

Briefing Note | February 2026

DON'T STOP NOW

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

By: Charles Cirtwill and
Zhexian Zhu

This report was made possible through the support of our many partners. 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.

This Briefing Note is part of NPI's Welcoming Communities Initiative which is made possible in part through the support of the Federal Economic Development Agency for Northern Ontario (FedNor).

northernpolicy.ca

© 2026 Northern Policy Institute
Published by Northern Policy Institute

874 Tungsten St.
Thunder Bay, Ontario P7B 6T6



THE BOTTOM LINE:

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

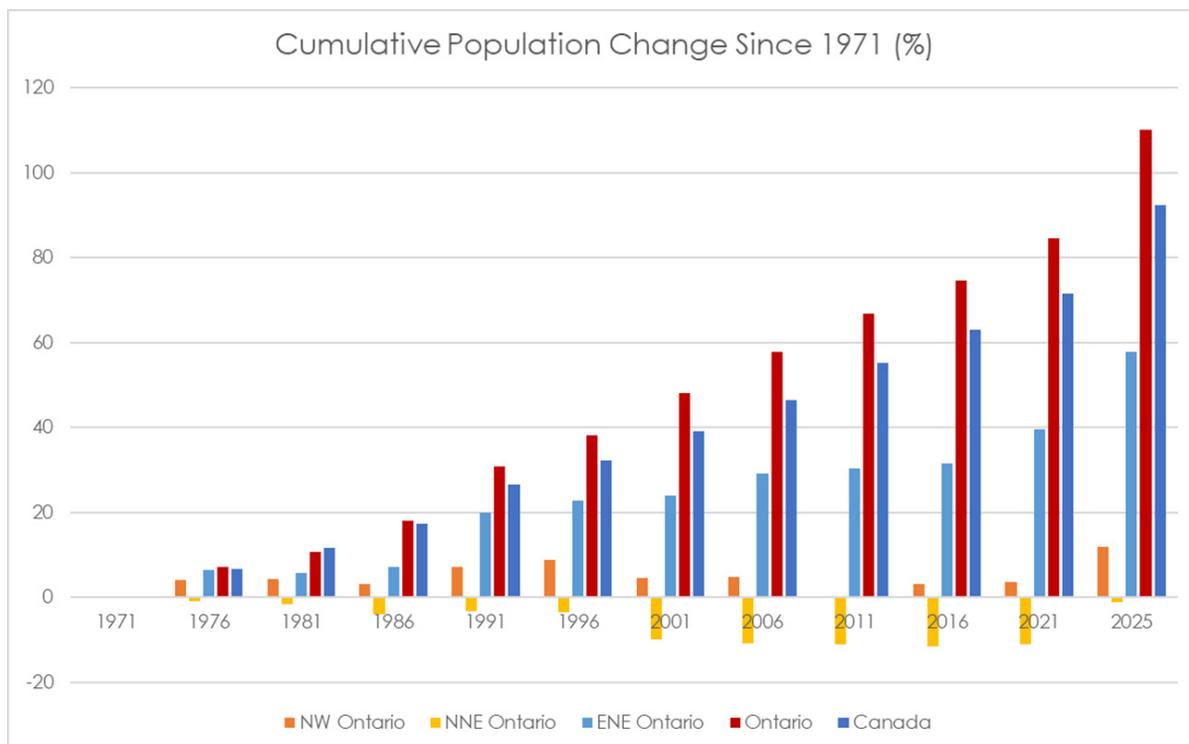
Growing permanent immigration **and** stabilizing temporary resident numbers in Northern Ontario should be the population priorities for the federal and provincial governments.

Ensuring that every region of Northern Ontario has **permanent** access to a community driven, local labour market focused immigration program is of paramount importance.

The number of temporary residents should also quickly be returned to pre-2025 numbers (or even a modest increase from those levels). This should be done by monetizing the available post-secondary capacity and rebuilding international student numbers. We should not, however, repeat the mistake of marketing studying in Canada as a "short-cut" to permanent residency and citizenship. Furthermore, temporary workers (not tied to post-graduate work permits) should be integrated whenever possible into permanent immigration streams.

SUMMARY

From 1971 to 2025 population in Canada almost doubled. Rising from 21.5 million to 41.5 million. Ontario's population over that same period more than doubled, from 7.7 million to 16.2 million. The story is very different in the regions that make up Northern Ontario.



In the areas closest to Toronto the growth was slower, but still significant. East-Northeastern Ontario (Nipissing, Manitoulin, Parry Sound, and Muskoka) grew by almost 60%. Seeing an increase in population from 151,000 to 240,000 between 1971 and 2025.

Northwestern Ontario (the census divisions of Kenora, Rainy River, and Thunder Bay) also saw some growth. Rising from 224,000 to just over 250,000, an increase of 12%. But population actually declined during most of this 50-year period, recovering only in the last five years.

In North-Northeastern Ontario (Cochrane, Timiskaming, Algoma, Sudbury, and Greater Sudbury) population actually declined over the last 50 years. Falling 1% from 462,000 to 456,000. As with Northwestern Ontario, the story would have been much worse except for a population “boom” over the last five years.

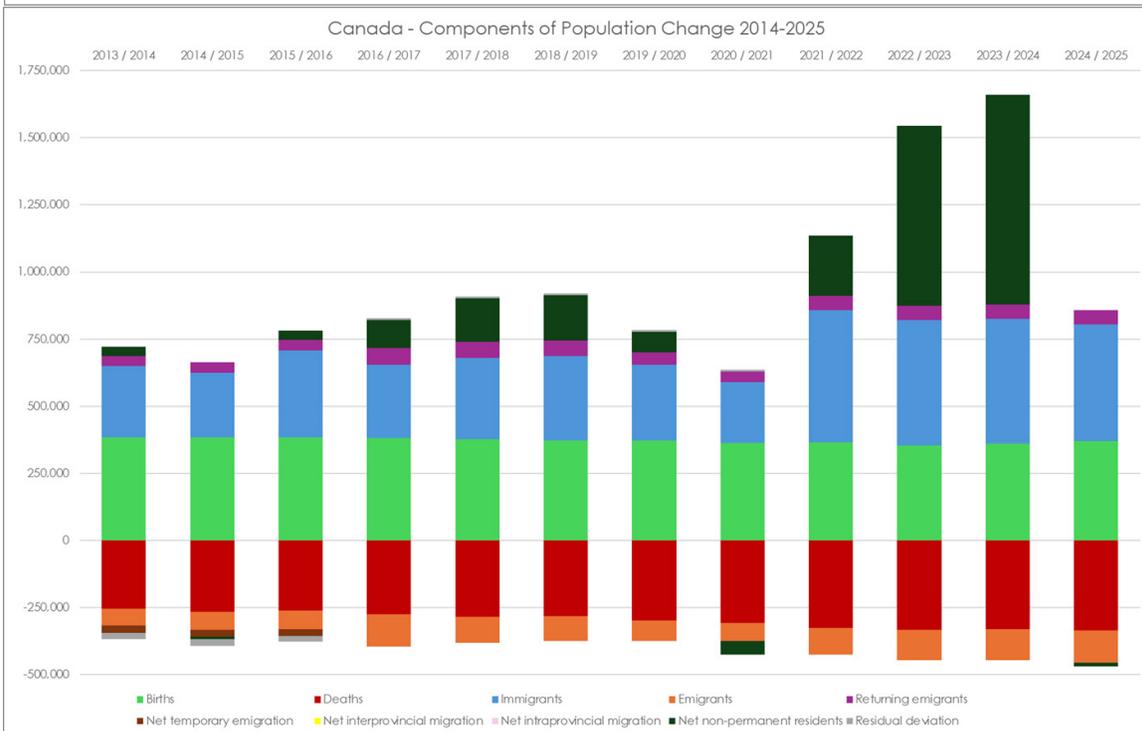
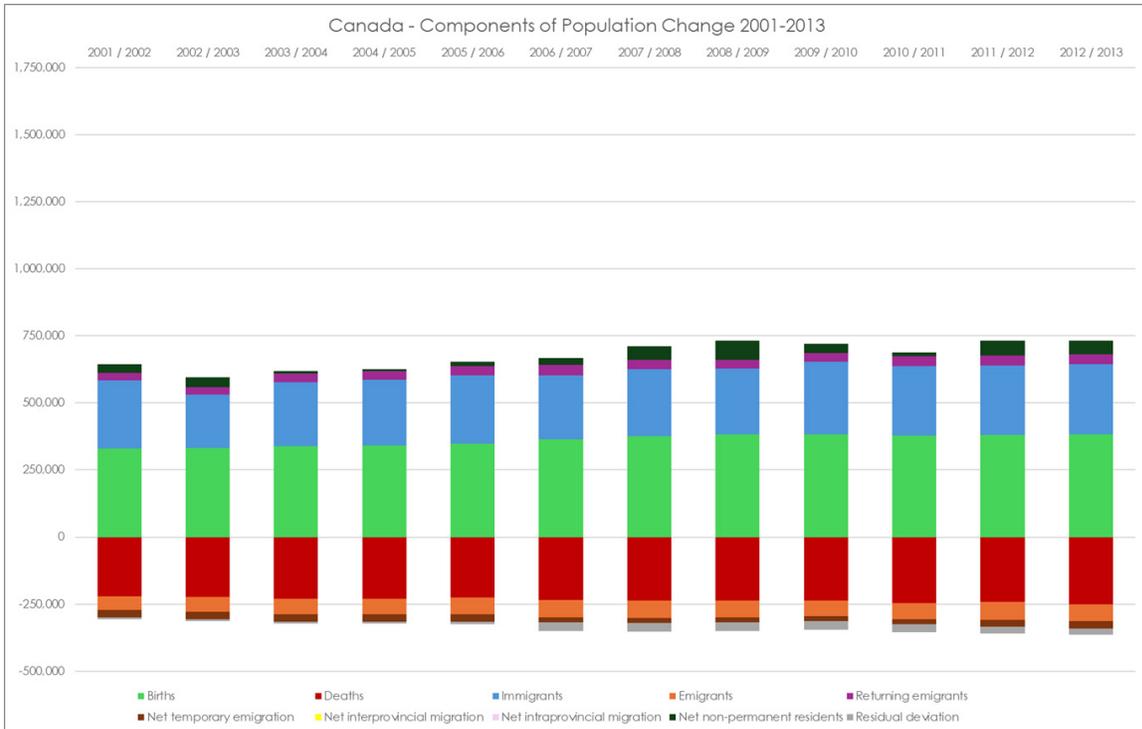
Total Population by Census District and Geographic Region 1971-2025

	1971	1976	1981	1986	1991	1996	2001	2006	2011	2016	2021	2025
Canada	21,568,310	22,992,605	24,083,495	25,309,330	27,296,860	28,528,125	30,007,095	31,612,895	33,476,688	35,151,728	36,991,981	41,494,132
Ontario	7,703,106	8,264,465	8,534,260	9,101,695	10,084,885	10,642,790	11,410,050	12,160,285	12,851,821	13,448,494	14,223,942	16,192,682
Kenora	53,230	57,980	59,030	52,835	58,750	63,335	61,899	64,420	57,607	65,533	66,000	73,541
Rainy River	25,750	24,768	22,615	22,870	22,995	23,163	22,110	21,565	20,370	20,110	19,437	19,964
Thunder Bay	145,390	150,647	152,355	155,675	158,810	157,619	150,860	149,065	146,057	146,048	146,862	157,640
NW Ontario	224,370	233,395	234,000	231,380	240,555	244,117	234,869	235,050	224,034	231,691	232,299	251,145
Cochrane	95,836	96,825	96,105	93,715	93,920	93,240	85,250	82,505	81,122	79,682	77,963	84,240
Timiskaming	46,485	43,760	40,805	40,305	38,980	37,807	34,440	33,285	32,634	32,251	31,424	33,211
Sudbury	29,031	27,287	27,040	25,775	26,175	25,457	22,895	21,395	21,196	21,546	22,368	24,430
Greater Sudbury	169,048	167,705	158,525	152,475	161,210	164,049	155,265	157,905	160,770	161,647	166,128	186,872
Algoma	121,937	122,883	132,755	131,840	127,270	125,455	118,565	117,465	115,870	114,094	113,777	128,128
NNE Ontario	462,337	458,460	455,230	444,110	447,555	446,008	416,415	412,555	411,592	409,220	411,660	456,881
Manitoulin	10,931	10,893	10,815	9,820	11,195	11,413	12,680	13,090	13,048	13,255	13,935	15,110
Muskoka	31,938	36,691	37,650	40,235	48,005	50,463	53,110	57,565	58,047	60,599	66,674	74,520
Parry Sound	30,244	32,654	33,140	33,825	38,425	39,906	39,665	40,920	42,162	42,824	46,909	51,423
Nipissing	78,867	81,739	79,120	79,005	84,725	84,723	82,910	84,690	84,736	83,150	84,716	98,837
ENE Ontario	151,980	161,977	160,725	162,885	182,350	186,505	188,365	196,265	197,993	199,828	212,234	239,890

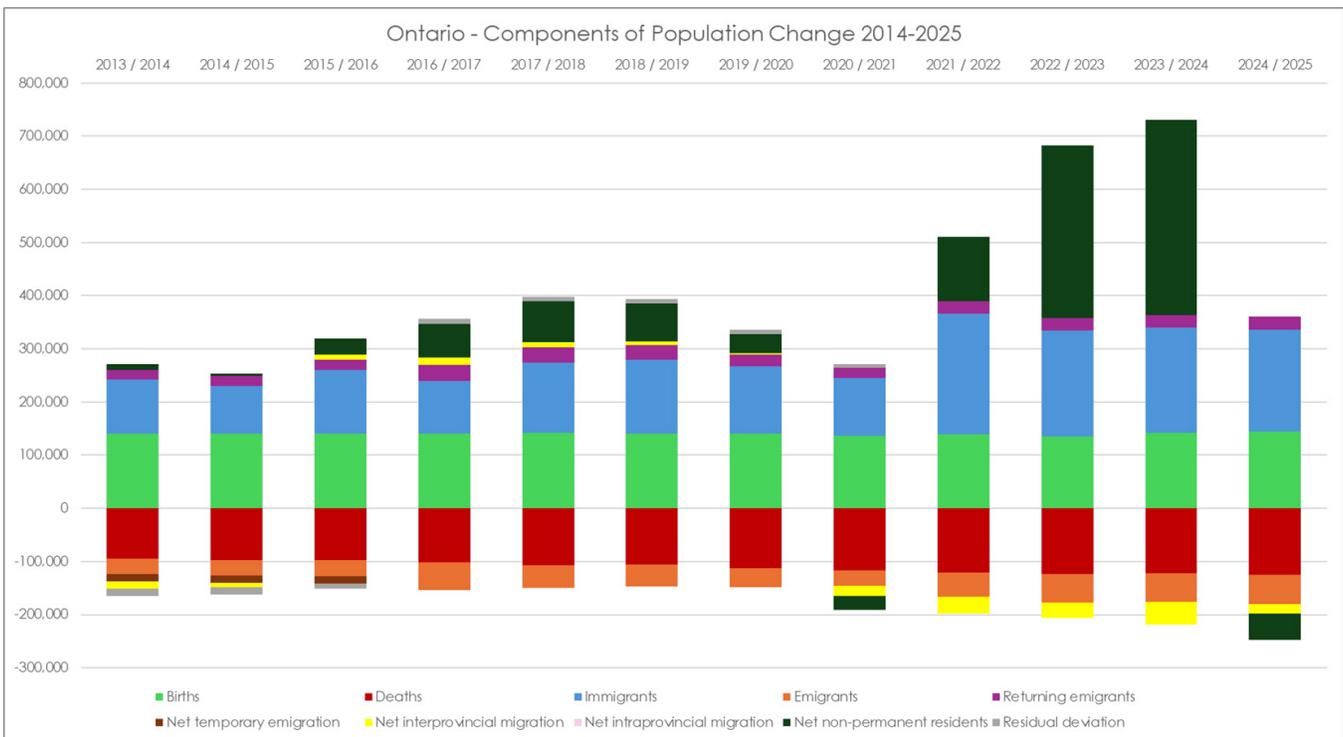
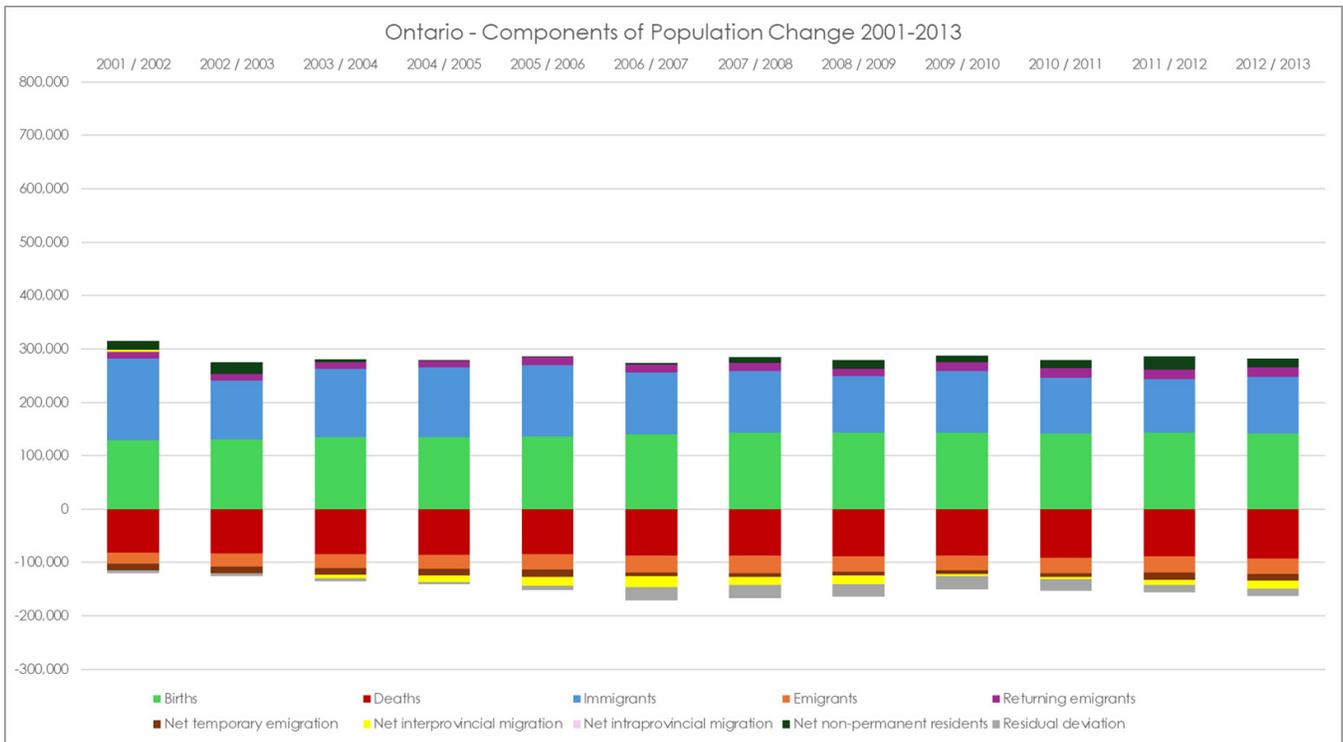


WHAT HAPPENED IN 2021?

In 2021 the overall trend for Canada changed in a significant way. While all other components of population change (including immigration) continued on roughly the same path, temporary (“non-permanent”) residents grew exponentially. The impact on total population is particularly evident in 2022, 2023 and 2024 (with “net non-permanent residents” actually being negative in 2025 as a result of a major change in federal policy).

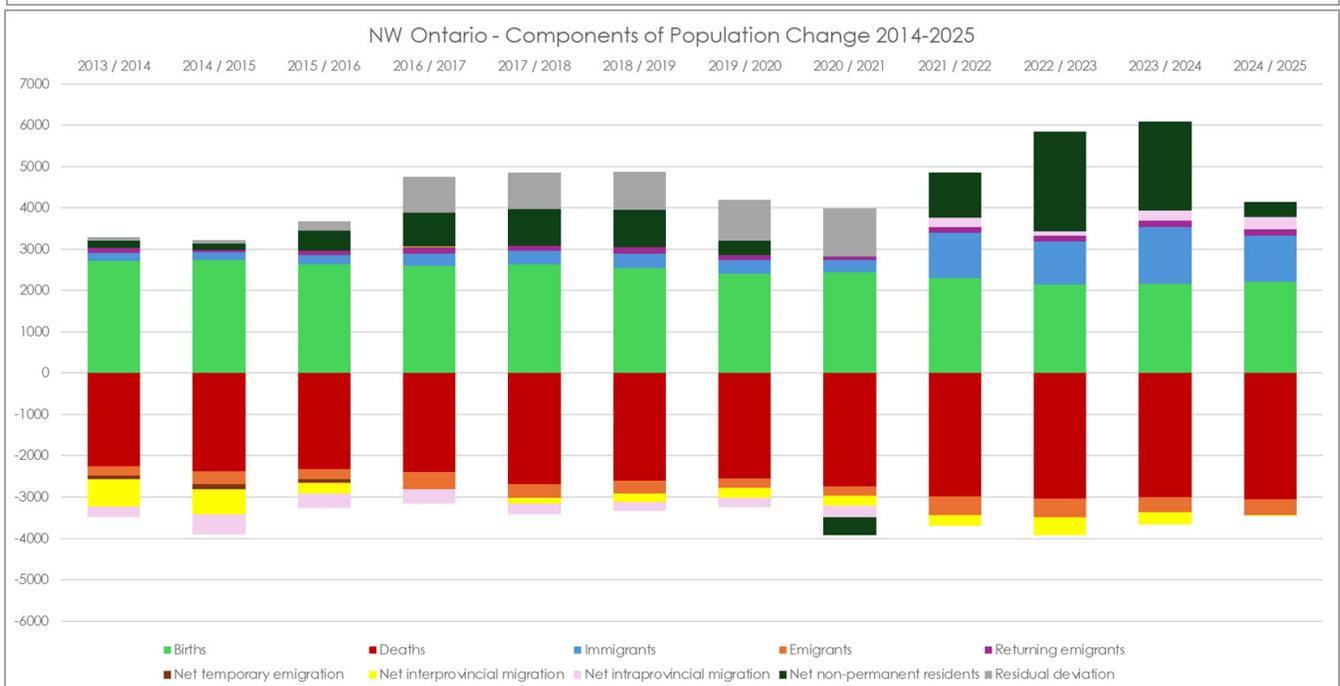
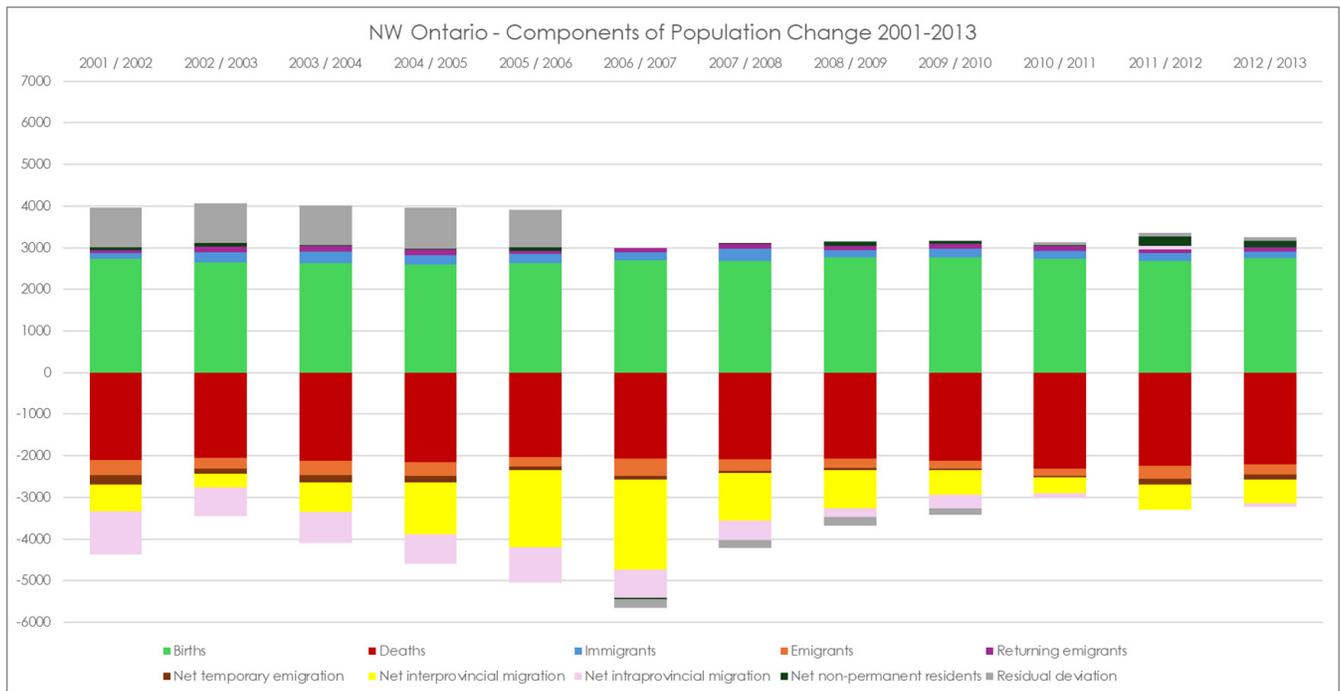


The same dramatic change can be seen in Ontario's numbers starting in 2021. Again, it is worth noting the massive spike is in temporary residents, not immigrants.

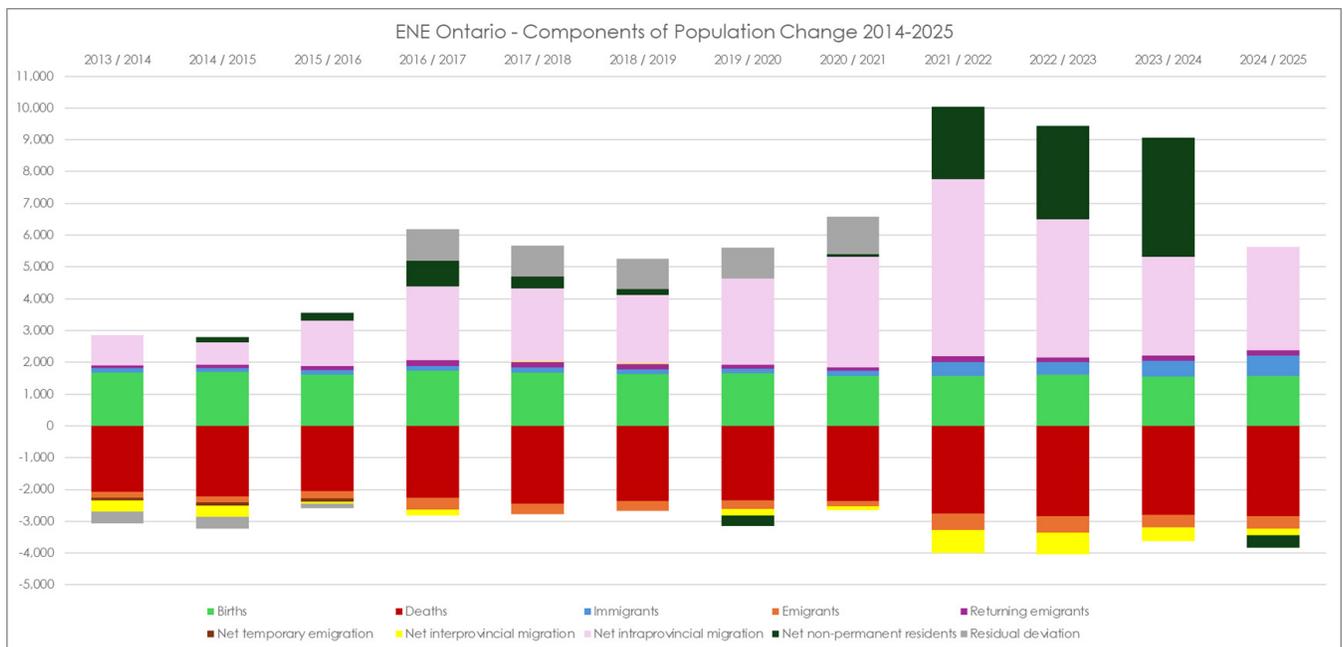
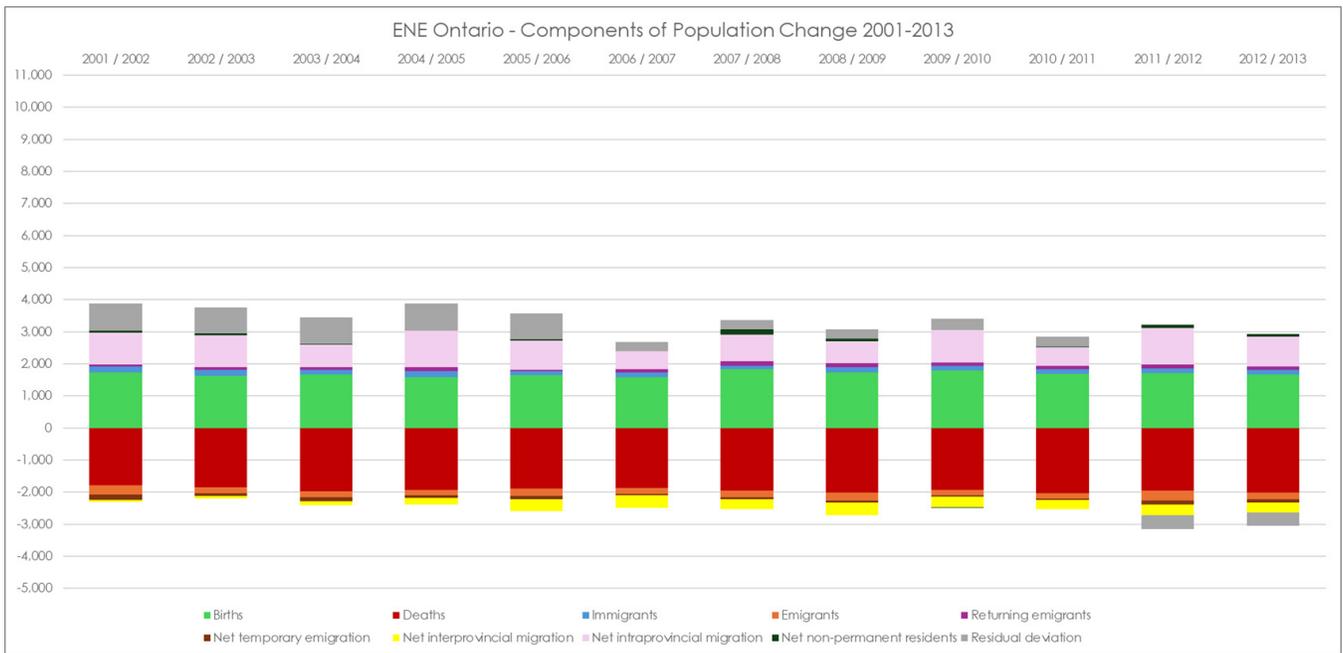


THE 2025 CHANGES PUT NORTHERN ONTARIO AT RISK

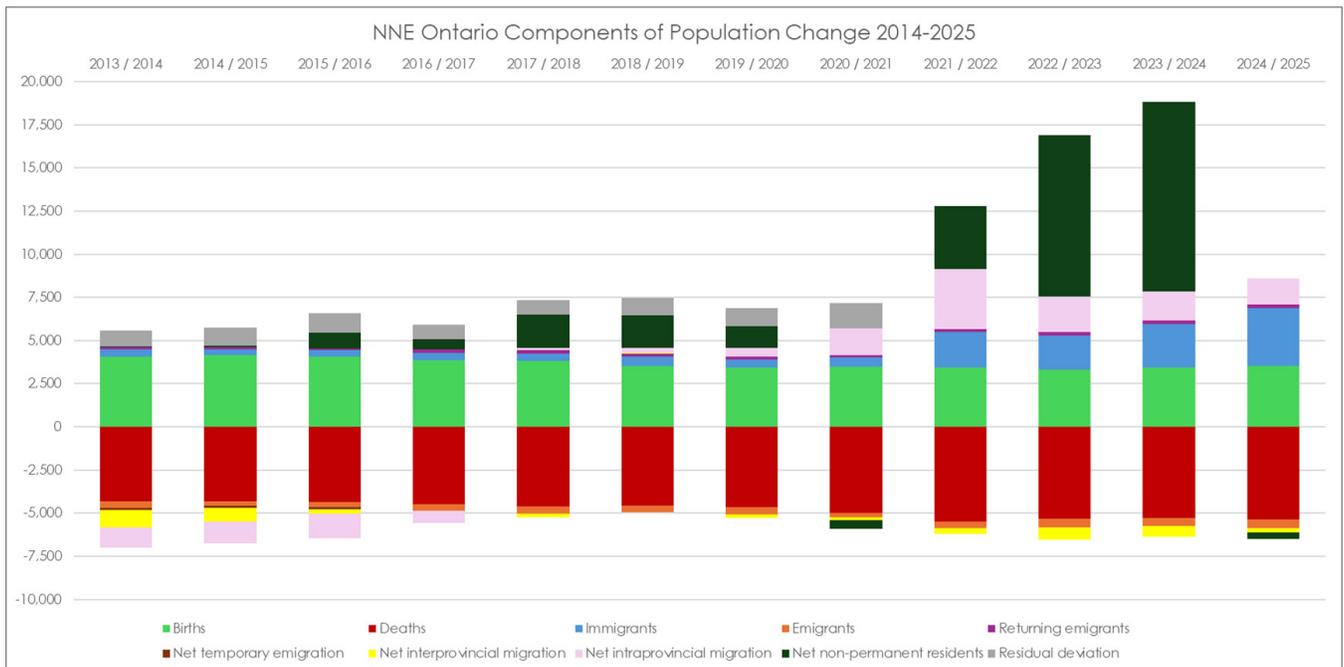
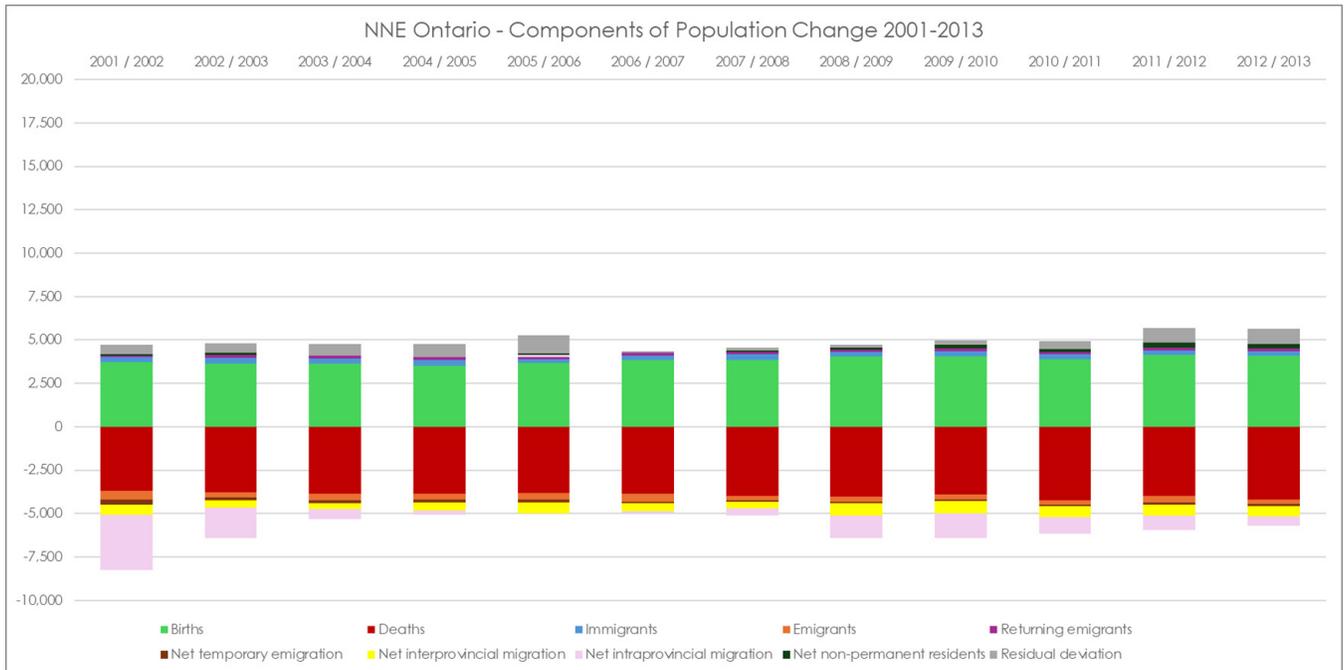
Immigration has been a key factor in a shift from stagnation to growth in Northern Ontario. The impact of federal programs like the Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot can be seen clearly in the period 2021 through 2025.



The population story in East-Northeastern Ontario is an interesting one. While both growth in permanent immigrants and a huge spike in temporary residents can be found here (as with other regions of northern Ontario) both trends are outweighed by intraprovincial migration. This region has been (and continues to be) a draw for other Ontarians. In fact, over the last five years that movement from southern to northern Ontario accelerated significantly as the Greater Toronto Area dealt with the crisis caused by the huge spike in temporary population.



The more northern regions of Northeastern Ontario also became an intraprovincial draw as the number of temporary residents grew in Southern Ontario. With net-intraprovincial emigration becoming a large positive factor in this region's population recovery between 2020 and 2025.



FALLING TEMPORARY RESIDENT NUMBERS:

Good for you, bad for us

Reining in the growth of temporary residents was a necessary corrective action for Canada, and Ontario, as a whole. Given the population trends outlined above, however, the steep and sudden decline in non-permanent residents after 2025 is very problematic for Northern Ontario.

First, it reduces the pressure to relocate within Canada and Ontario that many residents, temporary or permanent, newcomer or Canadian-born have been feeling. Pressure that was clearly paying off for the regions of Northeastern Ontario.

Second, recent population growth (and the resulting economic activity) has been driven by both immigration **and** temporary residents (largely students). As previously noted, this is true even in East-Northeastern Ontario. Cutting the number of temporary residents in any area of Northern Ontario risks slowing or even halting the economic reset being driven by the recent population influx.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Growing permanent immigration **and** stabilizing temporary resident numbers in Northern Ontario should be the population priorities for the federal and provincial governments.

Ensuring that every region of Northern Ontario has permanent access to a community driven, local labour market focused immigration program is of paramount importance.

The number of temporary residents should also quickly be returned to pre-2025 numbers (or even a modest increase from those levels). This should be done by monetizing the available post-secondary capacity and rebuilding international student numbers. We should not, however, repeat the mistake of marketing studying in Canada as a “short-cut” to permanent residency and citizenship. Furthermore, temporary workers (not tied to post-graduate work permits) should be integrated whenever possible into permanent immigration streams.

Sources

- 1971 Census of Canada, <https://publications.gc.ca/site/eng/9.834259/publication.html>
- 1976 Census of Canada, <https://publications.gc.ca/site/eng/9.836486/publication.html>
- 1981-2021 Census, <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/datasets/index-eng.cfm>
- Ontario Ministry of Finance, 2025 population projections, <https://data.ontario.ca/dataset/population-projections>
- Components of population change by census division, 2021 boundaries <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tb11/en/tv.action?pid=1710015301>

