



The Leaky Bucket 2024

A Closer Look at Immigrant Onward Migration in Canada



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Foreword

“I’m leaving the table. I’m out of the game.”

Leonard Cohen, “Leaving the Table”

The first instalment of *The Leaky Bucket* in October 2023 incited considerable shock upon publication last year. It stung to learn that despite Canada’s uniquely welcoming disposition, a growing number of immigrants are leaving.

This second look at *The Leaky Bucket* reveals that the proportion of immigrants leaving Canada has reached an all-time high. Despite extreme pandemic travel restrictions, immigrants still found ways to leave in record numbers.

But much has changed since October 2023. Public support for immigration has crashed to 30-year lows. Commentators have convinced Canadians that the volume of immigrants explains our foremost challenges: unaffordable housing, inaccessible healthcare, crime—even traffic. So while the first edition of *The Leaky Bucket* evoked a gasp, this instalment may inspire applause.

The extra detail available in this year’s report provides cause for a profound rethink of what ails us.

For example, we find that economic immigrants—those hand-selected for their unique ability to support Canada’s growth and development—are most likely to

leave. How do people preaching about immigration’s harmful effects on housing or healthcare or inflation reconcile their views with the fact that economic immigrants—tradespeople who build our homes, nurses who care for our loved ones, truckers who facilitate commerce, entrepreneurs who spur innovation—are increasingly reaching for the door?

These are not desperate people fleeing destitution for the comfort of Canada’s generosity. Rather, they are a globally coveted talent pool with global options. When we fail to retain newcomers, we are essentially helping them to contribute to another country’s success.

These findings have practical implications for all of us. Canadians have become so accustomed to a steady stream of anti-immigration commentary, but we must remember that the voices warning you about inflows are at best telling half the story. We must be equally concerned with how immigrants fare after arrival, and whether Canada can deliver a positive experience that persuades them to stay and contribute long-term.

Daniel Bernhard

CEO, Institute for Canadian Citizenship
October 2024

Key findings

- Onward migration is a short- and long-term phenomenon. Immigrants are most likely to leave Canada three to seven years after arrival and, cumulatively, Canada is losing one in every five immigrants to onward migration in the long term.
- Onward migration rates differ across and within provinces. Atlantic Canada has the highest onward migration rates both within the first five years of arrival and cumulatively. In Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, immigrants outside Halifax and Moncton are more likely to leave than those who settle in these cities.
- Immigrants who arrived as international students have higher rates of onward migration than those who arrived as foreign workers or permanent residents.
- Canada is losing 35 per cent of francophone immigrants in the long term. Onward migration of francophone immigrants is an issue that disproportionately affects Ontario and Quebec. Ontario, in particular, struggles to retain francophone immigrants at the rate at which it receives them.

Recommendations

- Develop strategies to address onward migration that factor in **who** is leaving **when**, with a particular emphasis on the first five years after an immigrant's arrival.
- Integrate retention targets into immigration policy. Establish a framework for reporting and account for variations in specific regions.
- Support provincial and municipal policy-makers to address unique retention challenges in their regions. Engage non-governmental stakeholders in a review of settlement service programs to ensure there is a focus on retention.
- Expand integration services for francophone immigrants to include a focus on retention, especially in Quebec and Ontario.
- Continue to monitor the onward migration rate for immigrants, exploring further the reason for immigrants leaving and the full extent of the retention problem for Canada.





A note on definitions

How we define demographic categories makes a difference in how we interpret our data. Therefore, understanding the onward migration of immigrant groups depends on clear terminology.

In this study, we distinguish between francophone, anglophone, and allophone immigrants. We use their mother tongue as the defining feature rather than their official language proficiency, which some other studies use.¹ We do this because we are interested in communities not only from the perspective of language, but also from the perspective of culture and identity, as these can be factors in an immigrant's integration and settlement decisions.

We also distinguish between one-step and two-step immigrants. We break down the two-step category to study-permit holders and work-permit holders, therefore presenting results across four categories: one-step (never held a work or study permit); two-step (study permit only); two-step (work permit only); and two-step (work and study permit).

The Glossary in Appendix B provides a full list of definitions.

The ongoing challenge with onward migration

One in every five immigrants who land in Canada will decide to leave within 25 years. And over a third (34 per cent) of onward migrants will leave in the first five years. While there are varying impacts on Canada depending on when an immigrant decides to leave, the acute risk in the early years should concern immigration policy-makers.

Historically, immigration has been a vehicle for Canada to advance GDP growth, ease labour shortages, improve the worker-to-retiree ratio, and enrich multiculturalism.² Onward migration, particularly in the early years, jeopardizes Canada's ability to meet these goals. When immigrants leave, investments in settlement and integration programs are lost. Depending on the age and stage at which an immigrant leaves, broader investments in education, skills, and training can also go unfulfilled.

To effectively address retention, policy-makers need a deeper understanding of both the short- and long-term consequences of onward migration. An understanding of who is leaving Canada when will not only help to inform tailored policies and programs, but also help to determine the full extent of the retention problem for Canada.

This study examines various demographic characteristics of immigrants who leave and the provinces with high onward migration rates.

1 Bérard-Chagnon and others, "Emigration of Immigrants."

2 Conference Board of Canada, The, *The Leaky Bucket*.



Tracking the journey: Measuring onward migration

Not all immigration journeys to Canada end within Canadian borders. Some return to the country they migrated from; others leave Canada for a new destination country. The term “onward migration” describes the process of immigrants leaving Canada to reside elsewhere.

In this report, we refer to onward migration via a rate. The onward migration rate is the percentage of immigrants in an arrival cohort—all those who obtained permanent residence in the same year—who have left Canada. We use the rate to assess the individual risk of an immigrant leaving given the size of their arrival cohort and given the number of years they have spent in Canada.

Definitions of all rates referred to in this study are included in the Glossary in Appendix B.

Catching up: The latest data

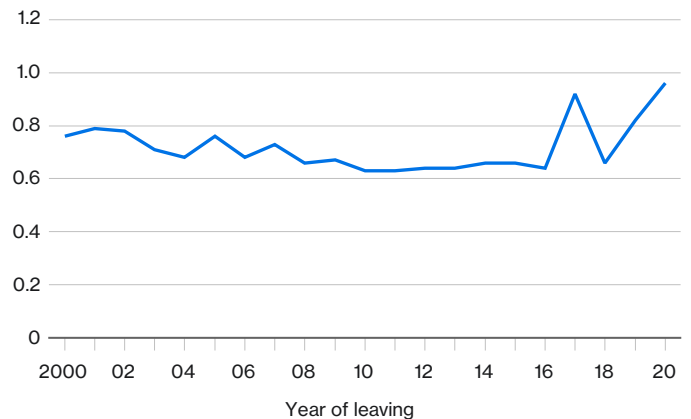
Onward migration has been a persistent phenomenon over the past decades but has only recently garnered public attention.³ The most recent available data— from 2020—shows annual onward migration rising to the highest recorded percentage in the previous 20 years. (See Chart 1.)

However, 2020 also saw the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected movement in and out of the country.⁴ For this reason, we cannot assess whether this spike is a continuation of the trend or an anomaly. We need to continue monitoring onward migration rates as more recent data becomes available.

On average, immigrants who landed since 1982 are leaving at an annual rate of 0.9 per cent.

Chart 1

Annual onward migration spikes in 2017 and continues to rise until 2020
(1982–2019 cohorts, per cent)



Sources: Statistics Canada; The Conference Board of Canada.

3 Keung, “Canada’s ‘leaky bucket’ of immigration”; DeLaire, Megan, “Immigrants explain why”; Patrick, “Nearly Half of New Immigrants Dissatisfied.”

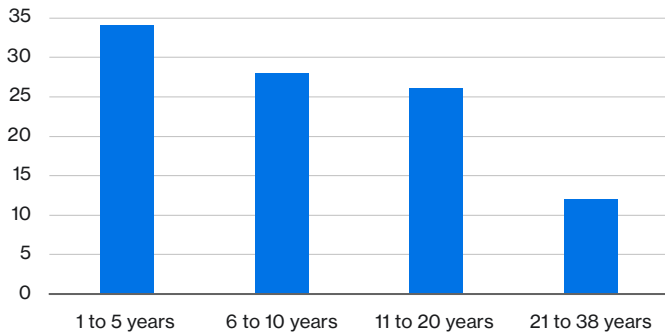
4 Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, *Immigration in the Time of COVID-19*.

When is onward migration most likely to happen?

Most onward migrants (34 per cent) leave within the first five years after arrival. (See Chart 2.) The remaining onward migrants leave between six and 20 years, with just 12 per cent leaving between 21 and 38 years. This emphasizes how important the early years after arrival are when determining an immigrant’s long-term settlement trajectory.

Chart 2

Onward migrants leave within the first five years since arrival
(share of onward migrants by years since arrival for the 1982–2019 cohorts, per cent)

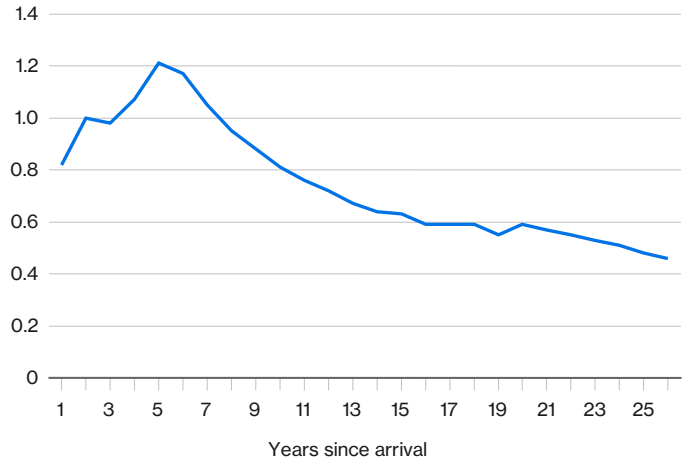


Sources: Statistics Canada; The Conference Board of Canada.

The size of incoming cohorts to Canada has increased notably since 1982. Just 121,200 immigrants were admitted in 1982⁵ compared to 341,180 in 2019.⁶ We can measure the likelihood of an immigrant leaving Canada in the 1980s the same as we can in 2019 by using a weighted rate, which accounts for the variations in size of cohort and duration of an individual immigrant’s stay in Canada. Chart 3 shows that an immigrant is at greatest risk of leaving Canada between three and seven years after arrival, peaking at five years.

Chart 3

Onward migration rate peaks five years after arrival
(weighted average share of tax filers at the time of admission for the 1982–2019 cohorts, per cent)



Sources: Statistics Canada; The Conference Board of Canada.

We can also use this weighted rate to determine the impact of onward migration on future cohorts, which policy-makers can use to design targeted interventions to address this.

For instance, the 2025–2027 Immigration Levels Plan targets 395,000 permanent residents in 2025. Of these, we expect that 0.8 per cent will leave after one year (3,225 immigrants), 1.0 per cent after two and three years (3,954 and 3,870), 1.1 per cent after four years (4,221), and 1.2 per cent after five years (4,799). Overall, 5.1 per cent (or 25,500) of the 395,000 planned permanent resident admissions in 2025 are expected to leave by 2030. (See Chart 4.)

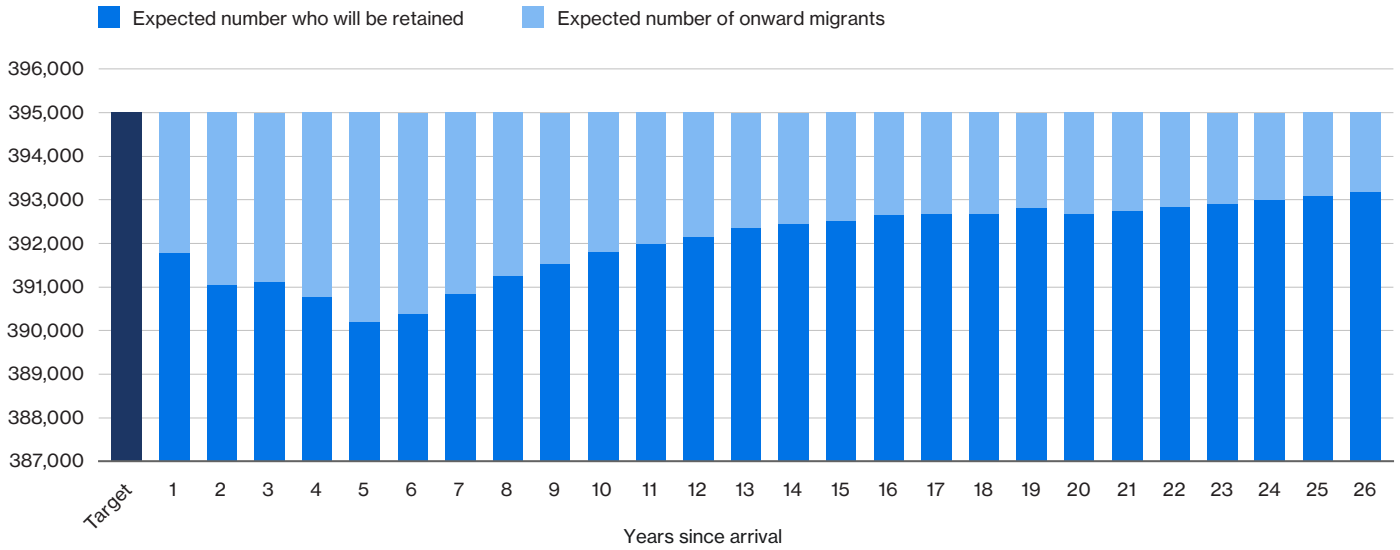
While the risk of onward migration is highest in the first five years, persistent onward migration is taking place. Currently, we can expect 18 per cent of immigrants to leave Canada within 25 years—a rate that is increasing steadily. (See Chart 5.)

5 Statistics Canada, “150 years of immigration in Canada.”

6 Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, “2020 Annual Report to Parliament on Immigration.”

Chart 4

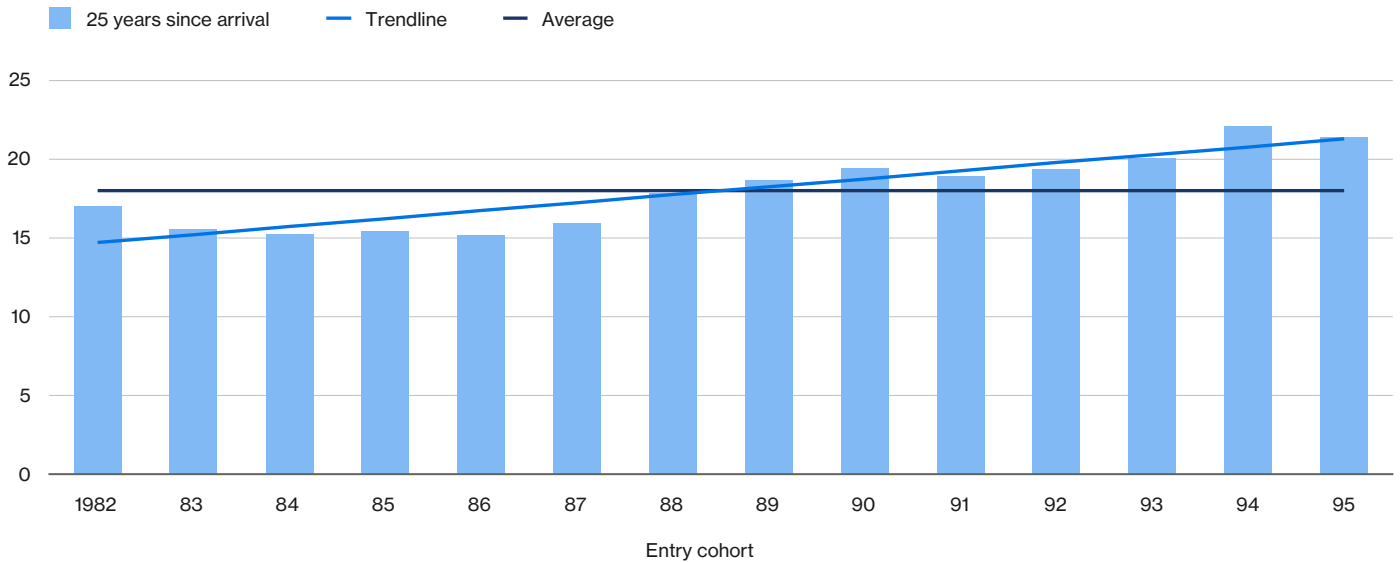
25,500 permanent residents admitted in 2025 are expected to leave by 2030, or five years since arrival
(count of immigrants)



Sources: Statistics Canada; The Conference Board of Canada.

Chart 5

On average, 18 per cent of immigrants will leave in 25 years
(cumulative 25 years after arrival, per cent of admissions)



Sources: Statistics Canada; The Conference Board of Canada.



Where are immigrants leaving from?

Canada is a country with vast, sparsely populated areas and densely packed major urban centres. This results in varying patterns of onward migration both between and within provinces.

However, in Ontario and British Columbia, a larger proportion of onward migrants are staying beyond five years compared to all other provinces. This means that these provinces retain the immigrants they receive for longer.

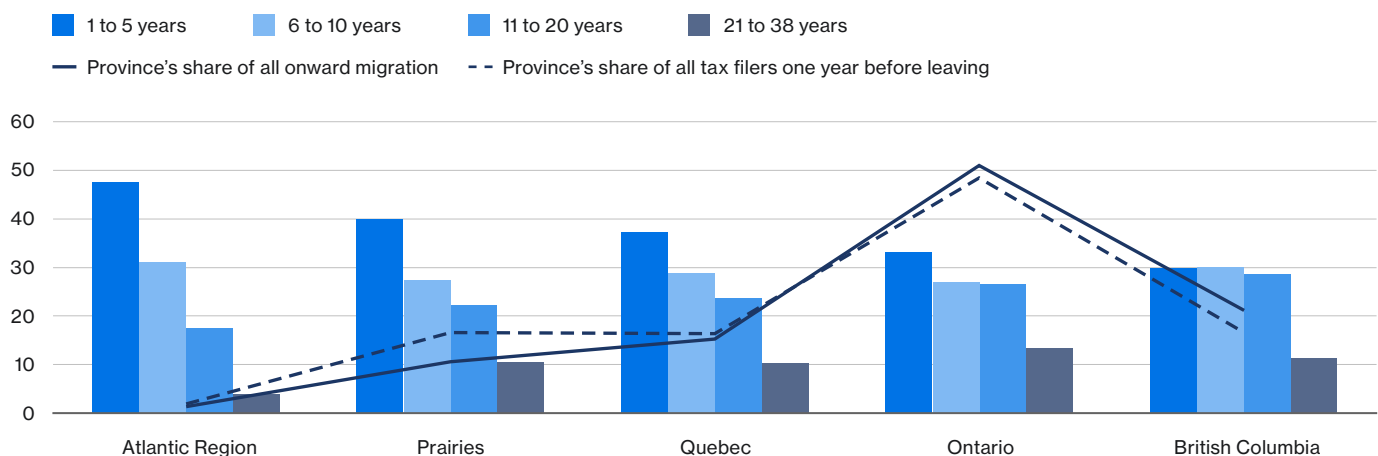
The province of settlement matters

Given that Ontario, British Columbia, and Quebec are the provinces that receive the largest proportion of immigrants year on year, it may be no surprise that they are also the provinces that see the largest share of onward migration (Ontario, 51 per cent; British Columbia, 21 per cent; Quebec, 15 per cent). (See Chart 6.)

The Atlantic Region, on the other hand, sees the opposite effect. This region has the lowest share of immigrant arrivals but sees the highest proportion of immigrants leaving within the first five years. (See Chart 6.)

Chart 6

Most onward migrants in the Atlantic Region are leaving in the first five years since arrival (share of onward migrants for the 1982–2019 cohorts, per cent)



Sources: Statistics Canada; The Conference Board of Canada.

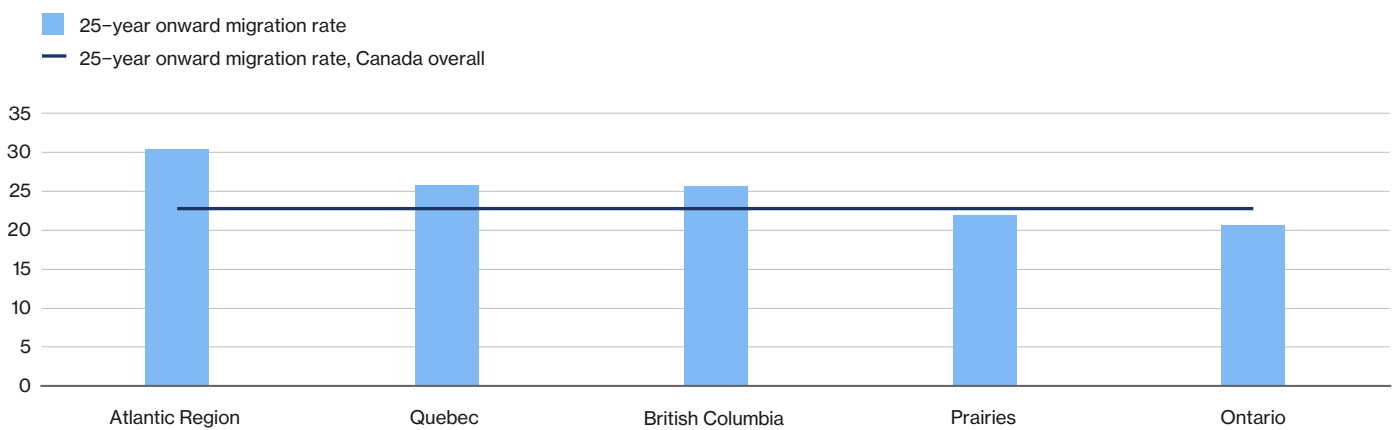
This trend compromises the goals of regional immigration initiatives like the Atlantic Immigration Program, which aims to attract newcomers and leverage the benefits of immigration for the region.

The Atlantic Region also has the highest cumulative onward migration rates 25 years after arrival compared to all other provinces and territories. (See Chart 7.)

Based on current estimates, even if those arriving through the Atlantic Immigration Program in 2025 stay for 25 years, we expect 1,365 permanent residents to leave out of the 5,000 that are targeted in the 2025–2027 Immigration Levels Plan. In other words, 30 per cent of those admitted in 2025 are projected to leave the Atlantic province by 2050. (See Chart 8.)

Chart 7

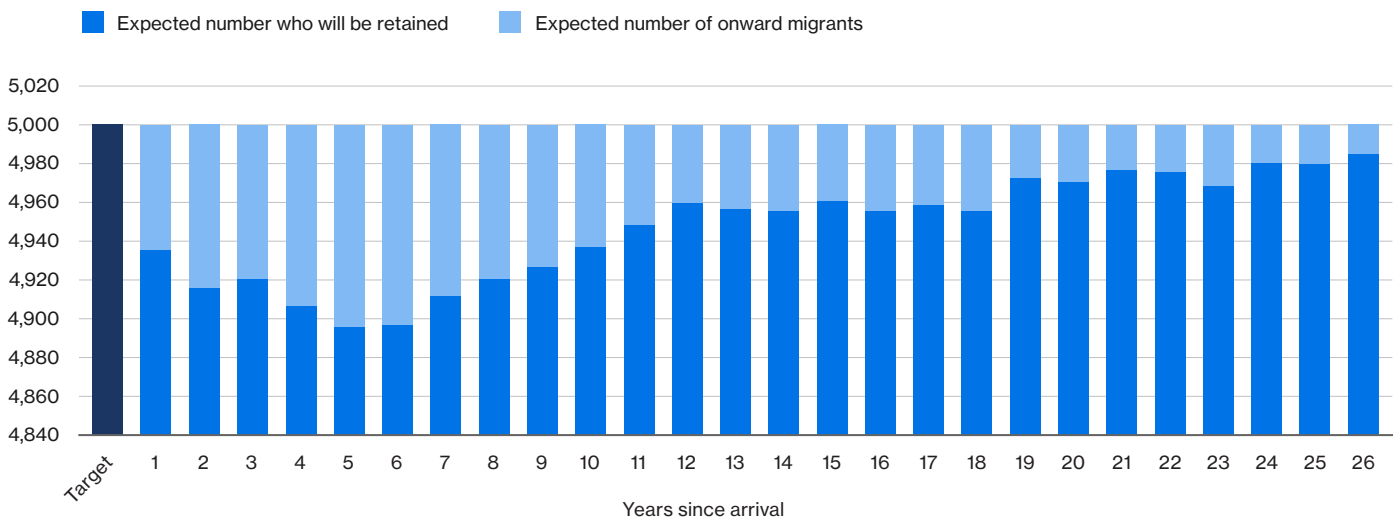
Atlantic Region has the highest cumulative onward migration rate among all provinces (weighted cumulative average of tax filers in the tax year prior to leaving Canada, per cent)



Sources: Statistics Canada; The Conference Board of Canada.

Chart 8

424 permanent residents admitted through the Atlantic Immigration Program in 2025 are expected to leave by 2030, or five years since arrival (count of immigrants)



Sources: Statistics Canada; The Conference Board of Canada.

The city of settlement matters

Onward migration varies depending on which city an immigrant chooses to settle in within a province. When we consider six immigrant-attracting cities in Canada, we see starkly different results.

The most populous Canadian cities—Montréal, Toronto, and Vancouver—have the largest proportion of onward migrants as a share of total onward migration in their respective provinces. (See Chart 9.) So, for instance, if an immigrant leaves the country from British Columbia, they are more likely to have resided in Vancouver than any other city or town in that province. The same trend can be seen in Montréal, Quebec, and in Toronto, Ontario.

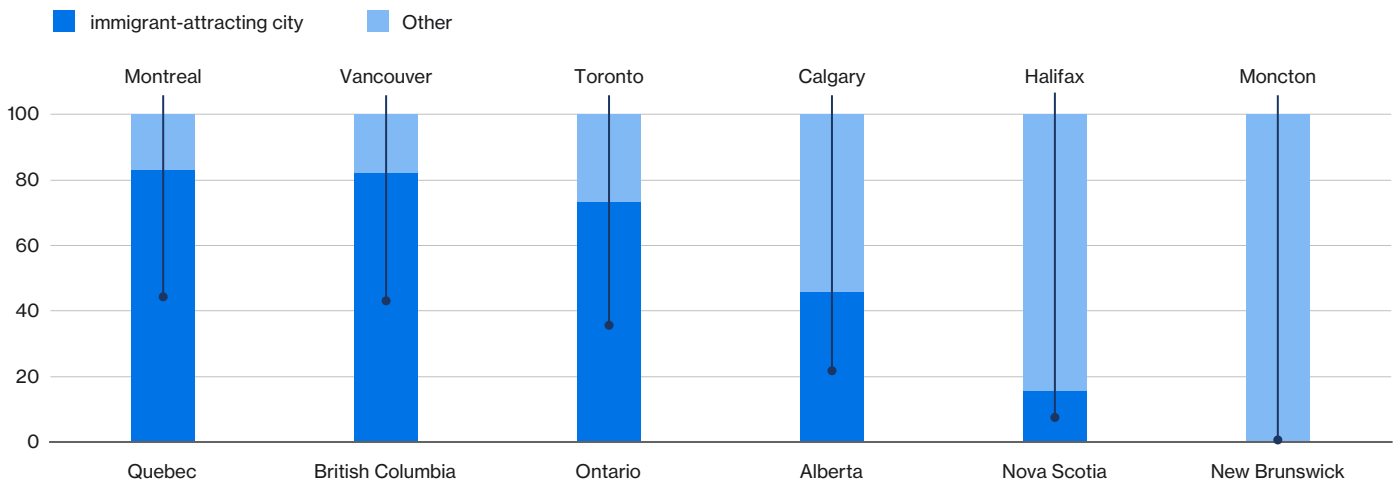
In contrast, smaller Canadian cities—such as Calgary, Halifax, and Moncton—experience the opposite trend. An immigrant who leaves Canada from Nova Scotia, for example, is more likely to be a resident of a town

or city in the province **outside** of the major urban hub of Halifax. The same trend can be seen in Calgary, Alberta, and in Moncton, New Brunswick. In fact, Moncton’s share of onward migrants leaving Canada is so low that it is rounded to zero in the data. (See Chart 9.)

Retention is not only an area of interest for federal immigration policy-makers. Municipal and provincial policy-makers can also benefit from these findings and adjust their policies, programs, and plans to respond to the increasing demands of immigration and migration trends in their regions. These findings will be particularly useful for policy-makers in the more populous provinces of Quebec, British Columbia, and Ontario, to help inform their regionalization strategies and planning.

Chart 9

Onward migration from Nova Scotia and New Brunswick is from regions outside of the major immigrant destinations (onward migration as a share of total onward migration in the reference province, per cent)



Sources: Statistics Canada; The Conference Board of Canada.

Demographic comparisons: Who is leaving Canada?

Economic immigrants are more likely to leave

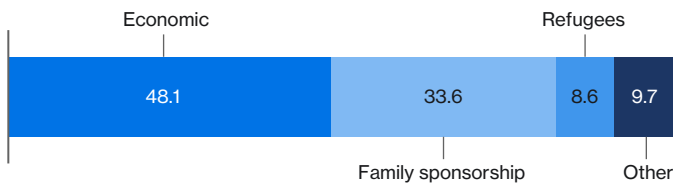
More than half of all immigrants who come to Canada are admitted under the economic immigration category.⁷ Among all onward migrants between 1982 and 2020, those who came to Canada under this category are the most likely to leave. (See Chart 10.)

Retaining economic immigrants is a key priority for most provinces to fill labour shortages in important sectors.⁸ Provincial and regional immigration programs—such as the Provincial Nominee Programs (PNP) and the Atlantic Immigration Program (AIP)—are designed to support this objective. A growing number of economic immigrants have been selected by the provinces and territories,⁹ which raises important questions about retention within those regions.

For all categories, the shape of the onward migration curve is similar, peaking at five years after arrival and then decreasing over time. (See Chart 11.) As the smallest proportion of onward migrants (8.6 per cent) (Chart 10), refugees also have the lowest onward migration rates. (See Chart 11.)

Chart 10

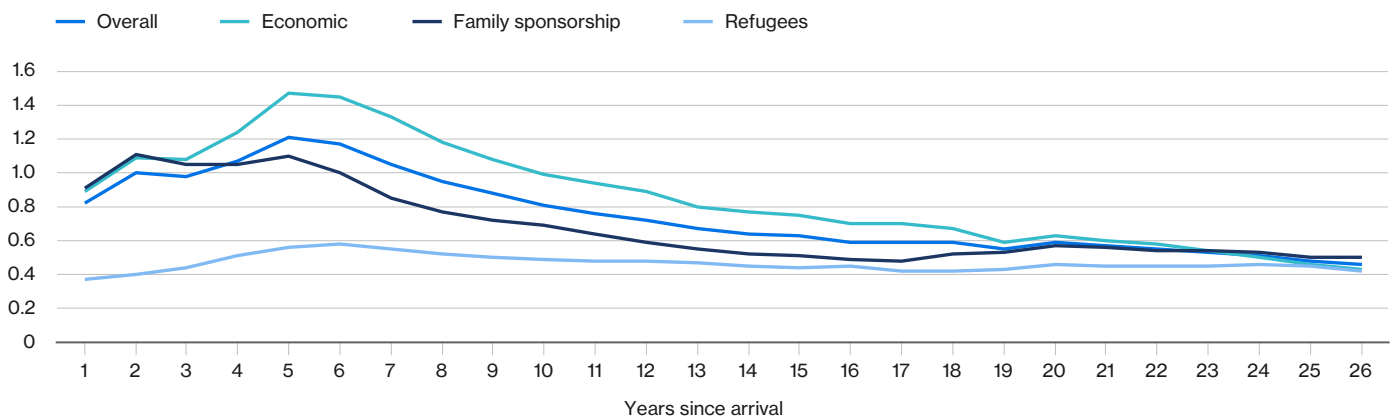
Most onward migrants had previously come to Canada through the economic immigration category (share of onward migrants by admission category for the 1982–2019 cohorts, per cent)



Sources: Statistics Canada; The Conference Board of Canada.

Chart 11

Onward migration rate peaks five years after arrival for those who came through family sponsorship and as refugees (weighted average share of tax filers at the time of admission for the 1982–2019 cohorts, per cent)



Sources: Statistics Canada; The Conference Board of Canada.

7 Statistics Canada, "Immigrants make up the largest share of the population."

8 Statistics Canada, "Provincial variation in the retention rates of immigrants, 2022."

9 Statistics Canada, "Immigrants make up the largest share of the population."

Immigrants who arrive as international students are more likely to leave

A growing number of permanent residents were once international students, temporary foreign workers, or both.¹⁰ They are called two-step immigrants. Those who never held a study or work permit before becoming permanent residents are one-step immigrants.

We study two-step immigrants in three categories:

1. Study permit only: immigrants who arrive as international students and do not hold another permit before becoming permanent residents;
2. Work permit only: immigrants who arrive as temporary foreign workers through the Temporary Foreign Worker Program or the International Mobility Program;
3. Study and work permit: immigrants who arrive as international students and then transition to the Post-Graduate Work Permit Program before becoming permanent residents.

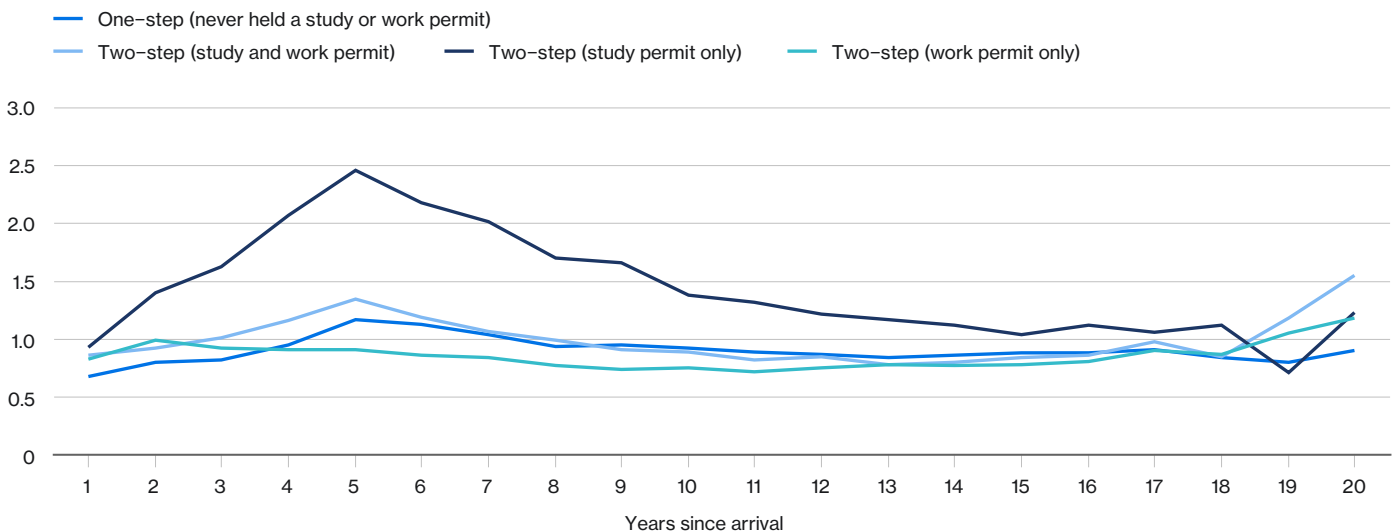
Two-step immigrants acquire permanent residency mainly through the Canadian Experience Class and provincial programs such as the Provincial Nominee Program and the Atlantic Immigration Program,¹¹ both of which are a part of the economic immigration streams.

Immigrants who arrive as international students, particularly those who only ever hold a study permit before becoming a permanent resident, are the most likely to leave Canada. (See Chart 12.) There is a noticeable spike of onward migrants at the five-year mark. This indicates that international students who gain permanent residency without holding another permit are most at risk of leaving without realising the full benefits of their education in Canada.

It is worth noting that we restricted the analysis in this section to cohorts that arrived post-2000, which coincides with the introduction of Provincial Nominee Programs in all provinces. There were no programs that formally enabled temporary residents to transition to permanent residency pre-2000.

Chart 12

Onward migration rates among two-step immigrants who only had a study permit spikes at five years since arrival (weighted average share of admissions for the 2000–2019 cohorts, per cent)



Sources: Statistics Canada; The Conference Board of Canada.

¹⁰ Schinnerl and others, “The Education-Immigration Nexus.”

¹¹ Hou and others, “Two-step Immigration Selection.”

We can draw inferences as to who these international students are by further breaking down the category of two-step immigrants who only ever held a study permit. As this group has had limited or no Canadian work experience before obtaining permanent residency, it is unlikely that this above-average five-year peak is being driven by those who have transitioned to permanent residency through the Canadian Experience Class.

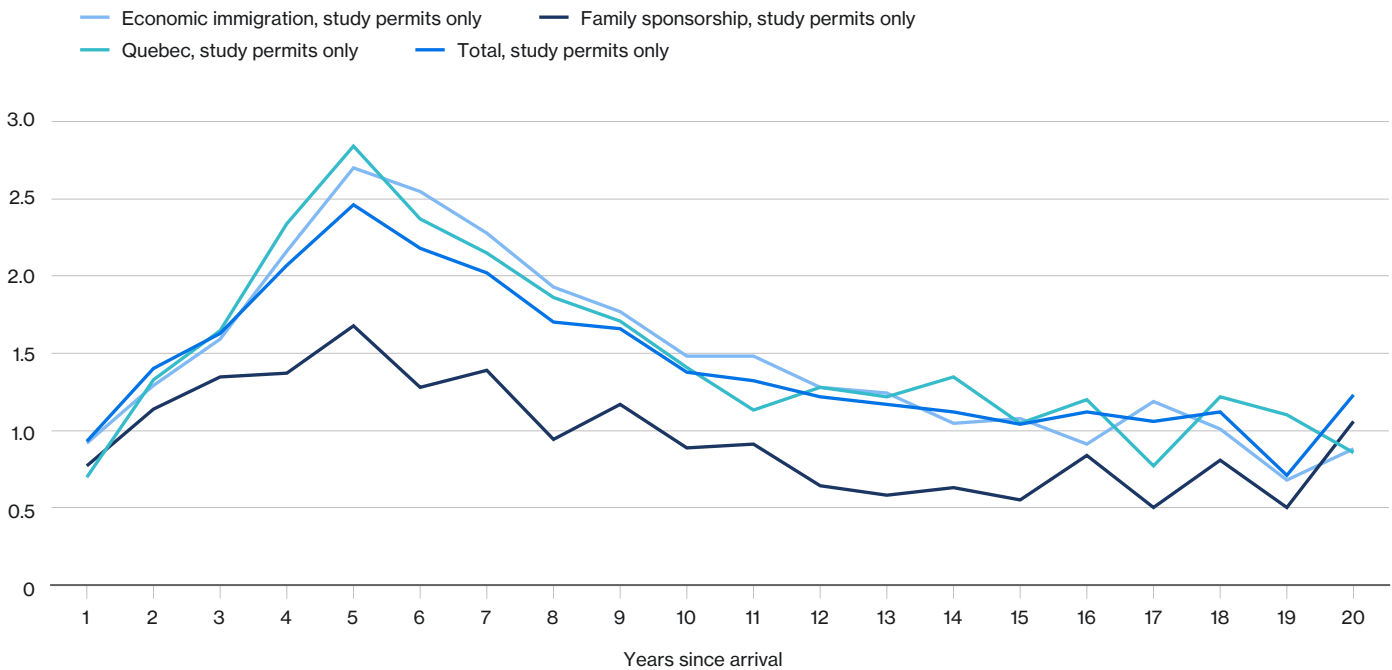
It is also unlikely that the spike is driven by those who obtained permanent residency as a result of being a child or dependent of a permanent resident, because those in the family sponsorship stream

consistently have the lowest rates of onward migration. (See Chart 13.) It is therefore likely the peak is being driven by those who became permanent residents through provincial immigration programs, such as Provincial Nominee Programs, the Atlantic Immigration Program, and Quebec immigration programs.

Quebec immigration programs include Quebec Skilled Workers, Quebec Entrepreneurs, Quebec Investors, and Quebec Self-Employed. International students who only ever held a study permit and transitioned to permanent residency through these programs have the highest peak rate of onward migration at the five-year mark. (See Chart 13.)

Chart 13

International students who became permanent residents through family sponsorship are the most likely to stay (weighted average share of admissions for the 2000–2019 cohorts, per cent)



Sources: Statistics Canada; The Conference Board of Canada.

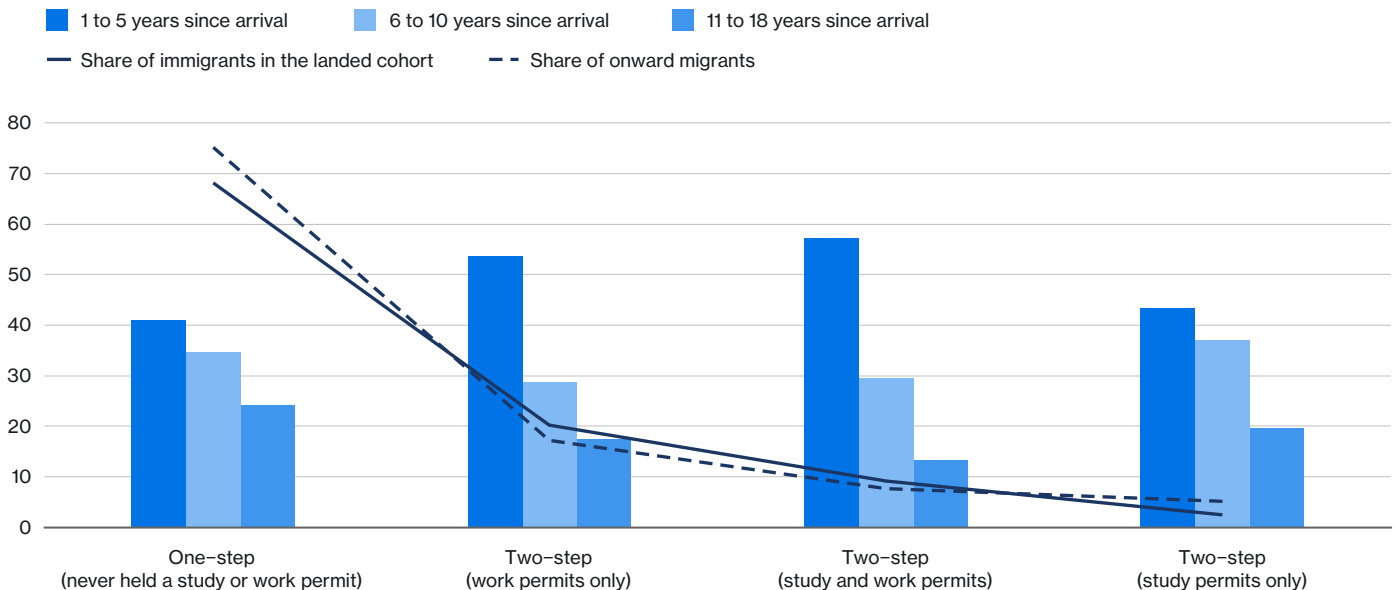
Overall, one-step immigrants are by far the largest proportion of immigrants who become permanent residents. Two-step immigrants who have held a study permit—including those who held a study and work permit—are the lowest proportion. (See Chart 14.)

However, this group has the highest rates of onward migration within five years of obtaining permanent residency. In other words, there are fewer permanent residents who were previously international students, but those who were international students are at a higher risk of leaving. (See Chart 14.)

The 2025–2027 Immigration Levels Plan anticipates that 40 per cent of the 395,000 permanent resident admissions in 2025 will be temporary residents who are already in Canada.¹² This amounts to 158,000 new permanent residents in 2025 who will have previously held a Canadian study or work permit. After applying a weighted average onward migration rate—combining those who previously held a study or work permit—we expect that 9,031 (or 5.7 per cent) of these immigrants will leave by 2030.

Chart 14

Fewer permanent residents were previously international students, but this group is at higher risk of leaving (share of onward migrants for the 2000–2019 cohorts, per cent)



Sources: Statistics Canada; The Conference Board of Canada.

¹² Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, "Notice – Supplementary Information."

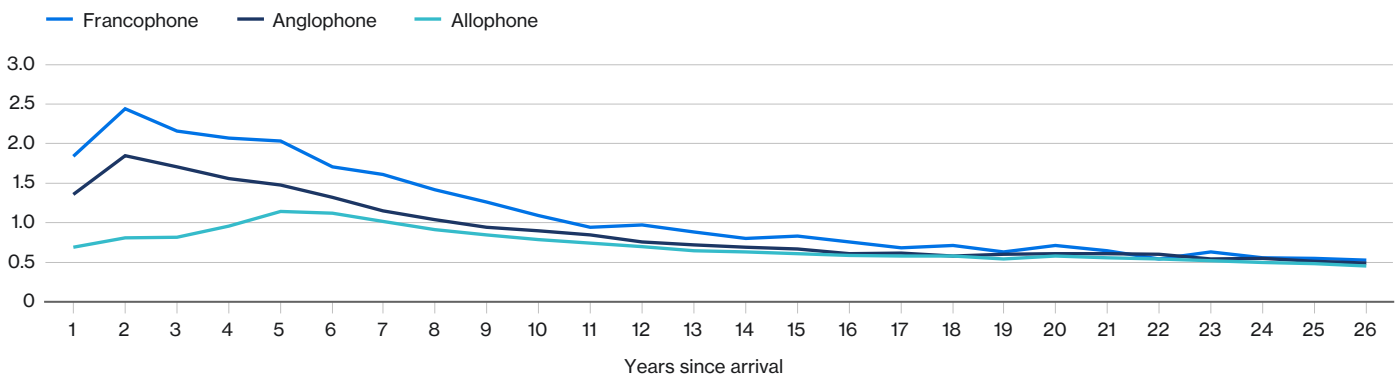
Francophone immigrants are more likely to leave

We study three language groups of onward migrants, distinguished by their mother tongue: francophones, anglophones, and allophones (those who speak neither French nor English). Although most immigrants report a mother tongue other than English or French, the population of those who speak French as their mother tongue is growing.¹³

If we consider onward migration of these groups in absolute terms, allophones are leaving the country more than other language groups because they are also disproportionately the largest group of arrivals to Canada. (See Chart 16.) However, after weighting, we find that onward migration rates of francophone immigrants are higher than those of anglophones and allophones. (See Chart 15.) As well, onward migrant francophones tend to leave earlier than anglophones and allophones.

Chart 15

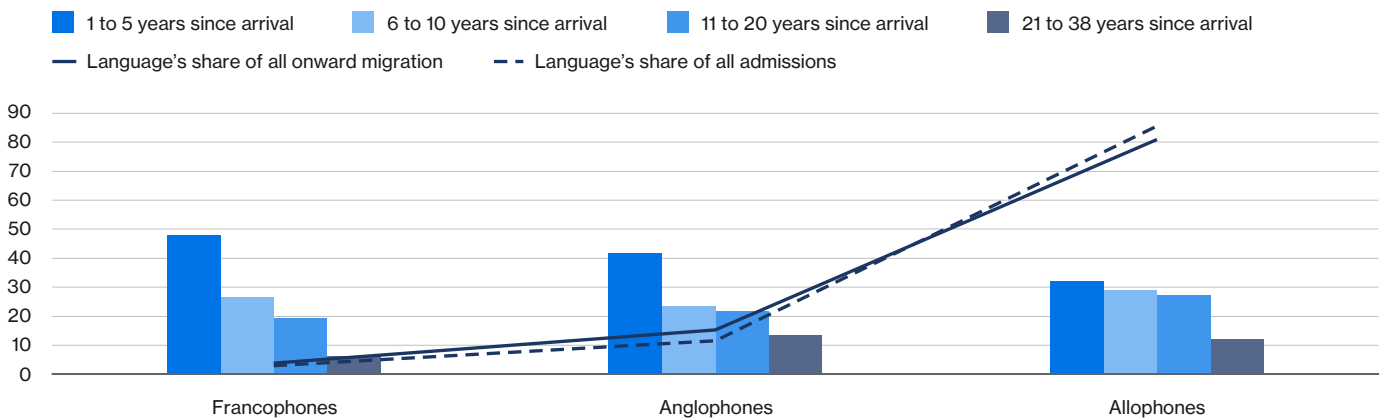
Onward migration rates peak two years after arrival among francophone, anglophone, and allophone immigrants (weighted average onward migration rate of admissions for the 1982–2019 cohorts, per cent)



Sources: Statistics Canada; The Conference Board of Canada.

Chart 16

Most onward migrants identified as allophones, speaking neither English nor French as their mother tongue (share of onward migrants by admission category for the 1982–2019 cohorts, per cent)



Sources: Statistics Canada; The Conference Board of Canada.

¹³ Statistics Canada, *Linguistic integration of immigrants and official language populations*.

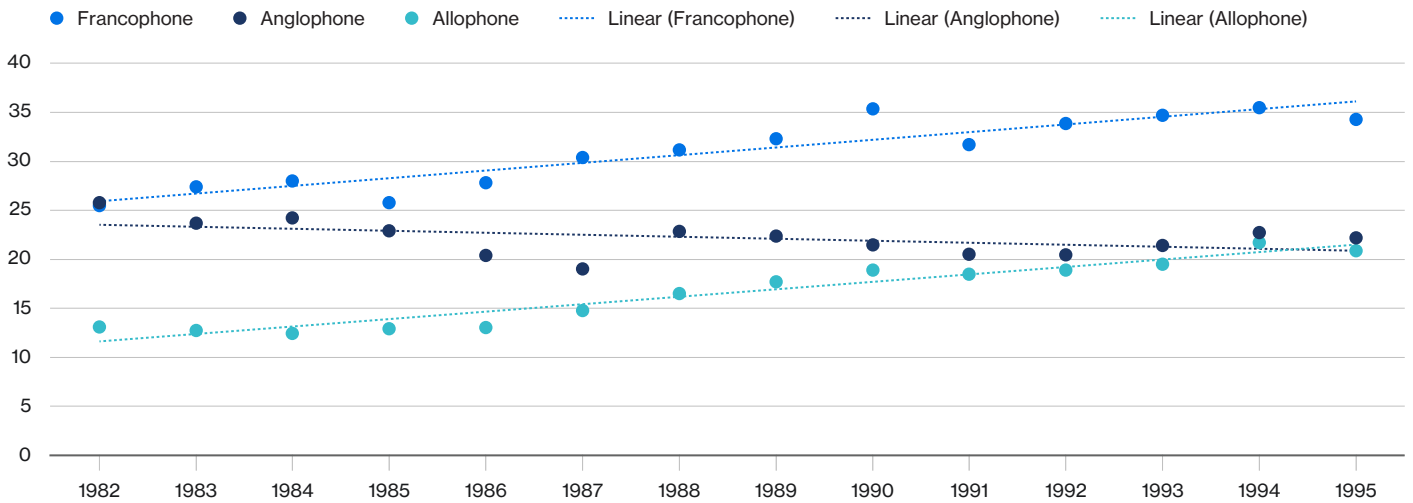
When we compare the onward migration rates of francophones, anglophones, and allophones, we see that both francophones and anglophones are at the highest risk of leaving at the two-year mark rather than five years. (See Chart 15.)

Cumulative onward migration rates show that Canada is losing one-third of its francophone immigrant population over the long term. (See Chart 17.) This issue is particularly pronounced in Ontario, where francophone onward migration rates are high compared to its intake of francophone immigrants. (See Chart 18.)

Chart 17

Long-term onward migration rates are accelerating among francophone immigrants

(25 years after arrival cumulative onward migration rate as a share of total tax filers at the time of admission for the 1982–1995 cohorts, per cent)

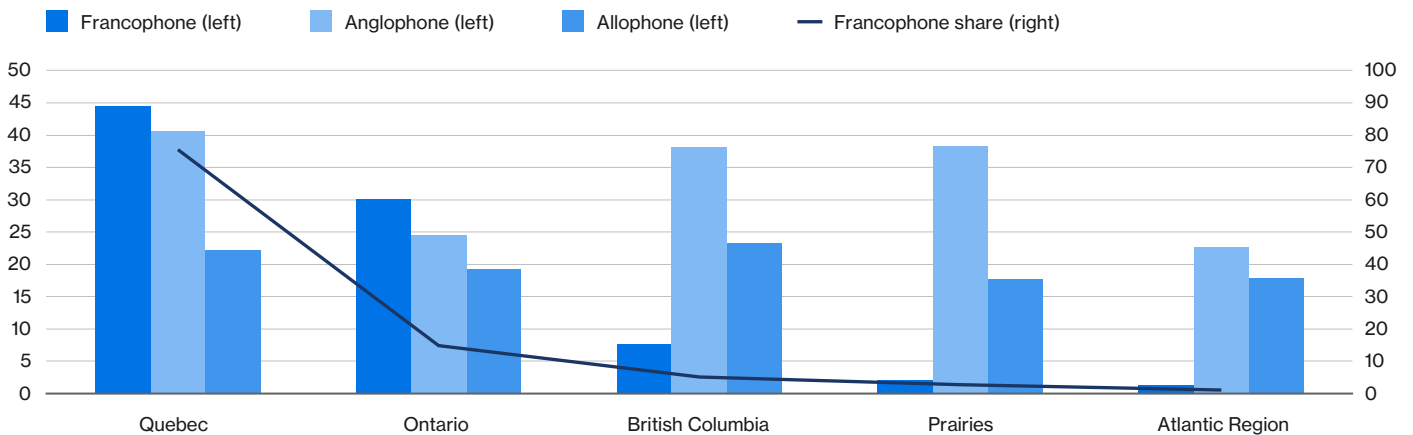


Sources: Statistics Canada; The Conference Board of Canada.

Chart 18

25 years cumulative onward migration rates of francophones are largest in Quebec and Ontario

(25 years cumulative weighted average of tax filers in the year prior to leaving Canada for the 1982–1995 cohorts, per cent)



Sources: Statistics Canada; The Conference Board of Canada.

It is not surprising that Quebec sees the highest cumulative share of francophone immigrants leaving given the province also receives the largest proportion of all francophones to Canada. In Ontario, however, the cumulative onward migration rate of francophones is high compared to the smaller proportion of francophone immigrants that it receives. This finding indicates that Ontario struggles to retain francophone immigrants at the rate at which it receives them.

In the other provinces and territories, there is much less onward migration of francophones, making it an issue that disproportionately affects Quebec and Ontario.

Francophone immigration, particularly outside of Quebec, is a priority for Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). IRCC policies recommend setting admission targets for francophone immigrants, with a view to gradually increasing admissions over time.¹⁴ However, onward migration of francophone immigrants, particularly in the early years, can significantly impede this objective.

Rather than the five-year peak we see in other groups of this report, onward migration of francophone immigrants peaks earlier, at two years. (See Chart 15.) This emphasizes the importance of supporting francophone immigrants, especially outside of Quebec, in the immediate years after their arrival.

Research has shown that immigrants who settle in an official language minority community are more likely to be retained,¹⁵ and French-speaking immigrants cite the presence of francophone minority communities as a key factor for staying.¹⁶ This should be a clear indicator to policy-makers outside of Quebec on how and when to support francophone immigrants to improve retention.



14 Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, "Policy on Francophone Immigration."

15 Haan and others, "Individual and community-level determinants."

16 Huot and others, "Prioritising Community Cohesion"; Delaisse and others, "The 'in-between' role."

Citizenship dilemma: Who stays and who leaves?

While Canada permits multiple citizenships, an immigrant’s country of origin may not.

Immigrants whose prior country of citizenship restricts dual citizenship are generally less likely to hold Canadian citizenship at the time of their departure. (See Chart 19.)

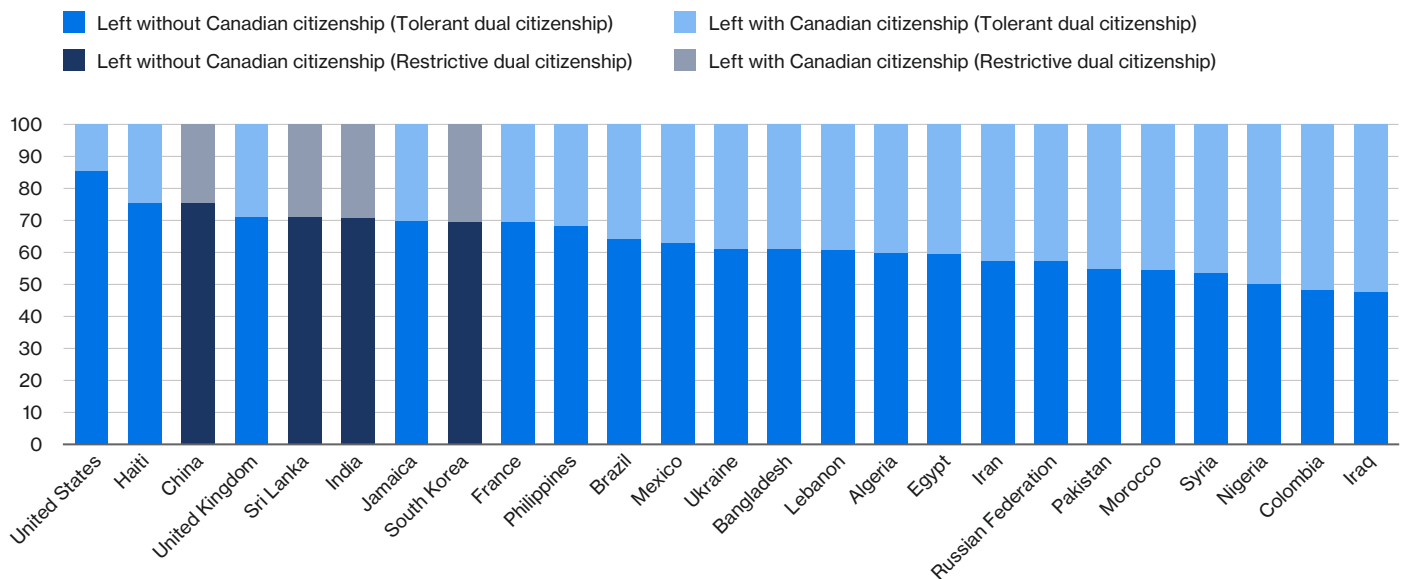
Some research shows that immigrants with United States citizenship are least likely to naturalize before leaving, even though they are not prohibited from doing so by the U.S. government.¹⁷ Between 40 and 60 per cent of onward migrants from Ukraine, Bangladesh, Lebanon, Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Russia, Pakistan, Morocco, Syria, Nigeria, Columbia, and Iraq obtain Canadian citizenship before leaving Canada.¹⁸

The ability to retain prior citizenship informs an immigrant’s settlement trajectory in Canada. Recent evidence from Canada shows that migrants from certain countries that permit multiple citizenships are not taking up Canadian citizenship.¹⁹ Other studies suggest that immigrants who acquire Canadian citizenship have better economic and social integration outcomes.²⁰

When we apply a cumulative weighted rate by source country, regardless of Canadian citizenship status, we see that onward migration from countries with restrictive dual citizenship policies is 1.6 percentage points higher than that from countries with more tolerant dual citizenship policies. (See Chart 20.) This finding takes into account that India and China had larger incoming cohorts to Canada than South Korea and Sri Lanka between 2000 and 2015.

Chart 19

All four countries with restrictive dual citizenship—China, Sri Lanka, India, and South Korea—are among top 10 countries with highest share of onward migrants who leave without Canadian citizenship (share of onward migrants who left with and without Canadian citizenship among the 2000–2015 cohorts, per cent)



Sources: Statistics Canada; The Conference Board of Canada.

17 Institute for Canadian Citizenship, “Naturalization Visualized.”

18 Institute for Canadian Citizenship.

19 Institute for Canadian Citizenship, “Citizenship in decline.”

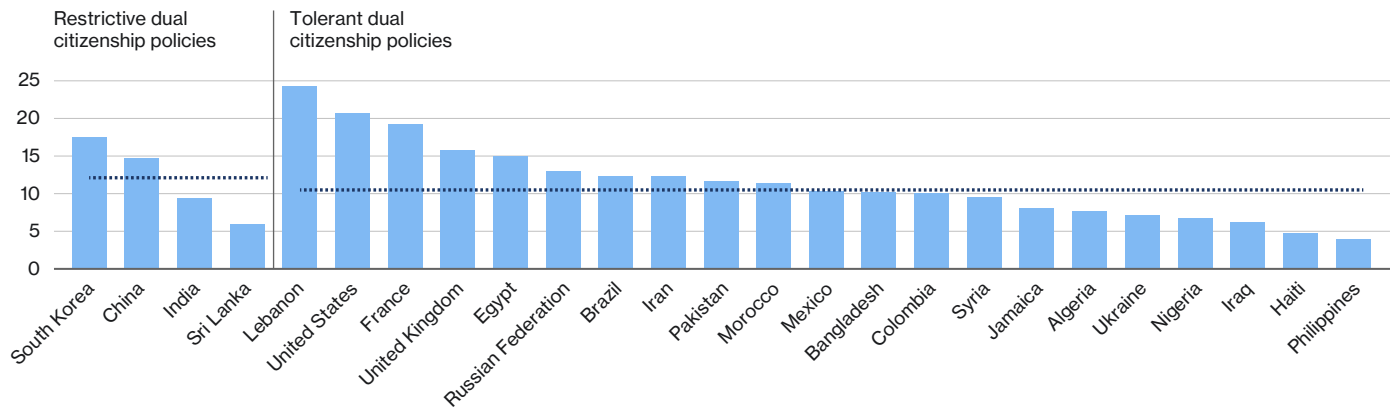
20 DeVoretz and others, “The economic causes”; Winter, “Multicultural citizenship for the highly skilled.”

Dual citizenship has strategic value to migrants in asset building, risk diversification, and family protection.²¹ Chart 21 shows the cumulative weighted onward migration rate among immigrants from the 2000–2015 admission cohorts who became Canadian citizens before leaving.²²

Ultimately, we cannot determine definitively whether acquiring Canadian citizenship and having access to dual citizenship is a reason for immigrants to leave Canada. While Chart 20 shows a higher average onward migration rate for countries with restrictive dual citizenship policies, Chart 21 shows both Lebanese and South Korean immigrants with the highest rates of onward migration – Lebanon being tolerant of dual citizenship and South Korea not.

Chart 20

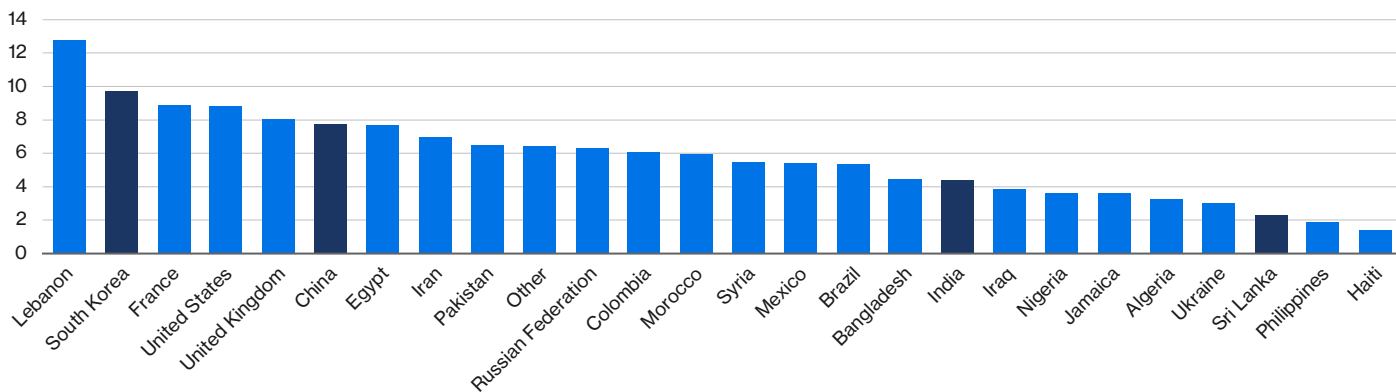
Regardless of Canadian citizenship status, onward migration of immigrants from countries with restrictive dual citizenship policies is higher than those from more tolerant countries (cumulative weighted onward migration rate as a share of total tax filers at the time of admission for the 2000–2015 cohorts, per cent)



Sources: Statistics Canada; The Conference Board of Canada.

Chart 21

Lebanese immigrants have the highest rates of onward migration among those who have taken up Canadian citizenship (cumulative weighted onward migration rate among those that have taken up Canadian citizenship, as a share of total tax filers in the for the 2000–2015 cohorts, per cent)



Sources: Statistics Canada; The Conference Board of Canada.

21 Leblang, “Harnessing the Diaspora.”

22 Leblang.

What does this mean for immigrant retention?

Onward migration and immigrant retention are two sides of the same policy challenge: the former is concerned with understanding who is leaving, the latter on encouraging immigrants to stay and contribute to Canada's success.

Analyzing onward migration rates provides a signpost to policy-makers as to where, when, and who to focus their attention and resources on to retain immigrants.

Immigrant retention requires both a short- and long-term focus. Challenges with retention are particularly acute within the first five years of an immigrant's arrival, and experiences in the early years can influence their settlement trajectory. This flags the need for policy-makers to understand immigrants' experiences in Canada from both an immediate and a sustained perspective.

Regional and local variations in onward migration rates provide policy-makers at the municipal and provincial levels with insight into where their programs and policies can be adapted to retaining immigrants, not only selecting them. Regionally specific insights are useful for informing regional immigration programs, such as the Atlantic Immigration Program and Provincial Nominee Programs.

Understanding whether people leave Canada from inside or outside urban cores can help federal, provincial, and municipal policy-makers inform regionalization strategies and planning. It can also help city or infrastructure planners and other interested stakeholders understand and plan for future population and migration trends.

Economic immigrants, particularly those who were previously international students, require a focus on retention in the early years of settlement.

Canada has long used immigration to improve economic outcomes. Higher onward migration rates of economic immigrants and international students, particularly within five years of becoming permanent residents, threatens this objective. Educational institutions and settlement service agencies should provide targeted support for immigrants in the early years after they obtain permanent residence and, in some cases, even before they arrive.

Language is a key indicator of onward migration and, therefore, retention. Both in the long and short term, francophones have higher onward migration rates. A specific focus on integrating francophone immigrants, especially in anglophone majority communities, is needed in Ontario in particular. Further study could be done in provinces that have a significant share of francophone immigration but little to no francophone onward migration (i.e., British Columbia, New Brunswick) to determine models for best practices to build welcoming French-speaking communities.



Recommendations

1. Develop strategies to address onward migration that factor in *who* is leaving *when*, with a particular emphasis on the first five years after an immigrant's arrival.

Onward migration poses challenges within the first five years and subsequently impacts the long-term settlement trajectory of immigrants in Canada. Policy-makers who incorporate an understanding of who is leaving when in retention strategies will achieve more effective outcomes that reflect the nuances of onward migration patterns in Canada.

2. Integrate retention targets into immigration policy. Establish a framework for reporting and build in variations for specific regions.

Currently, there are no formal metrics on immigrant retention that guide immigration policy and planning. Establishing and implementing retention targets, especially for regions with higher-than-average onward migration rates, will help develop tailored policies and practices, and lead to better overall outcomes for Canada.

3. Support provincial and municipal policy-makers to address unique retention challenges in their regions. Engage non-governmental stakeholders in a review of settlement service programs to ensure there is a focus on retention.

Onward migration concerns more than just federal immigration policy-makers. Educational institutions, businesses, provinces, municipalities, and community organizations all play a crucial role in retaining immigrants. Effective retention policy-making necessitates a multi-stakeholder approach and broadened focus beyond selection and integration to include retention as well.

4. Expand integration services for francophone immigrants to include a focus on retention, especially in Quebec and Ontario.

Language is a key indicator of onward migration as well as an important part of Canada's cultural and linguistic diversity. To support Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada's priority of enhancing francophone immigration, policy-makers need to apply a targeted approach to retaining immigrants in the first two years, especially in areas outside of Quebec, such as Ontario.

5. Continue to monitor the onward migration rate for immigrants, exploring further why immigrants leave and the full extent of the retention problem in Canada.

While the short-term challenges of onward migration are evident, the broader impact on Canada's economy and its immigration objectives cannot be fully assessed without further, more detailed research that considers who, where, when, and why immigrants are leaving.



Appendix A

Methodology

This study uses data from the 2021 Longitudinal Immigration Database (IMDB), which links immigration data with tax data.

The study includes people who meet all the following criteria:

- granted permanent residence between 1982 and 2019;
- were age 18 or over when they were granted permanent residence;
- filed taxes in Canada at least once since arriving.

The study uses fiscal non-activity as a proxy for onward migration. For this study, a person is counted as an onward migrant if they do not have a T1 Family File (T1FF) for two consecutive years and never filed a T1FF again by 2021, which is the last tax year in the dataset. The person is recorded as an onward migrant in the first year with no T1FF.

If there is an administrative record from Canada that the person has died, that person is not counted as an onward migrant.

In 2024, Statistics Canada released a report on immigrants who leave Canada, using a similar methodology to measure onward migration. However, their approach is stricter, requiring individuals to have not filed taxes for three consecutive years to be considered onward migrants.¹

The IMDB was not designed with the explicit goal of measuring onward migration, and therefore the data and analysis have a few limitations related to three issues: non-filers, eventual re-entry in Canada, and imperfections in data linkage.

Measuring onward migration through fiscal inactivity will capture some people who are in Canada but who stopped earning the types of income reported in the T1FF. Immigrants who have citizenship have the right to re-enter Canada, even years after they have left. This can lead to some overcounting of onward migrants.

Fiscal inactivity as a proxy for onward migration is likely most accurate for people who left many years ago. Finally, the linkage between immigration records and tax data is strong, but not flawless. Data linkage issues could slightly overestimate onward migration, especially among more recent arrival cohorts because immigrants may return, but also because tax filers may refile their tax returns in previous years as well.

This method of measuring onward migration is replicated among subgroups of immigrant arrivals, such as their province and Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) of first arrival, the immigration program they used to become permanent residents, their country of prior citizenship, whether they acquired Canadian citizenship, and whether they were English or French speakers.

We identify whether a person is still in Canada by whether they have filed taxes since they became a landed immigrant. If they have not filed taxes for two consecutive years and then failed to file in any tax year up to 2021, then we consider them to have left Canada.

This study is restricted to those granted permanent residence between 1982 and 2019, were at least 18 years old upon their arrival, and filed taxes in Canada at least once since becoming permanent residents up until 2021.

There are other approaches to measuring onward migration, although they are not as precise. The Canada Revenue Agency does not flag people as onward migrants even when they file taxes from abroad but do not reside in Canada. This makes it difficult for us to measure whether they can be classified as onward migrants.²

By measuring onward migration using a timeframe by which someone has not filed their taxes, we can more accurately measure those who leave Canada.

This study looks at changes across arrival cohorts and changes across time. “Cohorts” refers to groups of immigrants who gained permanent residence in the same year. The study examines demographic details of those who have left, including:

- their province and CMA of residence before they left Canada;
- the immigration program through which they became permanent residents;
- their country of prior citizenship and Canadian citizenship status;
- whether they previously held study or work permits;
- whether they were francophone, anglophone, or allophone, determined by their mother tongue declaration (see Glossary for definitions).

1 Bérard-Chagnon and others, “Emigration of Immigrants.”

2 Bérard-Chagnon, “Measuring Emigration in Canada.”

Appendix B

Glossary

Allophone immigrant: An immigrant who indicates their mother tongue is something other than English or French.

Anglophone immigrant: An immigrant who indicates their mother tongue is English.

Cohort: A group of immigrants arriving—gaining permanent residence—in the same year (i.e., the 1990 cohort).

Francophone immigrant: An immigrant who indicates their mother tongue is French.

One-step immigrant: A permanent resident who was not a temporary resident before (i.e. did not previously hold any study or work permits).

Onward migration: An immigrant leaving the country to return to their previous country of residence or moving to a new country.

Onward migration rate: A measure to determine the frequency (in per cent) at which immigrants leave the country to reside elsewhere.

25-years cumulative onward migration rate: The cumulative share of an immigrant admissions cohort that have left Canada within 25 years since arrival. The 25-years cumulative onward migration rate estimates the long-term trends in the share of onward migrants from the 1982–1995 cohorts weighted by the size of the entering cohort.

Annual onward migration rate: A measure to determine the frequency (in per cent) at which immigrants leave the country to reside elsewhere each year.

Weighted average onward migration rate by cohort: A measure to determine the frequency (in per cent) at which a cohort of immigrants leaves the country to reside elsewhere, weighted by the size of the entering cohort.

Weighted average onward migration rate by years since arrival: A measure to determine the frequency (in per cent) at which immigrants leave the country to reside elsewhere, based on the time that has passed (in years) since they gained permanent residence, weighted by the size of the entering cohort.

Restrictive citizenship: Countries with restrictive citizenship require the forfeit of one's citizenship if acquiring that of another country.

Tolerant citizenship: Countries with tolerant citizenship allow their citizens to hold dual citizenship.

Two-step immigrant: A permanent resident who was a temporary resident before (i.e., held a study or work permit prior to permanent residence).

Appendix C

Categories

Table 1
Immigration programs and admission categories

Immigration program of entry	Admission category
Federal Skilled Workers	Economic immigration
Quebec Skilled Workers	Quebec
Skilled Trades	Economic immigration
Canadian Experience	Economic immigration
Live-in Caregivers	Economic immigration
Other Caregivers	Economic immigration
Atlantic Immigration Pilot Program	Economic immigration
Atlantic Immigration Program	Economic immigration
Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot	Economic immigration
Agri-Food Immigration Pilot	Economic immigration
Federal Entrepreneurs	Economic immigration
Start-up Business	Economic immigration
Quebec Entrepreneurs	Quebec
Federal Investors	Economic immigration
Quebec Investors	Quebec
Federal Self-employed	Economic immigration
Quebec Self-employed	Quebec
Provincial Nominees	Economic immigration
TR to PR Pathway	Economic immigration
Sponsored Spouses and Partners	Family sponsorship
Sponsored Parents and Grandparents	Family sponsorship
Sponsored Children	Family sponsorship
Sponsored Intercountry Adopted Child	Family sponsorship
Sponsored Family - HC	Family sponsorship
Sponsored Family n.i.e. (not in use)	Family sponsorship
Protected Persons	Refugee
Dependant Abroad of Protected Persons	Refugee
Government Assisted Refugees (GAR)	Refugee
Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSR)	Refugee
Blended Sponsorship Refugees	Refugee
Humanitarian & Compassionate (HC)	Other
Public Policy	Other
Deferred Removal Order Class (D.R.O.C.)	Other
Retirees	Other
Temporary resident permits	Other
Dependant Resettled Refugees	Refugee

Sources: Statistics Canada; The Conference Board of Canada.

Table 2
Dual citizenship policies

Country of origin	Dual citizenship policy
Algeria	Tolerant
Bangladesh	Tolerant
Brazil	Tolerant
China	Restrictive
Colombia	Tolerant
Egypt	Tolerant
France	Tolerant
Haiti	Tolerant
India	Restrictive
Iran	Tolerant
Iraq	Tolerant
Jamaica	Tolerant
South Korea	Restrictive
Lebanon	Tolerant
Mexico	Tolerant
Morocco	Tolerant
Nigeria	Tolerant
Other	Other
Pakistan	Tolerant
Philippines	Tolerant
Russian Federation	Tolerant
Sri Lanka	Restrictive
Syria	Tolerant
Ukraine	Tolerant
United Kingdom	Tolerant
United States	Tolerant

Sources: Vink and others; The Conference Board of Canada.

Appendix D

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