

By Maria Babbage
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Seeking work and the support of close-knit ethnic communities, "virtually all" of the nearly two million immigrants who arrived in Canada during the 1990s settled in one of the country's 27 major cities, Statistics Canada reported last Wednesday.

Almost three-quarters of Canada's immigrants settled in the country's three largest cities -- Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver -- compared to 58% a decade earlier, the study found.

The pattern of immigration is contributing to what one expert calls a "hyper-urbanized" Canadian society, which in turn is putting additional pressure on already deteriorating infrastructure in the cities.

Hyper-urbanized society

"It's not just newcomers that look at Canada and say, 'Gee, I think the place I want to be is the big metropolitan areas.' Canadian-born people are doing that as well," says Myer Siemiatycki, director of Ryerson University's graduate program in immigration and settlement studies in Toronto.

"So there are much more complex economic and social and -- to some degree, cultural -- factors playing themselves out that are increasingly tilting Canada to what I would almost call not only an urbanized society, but a hyper-urbanized society."

The study, based primarily on data from 2001, indicates that the changing sources of Canadian immigration may account for this trend.

Immigrants from East and South Asia have historically settled in Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver, the study noted, and immigrants from these regions have accounted for an increasing share of all new arrivals in Canada.

They also stay there, the study found. Most immigrants remain in the same city they've settled in, as do most of their Canadian-born children.

"Certainly ties with social networks, family and friends and so on and the presence of existing ethnic communities within urban areas is an important factor in deciding where to live," says Grant Schellenberg, the study's author.

All three cities are well-known internationally, he adds, which may also be a factor.

Immigrants move to major cities because they believe it will make it easier to find work, says Gerd Damitz, president of the Association of Immigration Counsel of Canada, a non-profit organization that represents Canadian immigration practitioners.

"It's a big step for somebody . . . to immigrate to a new country, it's like starting a new life," said Damitz, who immigrated to Canada from Germany in 1990.

"So they want to be as secure as possible, and the most important fact is where to find a job."

But employers want Canadian work experience, which makes the job hunt frustrating for many immigrants, he adds.

The study noted that even though immigrants who move to large cities tend to be better educated, they were much more likely to work for low wages or be unemployed, and were less likely to earn higher wages than their natural-born counterparts.

For example, recent immigrants in Edmonton had an employment rate of 76.1%, compared with 84% for those born in Canada. Their unemployment rate was 5.9%, compared to 4.1% for Canadian-born workers.

Frustration

In addition, immigrant men who arrived in Canada between 1995 and 1999 earned 60% less than comparable Canadian-born workers, according to the report.

"They find out after sending 100 resumes and didn't hear back from even one," said Damitz. "Sure, there's frustration."

Immigrants also tended to be better educated than native-born Canadians, but in almost every urban region, a higher proportion of recent immigrants were employed in jobs with lower skill requirements than Canada-born employees. Many with university degrees were more likely to work jobs that required no formal education than their natural-born counterparts, the study said.

For example, 31% of recent immigrants in Vancouver with a university degree were employed in low-skill jobs, compared to only 13% of Canadian-born graduates.

The influx of immigrants to Canada's major cities will increasingly tax services like public transit, the report suggests.

In Montreal, 48% of recent immigrants used public transportation to get to work, compared to 20% among Canadian-born workers.

Municipalities have been eyeing billions collected by the federal government in gas tax revenues to repair much-neglected infrastructure, such as water systems, bridges and roads.

But as of July, only five provinces -- Ontario, Nova Scotia, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia -- had signalled that they wanted to participate in the promised \$4 billion to \$5 billion gas tax revenue agreement, money federal ministers say would be distributed by population.

30-year plan

Citing massive growth, Ontario unveiled a preliminary 30-year plan to control urban sprawl in its so-called Golden Horseshoe area around Toronto in July.

Officials estimated the arrival of an additional four million people over the next three decades would cost taxpayers more than \$100 billion.

Siemiatycki says a number of studies have shown that the 1990s were a particularly difficult time for immigrants.

"We are accepting ever more educated and labour-market experienced immigrants, and once they arrive, they're having more and more difficulties," he says.

"We're almost creating a sort of polarization in many of our cities."

Among the study's other findings:

- Immigrants between the ages of 25 and 54 were more likely to attend school than Canadian-born citizens.
- About one-quarter of all children up to the age of 17 in Toronto and Vancouver were recent immigrants, or born in Canada to parents who were recent immigrants in 2001. Most lived in a home where a language other than English or French was spoken.
- Under one-third of new immigrants took at least one course in either

English or French within six months of arriving in Canada.

- In most urban centres, immigrants were at least twice as likely than

Canadian-born workers to earn less than \$20,000 a year. They were much less likely to earn more than \$100,000 a year.