

RACISM AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION AS BARRIERS TO IMMIGRANT RETENTION IN RURAL ALBERTA

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Executive Summary

Alberta's Rural Renewal Stream was developed to support rural immigration by helping communities recruit skilled newcomers to address labour shortages and stimulate local economic growth. While the program has improved recruitment opportunities, it gives limited attention to the social conditions that influence whether immigrants remain in rural communities over the long term. Racism, social exclusion, inadequate settlement infrastructure, and limited access to ethnocultural and religious supports continue to weaken newcomers' sense of belonging and contribute to outmigration toward urban centres.

Between 2018 and 2023, immigrant retention rates in rural Alberta declined from **80.1% to 55.2%** (excluding Calgary, Edmonton, Red Deer, and Lethbridge) (Statistics Canada, 2025a). Although rural immigration is promoted as a strategy for economic development and population growth, many newcomers continue to relocate to urban centres where services, cultural communities, and social supports are more accessible.

This policy brief argues that economic recruitment strategies alone are insufficient to ensure long-term immigrant retention in rural Alberta. The Alberta government can strengthen immigrant integration and retention by expanding settlement services, increasing community accountability for inclusion initiatives, and strengthening anti-racism supports in rural communities.

Context

The immigrant population in rural Alberta has declined significantly over the last five years. Although immigrant retention rates in rural Alberta remain above 50%, the downward trend raises concerns about the long-term sustainability of rural immigration strategies. Immigration levels across Canada also declined in recent years (Government of Canada, 2023), further intensifying labour shortages in rural communities that already face limited infrastructure and population decline.

The Rural Renewal Stream allows designated rural communities to endorse qualified applicants with valid job offers from Alberta employers under the Alberta Advantage Immigration Program.

The Rural Renewal Stream allows designated rural communities to endorse qualified applicants with valid job offers from Alberta employers under the Alberta Advantage Immigration Program. The stream aims to address labour shortages and support economic growth in rural areas. However, while the policy supports recruitment, it does not sufficiently address long-term integration and retention challenges.

Retention rates refer to the percentage of immigrant tax filers who continue to reside in the same province or territory five years after admission (Statistics Canada, 2025b). According to Statistics Canada (2019), rural areas are communities with populations under 1,000 people or population densities below 400 persons per square kilometre outside Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs).

Immigrant retention is essential for rural economic sustainability, population growth, and community development. However, when communities lack adequate settlement infrastructure, cultural supports, and inclusive environments, many immigrants relocate to urban centres where they experience greater access to services and social networks.



Background and Evidence

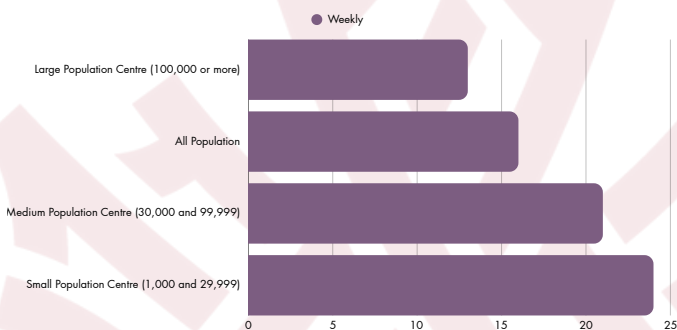
Research consistently shows that social inclusion and belonging strongly influence immigrants' decisions to remain in rural communities (Esses & Carter, 2019). Access to ethnocultural networks, religious institutions, and culturally responsive services contributes significantly to long-term settlement outcomes.

Statistics Canada (2025a) reported that immigrant retention rates in rural Alberta declined from 80.1% in 2018 to 55.2% in 2023 for immigrants with prior temporary resident experience. Similarly, immigrants who entered Canada directly without prior temporary status experienced a decline in retention rates from 79.6% to 55.7% during the same period.

Immigrant retention rates in rural Alberta declined from 80.1% in 2018 to 55.2% in 2023 for immigrants with prior temporary resident experience.

In addition to limited settlement supports, racism and discrimination continue to affect immigrant experiences in rural Alberta. Figure 1 demonstrates that hate crimes and hate-related incidents occur more frequently in smaller population centres than in larger urban areas (Alberta Hate and Bias Crime and Incidents Committee, 2023). Research from the Alberta Hate and Bias Crime and Incidents Committee (2023) found that hate crimes occurred weekly in 24% of cases in small population centres compared to 13% in larger centres.

Figure 1. Hate Crime and Incidents between 2019 to 2022



Adapted from Victimized community perceptions about hate crimes and incidents in Alberta: A 2019-2022 analysis, 2023.

Recent incidents in Brooks, Alberta, where white supremacist and anti-immigrant graffiti appeared on public property, further demonstrate the persistence of racism in some rural communities (Franklin, 2025). Experiences of discrimination, social isolation, and limited minority representation can negatively affect immigrants' sense of belonging and increase onward migration to urban centres.

Policy Analysis

The Rural Renewal Stream effectively addresses labour shortages and supports economic growth in rural Alberta. However, the program focuses primarily on economic recruitment rather than long-term social integration. While communities receive grants to support settlement initiatives, there are significant differences in local capacity, available services, and community readiness.

Many rural communities lack adequate settlement infrastructure, mental health supports, public transportation, ethnocultural organizations, and anti-racism initiatives. As a result, newcomers may experience social isolation and exclusion despite securing employment.

Research also suggests that rural populations are often less diverse and composed primarily of non-immigrant families (Finlay, 2022). In communities with limited visible minority representation, immigrants may struggle to establish social connections or access culturally familiar supports. Consequently, many immigrants relocate to urban centres where they can access larger ethnocultural communities and more inclusive social environments.

Many rural communities lack adequate settlement infrastructure, mental health supports, public transportation, ethnocultural organizations, and anti-racism initiatives.

Racism further undermines immigrant retention. Experiences of workplace discrimination, microaggressions, and exclusion can create unsafe or unwelcoming environments for newcomers. Without adequate institutional and community support, these experiences contribute to lower retention rates.

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Current policy approaches emphasize economic integration but do not sufficiently address social belonging and inclusion. A more comprehensive approach to immigrant retention must combine labour market integration with community-based social supports and anti-racism initiatives.



Policy Recommendations

1. Expand Settlement Services in Rural Communities

The Alberta government should increase funding for rural settlement services through the Family and Community Support Services (FCSS) program. Funding should support language services, housing assistance, employment navigation, and culturally responsive programming.

2. Strengthen Anti-Racism and Inclusion Initiatives

Rural municipalities should implement anti-racism education initiatives, workplace inclusion training, and community awareness campaigns and local reporting mechanisms for discrimination and hate-related incidents to strengthen social cohesion and improve immigrants' sense of belonging.

3. Support Ethnocultural and Community Networks

Provincial funding should support the development of ethnocultural organizations, newcomer community hubs, and multicultural programming in rural Alberta to reduce social isolation and encourage long-term settlement.

4. Improve Accountability for Community Integration Outcomes

Communities participating in the Rural Renewal Stream should demonstrate measurable integration supports, including settlement planning, anti-discrimination policies, and access to newcomer services.

5. Increase Access to Mental Health Supports

Immigrants experiencing racism, discrimination, and social exclusion should have access to culturally responsive mental health supports and counselling services in rural communities.

6. Develop Rural Community Readiness Standards

The Alberta government should establish community readiness standards for municipalities participating in the Rural Renewal Stream. These standards should include minimum expectations for settlement services, inclusion planning, transportation access, anti-racism initiatives, and newcomer support infrastructure. Establishing consistent readiness standards would help reduce disparities in local capacity and strengthen long-term immigrant retention outcomes across rural communities.

Conclusion

Alberta's Rural Renewal Stream has strong potential to address labour shortages and support economic development in rural communities. However, recruitment alone is insufficient to ensure long-term immigrant retention. Racism, social exclusion, and inadequate settlement infrastructure continue to influence immigrants' decisions to relocate to urban centres.

Long-term retention depends not only on employment opportunities but also on immigrants' ability to develop a sense of belonging and community connection.

Long-term retention depends not only on employment opportunities but also on immigrants' ability to develop a sense of belonging and community connection. Expanding settlement supports, strengthening anti-racism initiatives, and improving access to ethnocultural networks can significantly improve immigrant integration and retention in rural Alberta.

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About the Author

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