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Welcome to Your New Home: The State of Immigration in Northern Ontario

Northern Ontario Insights Series

By: Samrul Aahad

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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.
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- Kirkland Lake is on the Robinson-Huron Treaty territory and the land is the traditional territory of Cree, Ojibway, and Algonquin Peoples, as well as Beaverhouse First Nation.
- Each community is home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples.

We recognize and appreciate the historic connection that Indigenous peoples have to these territories. We support their efforts to sustain and grow their nations. We also recognize the contributions that they have made in shaping and strengthening local communities, the province, and Canada.

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About the Author

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Samrul Aahad graduated with an M.A. in Economics from the University of Saskatchewan where he was the recipient of the prestigious Boving Family Scholarship. During his Masters, he was able to contrast the conventional ways of analysis popular with economists with contemporary techniques such as ones used in machine learning. He has, previously, worked as a business/data analyst for various research organizations and industries locally and internationally.



Executive Summary

In the Spring of 2022, regional experts in Northern Ontario were interviewed to build a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities regarding the areas of food security, homelessness, mental health and addiction, immigration-migration, physician recruitment, and post-secondary education. The results of these key informant interviews led to unique insights into the state of these five subjects in Northern Ontario and highlighted the best avenues to address their challenges.

The insights received from experts are instrumental and shed light on the current conditions in the field. Learning from the individuals who have worked with and within local communities reveals opportunities to address these issues.

Findings primarily indicate a need for new policy strategies that effectively and holistically address some common issues:

1. Homelessness, mental health and addictions—alongside a lack of affordable housing, the transition between rehabilitation services or a correctional facility to life in society needs to be improved. Finally, a more collaborative approach with shared electronic records could yield a more effective and encompassing delivery of services;
2. Immigration—there is a lack of affordable housing for newcomers and a low retention rate in Northern Ontario. Additionally, the region needs to be better marketed to newcomers in order to address the existing labour shortages and high retirement rates;
3. Post-secondary institutions—in Northern Ontario suffer from a lack of funding generated by a freeze in tuition and funding levels. That is also true for Indigenous institutions, hampering their growth and stabilization. The attraction of international students has improved, but communities need to be welcoming to further attract and retain international students;
4. Food security—it has often been associated with food waste. However, insights suggest that income disparities are a more significant determinant of food insecurity. Moreover, having food that fits cultural preferences and nutritional needs is of the utmost importance. Furthermore, Indigenous land-based knowledge and self-determination present opportunities to address food security.
5. Physician recruitment—more funding and revised service agreements are needed to make health care jobs in Northern Ontario more attractive to newcomers, aligning financial incentives with position opportunities in smaller communities. As well, health professionals lack a better work-life balance, which hampers the attraction of more recent graduates to the region.

In sum, this series of insights highlighted some challenges that are perceived in Northern Ontario. However, these challenges also come with opportunities on which policymakers can act to improve the economy and quality of life in Northern Ontario.



Introduction

Good public policymaking does not happen in isolation. There are many individuals, organizations, and institutions that can – and do – provide valuable insight to decision-makers every day. As such, in the Spring of 2022, Northern Policy Institute interviewed regional experts to discuss the opportunities and challenges that exist for Northern Ontario in five different areas: food security; homelessness, mental health, and addiction; immigration-migration; physician recruitment; and postsecondary education. The results of these interviews can help inform new decision makers in the provincial and municipal governments.

Of course, policy advice does not stop there. Continuing to hear and learn from experts and other residents is important in ensuring policies and programs are appropriate for Northern Ontario's regions and communities from Timmins to Sachigo Lake First Nation to Powassan and everywhere in between.



Immigration in Northern Ontario

Newcomers represent potential growth and innovation for Northern Ontario. Conversely, the emigration of people from Northern Ontario is associated with a loss of labour and economic activity. Even though Ontario is the destination choice of almost half of all newcomers to Canada, the vast majority are in the vicinity of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and, to some extent, Ottawa-Gatineau (Haan and Prokopenko 2015). There are many reasons why newcomers choose Southern Ontario and why Northern Ontarians move elsewhere. One factor is the scarce supply of housing in Northern Ontario, which affects newcomers and residents alike. Anthony Miron¹ the program manager at Northeastern Ontario Settlement Services, said that “when you want to buy a house, there are not a lot of houses for sale, and the same goes for apartments for rent.” Thus “you have to pay a lot more for a decent apartment.” Piero Pucci² former supervisor at the Thunder Bay Community Economic Development Commission added that “the ability to provide housing at an affordable rate is one of the biggest challenges.” Thus, policymakers should see the lack of affordable housing as a major hurdle for attracting newcomers and keeping people in Northern Ontario.

Furthermore, it is not only imperative to attract newcomers but also to retain them. This is the key challenge that Northern Ontario faces according to Thomas Mercier³, the coordinator at Réseau du Nord. “We still have some issues with attracting and retaining newcomers here,” he said. He added that the “first two-to-three years are critical; once they [newcomers] are established, it’s very hard to move them.” Therefore, there should be a concerted effort to help newcomers get settled, especially in the early years.

Even so, not enough is being done to market Northern Ontario communities to potential newcomers. “We don’t have leverage on every part of the immigration continuum,” Mercier said. “For example, recruitment is managed by Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), with a pan-Canadian recruitment campaign. Even when these campaigns target rural areas, it’s not just Northern Ontario, and when they promote Francophone immigration, it’s not just about Northern Ontario.” Pucci added that “[the CEDC has] a number of relationships with agencies in Toronto, Winnipeg, and Ottawa that work on our behalf to explain to newcomers that there are opportunities outside GTA, ... and I think part of the messaging not only has to come from communities but also has to be delivered by provincial and federal officials.” Hence, a coordinated effort should be made to market Northern Ontario to potential newcomers.

On the other hand, there are serious labour shortages in Northern Ontario and newcomers can help address that. Pucci said that the “availability of jobs is quite diverse now” in Thunder Bay and that “we have positions to fill, and we are not filling them.” Miron added that “employers are often in positions where they must make a choice of hiring but don’t have access to a local pool of employees.” On the other hand, Mercier noted that “there are a lot of businesses going on sale as [more and more] boomers are retiring.” Thus, there are economic opportunities for newcomers in Northern Ontario and this should help boost immigration flow toward the North.

Lastly, when the experts were asked what they wanted to see happen with immigration in Northern Ontario if they could magically change things, one said that they would like to see all of Canada marketed to potential newcomers, not just Toronto and the Rockies, and another indicated that they would like to see community-led immigration programs.

In conclusion, lack of housing, low retention, and inadequate marketing to potential newcomers are some of the key immigration-migration issues Northern Ontario faces. However, job vacancies, along with increasing retirements, is enhancing Northern Ontario’s appeal as an excellent economic opportunity for newcomers.

¹ Anthony Miron, interview by author, April 04, 2022.

² Piero Pucci, interview by author, April 13, 2022.

³ Thomas Mercier, interview by author, April 11, 2022.



Reference

Haan, Micheal, and Elena Prokopenko. Northern Ontario Immigration Profile - Planning Our Workforce. City: Employment Ontario, 2015. Accessed 04 28, 2022. <https://planningourworkforce.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Northern-Ontario-Immigration-Profile-2015.pdf>.



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 enhance Northern Ontario's capacity to take the lead position on socio-economic policy that impacts our communities, our province, our country, and our world.

We believe in partnership, 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 based in or passionate about Northern Ontario.

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

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