Immigration in the New Rural Economy[1]

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The recently published 2006 Census results appear to support the conclusion that rural Canada is in trouble. Population in rural and small towns grew by only 1% between 2001 and 2006 (well below the national average of 5.4%), urbanization continues with less than 20% of our population living in places with a population of 10,000 or less, and what growth does occur is most often found in rural places with proximity to urban centres (Statistics Canada 2007a).[2]

In the past, we have relied on immigration to deal with such problems. When the Canadian government needed workers to build our major cities, it turned to Europe and the United Kingdom; when the government decided to increase the population in the West, it created major incentives to bring Northern Europeans to the prairies. In both formal and informal ways, immigration has been a primary strategy for population growth and allocation.

It no longer seems to work for rural growth, however. Immigrants, like the Canadian population in general, seem to prefer urban over rural centres (Bollman et al.; Bruce) (Beshiri and Alfred 2002). Even those who locate initially in rural areas appear to drift to urban ones within a few years (Houle). Only in rare circumstances do we see instances where immigration is sufficient to create the institutional capacity and migration streams that suggest more sustainable growth (Silvius and Annis).

It is therefore timely that the Metropolis Project should turn its attention to the issue of rural immigration. If we are to formulate appropriate policy and program responses, we must first seek to understand the dynamics driving the population changes, identify the bases for immigrants' choices, and explore the nature of their experiences upon arrival. These are within the domains of research and practice – and they are the primary objectives of this edition of *Our Diverse Cities*.

Populating rural spaces

To many, it is not self-evident that rural places need more population. If people choose to move to the cities, they ask, why must the government be concerned? If structural changes encourage this movement, why must we change those structures? From these points of view, population growth initiatives arising among rural people make sense if they wish to retain their lifestyle, but the intervention and support of governments should not be expected since the majority of the population lives in urban regions.

This position overlooks the many ways in which rural and urban people and places are inter-dependent, however. Rural areas provide the commodities that give us a positive balance of trade, they hold the sources of our water, the location of recreational and natural amenities to which we turn to be refreshed, they contain much of our biodiversity, they process most of the urban pollution, and they contain a large part of our social and cultural heritage. Without the people to extract, process, and transport those commodities, safeguard those amenities, and sustain our heritage, we would all be worse off – rural and urban alike.

Maintaining an adequate population base has become a challenge in many places, however, since the number of people required for commodity production has dropped significantly with economic and technological developments (Bollman et al.). The expansion of international competition has exacerbated this problem so that

[2] Centres with more than 30% commuters to nearby urban centres show 4.7% growth (Statistics Canada 2007b).

net incomes have declined below the level where they can sustain family or community integrity. In order to survive, for example, most farm households must include off-farm income (Keith 2003). As a result, we find that the availability of non-primary sector employment has become an essential ingredient to most primary production and the maintenance of relatively diversified rural communities an important contributor to successful commodity production. For this, an adequate level of population is required to justify and support the commercial, educational, health and other services on which commodity and industrial production depend (Collins).

Bollman et al. set the scene for the population dynamics in rural areas. They describe how the rural Canadian population is growing, but not as fast as the urban population. They point out how it is the primary sector that has felt the major effects of population loss, while the manufacturing sector in rural areas remains relatively strong, and they identify the important role of urban-adjacency for settlement patterns – as young families and retirees move to rural communities within commuting distance of urban centres.

Within these general patterns, considerable diversity exists, however. In a study of demographic trends, Mwansa and Bollman (2005) indicate that 33% of the rural communities in their study show consistent population growth over the 1981 to 2001 period. Even 24% of rural non-metro-adjacent communities showed such growth. Clemenson and Pitblado document important exceptions to the rural-urban migration trends – both in terms of time period and age range. This theme of "exceptions within the general trends" is picked up by many of the authors in this volume – providing an important guide in the search for solutions. It is within this context that we examine rural immigration.

Rural immigration
Immigration to rural areas appears subject to the same forces driving internal demographic trends (Houle; Rose and Desmarais). Most immigrants go to urban centres or soon move there if their initial destinations were rural (Houle). As with urban immigrants, rural immigrants have higher levels of education and are more likely to be employed than non-immigrants in their respective locations (Beshiri and Alfred 2002; Beshiri 2005) although both of these levels are lower than

those who settled in urban regions (Bollman, et al.) also show how the patterns of immigration have changed since 1996 – creating new conditions for recruitment and retention.

Employment opportunities, social support, language, amenities, and community response continue to provide the key factors influencing both recruitment and retention of immigrants (Bollman et al.; Bruce; Houle; Long and Amaya). Rural immigration reflects these forces – often creating particular challenges (Reimer et al.). Since employment is a key element in both immigration policy and practice, for example, it is little wonder that rural employment challenges go hand in hand with immigration ones (Collins).

In spite of facing many of the same forces as urban regions, there are several key differences that make rural immigration issues and challenges special, however. We will outline some of them below in terms of four characteristics distinguishing rural and urban places. In many cases, these characteristics place rural areas at a disadvantage when policies are formulated with urban places in mind and they should therefore get special attention for both research and program implementation.

Distance and density
Rural communities and people are basically defined in terms of their distance from each other and from major population centres (du Plessis et al. 2001). They are equally characterized by lower densities both across communities and within them. As a result, they do not have the advantages of agglomeration economies that often drive the urbanization process. From an immigration perspective, distance and density are in turn likely to affect the awareness, services, institutional completeness,[3] diversity, and network structures that function to attract and retain immigrants (Steinbach; Reimer et al.).

Being farther from the centres of economic, social, and political power, the knowledge of rural places is less likely to be available or accurate for potential immigrants. This will work in both directions – representations of rural opportunities are less likely to be included in immigrant recruitment programs and potential immigrants are less likely to request information related to rural areas and issues (Long and Amaya; Sorenson; Steinbach). Under these conditions,

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[3] "Institutional completeness" is the extent to which an ethnic group can meet the service needs of its community.

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proactive initiatives are necessary to offset this disadvantage.

Long distances and low densities also mean that the extent and range of social and institutional services are likely to be relatively low in rural areas (Halseth and Ryser 2006). We know that the availability of services is an important factor in the selection of destination for all types of migrants (Mills and Legault; Zehtab-Martin and Beesley). In addition, the lower population densities mean that the institutional completeness of particular immigrant groups is likely to be very weak – thereby reducing their attractiveness and retaining power. The importance of this type of characteristic is reinforced by several of the examples in the following readings where specific actions and programs have been developed to build such completeness – often with dramatic results (Kaache; Silvias and Annis; Steinbach).

Distance and density will also act to weaken the social networks that are so important to immigration (Portes 1997; Potter 1999). As Bollman et al. point out, while the price of transporting goods and information is declining, the price of transporting people is not. For immigrants, however, the latter is one of the most important factors – partly for their own movement, but more important for the establishment of networks supporting such movement. Moving from one location to another is a stressful and risky activity even where short distances are involved. International relocation creates even greater risks, so the process of visioning, planning, and moving are seldom taken without the level of trust and confidence being substantial. Building this trust is easiest and most effective within face-to-face exchanges – thus requiring the movement of people, often over a long period of time. Tourism, family gatherings, business, and cultural events often provide the venues for such exchanges, but their cost increases dramatically when rural travel is included. Once again, the opportunities for increasing knowledge, confidence, and trust are therefore reduced (Steinbach).

Economic structures

Rural places are also relatively unique by virtue of their economic structure. In Canada, they are rooted in commodity production – and although there has been a shift in the way we have extracted them, our trade in natural resources remains an overwhelming feature of rural places (Clemenson and Pitblado). This means that the employment, skill, and sectoral features of rural areas remain special in many respects (Leach; Sorensen) (Beshiri 2001; Beshiri and Alfred 2002). Even with the increase in the importance in manufacturing and service industries, the demands and nature of rural labour remain different than the urban environment. In response, we find that the demands on immigration are also different – with a higher proportion of primary-sector workers, selective demand for high skilled jobs, and low demands for professional employment (Bollman et al.; Long and Amaya; Sorensen). The employment, income, and certification challenges that affect all recent immigrants will have particular implications for rural places (Reitz 2005). Immigration programs must therefore take into account these special characteristics if they are to be successful.

Amenities

Rural places are also often distinguished by their amenities – usually in the form of natural resources. Mountains, lakes, rivers, beaches, and "wide open spaces" are only some of the many attractions for national and international visitors alike. They also provide potential destination attractions for immigrants – but most likely on a highly selective basis (Bruce; Silvius and Annis; Simard; Sorenson). Youth may seek the snow

Analysis of migration, media representations, and networks will therefore be required if we are to identify the particular challenges and opportunities faced by rural people, communities, and immigrants. We need to document the general trends and patterns, of course, but the literature here suggests that particular attention should be paid to regional and local variation – especially in a longitudinal manner.

and adventure of the mountains while young retirees move to the quiet of the lakes and rivers, for example. The process for destination selection based on amenities is most likely to be different than migrants seeking work or safety. Although we have several anecdotal tales of foreign purchase of retirement and amenity locations in rural areas, systematic research regarding the details is hard to find. Tourism, seasonal migration and marketing brochures will most likely play an important role in this process.

Heritage and identity

Finally, rural places can be distinguished from urban by the heritage, identity and related infrastructure that they contain. Many urban residents have rural roots – through family, employment, or experience. Our media, businesses and politicians make considerable use of this legacy – often arguing that the institutional and value foundations of our nation are rooted in elements of our rural heritage and nostalgia. In spite of the distortions and self-serving nature of many of these representations, they point to an importance of place which is hard to deny. By virtue of the fact that people grew up "here" – and struggled to create the homes, businesses and institutions that make each place unique, they contain significant value – especially for those with family or experiential connections (Ouattara and Tranchant). In many cases, it is the particularities of the place that maintain their social and personal relations – much as a micro-climate favours a particular type of biological diversity. The particular place and the social relations it supports, therefore, can serve as a destination to which potential immigration may flow (Nurse).

Heritage and identity dynamics can also form the basis for resistance to immigration, however (Vatz Laaroussi). Amor provides examples of the way in which social homogeneity may act as an obstacle to social inclusion of "strangers". Reimer et al. show how such ethnic and religious homogeneity may also provide immigration opportunities for local places (cf. also Bruce; Lane; Silvius and Annis). What is unclear are the conditions under which these opportunities can emerge. Although research on such issues is well advanced within an urban context, the special conditions and dynamics in rural places remains underdeveloped.

Immigration policies, action and research

The community development literature makes clear that successful initiatives for change emerge from a combination of local action, collaboration and supportive policy (Mills and Legault; Silvius and Annis) (Baker 1994). This is useful advice since each rural area provides different combinations of the key factors outlined above – creating variation in attractiveness, policy and opportunities for local action. However, smaller communities often lack the capacity to investigate, initiate programs and manage the demands of immigration, compounding the spiral of population decline (Moussa-Guene; Vatz Laaroussi). Their relative cultural and social homogeneity can often exacerbate this condition, making the introduction of diversity susceptible to misunderstanding and prejudice. Under these conditions, the support of flexible regional programs and organizations becomes critical (Leach et al.; Rose and Desmarais).

Several of the following articles document initiatives of this nature and in the process point to opportunities for rural immigration that would otherwise be neglected. Mentoring programs (Kaache; Raache; Yorn and Ouellet), targeted recruitment (Bruce; Silvius and Annis), migrant workers programs (Ferguson; Long and Amaya; Preibisch), and community support initiatives (Allen and Troestler; Lopez; Nolin and McCallum; Ouattara and Tranchant; Silvius and Annis), are some of the examples discussed in the articles below – all promising programs reflecting the social and institutional innovation which has always been a part of our rural history (Radford).

The authors remind us that these initiatives are all intimately connected to the policy regimes in which they operate. The description of the Manitoba and Quebec initiatives reported by the authors make clear that such policies can alter the general trends in significant ways. We need to explore the processes that make this possible.

Canada provides a useful opportunity for learning about the importance of such policies and programs since we have considerable variation across the country. Most of them are based on employment as the key element in those policies (Radford), but there is sufficient variation in the policy and local responses to provide insights regarding the important role of the social and institutional dimensions involved (Long and Amaya; Nolin and McCallum; Radford). Collins reminds us that there is much to be learned from international comparisons as well – particularly with the Australian experience since we share so many similarities.

Considerable research is required. Distance and density will continue to play an important role in rural opportunities even as their impacts change through technological, economic, social and political processes. Analysis of migration, media representations and networks will therefore be required if we are to identify the particular challenges and opportunities faced by rural people, communities and immigrants. We need to document the general trends and patterns, of course, but the literature here suggests that particular attention should be paid to regional and local variation – especially in a longitudinal manner. Comparison among regions will allow us to separate various effects and at the same time give us basic material for adjusting programs to regional characteristics. Local examples, case studies and comparisons are also necessary in order to understand the ways in which communities identify potential immigrants, reorganize themselves for their integration, and minimize social exclusion in the process.

Research on the characteristics of rural economies, amenities, and heritage is also required – including how they are represented to potential immigrants. The manufacturing sector seems particularly strategic for the future, but this general finding needs to be adapted to different regional and local assets. Research regarding the interdependence of the various economic sectors, amenities, and heritage at the local level will go a long way to facilitating good programs and strategies.

We do not know a great deal about the conditions under which the social inclusion of immigrants thrives in rural communities. Most of this type of research has taken place in urban centres where the larger population provides greater opportunity for individual and institutional diversity and the range of services can greatly increase the capacity of different ethnic, cultural, and language groups to co-exist. In Canada, most of our rural research efforts have been limited to the investigation of language differences in small towns – most often focused on our two official languages (Jackson 1975). The insights from this work now need to be extended to other language and cultural groups in anticipation of the policies that can make immigration to rural areas a more general occurrence.

As in the past, immigration will be a crucial element of Canadian strength and quality of life in the future. We have already demonstrated the many ways in which the Canadian economy, social organizations and cultural richness have flourished under the mix of skills, intelligence and efforts of a strong immigration program. If it is to continue we must direct our energy and resources to expanding beyond the boundaries of our major cities. We now have the capacity to identify and document the implications of each of the options. What we need are the resources and effort to gather the data and conduct the analysis.

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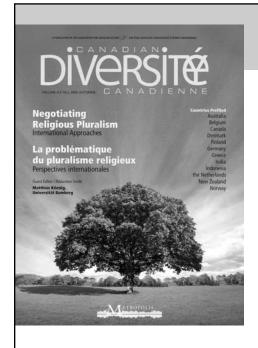
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