

Canada's Immigration Policy: The intersection of Public Perception and Canada's Future.

Q: Are the current shifts in Canadians' perception of immigration valid?

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“Canada faces enormous challenges in the years ahead. Our ability to meet these challenges will depend primarily on our willingness to adapt our attitudes and habits to the facts of life.”

Former Canadian Prime Minister, Pierre Elliott Trudeau, 1976

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to examine the downturn in public perception about Canada’s immigration policy and highlight policy adjustments to maintain economic growth while emphasizing the importance of integrating manageable levels of non-permanent residents (NPRs) into the socio-economic landscape. This paper asserts that current immigration policy is compromised due to an imbalanced focus on permanent resident (PRs) numbers that does not account for NPRs numbers in Immigration Refugee Citizenship Canada’s (IRCC’s) levelling plan¹. Overall population growth and the impact of significant numbers of NPRs has overextended segments of the economy and decreased GDP per capita. The repercussion has been record-breaking population growth in 2023 that has triggered public unease about IRCC’s projected PR immigration levels. By addressing these issues, public reticence can be shifted through forward-thinking policy designed to reduce numbers and sustain necessary immigration to maintain an average GDP growth of 1.5% through 1.7%. This policy adjustment begins with a singular comprehensive international migration definition.

Background

Canada is home to immigrants (StatsCan, 2022). In 2021, more than 8.3 million of the 38 million people in Canada considered themselves an immigrant at one point (StatsCan, 2022; CIA, 2023). By 2041, 34% of the population will have passed through immigration processes, an exponential growth in sum due to current policies. The 2024-2026 *levelling plans*, enables this exponential growth and helps 2020-2021 COVID-related drawbacks (Janzen and Fan, 2023; Singer, 2022; StatsCan, 2022). The national identity and international reputation of Canada have been the subject of scholarly investigation regarding what elements contribute to a consistent pro-immigration outlook, regardless of the party in power² (Triadafilopoulos, 2021).

Both 2022 and 2023 revealed record breaking immigration since Confederation, 1921; the highest among the G7 (StatsCan, 2022). In contrast to other G7 nations that are reducing their immigration quotas, Canada stands out in its plan to sustain high annual streams of permanent residents (PRs) (StatsCan, 2022). This is correlated to positive public opinion towards immigrants, making Canada a distinct outlier among industrialized democracies: many of whom struggle with anti-immigration sentiment (Acevedo and Meseguer, 2022; OECD,

¹ The levels plan is a projection of how many permanent residents will be admitted to Canada in a given year and sets targets for overall admissions per immigration category. Under the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, the Minister (of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada) must table the levels plan in Parliament each year.

<https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2022/11/an-immigration-plan-to-grow-the-economy.html>

² Official policies, section 27 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and the 1988 Multiculturalism Act have shaped and deeply embedded a national identity that seeks to embrace a mosaic of cultures, and diverse identities.

2023; Guchteneire and Matthias, 2005). Two factors that support Canadian receptivity are a sense of control and a sense of economic need. Relative geographic isolation, environmentally discourages illegal entry and supports legal migration patterns, thus providing the public a sense of controlled immigration (Triadafilopoulos, 2021).

The relative success of IRCC's selective, points-based recruitment of the highly skilled helps frame immigration as beneficial and necessary to economic interests (Government of Canada, 2022). This has resulted in an influx of immigrants that are young, more highly educated than the domestic workforce, who participate in the labour market, and aid in Canada's GDP growth that has outpaced other advanced economies (Janzen and Fan, 2023). There are issues regarding underutilization of highly skilled PRs due to poor recognition models of foreign credentials, however, for the most part, the Canadian economy has been held together due to immigration (IRCC, 2022; Janzen and Fan, 2023).

Current Issue

Emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, Canada experienced one of the fastest recoveries among advanced economies, specifically due to immigration (Government of Canada, 2022). Yet concerns arise about structural capacities to handle significant quarterly population increases. Public reticence about high immigration rates is steadily growing, while the rise in subtle anti-immigration sentiment seems to confound decision makers (Neuman, 2023). A study conducted by Abacus Data (2023) indicated 67% of respondents said the 500,000-target number was too high and 40% said the same number is “**way** too high”.

Why? Because the majority of respondents believe that the targets have negative impacts on housing affordability/availability, healthcare access and congestion. Another study done by Environics Institute (2023) showed that in 2022, only 27% of Canadians felt that there was too much immigration, compared to 44% in 2023. Polling by Nanos Research also describes an inversion of public opinion away from consistent consensus to welcome more newcomers. In December 2023, 61% said immigration levels should be reduced, in an about-face from polling completed less than a year earlier, where 61% said immigration levels should either increase or remain the same (The Editorial Board, 2024).

Note that non-permanent residents (NPRs), meaning foreign temporary workers and international students, **are not included** in the 2024-2026 level plan. Only PRs are accounted for and given annual projection numbers (500,000). According to Randall Bartlett, Senior Director of Canadian Economics at Desjardins, NPRs were the primary population driver in 2023 and will continue to be, assuming IRCC plans remain. By July 2023, over 698,000 NPRs arrived in Canada (StatsCan, 2023a). Bartlett calculates an overall population growth of 1.8% is needed annually from 2023 through 2028 to sustain average GDP growth of 1.5% through 1.7% (Desjardins, 2024). Shutting the doors on NPRs would drop GDP, deepen recession and blunt recovery, while substantial increases in NPRs would raise real GDP growth to the point of avoiding recession and have positive long-term economic outcomes. The short- and long-term effects to other segments of the economy would suffer, such as housing, healthcare, and infrastructure, which triggers public unease.

As a result of the escalated pace of population growth – 2.7% in July 2023 (Mallees, 2023) through visa approved PR, and NPR holders, pro-immigration sentiments may continue to diminish. This warrants the pertinent questions: What has caused this pivot in public perception, and is there validity to these popular concerns?

Key Considerations

Evolving perceptions towards immigration, amidst declining national optimism, decreased feelings of hopefulness, and increasing economic anxieties, merits a nuanced examination (StatsCan, 2022; Janzen and Fan, 2023). The current socio-economic landscape in Canada provides a fertile ground for scrutinizing this shift in attitudes (Gordozeisky, 2018; Lewin-Epstein and Levanon, 2005; Quillian, 1995; Shields and Alrob, 2021). Group threat theory offers insight on this about-face in public opinion suggesting that inter-group hostility and negative attitudes towards immigration can emerge from perceived threats to social standing and access to resources.

At a time when Canadians are losing sleep over financial concerns, as noted in RBC (2023) poll, facing the pressure of inflation, unaffordable housing, and high cost of living, such perceptions of threat become more pronounced. As resources are perceived to be scarce and competition for them intensifies, immigrants are often erroneously seen as exacerbating these challenges, becoming scapegoats for broader systemic economic issues. However, the reader must also acknowledge the preponderance of warnings from economists, the banking sector, policy analysts and media releases about the dislocation of segments of the economy, decreased labour productivity, and the downturn in GDP per capita for six consecutive quarters that results from Canada's 1.2 million population boom in 12 months (TD Economics, 2023; Global News, 2024). This underscores the need for nuanced adjustments to population growth rates through responsive immigration policies that balance socio-economic impacts and strive to alleviate tensions arising from economic insecurities.

Alternatives

In addressing the complexities of Canada's rapid population growth, two strategic approaches must be taken into consideration; the status quo and the recommended targeted levels approach. The following table presents an economic implication analysis of both.

Table 1 *The following Table provides an economic impact analysis of the two strategic approaches.*

	Option 1: Status Quo The ‘Hold the Line’ Approach	Option 2: Recommendation The ‘Targeted Levels Adjustments’ Approach
<i>Strategy</i>	<p>Keep the 2024 - 2026 leveling plan in place, which proposes the annual increase of PRs to 500,000. No restrictions on visas, including temporary foreign workers and international students. No definition.</p>	<p>Comprehensive approach that starts with the definition of immigration: all international migration into the country. Included both PR and NPRs, formerly referred to as the ‘invisible population’. Immigration targets must be lowered to fit manageable, Canadian population growth. The target will be observed through trends and mandated based on two factors: 1) Space and Resources Available; 2) Maintenance of annual increase of 1.5% - 1.7% GDP.</p>
<i>Positive</i>	<p>1) Maintains stability in the system, minimizes disruption, and relies on current methods.</p> <p>2) Bridges labour shortage gap for infrastructure development (StatsCan, 2021). Utilization of immigration to meet labour market shortages.</p> <p>3) Contributions to the pension system, support in aiding the dependency ratio (Peri, 2020).</p> <p>5) Projected GDP growth of 3% annually (TD Bank, 2023).</p>	<p>1) Allows for exact counting of all migration groups, which aligns with the Bank of Canada’s current measures of immigration (Bank of Canada, 2023).</p> <p>2) With appropriate counting and definition, adjustments in migration levels can align with available space and resources, leading to more sustainable population growth of 1.8%, or 720,000, compared to the 3.2% observed currently (Desjardins, 2024).</p> <p>3) Improves resource allocation, transitioning from the current crisis to a better alignment of immigration with available healthcare, social services, and educational resources, decreasing competition and group threat.</p> <p>4) Enhances integration and cohesion, more sustainable amount of migration will lead to improved integration experiences for immigrants, fostering social cohesion. (Japaridze and Kaplan, 2023; Abacus, 2023).</p> <p>5) Targets labour market needs with immigration levels, considering the transition to decrease economic immigrants and other visas, and utilize the</p>

Federal Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) from the 4% it currently is to an adequate amount to support infrastructure development (Bank of Canada, 2023; StatsCan, 2021; The Business Council, 2023).

<i>Negative</i>	<p>1) Competition resources; labour market shortage only evident in low-skilled employment, however, scarce for employment requiring a bachelor's degree or higher (StatsCan, 2021).</p> <p>2) High levels of immigration are leading to housing imbalance (Bank of Canada, 2023). High population growth scenario requires over 26 million housing units to be built by 2030 to meet the housing supply gap (CMHC, 2023). Addition must be added to the current \$72+ billion 10-year National Housing Strategy.</p> <p>3) Only 15,000 shelter beds are currently available (StatsCan, 2022). Insufficient for projected continued population growth of 3.7% (Desjardin, 2024).</p> <p>4) Earnings growth is much slower among skilled trades immigrants than any other economic immigrants (StatsCan, 2021).</p> <p>5) GDP per capita increase of mere 0.4%, much lower compared to other countries (TD Bank, 2023).</p>	<p>1) Implementing a new definition and approach will lead to an initial transition period, which would require administrative and policy development costs, which may be difficult due to a 3% decrease in Federal budget towards IRCC programs (Department of Finance, 2023).</p> <p>2) Reducing current immigration levels can lead to a short-term gap in labour market demands and heavier dependency on internal innovation and production methods (Beach, 2008; Fields and El-Assal, 2018; Rubinstein, 2022).</p> <p>3) The reduction of reliance on international students as a revenue source for post-secondary institutions requires a new financial agreement between Federal and Provincial governments. These agreements will need to compensate for the expected shortcomings from the current \$22.3 billion economic contribution from international students (Kane, 2023; StatsCan, 2023).</p>
<i>Analysis</i>	<p>May contribute to short-term economic growth but raises concerns about long-term sustainability and social integration.</p>	<p>Balanced method to align immigration with Canada's socio-economic capacities and growth targets contain more long-term benefits, mitigating upfront costs and potential short-term economic impacts.</p>

Implementation: Targeted Policy Adjustments

1. **Inclusive 'Immigrant' term for Policy and Planning:** Use the term **international migration** to refer to the total, annual im/migration³ numbers in policy and planning discourse. Use only one projected quota that must include all forms of migration (ex. PRs & NPRs). This redefinition will help in crafting policies that avoids undercounting international migration numbers.
2. **Flexible 'Levelling Plan':** Develop a 'levelling plan' for international migrations (all PRs & NPRs) that is based on 1.8% minimum to 2.2% maximum population growth rate (Desjardins, 2024). Using one annual population target that maintains average GDP growth of 1.5% to 1.7% will ensure controlled population growth that includes but is not exceeded by PRs & NPR numbers. This 'levelling plan' be revisited and revised annually to reflect changing national and global contexts (see Appendix).
3. **Continuous Stress Testing:** Allow for regular adjustments based on real-time assessments of Canada's infrastructure, healthcare, housing, and educational needs.
4. **Integration-Focused Policy:** Prioritize the integration of immigrants through scaling service capacities for effective integration programming. These programs should focus on housing, language training, employment, and cultural acclimatization. NPRs, who do not intend long-term integration, still need access to some resources and integrated services for their success during their time in Canada.
5. **Preventing a Tipping Point:** averts a potential breaking point where the strain on resources leads to group threat prevalence and a decline in Canada's status as a favoured destination for immigrants.

Next Steps

Public concerns are valid. Unsustainable population growth under Canada's current immigration policy jeopardizes the standard of living for Canadians and Immigrants alike. Adopting the recommended approach is crucial to maintain healthy integration and meet public needs. Let's keep Canada a home for immigrants.

Reference List

³ "im/migration" is a shorthand to indicate both immigrants and migrants. This term is used among settlement organizations i.e., <https://ocasi.org/ocasi-federal-pre-budget-submission-2024-2025> - See recommendation 4

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Appendix

Table 2. *The following provides recommended growth rates needed to maintain average GDP growth of 1.5% through 1.7% compared to current population growth. Projections based on Desjardins analysis report (2024) and Bank of Canada's Monetary Policy Report (2023). Current Canadian population is retrieved from StatsCan, 2023 as of October 2023. Please note, numbers are rounded to the nearest significant digit. PPG means Projected Population Growth. **Bold numbers are the target level/number for annual population growth.***

Current Canadian Population	Minimum Population Growth	Medium Recommended Population Growth	Maximum Population Growth	Current Population Growth as of July, 2023	Current Population Growth as of Dec. 2023
40,500,00	1.80%	2.0%	2.20%	2.7%	3.2%
2023	730,000	810,000	892,000	1,094,000	1,297,000
PPG	41,250,000	41,300,000	41,420,000	41,600,000	41,825,000
2024	742,000	826,000	911,000	1,124,000	1,338,000
PPG	42,000,000	42,170,000	42,330,000	42,750,000	43,164,000
2025	756,000	843,000	931,000	1,154,000	1,380,000
PPG	43,500,000	43,000,000	43,250,000	43,900,000	44,544,000
2026	783,000	860,000	952,000	1,185,000	1,425,000
PPG	44,300,000	43,870,000	44,215,000	45,085,000	45,970,000
2027	798,000	877,000	972,000	1,217,000	1,471,000
PPG	45,100,000	44,750,000	45,190,000	46,300,000	47,440,000
2028	811,000	895,000	994,000	1,250,000	1,520,000
PPG	459,200,000	45,650,000	46,180,000	47,550,000	48,960,000