

Policy Note #34 | December 2022

# Exit Signs, Northwestern Ontario, and Out-Migration

What Makes a Welcoming Community? (Series)

By: B. Kerem Karabeyoğlu



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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 Wahnapiitae First Nation.
- 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.

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.

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## About the Author

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Born and raised in Istanbul, Turkey, Kerem graduated in 2021 from Western University with a B.A. in Political Science. During his studies, Kerem developed a keen interest in the areas of Canadian Arctic Sovereignty and Intergovernmental Cooperation. His academic focus was also directed towards International Peace-building and Transitional Justice studies. Immediately after graduating, Kerem returned to Turkey to intern as a Junior Consultant in the Turkish Parliament. Now, back in Canada, he is pursuing his professional interests in promoting long-term sustainable development. Having experienced Northern Ontario for the first time tree-planting, he has been inspired to return to the natural beauty of the region ever since. An avid trail runner, soccer fan, and skier, Kerem is also passionate about producing music in his free time.

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## About the Partner: Northwestern Ontario Local Immigration Partnership

The Local Immigration Partnership (LIP) and Northern LIP are initiatives that are focused on improving access to, and the coordination of, effective services that facilitate immigration settlement and integration. The Northwestern Ontario Local Immigration Partnership serves Thunder Bay and 31 other communities in Northwestern Ontario.

## About the Northern Analyst Collective:

The Northern Analyst Collective, a project of Northern Policy Institute, will allow members to “time share” a professional policy analyst. By merging our collective resources we can ensure that the smallest municipality or local charity can access high-end skills at an affordable price.



NPI is pleased to have the support of FedNor for this important work to assess the impact of the Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot in Northern Ontario.

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# Executive Summary

Northwestern Ontario needs, on average, 792 more immigrants annually (through to 2046) than the Ontario Ministry of Finance projects us to receive, to maintain our current ratio of dependents to workers. With that being said, a large part of population growth revolves around not only attracting people to these regions, but also retaining the population already here. As such, Northern Policy Institute, in collaboration with organizations across Northern Ontario, launched an exit survey to collect data on why people leave Northern Ontario communities. This survey was one of six surveys launched in February 2022 looking at the factors and experiences that contribute to the continuum of welcoming – from the individual, employer, and service provider perspective – at the community-level in Ontario's northern regions.

Although the exit survey was targeted at all out-migrants from these communities, this analysis specifically focuses on respondents that previously lived in Northwestern Ontario, and the factors contributing to their decisions to leave. More specifically, respondents were asked to consider socio-economic factors such as their employment and housing satisfaction, opportunities present in the community, and their sense of belonging to provide greater insight on their decision to leave. Similar reports are conducted for those that left Northeastern Ontario and Francophone respondents that previously resided anywhere in Northern Ontario.

Overall, the survey results revealed that both social and economic factors played a large role in the decision-making process when electing to leave a community. Socially, respondents in Northwestern Ontario indicated a higher level of dissatisfaction with the welcoming and sense of belonging they experienced in their previous Northwestern communities, compared to those who previously resided in Northeastern Ontario.

Looking at economic factors, half of respondents indicated they were satisfied with their employment situation, though the most common reason for out-migration was the presence of better job opportunities elsewhere. Also, compared to respondents from other regions in Northern Ontario, data shows there are greater housing issues pertaining to availability and overall quality of housing in Northwestern Ontario communities.

In consideration of the survey findings specific to those that out-migrated from Northwestern Ontario, some report recommendations include:

1. Investment in labour market integration for immigrants, Indigenous peoples, and the domestic population is an opportunity for the regions to better retain its residents. Additionally, promoting diverse job opportunities can aid in retention.
2. Affordable, adequate housing in Northwestern Ontario communities is needed to address housing issues in the regions.
3. Communities and organizations can work to promote socialization through virtual or in-person workshops, events, and activities to connect newcomers and those already living in the communities.

The above measures help address some of the challenges respondents mentioned facing in their previous communities. Addressing and mitigating these issues might help reduce the number of out-migrants from Northwestern Ontario communities. Moving forward, to track the progress of initiatives implemented to retain the existing population, community-level data is needed to inform decision-making and program evaluation.

## Introduction

Many Northern Ontario communities are experiencing a demographic shift and a population decline. A population that is aging at a faster rate than the rest of the province, paired with a low birth rate and high levels of youth out-migration, can result in future labour market shortages.

To help mitigate these challenges, communities in Ontario's northern regions must prioritize attraction, retention, and welcoming, as well as ensure full labour market participation amongst the population.

To further explore this topic and inform local-level decision-making, Northern Policy Institute (NPI), in partnership with multiple organizations across the various regions of Northern Ontario, conducted a data collection initiative to assess former residents' level of satisfaction with the community in which they previously resided, and their reasons for leaving. The exit survey was open from February 1 to February 22, 2022.

The survey was conducted on individuals who had previously resided in a Northern Ontario community and have since left that community. Analysis of these results were conducted for three subgroups: those who previously resided in Northwestern Ontario, those who previously resided in Northeastern Ontario, and those who are "fluent" or "advanced" in French and previously resided in a Northern Ontario community. Of those who responded to the exit survey, less than five respondents participated in the Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot (RNIP).

The purpose of this survey was to better understand the factors influencing out-migration from the regions of Northern Ontario.

## Methodology

The questions in the survey were designed to gain a better understanding of several economic and social features that influenced respondents' decision to leave their communities. Factors such as employment and housing satisfaction, opportunities present in communities, and other social factors were included in the survey.

Distribution was done through a collective effort by organizations across Northern Ontario, and took the form of targeted social media ads, direct distribution through emails, social media posts, newsletters, information sessions, and direct reach out (personal emails, phone calls, and word of mouth). In addition, respondents were entered into a draw to win one of two \$100 prepaid Visa gift cards. All surveys and promotional materials were available in French and English.

The sample size was made up of 147 respondents who were surveyed using a non-random participant self-selection online survey method. Thirty respondents indicated that their previous communities were in Northwestern Ontario. This paper specifically looks at those who previously resided in a Northwestern Ontario community.

As a result, the data from this region is limited. Further data collection will need to be conducted in the future to arrive at more concrete conclusions on the subject. Due to the sample size, analysis is not available at the community-level. Additional analysis is conducted in a complementary report for French-Speaking respondents who formerly resided in any Northern Ontario community. Given the number of respondents for this survey, caution should be made to avoid over-generalizing these experiences to all people who lived previously in a Northwestern Ontario community.

## Demographics

A total of 30 respondents indicated that they had previously lived in the communities of Northwestern Ontario. Seventy per cent of respondents had previously resided in Thunder Bay. Other communities include Kenora, Dryden, Fort Frances, and Sioux Lookout.<sup>1</sup>

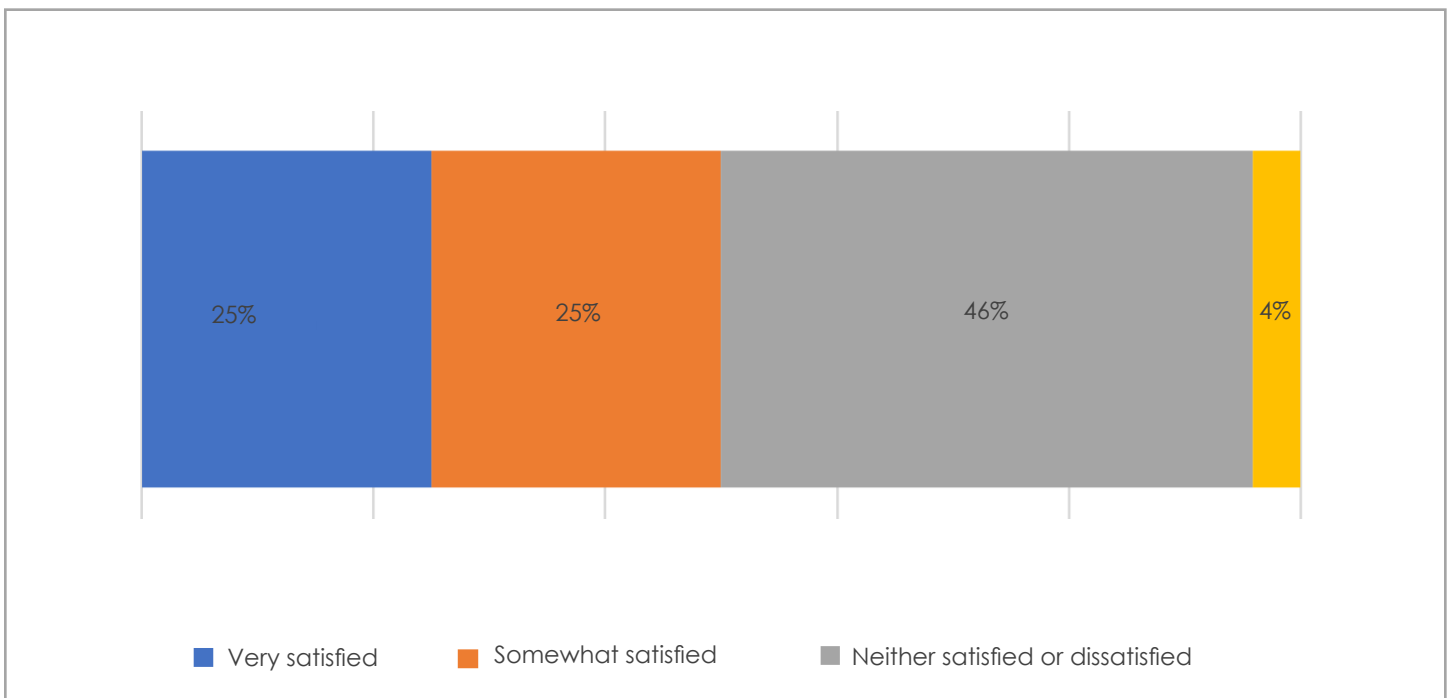
Of the 30 respondents, 70 per cent identified as male and 27 per cent identified as female.<sup>2</sup> Of the total, 63 per cent identified as “Born Canadian Citizen” and 20 per cent identified themselves as a “Permanent Resident”.

## Satisfaction with Employment in Previous Communities

When asked about the level of satisfaction with their employment situation in their previous community, 46 per cent of respondents indicated that they were neither satisfied nor unsatisfied. Other respondents indicated

being somewhat (25 per cent) or very (25 per cent) satisfied with their employment situation in their previous communities. Very few respondents indicated being very dissatisfied.

Figure 1: Respondents by Employment Satisfaction (%)



Note: (n=30)

Workers with former occupations in skill level O (management jobs) and A (professional jobs that usually require a degree), were most satisfied with their employment situations in their previous community. Of

those that were satisfied with their employment situation, the most common industries of employment noted were health care, and social assistance. No specific reasons were given regarding employment dissatisfaction.

<sup>1</sup> Thirty per cent of respondents indicated a variety of different communities in Northwestern Ontario.

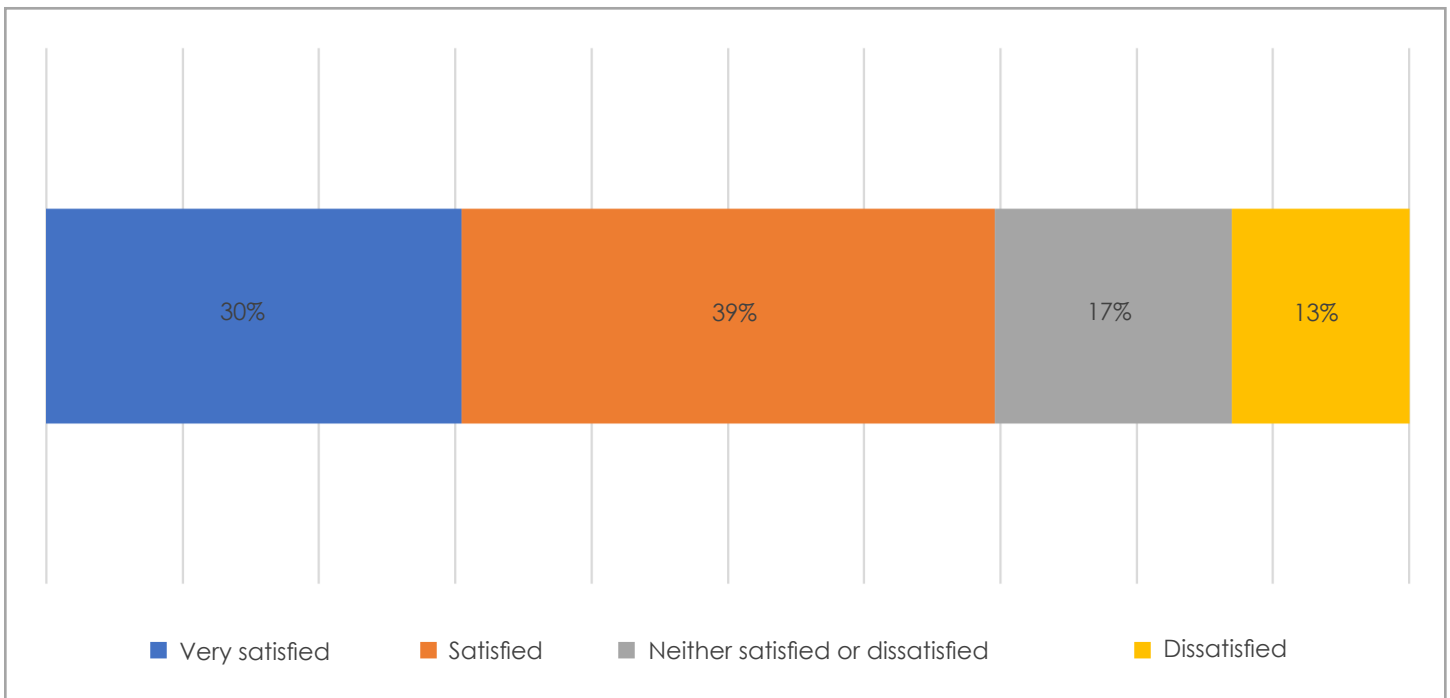
<sup>2</sup> Three per cent of respondents did not indicate their gender identity.

# Satisfaction with Housing in Previous Communities

A high proportion of respondents indicated that they were satisfied with the housing situation in their previous communities. Thirty-nine per cent indicated that they were satisfied with their housing situation, while 30 per

cent indicated that they were very satisfied. A minority of respondents indicated that they were dissatisfied with the housing situation in their previous communities.

Figure 2: Respondents by Housing Satisfaction (%)



Note: (n=23)

Low vacancy and availability of housing was the most common reason why respondents were dissatisfied with housing in their previous communities. Similarly, most respondents indicated that the available housing

did not meet my (and/or my family's) needs. Several respondents also indicated that there were not enough housing search resources available to find a house or an apartment.

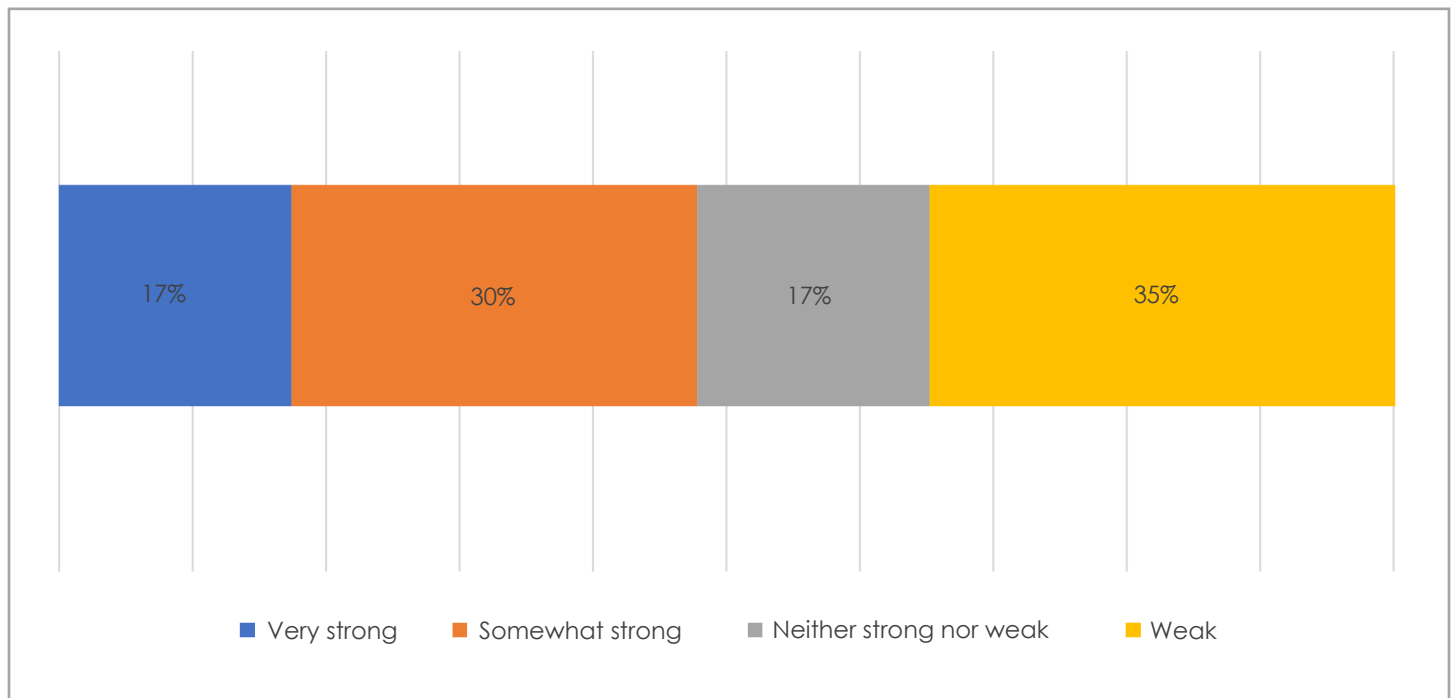


# Sense of Belonging in Previous Communities

Several respondents indicated that their sense of belonging in their previous communities was weak (35 per cent). On the other hand, 30 per cent indicated that

they had a somewhat strong sense of belonging in their previous communities. Seventeen per cent indicated that their sense of belonging was very strong.

**Figure 3: Respondents by Sense of Belonging in Previous Community (%)**



Note: (n=30)

Twenty-seven per cent of respondents indicated that they found their previous community to be welcoming. Another 27 per cent found their community not welcoming to newcomers. Furthermore, 20 per cent of respondents indicated that they did not have any

family living in their previous communities prior to arrival. A lack of family was also what respondents indicated was a major reason for moving away from their previous communities.

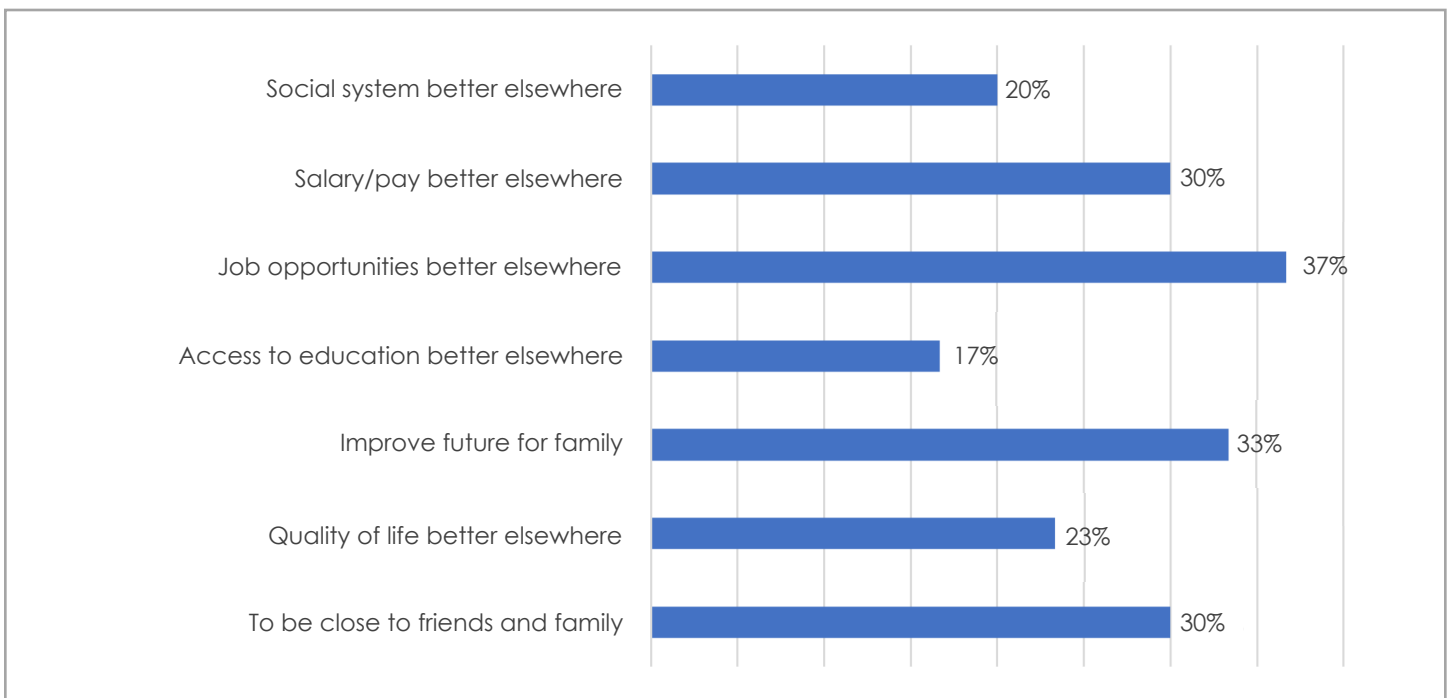


## Main Reasons for Moving Away from Previous Community

A common notion among the respondents is that both social and economic factors play a large role in the decision-making process when leaving a community. Out of 30 respondents, a high of 37 per cent indicated better job opportunities elsewhere as a reason for leaving the

previous community. Thirty-three per cent of respondents indicated that they left to improve the future for their families and 30 per cent of respondents indicated better salary options outside of their previous community.

**Figure 4: Respondents by Reasons for Leaving Previous Community (%)**



Note: (n=30)

Twenty-three per cent of respondents indicated that their current community is elsewhere in Canada, outside of Northern Ontario. Another 23 per cent indicated that their

current community is elsewhere in Ontario, outside of the regions of Northern Ontario. Twenty per cent indicated that their current community is in Northwestern Ontario.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Twenty percent left the section blank, and the rest of the data was too small to report.

## Aspects Liked About Previous Communities

Thirty-seven per cent of respondents indicated that the climate and physical environment in Northwestern Ontario were the most likable aspects of their previous communities. Twenty per cent of respondents highlighted that one could achieve their desired lifestyle and quality

of life within those previous communities. The availability of good quality housing was the response from 17 per cent of respondents. Similarly, 17 per cent indicated that their families' safety was not a concern within these previous communities.

## Greatest Difficulties Following Arrival in Previous Communities

According to respondents, the greatest difficulty they faced upon arrival in their new community was the lack of social interaction and possibilities of making new friends in their previous communities (27 per cent).

Twenty-three per cent indicated that they had difficulties adapting to a new culture or new values. Gaining access to professional help such as medical, dental, or legal services was also an issue for respondents (17 per cent).



## Conclusion and Recommendations

Overall, the findings from the Northwestern Ontario Exit Survey suggest that there are areas for improvement such as housing and social services. Additionally, the biggest challenge respondents faced in their previous community was lack of social interaction.

Although most respondents indicated that they are satisfied with their employment situation, the survey respondents largely indicated that employment-related factors were a reason for out-migration. Low salaries were not one of the larger issues relating to employment. Instead, respondents indicated a lack of diversity in labour market opportunities. **Continued investment in labour market integration for immigrants, Indigenous peoples, and the domestic population is necessary for the region to better retain its residents. Additionally, encouraging diversity in job opportunities can be helpful with retention.** This diversity can be encouraged in a multitude of ways such as investment in industries and occupations of growth, alignment between what is taught in schools and the skills needed in the labour market, and funding such as the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation (NOHFC) and FedNor internship programs that helps businesses provide job opportunities.

One issue for respondents previously living in Northwestern Ontario were the difficulties they faced finding housing. Compared to respondents from other regions in Northern Ontario, data shows there are greater housing issues pertaining to availability and overall quality of housing in Northwestern Ontario communities. There is a **higher need for housing affordability and adequacy in the communities of Northwestern Ontario.**

Another prominent issue in Northwestern Ontario is the low sense of belonging. Respondents in Northwestern Ontario indicated a higher level of dissatisfaction with the welcoming they experienced in their previous Northwestern communities, compared to those who previously resided in Northeastern Ontario. It is important to note that the pandemic might have influenced responses regarding their difficulties socializing, which in turn could have contributed to a low sense of belonging. Physical distancing has led to the temporary closure of many recreational and social establishments that promoted these activities within the communities. Regardless, **communities and organizations can work to promote socialization through virtual (or in-person) workshops, events, and activities.** With increased connections formed in the community, citizens might experience a higher sense of belonging to the community.

Moving forward, community-level data can promote informed decision-making related to out-migration in the communities of Northwestern Ontario. As such, an effort should be made across, and in this case, beyond Northern Ontario to share, promote, and take these surveys. With granular data, there is the opportunity for comparability across regions, allowing for the identification of best practices and areas for improvement.



# 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.*

## Related Research

**Identifying Northern Ontario's Strengths and Weaknesses in the Attraction and Retention of Newcomers**  
Christina Zefi

**Magnetic North 2021 Conference Report: Attraction, Retention, and Welcoming in Ontario's Northern Regions**  
Mercedes Labelle

**A Reason to Stay: Retaining Youth in Northern Ontario**  
Andre Ouellet & Dr. Martin Lefebvre

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