ensure that citizens are welcoming to newcomers. By working collaboratively to support the RNIP, participating communities will ensure the success of the program. Lessons and findings from a successful RNIP have the potential to improve diversity and economic sustainability in rural Canada.



References

- Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. "Using thematic analysis in psychology." *Qualitative research in psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77-101.
- Esses, Victoria and Carter, Charlie. *Beyond the Big City. How Small Communities Across Canada Can Attract and Retain Newcomers*. Ottawa: Public Policy Forum, 2019. <https://ppforum.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/BeyondTheBigCity-PPF-July2019-EN-1.pdf>
- Forrestal, Sarah G., Angela Valdovinos D'Angelo, and Lisa Klein Vogel. "Considerations for and lessons learned from online, synchronous focus groups." *Survey Practice* 8, no. 2 (2015): 1-8.
- Government of Canada. 2019. "Canada Gazette, Part I, Volume 153, Number 33: GOVERNMENT NOTICES." Published August 17, 2019. <http://canadagazette.gc.ca/rp-pr/p1/2019/2019-08-17/html/notice-avis-eng.html#nL1>.
- . 2020. "About the National Occupational Classification." Government of Canada. Last modified September 14, 2020. <https://noc.esdc.gc.ca/Home/AboutTheNoc/3bb0e22ec8cd47f38ac8a7edaee2a732>.
- Hou, Feng, Eden Crossman, and Garnett Picot. "Two-step Immigration Selection: Why Did Immigrant Labour Market Outcomes Vary by Admission Programs?" Statistics Canada. August 18, 2020. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-626-x/11-626-x2020015-eng.htm>
- Northern Policy Institute. n.d. "Northern Ontario Boundary Map." <https://www.northernpolicy.ca/boundarymap>.
- Statistics Canada. "Immigration and ethnocultural diversity: Key results from the 2016 Census." Statistics Canada. October 25, 2017. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/171025/dq171025b-eng.htm>
- . 2016. *Census of Population*. Accessed August, 17 2020. <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/index-eng.cfm>
- . 2018. "Census metropolitan area (CMA) and Census agglomeration (CA)." Modified September 17, 2018. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/92-195-x/2011001/geo/cma-rmr/cma-rmr-eng.htm>
- . 2018b. "Census subdivision: Detailed definition." Modified September 17, 2018. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/92-195-x/2011001/geo/csd-sdr/def-eng.htm>.
- Traisnel, Christophe, Josée Guignard Noël, and Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault. *Les étudiants internationaux francophones dans les Maritimes : un portrait au regard du marché de l'emploi*. Moncton: Institut canadien de recherche sur les minorités linguistiques, 2016.
- <https://icrml.ca/fr/recherches-et-publications/publications-de-l-icrml/item/81495-les-etudiants-internationaux-francophones-dans-les-maritimes-un-portrait-au-regard-du-marche-de-l-emploi>.
- Van Huystee, Monica. "A profile of foreign students who transition to permanent resident status in Atlantic Canada." Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2011.
- <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/reports-statistics/research/a-profile-foreign-students-who-transition-permanent-resident-status-atlantic-canada.html>
- Zefi, Christina. *The Northern Attraction Series. Exploring the Need for a Northern Newcomer Strategy*. Thunder Bay: Northern Policy Institute, 2018. https://www.northernpolicy.ca/upload/documents/publications/commentaries-new/commentary-zefi_newcomers-1-en.pdf.

About Northern Policy Institute

Northern Policy Institute is Northern Ontario's independent think tank. We perform research, collect and disseminate evidence, and identify policy opportunities to support the growth of sustainable Northern Communities. Our operations are located in Thunder Bay and Sudbury. We seek to enhance Northern Ontario's capacity to take the lead position on socio-economic policy that impacts Northern Ontario, Ontario, and Canada as a whole.

Related Research

Northern Attraction Series
Christina Zefi

Building a Home: Strengthening the Pathways for Newcomer Economic Integration
Rachel Rizzuto

Assessing Labour Market Shortages Series
Alex Ross

NORTHERN
POLICY INSTITUTE

INSTITUT DES POLITIQUES
DU NORD

northernpolicy.ca