

Newcomers: Get rich, go rural



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Rural Canada is crying out for more doctors, nurses and other skilled workers. More than a year ago, Denis Coderre announced that his Department of Citizenship and Immigration would be tinkering with a plan to channel immigrants to rural areas and smaller settlements in an effort to divert them from Canada's major cities — by locking highly skilled workers, including medical professionals, into jobs and settlement in rural areas for three to five years, in exchange for immigration status. Since then, Quebec Immigration Minister Michelle Courchesne is reportedly searching for ways to encourage immigrants to settle outside of Montreal.

Now, a new study of census data suggests that tackling the economic integration of immigrants through some sort of rural-enticement policy just could work. The study shows that recent immigrants to British Columbia who settle in Victoria or places like Nanaimo or Prince George tend to do better in the labour market than those in Greater Vancouver.

In Victoria, 80 per cent of recent immigrant men participate in the labour force, compared to 64-per-cent in Greater Vancouver. Among recent immigrant women, 70-per-cent in Victoria and smaller places were in the labour force, compared to 51-per-cent in Vancouver. The newcomers' average income is higher in smaller communities than in Vancouver. Recent immigrant men averaged well above \$22,000 in places outside of Greater Vancouver, as opposed to only \$17,350 within it. Recent immigrant women in Victoria earned almost \$16,000; their counterparts in Vancouver made on average slightly more than \$12,000.

The lesson: Smaller communities seem to reward immigrants more generously than gateway cities. This pattern is consistent across educational categories. A self-selection by the most-skilled immigrants to settle in smaller places can therefore be ruled out as an explanation for the rural-urban differences.

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Any attempt to revive ways of encouraging rural settlement must recognize the underlying workings of the immigrant labour market in different communities. Skilled professionals, especially foreign doctors and nurses, are precisely those least likely to have their foreign credentials recognized by Canadian regulatory bodies. Stripped of their ability to practice, they wind up in low-paying jobs.

For newcomers, large cities' immigrant and ethnic communities seem to offer vital opportunities. The expected scenario is that the adjustment will be made easier by a large immigrant community that can pass on information about job openings. Immigrant entrepreneurs will hire ethnic workers, and demand for ethnic specialty goods and services will provide business opportunities.

Now consider a less rosy scenario: Newcomers must line up at the end of a long labour queue, behind immigrants who've arrived earlier, developed effective social and economic networks and gained Canadian work experience. What's left are jobs in the lower end of the labour market, or in a sweatshop or the underground economy.

Indeed, the presence of large ethnic and immigrant communities is not always associated with improved employment conditions for newcomers. South Asians, one of B.C.'s major immigrant groups, have higher unemployment rates in places with a large South Asian presence, such as Abbotsford.

Based on these statistics, Mr. Coderre's initial proposal to encourage immigrants to seek economic opportunities outside of Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver has merit. Unfortunately, the suggested measures to implement the plan are unacceptable from a civil-rights perspective. The plan proposed to deport immigrants who broke the terms of their employment and settlement agreement — a strategy condemned by legal experts as violating the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

The most promising aspect of Mr. Coderre's proposal was to persuade provincial professional and trades-regulating bodies to recognize newcomers' credentials. This would solve Quebec's problem — that immigrants who settle outside Montreal can't match available jobs with their credentials — without compromising immigrants' basic rights to freedom of movement within Canada.

Immigrants who are stripped of their credentials cannot be lured to small towns by work they cannot perform. Instead, they'll follow the bright lights of the city, where a wider range of jobs in the low-wage and informal sector exists.

On the other hand, once highly skilled and experienced workers find work in their fields, they will be attracted to the existing employment opportunities in small towns and even remote rural locations — places Canadian professionals reject. After all, most immigrants come to Canada to work. We all would benefit from having them go where they are needed most.

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