

Migration and urbanization trends and family wellbeing in Canada: A focus on disability and Indigenous issues

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The Vanier Institute of the Family

- A national, independent, charitable organization committed to **sharing knowledge of families in Canada** in all their diversities
- **Positioned at the centre of networks** of researchers, educators, policy makers, and organizations with an interest in families
- **Strengthens the national understanding** of families by making research evidence more accessible
- Established in **1965**

The importance of a family lens

- **Thinking about *families*, rather than *individuals***, is essential if we wish to position families as the focus of policy discussions
- **Lays the groundwork for evaluating culture and practices of policy makers**, and recognizes policy strengths, weaknesses, and gaps in understanding
- Useful in identifying **unintended influences on families** of policies designed with individuals in mind

Family Diversities Framework



FAMILY STRUCTURE

How people are linked to form families

- Parenting structures
- “Non-kin” structures
- Generational structures



FAMILY WORK

The distribution of paid and unpaid work within families

- High-risk work
- Work defined by periods of absence
- Precarious or marginalized work
- Care work



FAMILY IDENTITY

Lenses through which families are viewed

- Race/ethnicity
- Religion
- Citizenship
- Sex and gender

Family wellbeing is the desired outcome for all family types

Family Identity

Families with disability

Indigenous families

- **Families with disability and Indigenous families experience exclusion**
- **Priority employment equity groups**
- **Families with disability**
 - Family member(s) limited in daily activities due to a long-term condition or health problem
 - Applies to physical and mental health, sensory, or cognitive disabilities
- **Indigenous families**
 - First Nations, Inuit, and Métis; > 50 Nations and 50 Indigenous languages
 - Distinct from one another with unique languages, histories, spiritual beliefs, and cultural practices.
 - Definitions of family often diverge from dominant policy model

Migration and urbanization in North America

- **Experiences in Canada and the U.S. differ due to unique political, economic, socio-cultural, and historical circumstances**
- **Family reconciliation and economic needs**
 - Family reunification as the “bedrock” of US immigration
 - Wider range of family members, but capped according to category of relationship and country of origin
 - Canada has more economic immigration
 - Narrower range of relations but numbers are not capped
- **Both countries highly urbanized but different urban governance models**
 - Canadian cities not as complex governmentally - dominated by central cities
 - US cities more complex with fragmented metro areas - affects access to programs and services

Migration

- Immigration policies can unite or fragment families
- Four immigrant classes:
 - **Family sponsorship** class prioritizes specific relationships
 - **Economic immigrant, refugees, and “other” immigrant** classes have a more restrictive set of family members
- Policy priorities may be implicitly designed for specific types of diversities:

Family Structure

- Parents, either married or common-law, with children

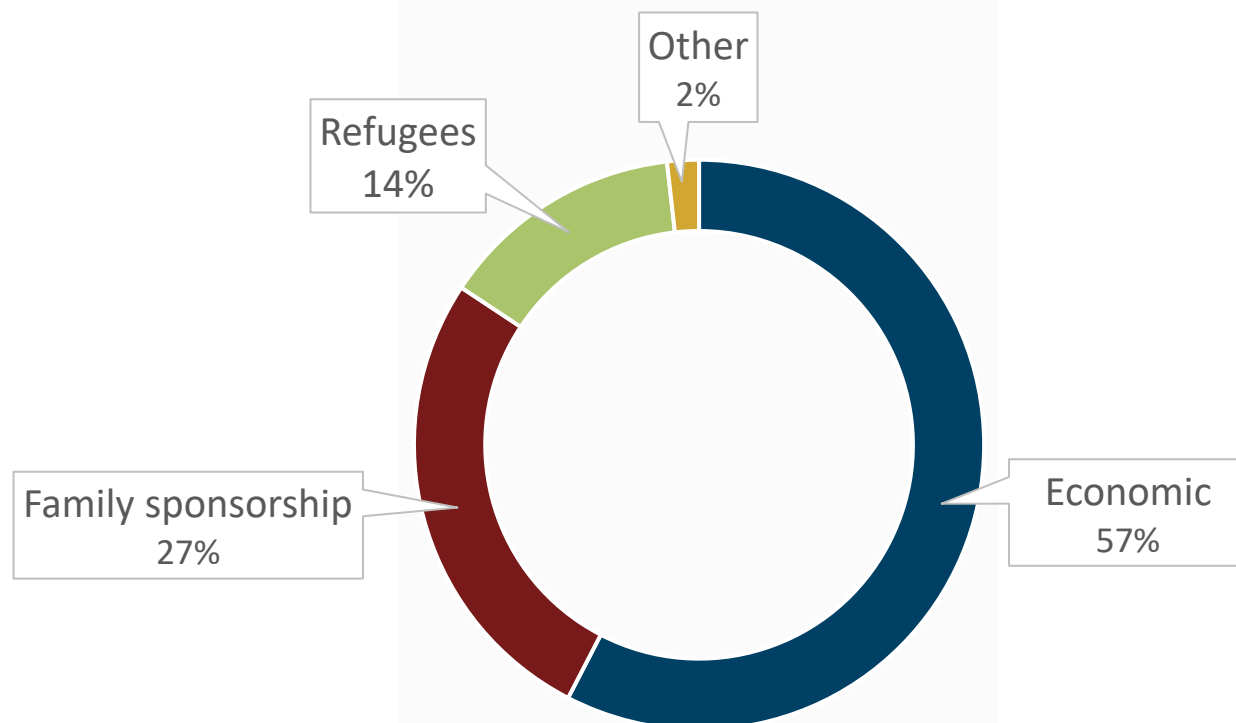
Family Work

- Families who fill employment needs designated by government

Family Identity

- Families who are part of identity groups that are not valued

Percentage of Permanent Residents admitted to Canada by Immigration Class, 2020



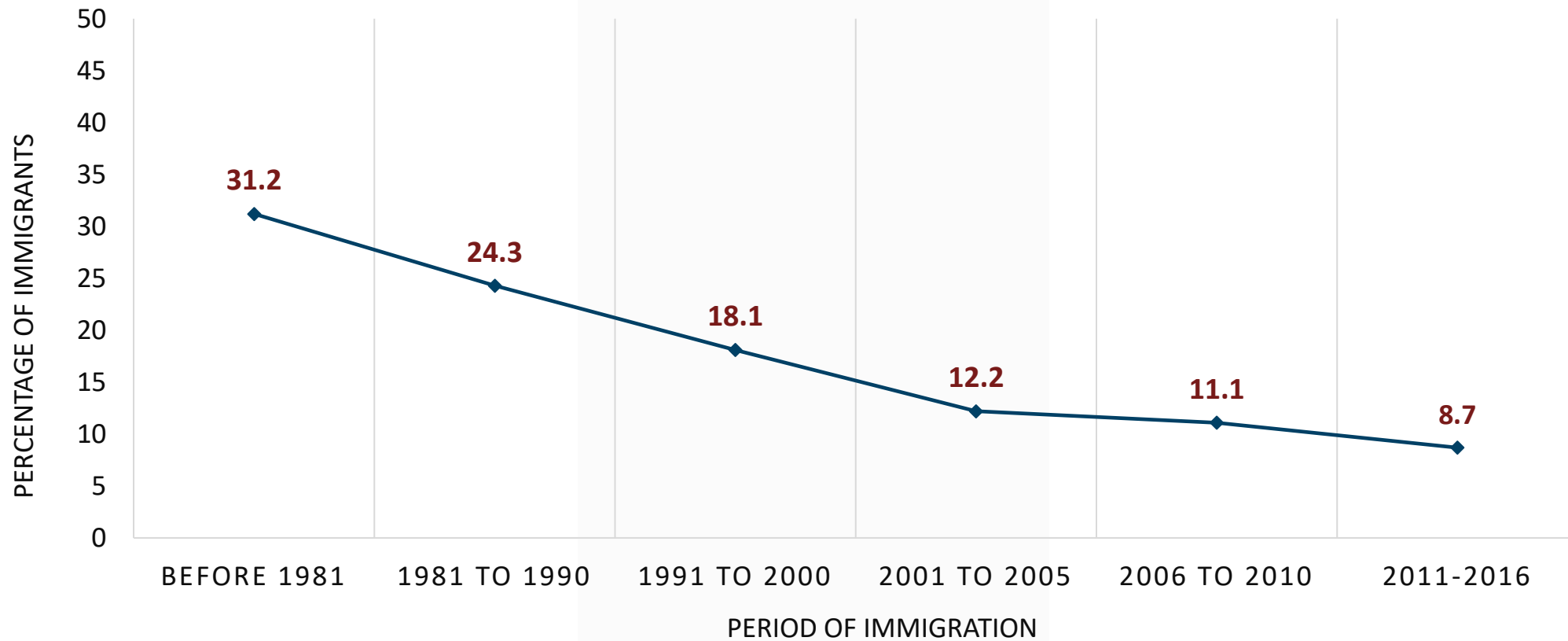
Source: Minister of Immigration Refugees and Citizenship. (2022). *2021 Annual report to parliament on immigration*.

<https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/publications-manuals/annual-report-parliament-immigration-2021.html>

Families with Disability

- **Canada has not had a history of welcoming immigrants with disabilities**, but immigration law does not preclude people with disabilities and their families from applying
- **Excessive demands clause** - may be deemed inadmissible on health grounds:
 - Anticipated health or social service costs expected to exceed those of average Canadians over five years
 - Or, if demand on health or social services would increase waiting times that could negatively affect the health of Canadian citizens or permanent residents
- Aims to protect overuse of Canada's publicly funded social and health care systems, BUT it treats **financial costs as a burden of disability**, rather than as an investment in full participation, inclusion, and positive contributions to Canadian society
- Family wellbeing - **negative physical and mental health implications** for older family members left behind

Immigrants to Canada by Period of Immigration and Presence of Disability



Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Survey on Disability (CSD) 2017, linked to the 2016 Census of Population

Indigenous families

- First Nations peoples granted citizenship in **1960**
 - After WWII, Indigenous families were encouraged **to leave reserves and assimilate** into the dominant culture.
 - *“Despite the geography of their birth, to be considered citizens, **Aboriginal Canadians had to ‘immigrate’** from peripheral reserves to mainstream Canadian communities in a manner metaphorically similar to the journey taken by the refugees who left Europe’s DP camps and immigrants who fled its impoverished regions.”*
- Indigenous families have been subject to forced **migration and relocation** to urban areas and other remote regions
 - **Framed by government for**
 - Administrative usefulness
 - Development
 - **Implications for family wellbeing**
 - Disconnection from land and family, erosion of intergenerational cultural influences, greater risk of depressive symptoms and less effective parenting

(Bohaker & Iacovetta, 2009, p. 66)

Urbanization

- In 2021, **83.4%** of households were in **urban areas**
- In Canada, rural areas have a population of **less than 1,000 residents** and a population density of **less than 400 people/km²**
- Almost equal numbers moving from rural to urban as urban to rural
- Growth of **downtown** populations
- Between 2016 and 2019, **9 in 10 new immigrants** settled in large urban centres (pop. 100,000 or more)

Family Structure

By-laws in large cities that allow garden suites on residential locations make it easier for multigenerational families to reside in the same location

Family Work

Cities have more employment opportunities, but long commutes may affect how families apportion their work

Family Identity

Same-gender, non-binary or transgender couples more likely to live in large urban centres, especially in the downtown core where they may feel more welcome

Families, disability, and urbanization

- **Urban areas have better access to health care and other related supports, which can improve the wellbeing of families**
 - Family physicians, specialists, and emergency departments
 - Community and social support services available for families such as respite care, supportive housing, specialized transportation, and service coordination and arrangement
- **Consider challenges of city living such as affordability and its impact on a family's material wellbeing**
- **Official statistics not kept for families with disability having to relocate or do without needed services**
 - Information gap when considering policies to help ease the transition and ensure continuous, high-quality supports and services

Indigenous families and urbanization

- **More than half** of Indigenous people live in **urban areas**
- **High mobility**, moving into and out of urban spaces according to family circumstances and presence of other family and community members
- **Poverty levels high** for urban Indigenous families
- Experiences of **persistent racism**, significantly greater risk of human rights violations
 - Some change related to Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) and Idle No More movement
- Media representations entrenched in **“victim”** and **“survivor”** narratives
 - Could feature Indigenous families that are thriving and experiencing high levels of family wellbeing

Good policy from a family diversity perspective

Family Structure	Family Work	Family Identity
<p>How do we know the impact of migration and urbanization if we set policy without flexibility in the definition of family?</p> <p>Assess the impact of imposing a dominant family model.</p> <p>Allow families to remain intact for better relational wellbeing.</p>	<p>How do we support families that relocate to Canada or to an urban centre for better job opportunities?</p> <p>Assist with earlier recognition of international qualifications for immigrants and ensure equal educational opportunities for Indigenous people.</p> <p>Improved access to employment insurance special benefits to support families during major life transitions for better material wellbeing.</p>	<p>How do we ensure that experiences of specific identity groups are not overlooked?</p> <p>Disaggregate national data whenever possible to monitor stability and change in outcomes of families' material, relational, and subjective wellbeing.</p> <p>Advance programs and services to address systemic barriers and inequality.</p>

Thank you

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