



Welcoming Immigrants: Community Perceptions from the Lived Experience Expert Panel (LEEP)



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Introduction

Canada's rural and small communities can flourish in the next half century by welcoming immigrants who can help sustain the economy and address essential workforce shortages. Positive attitudes from existing residents towards immigrants can help newcomers feel at home in their new communities.

This report aims to offer a snapshot into non-immigrant attitudes towards immigrants in Huron and Perth's rural and small communities. A survey was conducted among persons with lived experiences of systems and who have faced discrimination in the past to explore attitudes towards immigrants. Survey respondents are members of Huron Perth Public Health's Lived Experience Expert Panel (LEEP).

The survey found that most respondents knew recent newcomers, particularly from India, Syria, Mexico, and Ukraine. Roughly 25 per cent of the respondents considered themselves to be very welcoming and 60 per cent roughly somewhat welcoming. The respondents also identified that newcomers had limited options for housing, suitable and economically viable jobs, and public transportation. The respondents were most likely to welcome newcomers to the community by asking questions and listening to others, supporting a small business run by a newcomer or attending a cultural activity or event.

This survey suggests that people who have lived experience of systems and have experienced discrimination in rural and small communities are generally welcoming towards newcomers in spite of any economic hardships they may have faced or still face. This bucks the growing anti-immigrant sentiments drawn by recent national polls on the subject.

This report on the LEEP survey starts by introducing the subject, followed by a brief examination of the reasons why the survey was commissioned. This is followed by an exploration of the role of Local Immigration Partnerships, the survey methodology, a summary of findings, and the survey limitations. The report concludes with lessons learned from the LEEP.

Background

Positive attitudes towards immigrants of all racial, cultural, and religious backgrounds are a key component for creating welcoming communities to which immigrants are attracted and want to stay in (Esses et al., 2023). Positive attitudes can drive the public's behaviour toward immigrants and affect their reactions to immigration policies and practices. Positive attitudes also impact the availability of local support and services for immigrants and newcomers.

To promote positive attitudes and interactions towards immigrants, the Huron County Local Immigration Partnership has annually celebrated a Welcoming Week since 2021. Held in September, Welcoming Week is an international campaign marked by organizations and communities designed to bring neighbours of all backgrounds together through events and activities to build connections and underline the importance of welcoming and inclusive places. Part of Huron County's Welcoming Week campaign is to encourage individual actions to welcome newcomers to Canada.

National polls about attitudes among Canadians towards immigration have highlighted that people who live in rural areas are more likely to have negative attitudes towards immigration (Environics, 2023). Particularly, among the people surveyed, people in rural areas were less likely to see the need for more immigrants, more likely to see refugees as a strain on systems, and more likely to say that immigrants did not adapt to Canadian values.

Additionally, local surveys conducted in Huron and Perth among 297 immigrants and visible minorities have highlighted discrimination as a significant challenge immigrants and visible minorities face (Lapshina & Esses, 2021). A total of 76.1 per cent of immigrants who were visible minorities reported experiencing discrimination in the past three years. The people who reported experiencing discrimination identified the perpetrators as most likely to be White non-immigrants in Huron and Perth. When an individual experienced discrimination, they were less likely to feel a sense of acceptance and welcoming within a Huron or Perth community, the researchers found.

On the other hand, additional research conducted among immigrants in Huron and Perth highlighted that community members made many newcomers feel welcome (Nonkes, Nadkarni & Thomson, 2024; Social Research and Planning Council, 2017). In a 2023 survey of 195 immigrants who live in Huron and Perth, 69 per cent stated they found their community to be somewhat or very welcoming to immigrants and newcomers. Through 2017 focus group discussions, immigrants in Huron and Perth reported communities as friendly and feelings of being respected and valued.

In the neighbouring counties of Grey and Bruce, also a rural region of Ontario, a study of immigrants reported they appreciated the friendliness and neighbourliness of their communities (Nguyen & Kelly, 2023). The Grey and Bruce immigrant residents said they enjoyed being on a first-name basis with many in their communities and felt that residents supported one another as needed. That said, developing deeper, more meaningful relationships with non-immigrant residents who had established social networks in their area was seen as challenging by the Grey-Bruce immigrant research participants.

About the Immigrant Survey

The Huron County Immigration Partnership works with a network of organizations to ensure Huron County is a welcoming community where newcomers to Canada feel supported, at home, and integrated in all spheres of their lives.

In November of 2023, the Local Immigration Partnership launched an Immigrant Survey - a multilingual survey open to all immigrants, refugees, international students, temporary workers, refugee claimants, and their families in the Huron and Perth region. The survey asked newcomers to share experiences of living, working, and studying in the area to help build a thriving, prosperous community for everyone.

As the Immigrant Survey was being developed, the Local Immigration Partnership also wanted to understand how welcoming Huron Perth communities are to newcomers from the people who live in communities seeing an increase in newcomers, what residents see as barriers for newcomers, and what their communities would be willing to do to welcome newcomers.

About the LEEP

The Lived Experience Expert Panel (LEEP), an initiative of Huron Perth Public Health, is a virtual panel of Huron Perth residents, adults 18+, who have experience of systems which may include social assistance, education and healthcare, and legal systems such as courts, child welfare, the Indian Act, immigration, and others. People's experiences of discrimination can be based on ability, age, body size, culture, ethnicity, family status, gender, language, race, religion, sex, social class, socio-economic status, or other social determinants of health. The LEEP is one public health initiative that aims to advance health equity by including lived experience and expertise in program planning, policy development, service improvement and decision-making for Huron Perth Public Health and its community partners. Panelists agreed to share their expertise and insights with Huron Perth Public Health and community partners.

Part of the impetus for asking the LEEP about welcoming newcomers is that there is an information gap in the literature. Rural Huron and Perth County residents, particularly those who have lived experience of systems and have faced discrimination themselves, have not been asked for their insight into their communities concerning newcomer experiences.

Survey Methodology

The LEEP survey about community perceptions of immigrants was designed by representatives from the Huron Perth Public Health and the Huron County Local Immigration Partnership.

Members of the LEEP received surveys via email which includes a link to a secure online survey platform. The survey was open for two weeks. Of the 29 active panelists, 17 responded to this survey. Results were compiled and returned to the Panel for feedback. The summary was then shared with the Local Immigration Partnership. This report results from a collaboration between the Huron Local Immigration Partnership and the Lived Experience Expert Panel survey and the Huron Perth Public Health LEEP Team Lead.

Findings

Almost all panelists who responded indicated that they are seeing an increase in newcomers in their community. Many panelists who knew a recent newcomer to Canada, and indicated that their countries of origin included India, Syria, Mexico, and Ukraine. A total of 25 per cent of panelists indicated their community was very welcoming, and 60 per cent said it was somewhat welcoming. Half of the panelists were aware of programs and services for newcomers, including the YMCA Settlement Services, local libraries, the Local Community Food Centre, the United Way, and some church/faith groups.

When asked about barriers to welcoming newcomers, most indicated that Huron Perth communities do not have enough of the following:

- ▶ Housing
- ▶ Suitable well-paying jobs
- ▶ Public transportation options

Some panelists noted other barriers including: language; isolation; negative attitudes; that there are too few organizations supporting settlement in some communities; and racism/discrimination.

Welcoming activities that panelists said members of their communities would be likely to do include:

- ▶ Being open to creating welcoming spaces
- ▶ Asking questions and listening to others
- ▶ Supporting a small business run by a newcomer
- ▶ Attending a cultural activity or event

Some panelists also indicated that members of their community would also: Volunteer to become a newcomer host; bring a small gift of homemade food to the home of a newcomer; volunteer at a multicultural event; and look at news sources from other countries.

When asked about programs and services that may be missing, panelists indicated that there is a lack of suitable and affordable housing for everyone, including newcomers, and that there needs to be more help for newcomers to be connected to the services they need including health care, schools, childcare, income supports, emergency services and assistance with navigating their new communities.

Some panelists also indicated that they would like to support newcomers but aren't sure how; that there should be more ways for newcomers to connect with others from their country of origin, especially in rural areas; that there could be more volunteer opportunities to help; more information about newcomer resources; and better access to interpretation services.

Discussion

The Lived Experience Expert Panel responses to this survey indicate that people in Huron Perth communities recognize that there are few suitable housing options available for newcomers. This is also true for other residents in need of affordable housing. Their responses also indicated a solid awareness of the support and services available to new immigrants and the gaps and barriers newcomers face. Panelist responses reveal that people recognize that there are things they can do to welcome newcomers to their community and that people are willing to do them and open to learning more about how.

The Lived Experience Expert Panel survey results reiterate that members of rural and small communities are welcoming to newcomers, and that they understand that immigration is an advantage for rural communities, that seeking immigration in response to out-migration, labour shortages, and aging populations is necessary and important.

It is worth noting that survey findings reflect the experience of the Local Immigration Partnership as community groups have formed to respond to the wave of newcomers over the years including most recently from Syria and Ukraine.

Limitations

At the time of this survey, the Lived Experience Expert Panel comprised 43 panelists. Nearly 40 per cent of panelists responded to this survey. Approximately 75 per cent of responding panelists resided in Huron and 25 per cent lived in Perth. Most panelists reside in communities with grocery stores (towns or the City of Stratford). The average age of panelists who responded was 42. Almost all panelists live in households that earn less than the living wage, and all have experienced discrimination. To our knowledge, no panelist is a recent immigrant to Canada.

Conclusion

Responses from the Lived Experience Expert Panel reiterated and confirmed what we know from other studies; that rural residents are often welcoming toward newcomers. It also reveals that rural residents are aware of the barriers faced by newcomers, and that newcomer needs are not dissimilar to their own. The responses also indicate that there is some impetus for community members to be aware of services for newcomers; this group could also identify gaps. Finally, despite the interest in newcomer issues reported by respondents, few of them participated in events. This reveals an opportunity to consider increasing promotion of welcoming and other events such as the Multicultural Festival in places that may reach populations reflected by the LEEP.

As we work toward our goal, which is to be welcoming to every neighbour that makes Huron County home, understanding where and how current residents can undertake concrete actions is critical to creating and sustaining welcoming communities. This brief study demonstrates that there is fertile ground for more education, awareness and opportunities to further engage community members who already have some insight into the barriers newcomers face and who are interested and willing to help make our communities welcoming to everyone.

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