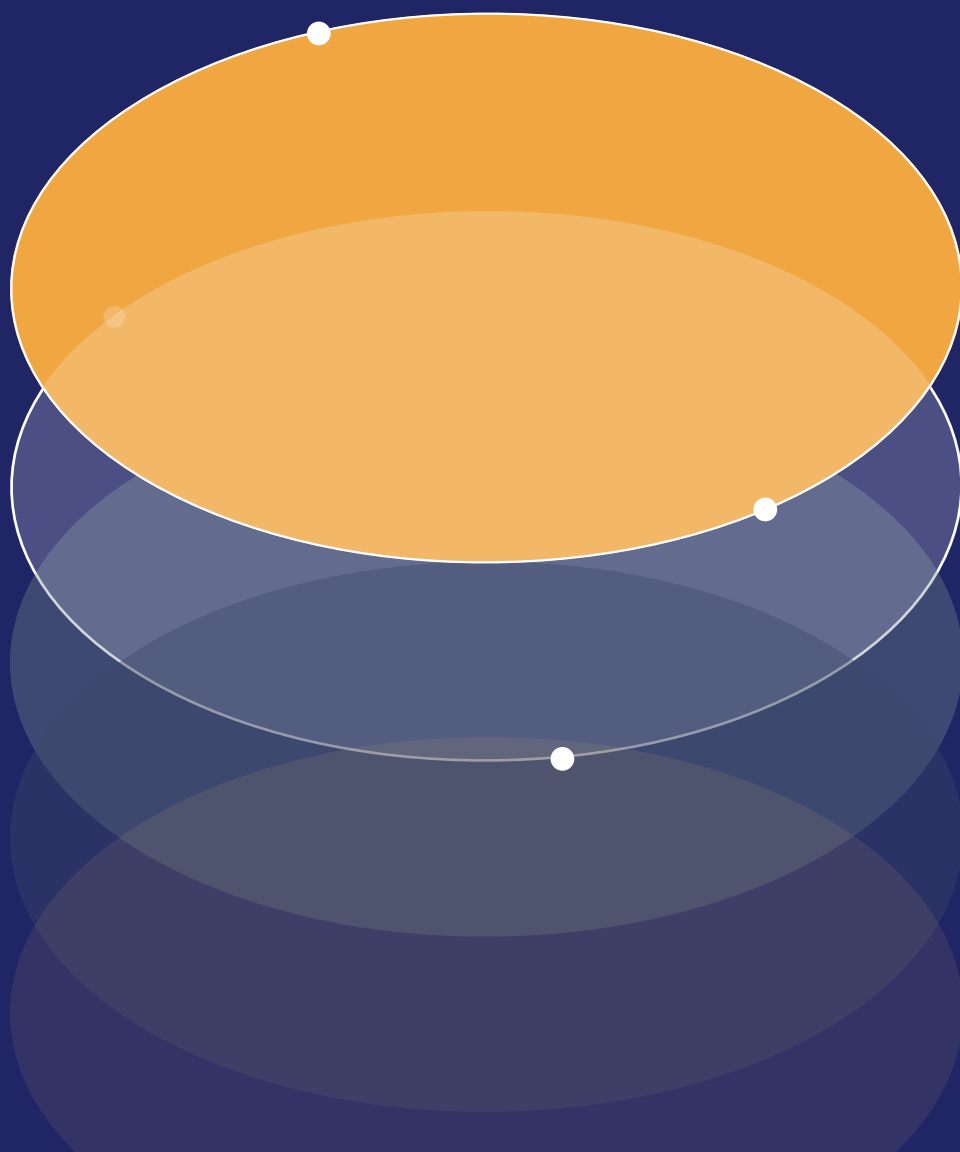


The impact of immigration on prosperity in Canada

Key Insight Report #3

June 2022



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About Century Initiative

Century Initiative is a national, non-partisan charity with a mission to enhance Canada's long-term prosperity, resiliency and global influence by responsibly growing the population of Canada to 100 million by 2100. Century Initiative delivers its mission by leading, enabling and partnering on initiatives that support long-term thinking and planning in immigration, urban development, employment and entrepreneurship, early childhood supports, and education.



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Immigration and prosperity

In Canada, immigration is a defining feature of our economic strategy. Immigration drives 82% of Canada's population growth, and over the next five years, will account for 100% of Canada's net labour force growth.¹

Whether that is a good strategy is the focus of debate. Even among those who support immigration, some raise concerns that high levels of immigration will leave the average resident poorer. Others maintain that without considerable population growth through immigration, Canada is at risk of a stagnating economy that trails its peers.

So what do we know about the relationship between immigration and economic prosperity?

On balance, the evidence suggests that immigration is good for the economy, or at the very least has a neutral impact. More importantly, though, the context matters.

Mostly, it depends on policy choices: how immigrants are selected, the economic context when immigrants arrive, and how immigration policy and settlement services are designed.² It also depends very much on who, when and where – and how you measure impact.

Much of the academic research is not always relevant to Canada's distinct context. For example, most immigration to Canada is planned and managed with selection processes, which is not always the case for other countries. Similarly, plenty of research looks at relatively short-term impacts of immigration, but the available evidence suggests that the benefits of immigration are most significant in the long-term.³

Century Initiative is focused on responsibly increasing Canada's population to 100 million by 2100. But the goal is not to be bigger for the sake of size, it is to be better off. That is why Century Initiative developed the [Scorecard on Canada's Growth and Prosperity](#) to assess how Canada is performing across 38 indicators in six focus areas that, taken together, indicate whether Canada is well-positioned to grow.⁴

This Key Insight paper builds on the Scorecard by looking at the evidence on how immigration affects prosperity and what that means for policy choices in Canada. That body of research focuses on three main dimensions of economic prosperity:⁵

- performance of the economy as a whole (e.g., GDP per capita);
- outcomes in the labour market; and
- the impact on public finances.

This report highlights theories, research, and debates around each of these dimensions. It also looks at what these

measures miss and what we know about the relationship between immigration and other pressing policy concerns, like housing affordability. Finally, the report highlights implications for policy, because to position Canada for growth that benefits all of our residents for the long-term, we need policies and supports that ensure newcomers are in a position to contribute their talents and help build our future, just as previous generations of arrivals shaped our present.

The impact of immigration on overall economic performance

The broadest way of looking at the relationship between immigration and prosperity is to look at the level of economic activity across the economy. Growing our population through immigration contributes to a larger Gross Domestic Product (GDP). But that alone does not tell us about prosperity for the average citizen – it is more useful to look at GDP per capita, which looks at the economic activity per person.⁶ If GDP shows us the size of the economic pie available, GDP per capita shows whether the average slice is getting larger or smaller as that pie grows.

Growth in GDP per capita is an important priority for Canada. While Canada is in the middle of the pack among OECD countries, we are losing ground compared to the US: Canada's GDP per capita fell from about \$47,000 (current USD) in 2008 to just over \$43,000 in 2020.⁷ Over the same period, the United States' GDP per capita grew by about 30%, from \$48,000 to \$63,000.⁸

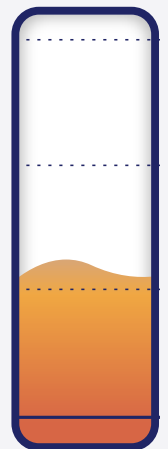
Indicator

GDP per capita

Direction Canada is Trending

Needs Attention

GDP per capita reflects total economic output per person and is an important measure of Canada's overall prosperity, living standards, and economic well-being. Fully leveraging the talent and skills of immigrants in the labour market is one important path to improving GDP per capita in Canada.



What the evidence says overall

International studies of advanced economies often show an increase in immigration to be associated with a modest increase in GDP per capita. Research by the IMF suggests that "Immigration significantly increases GDP per capita in advanced economies."⁹ A study of OECD countries found that increases in immigration lead to proportionate but small increases in GDP per capita.¹⁰ Other research on 22 OECD

countries found a positive relationship between immigration and GDP per capita.¹¹ Still, research on the topic is not unanimous that GDP per capita grows with immigration.¹²

In part, this is because most of the research about immigration and prosperity focuses on the short-term. But the long-term may be where the most significant impacts lie. In Canada we know that the children of immigrants (and immigrant children¹³) often fare well,¹⁴ which suggests another long-term benefit of immigration, but there is little data on the net impact of second- and third-generation arrivals on GDP per capita in Canada.¹⁵

While there is considerable international research, the effects of immigration on GDP per capita in Canada have not been studied heavily. In one study, the OECD found that a 1%-point increase in migration leads to a 0.19% increase in GDP per capita in Canada.¹⁶ Other research suggests small negative effects on GDP per capita in Canada,¹⁷ but with important caveats. For example, one paper finds that while immigrants to Canada might slightly decrease GDP per capita in the long run, they actually increase GDP per capita of the non-immigrant population.¹⁸ Another paper finds that even though high-skilled immigration boosts Canadian productivity, it slightly decreases GDP per capita in the short run because many high-skilled immigrants spend time in postsecondary education in the years after arrival — in part to overcome regulatory barriers to working in their fields.¹⁹

How immigration contributes to overall economic prosperity

Immigration can lead to GDP per capita growth through a few different pathways. One is through increased productivity. Immigrants have been shown to boost productivity,²⁰ including in studies of Canadian firms.²¹ Having a deeper talent pool to draw from allows for better matches between workers and their skills and the tasks for which they are hired.²² Immigrants may also introduce new ideas and approaches that can increase productivity.²³

Another pathway is through demographics. The average immigrant is younger than the average Canadian and more likely to be in or entering their prime years in the labour force.²⁴ This is essential in the face of an aging population: 18% of Canadians are 65 or older²⁵ and Canada's dependency ratio — the number of seniors and youth relative to the number of working-age people — has grown. Immigration is expected to account for all of Canada's labour force growth for the foreseeable future.²⁶ This makes immigration an essential source of long-term labour force growth. It also applies to business owners, as approximately seven in ten private business owners in Canada are looking for someone to take over their businesses in the next decade²⁷ and only about one-third of family-owned businesses in Canada have succession plans in place.²⁸

Immigrants also contribute to more innovative economies, which leads to greater prosperity. The evidence on this link is discussed in greater detail in Century Initiative's report [Driving innovation and entrepreneurship in Canada: The benefits of immigration](#).²⁹ US research suggests that immigrants enhance innovation largely because they disproportionately hold STEM degrees.³⁰ They can also produce 'spill-over' effects — meaning they make non-immigrants more innovative too.³¹ Immigrants in Canada are more likely to implement innovations in their businesses.³² They also contribute to a modest increase in the development of patents, though to a lesser degree than in the United States.³³

Picking up your life and starting over in a new country is an inherently entrepreneurial choice, so it's no surprise that newcomers disproportionately create new economic opportunities. In Canada, immigrants represent 22% of the population but 33% of business owners with paid staff.³⁴ Immigration to Canada has also been shown to increase international trade, because immigrants improve trade relations with their countries of origin.³⁵ Similarly, diaspora networks can play an important role in growing international trade and transferring knowledge.³⁶ High-skilled immigration can also increase foreign direct investment.³⁷

What can limit immigration's potential benefits for prosperity?

Still, there are factors that can mitigate the positive effects of immigration on GDP per capita, or even lead to negative effects. For example, immigrants may send remittances to their country of origin, benefitting that country but reducing economic activity in Canada.³⁸ Because immigrants often face barriers in the labour market, their skills are under-utilized and the economy does not benefit from their full potential.³⁹ While this can happen due to poor credential recognition, it can also be the result of discrimination or

Indicator

Productivity

Direction Canada is Trending

Falling behind

As Canada's population ages, and the share of the working age population shrinks, enhancing productivity is key to maintaining economic growth. Productivity is an important driver of attractiveness for investment and global competitiveness.



immigrants' skills not being well-suited to the Canadian labour market.⁴⁰ Thoughtful selection criteria and good supports for immigrants are essential to ensuring that immigration benefits the economy.

What these measures miss

GDP per capita says a lot more than just GDP does. But it still does not tell us if the average — or the majority — of Canadians are better off. By their nature, GDP and GDP per capita overlook inequality questions and societies that see highly unequal GDP growth can be prone to rising instability and diminishing social cohesion.

These measures of prosperity also miss important outcomes that speak to core values and national interests. While it would be possible to implement an immigration system with a focus solely on growing GDP per capita, governments must take into account other considerations as well. With the right mix of policy, Canada can grow population responsibly, balancing economic interests with social, international, and humanitarian ones.

Key Takeaway: supporting immigrant productivity has economic benefits for all

International and Canadian evidence shows that immigration has significant potential to boost economic prosperity. But that benefit depends on sound policy choices. Policies that help improve immigrant productivity, by enabling immigrants to innovate, find work quickly, use their skills and education, invest in Canada, and succeed in the long term, are not just good for those immigrants, they build prosperity for all.

The impact of immigration on the workforce

One of the more direct ways that immigration can affect prosperity is by bringing more people into the Canadian labour market. Because of Canada's growing demographic challenges, newcomers are an essential source of talent to fill positions across the economy. However, if a growing workforce exceeds job growth, there is risk that it could weaken bargaining power of workers or increase unemployment. Because this touches directly on people's economic well-being, this is a heavily researched dimension of immigration and one that features prominently in policy debates.

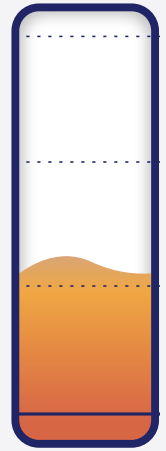
Indicator

Employment rate

Direction Canada is Trending

Needs Attention

Broad employment is needed for Canada's businesses to thrive, for household incomes to rise, for the effects of population aging to be mitigated and for tax revenues needed to support essential services for a growing population.



What the evidence says overall

There is a large body of research about immigration and labour markets. By and large, that research suggests that immigration has little net impact on the wages and employment of non-immigrant workers.⁴¹ One of the most influential studies on this topic was done by Canadian Nobel Prize winner David Card, who found that a large, sudden influx of Cuban immigrants to Miami in 1980 had insignificant impacts on wages or employment of those already living there.⁴²

How does immigration impact Canadian labour markets? The research shows varied impacts. A paper by George Borjas suggested that immigration to Canada reduced wages.⁴³ Another study on immigration to Canada found that immigrants raise the unemployment rate in the short term, but mostly because immigrants themselves have a difficult time finding work at first, and that in the long run immigrants either lower unemployment rates or have neutral effects.⁴⁴ Others interpret the existing evidence to suggest that immigration has a negligible impact on average wages (over 3-5 years) in Canada.⁴⁵ There is, however, some evidence that immigration can lead to lower earning among previous cohorts of immigrants.⁴⁶

How immigration can contribute to a strong labour market

Immigrants are most likely to strengthen the labour market when they are positioned to do well — employed in jobs that fit their training and pay fairly. Immigrants also strengthen the labour market when they are performing work that is complementary to Canadian workers, bringing new skills, training, and knowledge to the labour market. Outcomes can also be improved for both domestic workers and immigrants when discrimination and labour market friction for immigrants is reduced.

What can limit good labour market outcomes of immigration?

While immigrants typically fare much better in Canada than in their country of origin in absolute terms, they often struggle compared to non-immigrants.⁴⁸ Although this is improving by some measures,⁴⁹ immigrants still face regulatory barriers (like limited credential recognition) and other social barriers (like employers discounting education or work experience outside of Canada and discrimination).⁵⁰ Removing such barriers, for example by improving foreign credential recognition, would improve immigrant outcomes and support healthy employment markets. For example, there are many vacancies in health occupations in Canada, and yet almost half of immigrant health professionals are unemployed or working in non-health occupations.⁵¹

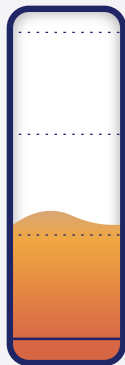
Indicator

Immigrant income gap

Direction Canada is Trending

Needs Attention

The gap in income between newcomers and all Canadians is an indicator of integration for recent immigrants. It reflects whether newcomers are experiencing economic success and whether the economy is leveraging their talent and skills effectively.



Temporarily in Canada:

In addition to Canada's large immigrant population, we are also host to many temporary residents, notably international students and those in Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP). In 2020, there were almost 600,000 study permit and temporary work permit holders, compared to only 184,000 permanent residents admitted.⁵² There are critiques of how well these initiatives (particularly the TFWP) serve temporary residents, with some suggesting that they take advantage of these groups.⁵³ While the presence, rights, and status of temporary residents are hotly debated, these groups are not always part of the discussion when it comes to the economic impacts of immigration, mostly because they are not permanent immigrants; they're temporary residents. Yet both of these groups contribute to the Canadian economy by working, paying taxes, and as tuition-paying post-secondary students and consumers. Expanding the rights of TFWs and providing temporary residents with easier routes to permanent status could go a long way toward protecting these groups and strengthening the Canadian economy.⁵⁴

Selection approaches to prioritize skills that are in high demand are intended to minimize competition with current workers and ensure immigrants are positioned to succeed.⁵⁵ Canadian immigration selection has seen a broader shift from general attributes like education and language skills to the current approach built around the Express Entry system which focuses more on nearer-term skills needs and filling current job vacancies.⁵⁶ These skills-based approaches can only be as strong as the labour market information that shapes the policy, and predicting skills needs in a complex economy is not a straightforward exercise. There is evidence that efforts to choose immigrants more selectively have less impact on the economy than choices about immigration levels more generally.⁵⁷

What these measures miss

Papers like Card's consider the effect of a sudden influx of immigrants. But immigration flows to Canada tend to be fairly steady. This has geopolitical roots: Canada shares only one land border, and it is with the United States — already a difficult country for immigrants to access. For this reason, Canadian immigration is typically planned immigration. When immigration can be *planned*, and when it is not susceptible to shocks, it is easier to grow population in a way that benefits the most people.

Key takeaway: skills are a critical part of the puzzle

The labour market impacts of immigration depend largely on the skills of those who are immigrating and the existing structure and skills makeup of the labour market. While overall effects on wages are minimal, policy choices can shape the effects on particular groups of workers. Workforce outcomes for newcomers and Canadian workers are improved when selection prioritizes skills,⁵⁸ when they are able to do the work for which they are trained, and when we attract talent that complements the skills in the Canadian workforce.

The fiscal impacts of immigration

Another way to assess the economic impact of immigration is to consider how immigrants impact the public purse. The most common way to measure these impacts is to look at the balance between how much immigrants contribute in taxes and how much they receive in government benefits and services. Of course, for newcomers and current Canadians alike this is a narrow and transactional measure. It is however a common feature in policy discussions about immigration.

What the evidence says overall

Studies on immigrants' fiscal contribution suggest varied effects.⁵⁹ When comparing internationally, tax and policy differences across countries as well as differences in immigration lead to a great deal of variation. Results also depend on how you measure; because the benefits of

government spending are not measured directly, findings depend on economic models, assumptions, and data used.⁶⁰

Immigration's fiscal impact has been a topic of debate among Canadian researchers for many years. In 1989, Ather Akbari found that the average immigrant made a fiscal contribution of over \$500 per year (about \$1,100 today).⁶¹ A Fraser Institute study argued that immigrants receive more in annual transfers than non-immigrants do,⁶² though the effects reflect that earlier-career immigrants were compared with a broader population of Canadians.⁶³ Others have found small but still negative fiscal effects of immigration in Canada,⁶⁴ although these could be outweighed by even modest improvements in immigrant economic outcomes (i.e., by making it easier for newcomers to work).⁶⁵

Canadian research has found major differences in outcomes across immigration streams when it comes to fiscal impacts: immigrants who arrive through “economic” streams often pay more in taxes than they receive in transfers.⁶⁶ This is unsurprising as they are more likely to be in the workforce, but it is important to note that people often immigrate for multiple reasons (such as work and family), and that non-economic immigrants and their children still provide critical contributions to the Canadian economy, especially in the long term.

How immigration can contribute to government coffers

Immigrants tend to contribute more to government coffers if they are of early working age, migrate permanently, and are skilled economic immigrants from high-income countries that are most likely to have their skills recognized in the labour market.⁶⁷ International comparisons also show, unsurprisingly, that immigrants are more likely to contribute on net in the short-run when the regulatory environment allows them to work freely,⁶⁸ and when their eligibility for benefits is more limited.⁶⁹ Short-term costs need to be considered against long-term benefits; effective investments in settlement supports and safety net increase net costs in the near-term but can substantially tip the scales in favour of net contribution to public balance sheets in the longer term.

What drives the fiscal costs of immigration?

When immigrants face barriers to participate in the labour market, they are more likely to draw on supports and less likely to contribute tax dollars. There are also differences driven by demographics and selection approaches. Senior newcomers for example are more likely to have net fiscal costs than people early in their working lives and humanitarian class immigrants may have a harder time integrating into the labour market than economic immigrants.

The fiscal impact of immigration may also differ between different jurisdictions and levels of government. In the US,

immigration has been found to boost federal finances and harm local government finances,⁷⁰ but this likely depends on the policy and immigration context, and the breakdown of jurisdictional responsibilities.

What these measures miss

In general, studies of the fiscal impacts of immigration measure short-term results, which are easier to assess. These will tend to underestimate the contributions of newcomers because they capture the early years of labour market integration at a time that immigrants are more likely to make use of settlement services.

Key takeaway: long term impacts show the whole picture

Most of the differences in the fiscal effects of immigration reflect life cycle differences. By nature, children and retirees are far less likely to be net contributors than working-aged people.⁷¹ Similarly, recent immigrants tend to cost more on net in early years as they integrate and shift to net contribution in the longer run. By some measures, the age or life stage at which someone immigrates can mean differences to the tune of \$100,000 per immigrant.⁷² Short run fiscal measures will tend to underestimate fiscal contributions, even before taking into account the benefits that are not easily measured in government finances (e.g., by family caregiving that offsets public costs).

Looking beyond the standard economic measures

These three main economic measures do not encompass all economic prosperity. For example, these measures do not consider that 40% of immigrants over the age of 15 volunteer, that immigrants donate more to charity than Canadian-born citizens,⁷³ or that immigrant women do more unpaid labour than non-immigrant women.⁷⁴ One study that attempts to combine a range of measurements estimates that Canadian non-immigrants are almost 5% better off thanks to immigration.⁷⁵ Looking nationally also misses a bigger global impact, with some estimates suggesting that if all of the would-be migrants in the world could move where they hope to, it could increase global GDP by somewhere between 50-150% of global GDP.⁷⁶

Standard economic measures also miss the relationship between immigration and national identity. Immigration has long been part of Canadian identity. Support for immigration is higher in Canada than in nearly any other country,⁷⁷ and has grown over time.⁷⁸ Amid rising tides of xenophobia on a global scale, Canada's support for immigrants and immigration represents a breed of “Canadian exceptionalism” for some.⁷⁹ Immigration gives Canadians a shared objective – one that often crosses the boundaries of region or party

affiliation. It also gives the country an international brand: Canada's reputation as a multicultural, diverse country of prosperity and opportunity is important in building trade and investment.

Calls for lower immigration may be based on concerns about immigration's impacts on other economic indicators such as rising housing prices, increased inequality, and environmental harms.⁸⁰ While these concerns are important for immigrants and non-immigrants alike, they are not issues that can be remedied by immigration policy. Instead, good immigration policy is needed alongside other policies that make Canada a good place to live.

Indicator

Housing affordability

Direction Canada is Trending

Falling behind

Concerns about housing affordability have risen to the top of the Canadian policy agenda, as both renters and first-time home buyers experience surging costs. In response, some have called for immigration limitations to moderate competition for limited housing supply.



Housing & immigration:

Population growth that outstrips housing supply can certainly contribute to higher housing prices. In Ontario, population growth that outpaced projections has been a factor in price growth, especially in mid-sized communities.⁸¹ That population growth in places like Atlantic Canada is not driven by newcomers, but more by people coming from elsewhere in Canada.⁸² A 2011 study also found that immigration does have a small impact on housing prices, but that the effect is caused by established immigrants, rather than recent ones.⁸³ But rising costs are clearly driven primarily by housing market factors. Even as new arrivals plummeted in 2020, Canada saw some of the fastest housing price growth the country has ever experienced⁸⁴ despite a nearly 50% reduction in immigration caused by pandemic restrictions.⁸⁵

Even a substantial reduction in immigration would be unlikely to reduce housing prices, although it would have major impacts throughout the economy. Instead, housing costs are better addressed through housing policy measures, such as efforts to increase supply, modernize zoning, tax unused properties or foreign house purchases, and prevent house flipping.

Policy choices to drive immigration and prosperity

Immigration policy is about more than levels and targets – it must maximize the benefits of immigration while ensuring that immigrants and non-immigrants alike prosper. Across all the research on immigration and prosperity, it is clear that policy choices are critical to the relationship between immigration and prosperity. There are evidence-based strategies to ensure that immigration translates into prosperity for Canadians and newcomers including:

- Base immigration policy decisions on a range of economic measures, including GDP per capita, employment data, and government finances, as well as other economic and non-economic factors with a focus on the medium and long terms. Canadian policy often heavily discounts long-term effects, even though long-term immigrant success, the generational impacts of immigration, and long-term demographic factors are critical.
- Prioritize reducing barriers to immigrant settlement and integration, for example through language and labour market training, credential recognition, and settlement outside Canada's largest cities, and supporting entrepreneurship and business formation.⁸⁶
- Build on the responsive Express Entry system with investments in streamlined and user-friendly administration of immigration selection while maintaining a depoliticized approach.
- Design economic immigration streams to respond to a mix of short, medium, and long-term needs. This can include skills for sectors projected to grow in the medium term (like health human resources, clean technology, and the digital economy) and broader human capital approaches for emerging industries.
- While Canada is often seen as a global leader on immigration selection and settlement, policymakers should prioritize generating and mobilizing evidence about what works in immigrant integration and selection. This should be supported by strong data collection and cross-sector partnerships. For example, within the EU, a partnership of national and urban governments has been built to share best practices on immigrant integration.⁸⁷

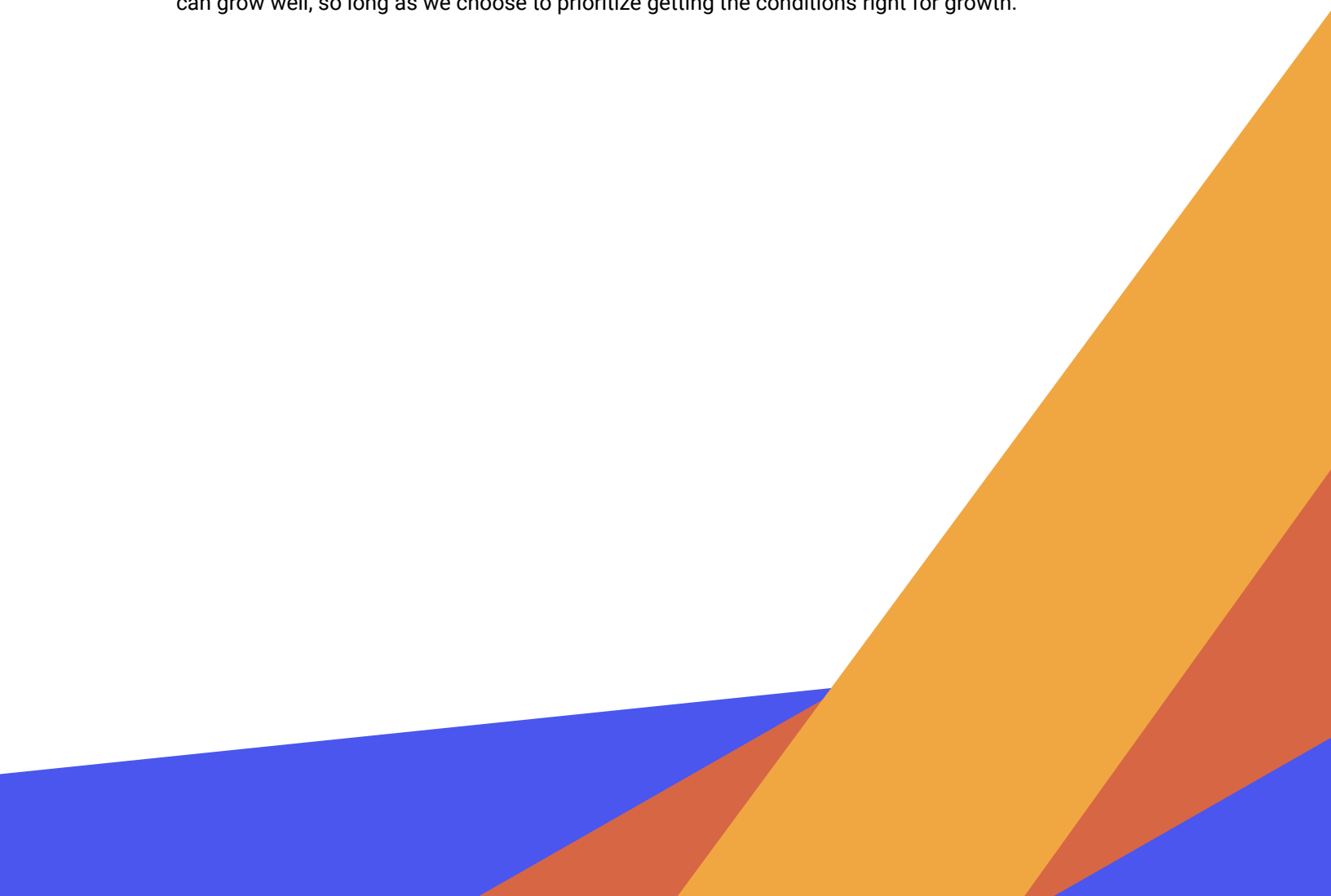
Prosperity takes planning

Taken as a whole, research suggests that the net effects of immigration on prosperity are slightly positive. But comparisons between places and times also make it clear that these effects are not a given — they are a product of context and policy choices.

In that sense, Canada is well positioned to succeed. Canada is ranked as the world's most accepting country towards immigrants,⁸⁸ its policies to integrate migrants are considered among the best in the world,⁸⁹ and immigration has widespread public and political support. Part of Canada's international reputation is as a country that does immigration well. Geopolitics also work in Canada's favour, allowing for stable, planned selection. This means that we have a responsibility to plan for growth, so that we can maximize the positive impacts of immigration and grow well.

It is important to think about immigration from a more long-term perspective. One way to do this is to ask what Canada would be like in 100 years without strong immigration. Almost certainly, it would be a less diverse, influential, and prosperous country. Fundamentally, we are faced with a choice between a bigger, bolder Canada or a stagnating one with a shrinking role on the world stage.

We can see from our international peers that the relationship between immigration and prosperity can vary. Even if evidence points to a net positive impact on prosperity, Canada cannot afford to be complacent about investing in good immigration policy, selection, and integration. Canada's demographic context means that good immigration choices are critical to our economic future. We can grow well, so long as we choose to prioritize getting the conditions right for growth.



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