

# Settling beyond big cities: A scoping review of the Canadian literature on immigration to rural and smaller communities

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## Abstract

*Newcomers are living and working across rural and smaller communities in Canada. However, immigration research and policy are overwhelmingly focused on large, urban centres. Responding to this knowledge gap, this article presents the results from a scoping review of the Canadian literature on immigration outside of Canada's largest cities. An analysis of 90 studies reveals several key trends in the literature related to the geographic focus and themes addressed. The results of the review demonstrate that the majority of studies focus on regions with a high population density that are in close proximity to major urban centres, thus revealing a gap in knowledge regarding settlement across more rural and northern parts of the country. Issues related to settlement services, employment opportunities, welcoming communities, public policy, infrastructure, and retention and secondary migration were the most addressed themes across the literature and represent the diversity of rural Canada. In response to these findings, we conclude with a discussion of the potential opportunities for future research and policy change.*

## KEYWORDS

Canada, immigration policy, newcomers, rural communities, settlement and integration

## Résumé

*Des nouveaux venus vivent et travaillent dans les petites communautés rurales au Canada. Cependant, les recherches et les politiques d'immigration sont concentrées sur les grands centres urbains. Pour répondre à cette lacune en termes de connaissances, cet article présente les résultats d'une revue de littérature sur l'immigration en dehors des grandes villes du Canada. Une analyse de 90 études révèle plusieurs tendances clés dans la littérature liées à l'orientation géographique et aux thèmes traités. Tout d'abord, cette démarche confirme un manque d'intérêt concernant l'implantation des nouveaux arrivants dans les régions rurales ou celles situées au nord du pays. Par ailleurs, les problèmes liés aux services d'accueil, aux opportunités d'emploi, aux différentes communautés territoriales, aux politiques publiques, aux infrastructures existantes, à la rétention et à la migration secondaire sont les thèmes les plus souvent traités à travers la littérature. Ces enjeux sont aussi présents au sein des milieux ruraux. À la lumière de ces*

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*résultats, nous terminons notre propos avec une discussion sur des pistes de recherche à approfondir ainsi que sur des changements souhaitables aux politiques actuelles.*

#### MOTS CLÉS

accueil et intégration, communautés rurales, Canada, politique d'immigration, nouveaux venus

#### Key messages

- The urban focus of knowledge production around immigration in Canada excludes the rural experience and has resulted in an incomplete portrait of settlement and integration.
- As governments continue to promote the regionalization of immigration, more research on rural immigration and funding for settlement services and infrastructure in smaller places is urgently needed.
- Addressing the challenges that newcomers face in rural and smaller places will require systemic policy change that accounts for the urban policy bias in Canada and diversity of rural spaces.

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

While more and more newcomers are settling in rural and smaller places, immigration continues to be a largely urban phenomenon in Canada (Rishworth et al., 2022). In 2021, over 9 in 10 recent immigrants lived in an urban centre with a population of over 100,000 residents (Statistics Canada, 2022). While Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver continue to welcome the most immigrants, the share of immigrants settling in these three cities has started to decline, falling from approximately 73–75% in the 1990s and early 2000s, to 56% in 2016 and 53.4% in 2021 (Krahn et al., 2005; Sherrell et al., 2005; Statistics Canada, 2022). An immigrant in Canada refers to “a person who is or has been a landed immigrant or permanent resident” and thus includes resettled refugees (Statistics Canada, 2022). Increasing numbers of immigrants are settling in small urban centres and rural areas. Despite this trend, research and policy continues to focus on immigration in Canada’s biggest cities (Dennler, 2022; Lam, 2019). As a result, little is known about the settlement and integration of newcomers in small towns or cities, hamlets, or rural regions. Funded by the Government of Canada, this scoping review addresses this knowledge gap by reviewing and analyzing the existing grey and academic literature across the Canadian context, in an effort to answer the following questions:

1. From where is knowledge being produced about immigrant settlement and integration in smaller and rural places?
2. What aspects and themes are being studied?

Immigration patterns in Canada are influenced by the geographic size and location of the country. Canada is a large country with a relatively small population, and is almost entirely surrounded by ocean (World Bank, 2023). In comparison to other regions, particularly countries neighbouring current conflict zones (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2022), Canada does not contend with large numbers of asylum seekers or migrants at its borders. Despite this, irregular border crossings are a politicized issue in Canada and receive significant media attention (Boyd & Ly, 2021; Paquet & Schertzer, 2020). However, the vast majority of immigrants admitted into Canada are selected and vetted before their arrival, to fulfill the objectives of the immigration system (Labman, 2016). Immigration to Canada exists “as a means of fulfilling the national objectives of social, economic, and cultural development and family reunification ... [and] satisfying international obligations through the resettlement of refugees” (Krahn et al., 2005, p. 872). Today, economic immigrants make up the majority, over 50%, of permanent residents coming to Canada, followed by sponsored families and resettled refugees and protected persons (Statistics Canada, 2022). Immigration policy is currently, and has been historically, used by policymakers to spread the benefits of immigration across the country, and to address outmigration in smaller and rural places (Abu-Laban & Garber, 2005; Vatz Laaroussi, 2005).

Immigration policies have been used to spread newcomers across the country since the creation of the Canadian state (Bantjes, 2005). In the early 1900s, immigration policy was largely focused on developing agricultural settlements in Canada. However, after World War II the vast majority of immigrants began settling in urban centres (Krahn et al., 2005). Regionalization efforts have been primarily used to even out population growth across the country, address issues of population decline, and meet current economic and labour market needs (Carter et al., 2008; Krahn et al., 2005). While immigration is a joint responsibility of the federal and provincial governments in Canada, the provinces and territories were largely absent from the immigration process until the 1970s. During this time, Quebec expressed a desire to play a larger

role in the selection and destination of immigrants within its jurisdiction in order to address slowing population growth and place more emphasis on French-language proficiency. In 1991, the federal government and Quebec signed an accord that gave Quebec the authority to select all economic immigrants for the province (Picot et al., 2023; Vatz Laaroussi et al., 2010). Quebec attempted to regionalize immigration by destining refugees to smaller centres and offering incentives to immigrants already living in big centres to move to smaller places. The Quebec regionalization efforts indicate that it may be easier for smaller centres to retain immigrants that were first destined to these communities, rather than attempting to attract newcomers that were first settled in big cities such as Montreal (Krahn et al., 2005).

Outside of Quebec, the introduction of the Provincial Nominee Program (PNP) in the 1990s contributed significantly to the destination of economic immigrants outside of Canada's three largest cities. Introduced in all provinces and most territories between 1998 and 2009, the PNP is an agreement between the federal and provincial or territorial governments that allows provinces and territories to actively recruit and nominate immigrants to settle in their jurisdictions based on their employment and demographic needs (Carter et al., 2008; Picot et al., 2023). The program played a major role and was largely successful in the regional decentralization of economic immigrants between 2000 and 2010 as immigration declined in Ontario and British Columbia, and grew across the Prairie and Atlantic provinces. In addition to the PNP, other factors such as changing economic conditions also played a role in this regional redistribution (Picot et al., 2023; Statistics Canada, 2022).

Canadian policymakers have also sought to redistribute resettled refugees across the country. Notably, in British Columbia in 1999, the settlement of Kosovar refugees in four centres outside of the Greater Vancouver area was an attempt to disperse government-assisted refugees beyond large urban centres. The vast majority of Kosovars stayed in the original communities in which they settled, and the research indicates that social and economic conditions were key determining factors in long-term settlement. Importantly, the Kosovars benefited from an expanded definition of family that allowed extended family groups to be settled together and resulted in enhanced settlement outcomes and reduced secondary migration. Those individuals who did move elsewhere largely did so to access education and employment opportunities (Sherrell et al., 2005). These findings are consistent across a number of previous and more recent research studies that demonstrate the importance of settling friends and family together, and the presence of meaningful employment opportunities and education options in destination communities (Abu-Laban, 2001; Abu-Laban et al., 1999; Jenkins, 2019). The more recent expansion of the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) is another example of such government dispersal efforts. Every community receiving Government-Assisted Refugees (GARs) is required to have a RAP. Through the expansion of the RAP, the federal government is sending more refugees to smaller and medium-sized cities in an effort to "take the pressure off of Canada's gateway cities such as Montreal, Toronto, or Vancouver that are experiencing a noticeable growth in their populations" (Abid, 2020, p. 13).

In addition to government-initiated dispersion efforts, another way in which refugees, as a specific category of immigrant, settle in smaller communities is through the private sponsorship program. Established in the 1970s, private sponsorship allows Canadians to come together, raise funds, and bring refugees into any community across the country (Labman, 2016). While GARs are only sent to about 36 communities, during the Syrian refugee resettlement initiative alone over 350 communities across Canada, including many rural and smaller places, welcomed refugees into their communities (Drury, 2020; Gingrich & Enns, 2019; Government of Canada, 2021; Hyndman et al., 2016; Jenkins, 2019; Kaida et al., 2020). The important work of select Canadian scholars (Derwing & Mulder, 2003; Haugen, 2019; McNally, 2020) demonstrates the significant impact that private sponsorship has had across rural Canada, and the challenges that sponsors and refugees experience throughout the process.

Government and community-led initiatives such as private sponsorship and regional dispersion efforts have resulted in increased cultural and ethnic diversity across the country (Lam, 2021; Statistics Canada, 2022). While the total number of newcomers might be smaller in a rural place compared to a large city, some communities have comparable or higher rates of immigrants per capita. For example, in Brooks, Alberta, a town of almost 15,000 people, over one-third of the population is made up of newcomers due to a large meat-packing plant that attracts and recruits immigrant employees (Bragg & Hyndman, 2022; Statistics Canada, 2021). In Altona, Manitoba, a town of 4,000, 1% of the population is made up of refugees (Lam, 2019). Thus, it is evident that newcomers are arriving, settling, working, and staying in smaller communities. In this context, this scoping review maps and analyzes the existing literature on immigration outside of Canada's largest cities to identify existing knowledge gaps and opportunities for future research and public policy change.

## METHODS

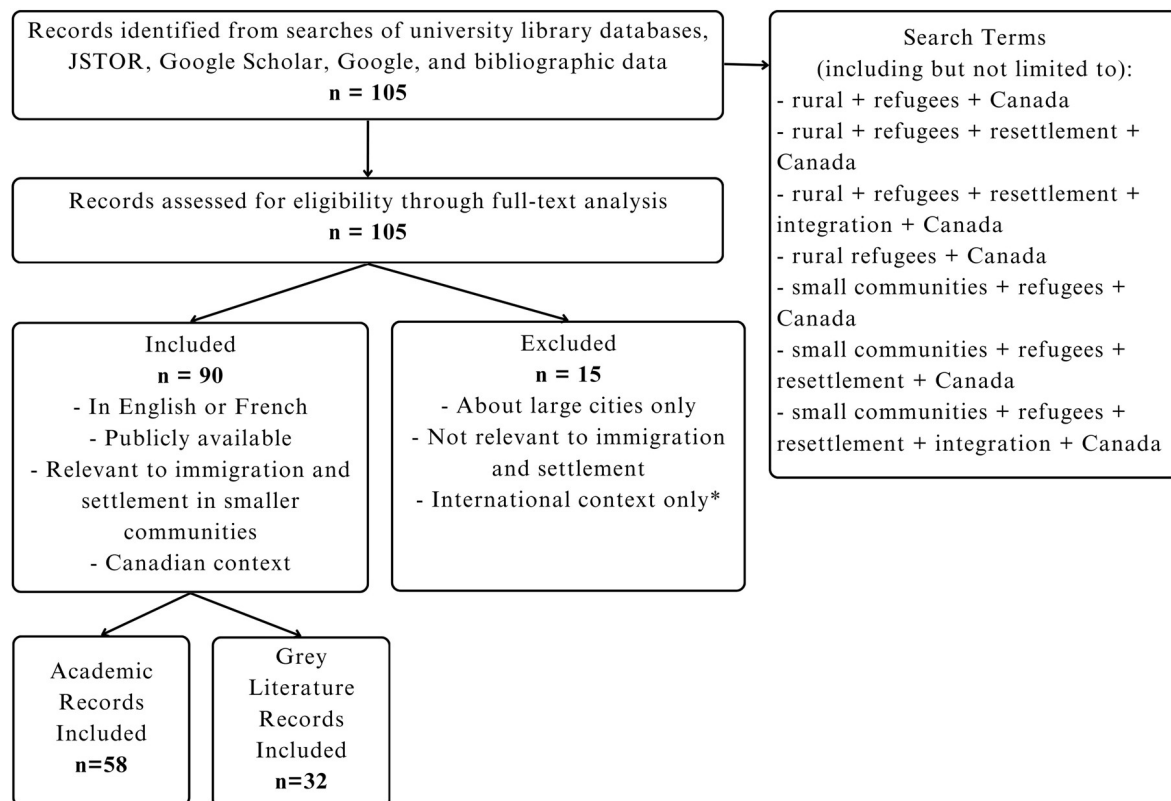
This review was based on a scoping review framework and involved identifying research questions, selecting relevant studies, charting and analyzing the data collected, and collating and reporting the results (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Peters et al., 2021; PRISMA, 2023). The research questions guiding the team-based review were:

1. From where is knowledge being produced about immigrant settlement and integration in smaller and rural places?
2. What aspects and themes are being studied?

For the purposes of this study, smaller communities are understood as places that (1) are outside of metropolitan urban centres (such as communities outside of Montreal-Toronto-Vancouver), (2) receive fewer newcomers and are less diverse than major urban cities, and (3) face many of the challenges and benefits associated with living in rural and smaller places. Across contexts and regardless of community specifics, rurality is generally characterized, to differing extents, by challenges related to aging and declining populations, limited access to services and cultural amenities, greater geographic distances and transportation challenges, and/or less cultural diversity (Parkins & Reed, 2013).

The intent of this review was to facilitate a comprehensive analysis of the subject area, which is largely under-researched, across a diversity of evidence. To offer a far-reaching summary of existing knowledge, the review was broad in scope. There was no limit placed on date of publication, given the relatively small number of studies on newcomer settlement in rural Canada. A research team of two leads and two research assistants searched for articles independently in the spring of 2022. Relevant sources were identified from electronic databases including Google Scholar, JSTOR, university library databases, published bibliographic data, and applicable networks and organizations. See Figure 1 for the search terms used. This initial search identified 105 records. The two research leads on the project reviewed each potential study against the inclusion criteria. Inclusion criteria were that the record be written in English or French, be publicly available (not necessarily open access), and include knowledge regarding immigration and refugee resettlement in smaller communities in Canada. Records were read in their entirety and not included or excluded based on the title or abstract alone. After assessing for eligibility, 90 records were included: 58 academic studies and 32 grey literature sources. In line with scoping review methodology, we included a variety of both academic and grey literature sources, including reports from civil society, newcomer organizations, and policy institutes, as well as government documents (Peters et al., 2021). Figure 1 visualizes our record selection process.

After establishing the data set of 90 studies, all the studies were catalogued in a citation software and coded in Excel. Data collected and recorded included: study title, author(s), year published, publisher, type of literature (grey or academic), geographic location (by province and case study location, if applicable), and themes of refugee resettlement and integration addressed. After the initial coding process was completed by a research assistant, the research leads independently reviewed the coding and data entry. The research leads then met to discuss and finalize the most prominent themes and trends which are discussed in detail below.



**FIGURE 1** Flowchart of literature selection process. Although international sources were identified and analyzed from comparative contexts, this scoping review presents only the results from the 90 Canadian studies, given space constraints and contextual differences.

## FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

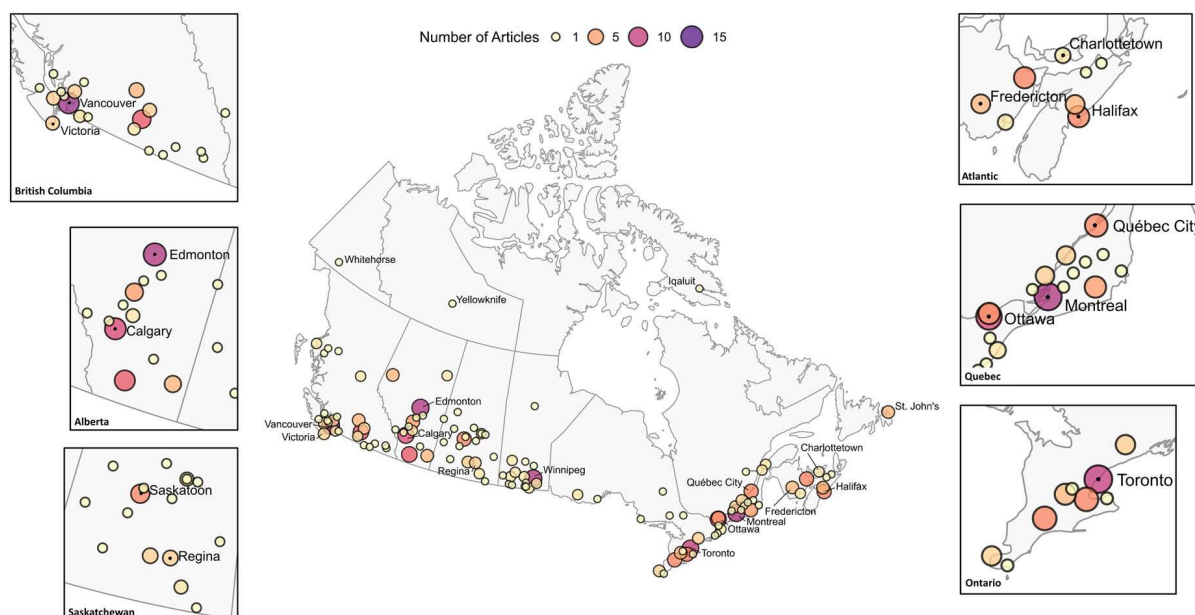
### Geographic focus and place-based analysis

Defining rural places in Canadian public policy has a long and debated history that extends from the use of threshold-based approaches by governments and departments, such as Statistics Canada, to delineate the rural from the urban in an effort to carry out economic and social service mandates (Reimer & Bollman, 2010; Statistics Canada, 2015). Although rurality is constituted by many as socially constructed places that reflect a specific history, lifestyle, relationality, identity, and local knowledge—to policymakers, rural is a reflection of distance and density: “the distance between places and the density of people in particular locations” (Reimer & Bollman, 2010, p. 13; Gadsby & Samson, 2016; Massey, 2005; Parkins & Reed, 2013). Defining rurality by these two dimensions is not a simple process, as rural communities are diverse and can include agricultural-based regions, fishing villages, hamlets, small fly-in communities in the north, and medium-sized cities, among many others. Thus, defining rurality is a contentious process that has significant economic and political consequences (Parkins & Reed, 2013; Reimer & Bollman, 2010).

The intersection of rural Canada and immigration is largely constituted by how public policy defines and understands rurality. In an effort to increase efficiency, policymakers are biased towards urban centres where transaction costs are lower and services are concentrated (Reimer & Bollman, 2010). Constructed within this ecosystem of Canadian public policy, immigration policy is inherently biased towards the settlement of migrants in urban spaces and largely ignores the nonurban. While the objective of many immigration policies is to distribute immigrants across the country, research shows that government funding does not adequately support this goal, and thus, smaller communities are set up to fail (Dennler, 2022). For example, the expansion of existing services funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) continues to benefit urban centres, as “there is a high barrier to entry for IRCC funding ... small and rural communities are disadvantaged by IRCC eligibility criteria that only support services to permanent residents ... [and] provincial funding for settlement services does not sufficiently fill gaps in small and rural communities” (Dennler, 2022, p. 10).

The urban biases inherent in immigration policy govern the “spatial settlement patterns” of newcomers, which have profound effects on integration experiences and future settlement patterns (Hyndman, 2022, p. 666). The historical geographies of Canadian immigration, which favoured urban settlement, continue to shape settlement patterns today (Edmonston, 2016). The past experiences that urban centres have of accepting and settling newcomers strengthen their capacity for welcoming and integrating immigrants and refugees in the future (Walton-Roberts et al., 2020). Additionally, the evidence clearly demonstrates that newcomers are attracted to communities where networks of family or friends are already established. While other factors also attract newcomers to specific places—such as employment and educational opportunities, access to services and cultural amenities, the cost of living, and the perception of a welcoming community—the presence of family and friends is particularly important (Esses & Carter, 2019).

To answer the place-based question, “From where is knowledge being produced about immigrant settlement and integration in smaller and rural places?,” the collected studies were categorized by provincial and local study locations or focus, noting one or more specific case study communities where applicable. Figure 2 visualizes the geographic distribution of the literature. It demonstrates that the majority of the collected



**FIGURE 2** Geographic distribution of Canadian studies.

studies took place in regions with a high population density that are in close proximity to major urban centres. This reveals a gap in knowledge regarding settlement across more rural and northern parts of the country. At the provincial and territorial level, studies are concentrated in Ontario (n = 35), Manitoba (n = 25), Alberta (n = 24), and British Columbia (n = 23), with far fewer studies considering the northern context (only two or three studies for each territory).

There were 121 case study communities in the studies. As seen in Table 1, the large majority (n = 96 or 79%) of these communities have a population of 125,000 or less, and half of the communities have populations less than 25,000. About one-third of the communities would best be described as small to medium-sized cities, as 36 (30%) have populations between 50,000 and 500,000 people. Very small communities were less represented, with 21 (17%) of the case study communities having populations under 5,000.

The presence of larger case study communities generally results from studies using a comparative methodology. For example, one study contrasts the experiences of Kosovar refugees in Vancouver to those in smaller cities in British Columbia like Vernon (population 40,000) (Sherrell et al., 2005). Another study compares refugee sponsorship in Ottawa (population one million) to sponsorship in the small community of Leamington (population 33,000) (Gingrich & Enns, 2019). Another study compares resettlement in Toronto to experiences in Guelph (population 135,000 people) (Drury, 2020). Overall, the focus of the literature on small and medium-sized cities indicates a focus on larger or more urban communities in the literature, where larger numbers of newcomers are settled.

## Thematic analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted to answer the question, “What aspects of rural immigrant settlement and integration are being studied?” Fourteen themes (Table 2) were identified through a process of thematic coding in which a list of key thematic ideas was generated from the literature (Gibbs, 2007). Studies often address multiple themes and thus the percentages do not add up to 100%. This analysis revealed that certain topics are more prevalent than others. There may be a number of reasons for the prevalence of certain themes over others, such as (1) the available funding is directing research in a certain area, (2) the expertise and academic disciplinary background of researchers undertaking work in this field is shaping the themes studied, and/or (3) the perceived importance of certain themes over others may be contributing to knowledge gaps.

## Settlement services

The most prevalent theme, settlement services, was addressed in 69% (n = 62) of studies. Language learning as a settlement service was addressed in 51% (n = 46) of studies. While the availability of settlement services depends on the province and size of the community, settlement and other formal services targeted toward newcomers are largely concentrated in large urban centres. Where settlement services are available in rural and smaller places, the ability of service providers to deliver comprehensive services is complicated by limited funding and few opportunities to refer newcomers to other social services (Dennler, 2022). While research suggests that settlement services in general need to be expanded to address the key needs of newcomers (Abid, 2020; Ashton et al., 2016), gaps in settlement services are particularly evident in

**TABLE 1** Canadian case study communities by population.

Population category	Number of communities	Percentage (%)	Cumulative percentage (%)
Under 1,000	4	3	3
1,000–4,999	17	14	17
5,000–9,999	18	15	30
10,000–24,999	24	20	50
25,000–49,999	12	10	60
50,000–124,999	21	17	77
125,000–499,999	15	12	89
500,000 +	10	8	99*
Total	121	99*	

\*Due to rounding, the total does not equal 100%.

**TABLE 2** Thematic analysis of the literature.

Theme	Description	Number of studies	Percent of total (%)
Settlement services	This theme discusses supports targeted towards newcomers, such as organizations with settlement workers who support newcomers.	62	69
Employment	This theme considers opportunities for paid employment and barriers to accessing employment (such as credentials or discrimination).	60	67
Welcoming communities	This theme captures community attitudes towards newcomers, racism, and other dynamics that contribute to inclusion/exclusion, efforts to promote welcoming communities, and newcomer sense of belonging.	60	67
Policy recommendations and/or analysis	This theme includes studies that analyze or evaluate specific policies or make policy recommendations to governments.	56	62
Language learning	This theme captures the challenges and opportunities for learning English or French, including language classes and less formal arrangements like volunteer tutoring.	46	51
Education	This theme considers education at all levels, from public education for children to colleges and universities.	45	50
Retention and secondary migration	This theme considers why newcomers decide to stay in a community or move elsewhere, as well as how governments and communities have supported or struggled with retention.	45	50
Religion and culture	This theme encompasses the context of community characteristics and the navigation of religious and cultural differences.	42	47
Other social services	This theme includes services that are not captured in another category, such as childcare or libraries.	36	40
Housing	This theme considers opportunities and challenges related to accessing quality housing, including rental housing and home ownership.	33	37
Health and well-being	This theme includes discussions of formal health and mental health care services as well as general well-being.	25	28
Transportation	This theme captures discussions of various forms of transportation and challenges associated with limited public transit.	26	29
Local governance	This theme considers how municipal governments or local organizations participate in welcoming newcomers.	14	16
Interpretation and translation	This theme considers services to translate spoken or written language.	12	13

rural places where “many service providers are funded to provide only a narrow range of service types” and access to basic services is already limited (Dennler 2022, p. 6). Dennler (2022, p. 7) contends that:

Gaps in settlement services are felt especially acutely in small and rural communities because the social service ecosystem there is so small. Residents already face difficulties accessing basic services, including health care, Service Canada, and provincial one-stop shops. Most communities have few social services to address unemployment, poverty, homelessness, or family issues. A settlement worker may be the only person within a hundred-kilometre radius who has the expertise to assist with the unique challenges faced by immigrants. Within a context of limited social services, settlement workers can rarely rely on other nearby organizations to meet some of the service needs of their clients.

Volunteers, such as private refugee sponsors, can fill in the gaps when settlement services are not available (Haugen, 2019; McNally, 2018). However, this reliance on social capital and volunteer involvement means that service provision is uneven and varies between communities and over time (Haugen, 2022; Wilkinson & Garcea, 2017).

## Employment

Newcomer employment was addressed in 67% (n = 60) of the studies. The employment of immigrants is often a gauge of successful settlement in Canada. Yet, newcomers face many barriers to finding and securing quality employment options (Abuhamed, 2020; Agrawal & Zeitouny, 2017; Dennler, 2022; Fang et al., 2021). Finding employment is complicated by factors such as lack of recognition of credentials acquired outside of Canada, lack of access to daycare (especially for women), cultural and religious commitments (such as observing Ramadan), and an expectation that newcomers should take any job offered to them, which are overwhelmingly labour intensive and low-paying jobs (Abuhamed, 2020). For example, across Canada, immigrants, including refugees, are over-represented in the agri-food sector, such as in meat-packing and processing plants (Helps et al., 2020). Resettled refugees face particular challenges and tend to experience higher rates of unemployment than other immigrants or those born in Canada, have lower incomes, be overqualified for the work that they do, work part-time or temporary jobs, and rely on social assistance more than other immigrant groups (Wilkinson & Garcea, 2017). Overall, newcomers face structural and systemic barriers when seeking employment, many of which are complicated by living rurally (Agrawal & Zeitouny, 2017).

## Welcoming communities

The theme of welcoming communities was also prevalent in a majority of studies (67%; n = 60). While policymakers, organizations, and municipal organizations have placed significant emphasis on how rural places can be welcoming communities for newcomers (Caldwell et al., 2017; Federation of Canadian Municipalities, 2016; Rural Ontario Institute, 2017), there is no agreed-upon definition of a welcoming community (Lund & Hira-Friesen, 2013). Unfortunately, efforts to foster “welcome” do not always address issues that underlie explicit and implicit negative attitudes towards newcomers. Studies on rural immigration have indicated that newcomers do not feel deeply welcomed by the broader community (Aora & Lauzon, 2019; Lam, 2021). In one study, immigrant participants described how “while people were friendly and would greet them, it was really about the ‘niceties’ with no opportunities to deepen relationships or friendships” (Aora & Lauzon, 2019, p. 30). This resulted in feelings of disconnection and isolation among newcomers (Aora & Lauzon, 2019). Throughout the literature, smaller places are constructed as racially homogenous, white spaces that are not particularly welcoming towards newcomers and do not have the cultural amenities to serve them (Chai, 2021; Dauphinais et al., 2021; Roberts, 2020).

## Public policy

Many of the studies (62%; n = 56) analyze policy and/or make policy recommendations. This literature is overwhelmingly focused on analyzing federal immigration policy (40%; n = 36) and making recommendations to the federal government (36%; n = 32). The focus on national policy is due to the concentration of settlement services with IRCC, the federal department of immigration. While settlement service providers may receive funds from other sources such as provincial governments, the largest funder of settlement services is IRCC. Thus, federal policy priorities significantly shape the settlement sector and the focus of immigration research remains concentrated at the federal level (Dennler, 2022). The analysis of policies and policy recommendations for other levels of government is much less represented in the literature, despite the importance of non-settlement services, such as education or health care, to the integration of newcomers (Abuhamed, 2020; Agrawal & Zeitouny, 2017).

## Infrastructure and services

Newcomers face many of the same challenges as rural residents, including a lack of access to public services and other amenities (Ashton et al., 2016). The literature reflects this, and collected studies addressed topics of education (50%; n = 45), religion and culture (47%; n = 42), and housing (37%; n = 33). While access to services is also an issue in big cities, rural and smaller communities often lack some of the essential services and infrastructure, such as public transportation, on which many newcomers rely (Agrawal & Zeitouny, 2017; Dennler, 2022). Research demonstrates that transportation is a major challenge in rural and smaller places, and the lack of adequate public transit “exacerbate[s] geographical gaps in services” (Dennler, 2022, p. 8). Thus, it is evident that gaps in infrastructure investment in smaller communities compound and amplify other challenges such as accessing employment opportunities. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic deepened the inequities experienced by newcomers in rural places (Helps et al., 2021). In the context of privately sponsored refugees specifically, sponsors in rural areas often fill in key infrastructure and service gaps through social capital, organizing volunteers, and providing the services themselves. While these efforts can be very successful, they are uneven across communities with varying levels of social capital, volunteer hours, and donations (Haugen, 2022).

## Retention and secondary migration

The topic of retention and secondary migration was addressed in 50% of the collected studies ( $n = 45$ ). There are many reasons why a newcomer may want to stay or leave their initial destination, whether rural or urban. Aspects that attract newcomers to a community in general include: the perception of a place or community, the presence of family or friends and other immigrants, employment opportunities, educational opportunities, access to cultural and religious amenities, and other quality of life aspects, such as crime rates, cost of living, and natural landscape (Esses & Carter, 2019). Research demonstrates that newcomers leave small centres for a variety of reasons including lack of services, inadequate employment and education opportunities, lack of public transportation, lack of amenities such as cultural foods and religious services, isolation, inadequate housing, lack of settlement services, experiences of discrimination or racism, and desire to be closer to family and friends elsewhere (Abid, 2020; Esses & Carter, 2019; Hellstrom, 2020; Jenkins, 2019; Lam, 2021; Sherrell et al., 2005). Select studies also speak to the reasons why some newcomers decide to stay in rural places long term. McNally (2018, 2020) found that there were four main reasons why refugees stayed in rural Nova Scotia: they had formed a strong relationship with the sponsors and community, they had found employment, there were other refugee families in the same area, and all members of the refugee family felt at home in the community. Haugen (2019, p.61) found that refugees settled in smaller places can benefit from “the social capital, economic opportunities, and affordable housing options that rural communities can offer” and, in some cases, “refugees can readily access services in rural communities that have become stretched in the cities.” Additionally, rural and smaller places can offer newcomers the opportunity to own a house and have a garden, which are often unattainable in Canada's largest cities (Dennler, 2022; Haugen, 2022; Hyndman, 2022).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This review demonstrates that although governments are continuing to invest in regionalization and dispersal policies, and newcomers are increasingly settling outside of Canada's largest urban centres, government funding for settlement services and infrastructure in these spaces is lacking, as is research on the benefits, challenges, opportunities, and realities of immigration in smaller and rural places, particularly across more rural and northern parts of the country. Moving forward, this review presents significant opportunities for future research and policy change.

While the studies included in this review address the benefits and challenges of immigration in rural and smaller places across various themes, the systemic policy change needed to address these issues will require recognizing that these barriers are part of the historical, place-based economic and social context in which rural communities in Canada are situated. The literature documents a number of challenges related to immigration in rural and smaller places, particularly a lack of settlement services, employment and education opportunities, welcoming spaces, public services, and infrastructure. Despite these challenges, the literature also identifies many benefits of living rurally, which can include affordability, increased space, access to available services, and a sense of community, among others. The heterogeneity of these findings demonstrates the diversity of rural Canada, and that the opportunities and challenges present in these spaces can differ across various factors including, but not limited to, community size and diversity, provincial context, distance from urban centres, and economic opportunities. Additionally, some of the barriers identified in the literature may be amplified in rural places, but are representative of challenges across urban and rural spaces. For example, prejudice and discrimination towards immigrants is an issue across the country that impacts a newcomer's sense of belonging, welcome, and equality, and their access to various services (Agyekum et al., 2021; Esses, 2021; Haugen et al., 2020). While there are specific challenges in rural spaces regarding a lack of anonymity and small community size (Haugen, 2023; Kyriakides et al., 2020), ensuring that newcomers are welcomed into Canadian communities is a broader issue in Canadian society as a whole.

Overall, the barriers and challenges identified in the literature largely speak to: (1) the lack of cultural and ethnic diversity in rural places relative to urban places; (2) the distance of rural places from urban centres where amenities and services are overwhelmingly located; and (3) the lower population density in rural places, which results in fewer services and less government funding flowing to these communities. While some of these barriers cannot be changed, such as the geographic distance of rural places from large urban centres, others can and should be improved, especially as regionalization and dispersal policies continue to be prioritized in Canadian immigration policy.

Systemic change will require not only improving our knowledge of the context, challenges, and opportunities of settlement and integration in the most rural and smallest communities, but also recognizing that Canadian public policy is biased towards urban centres, which negatively impacts newcomers and all rural residents. Importantly, rural and smaller municipalities do not often have the fiscal capacity to improve public infrastructure and increase service provision in their communities (Haugen et al., 2023). Thus, facilitating successful settlement across rural Canada will require that public policy recognize the diversity of smaller places and the inherent challenges that these places face. Haugen et al. (2023, p. 115) contend that:

There are distinct challenges and realities associated with life in rural places, and simply implementing urban policies in rural places, through a ‘one-size fits all approach’ will not often work. Rather, facilitating successful resettlement in rural places through

policy making requires adopting a rural lens and potentially partnering with rural experts, organizations, and researchers to advise on the rural implications of policies designed by, largely, urban-based policymakers.

Addressing the knowledge gaps presented by this review, especially regarding immigration in the most rural and northern parts of Canada, and the adoption of a rural lens in Canadian policy making, offers important opportunities for future research and the improvement of settlement outcomes for newcomers in rural and smaller places.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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