



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# Supporting Canada's COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery Through Robust Immigration Policy and Programs

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Canada has been seen globally as a leader in immigration and integration policies and programs, and as an attractive and welcoming country for immigrants, refugees, temporary foreign workers, and international students. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed some of the strengths of Canada's immigration system, as well as some of the fault lines that have been developing and have deepened over the last few years. In this briefing, we provide an overview of Canada's immigration system prior to the pandemic, and the policies and programs in place to support immigrant selection, settlement, and integration. We then discuss the system's vulnerabilities as revealed by the pandemic, and explore a post-COVID-19 immigration vision.

Canada's immigration process has been highly selective, garnering support from the Canadian public for its strong focus on highly skilled immigrants and the economic contributions they can make, while overlooking the fact that many temporary foreign workers in Canada who are deemed low-skilled are in fact involved in essential work. Canada has created a bifurcated migration system with high-skilled migrants becoming permanent residents, and migrants deemed lower-skilled becoming permanently temporary. Yet as the pandemic has revealed, many temporary foreign workers, including agricultural workers, are essential to the functioning of our economy and the food security of our country. The pandemic has also highlighted the vulnerability of a variety of permanent and temporary resident groups in Canada (e.g., refugees, refugee claimants, temporary foreign workers, international students, immigrant women), the drive for family reunification and the constraints therein, the benefits and particular challenges of regionalization, and the difficulties involved in meeting targets for Francophone immigration and sustaining these immigrants in Francophone minority communities in Canada. To address these issues requires a consolidated re-evaluation of Canada's immigration program and policies, engaging Canadians in these discussions.

It is also the case that despite Canada's focus on bringing in highly skilled immigrants, a long-standing problem in Canada is the underutilization of these immigrants' skills, leading to a waste of human capital. This has been especially salient during the pandemic in terms of internationally educated healthcare professionals. Many immigrants in health-related occupations have experienced deskilling, which is particularly noteworthy given the large number of jobs in health occupations in Canada that are unfilled. With the urgent need for health workers to be mobilized for testing, tracking, and provision of health services during the pandemic, it is time to revisit the need to more fully use the skills of immigrant healthcare professionals who are in Canada but not working in the professions for which they were trained.

Canada has a highly respected settlement sector that provides a variety of services to immigrants and refugees settling in Canada, and these services have also been deemed essential during the pandemic. These services have traditionally been provided in person and the pivot to online

delivery has not occurred without difficulty. Agencies often lack the equipment and digital expertise to provide all services online, and immigrant and refugee digital literacy and access to technology is at times lacking. It is also the case that the pandemic has highlighted a variety of additional services and supports that are required during, and beyond, the pandemic. The pandemic has also underscored the lag between eligibility for settlement services, which is organized around a historical norm of direct entry of immigrants as permanent residents, and Canada's current immigration regime, in which more newcomers enter with temporary status, with the hope or intention of transitioning to permanent residents. The need for international students, temporary foreign workers, and refugee claimants to receive some of these services has become especially salient at this time.

The settlement and integration of immigrants also requires the support of Canadians, and public attitudes toward immigrants in this country are not fully immune to xenophobia, especially at a time of higher unemployment and when uncertainty and feelings of threat dominate. It is thus essential to closely monitor Canadians' attitudes toward immigrants, temporary residents, and immigration, and to proactively engage in efforts to promote positive attitudes while reducing the racism that these groups may experience.

This report provides a set of recommendations for action by the federal and provincial/territorial governments designed to optimize immigration to Canada: see Appendix A. At a broad level, these include:

- A public education program on immigration (to promote an informed public), followed by a comprehensive review, whether in the form of a Royal Commission, task force, or other mechanism, to engage Canadians in a discussion of the future of immigration to Canada, and a recalibration of its policies and programs to meet Canada's own current and future needs and its global responsibilities
- Immigration planning and federal settlement funding that takes into account both permanent and temporary residents
- Expanded pathways to permanence for temporary residents
- Targeted policies and programs that address the needs of vulnerable permanent and temporary resident groups
- Special consideration of Francophone immigration
- Public campaigns and civic engagement program expansion to promote positive attitudes toward immigrants, refugees, and immigration among established Canadians and to promote smaller jurisdictions to newcomers
- A coordinated network of national promising practices in the incorporation of skilled immigrants in the workplace
- Research to drive evidence-based policy and program redesign during the pandemic and beyond
- Leadership on the Global Compacts on Refugees and Migration

As of the third quarter of 2020, Canada's population growth has stopped, and all future growth will solely rely on immigration. Over the next three years, the Canadian Government intends to bring to this country the population equivalent of the Province of Manitoba through permanent resident streams. Additionally, Canada will continue to accept many international students, refugee claimants, and temporary foreign workers for temporary residence here. The importance of

immigration for Canada will continue to grow and be an integral component of the country's post-COVID-19 recovery. To succeed, it is essential to take stock, to re-evaluate Canada's immigration and integration policies and programs, and to expand Canada's global leadership in this area. The authors offer insights and recommendations to reinvigorate and optimize Canada's immigration program over the next decade and beyond.