RURAL SETTLEMENT SERVICES IN WESTERN CANADA: AN INVENTORY AND OPPORTUNITY ASSESSMENT

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More immigrants are choosing to migrate to rural areas in Canada yet we know very little about the settlement services available to them. Evidence that identifies existing services and gaps in service provision are derived from case studies of 29 rural communities in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. The expansion of rural settlement services is needed to meet current and future needs of newcomers in rural western Canada. The findings suggest that current settlement services need to be offered more frequently, more broadly across specific geographic regions, to those newcomers who are currently ineligible for services, and should be expanded to include a wider range of services, including newcomer community integration.

In recent years, rural communities in Western Canada have seen an increase in the number of newcomers settling in their communities (Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC), 2015). The newcomer population increase in rural areas can contribute to economic growth and can help offset population decline caused by resident out-migration (Newbold, 2011); however an influx of newcomers can also strain already limited newcomer settlement services and community infrastructure (Moss, Bucklaschuck & Annis, 2010). Newcomers are an essential part of the economic vitality of small or remote communities; however, surprisingly little research has explored the settlement services available in such Western Canadian communities. What settlement supports are available to newcomers in rural Western Canadian communities? What services are currently offered and are there notable gaps in the settlement services offered? Supporting the settlement of newcomers improves community health and decreases the propensity of newcomers relocating to larger metropolitan centers where services are more readily available (Moss, Bucklaschuck & Annis, 2010; Krahn, Derwing & Abu-laban, 2005). This research assessed the settlement services offered and identified potential gaps in rural communities across CIC's Western Region, which includes Manitoba (MB), Saskatchewan (SK), Alberta (AB), and British Columbia (BC).

CONTEXT

Between, 2004 and 2013, over 130,000 permanent residents moved to non-urban centers (CIC, 2015), which was a shift driven by economic opportunities and family reunification (Ashton, Pettigrew, & Galatsanou, 2015; Frideres, 2006). This growing population of newcomers is also increasingly diverse in their countries of origin or ethno-cultural backgrounds. Additionally, some small communities have experienced proportionally large numbers of newcomers, which can have a big impact on the communities' infrastructure (i.e., housing and childcare) and settlement services (Moss, Bucklaschuck & Annis, 2010). Thus, the successful settlement and integration of newcomers is even more crucial to the health of the community. The settlement of newcomers includes, but is not limited to, finding employment, housing, and language training. Accessible settlement services, especially in small rural communities, are a fundamental necessity for the community to attract, settle, and retain newcomers (Derwing & Krahn, 2008; Krahn, Derwing & Abu-laban, 2005).

PURPOSE

In light of the dearth of knowledge on rural settlement services and the increase of newcomers settling in rural Western Canada (i.e., BC, AB, SK, MB) (CIC, 2015) this research aimed to inventory settlement services across Western Canada and to identify potential gaps and opportunities. In this research, the term newcomer is defined as a person who is a permanent resident, refugee, refugee claimant, temporary foreign worker, naturalized citizen, or international student and has been living in Canada five years or less. In Canada, CIC provides funding to settlement service providers (SPOs) to support newcomers' settlement in Canada (Richmond & Shield, 2005). Newcomers are permanent residents and refugees who are eligible for CIC funded settlement services. Therefore, temporary foreign workers, refugee claimants, naturalized citizens, and international students are not eligible for CIC-funded settlement services. SPOs can offer services to these groups if they have additional funding through territorial or provincial governments or other sources (e.g., NGOs, private sector). This research explores the availability of settlement services, regardless of the source of funding, but is not intended to be exhaustive. Instead, this research draws a picture of the settlement services landscape in selected rural communities across the four western provinces.

METHOD

The present research is part of a larger project called the "Immigration Settlement Services and Gaps in CIC's Western Region," which was funded by CIC through Immigration Research West at the University of Manitoba and was managed by the Rural Development Institute (RDI) of Brandon University, Canada (Ashton, Pettigrew, & Galatsanou, 2015). This research, which explored a broader range of topics, was conducted in collaboration with co-principle investigators from the four western provinces; Dr. Miu Chung Yan (University of British Columbia); Dr. Anna Kirova (University of Alberta); Dr. Joe Garcea (University of Saskatchewan); Dr. Lori Wilkinson (University of Manitoba); and Dr. Bill Ashton (RDI, Brandon University). To oversee the project a governance structure was created that included an overall project advisory panel and four additional advisory panels for each province, which all included representation from multiple levels of government, CIC, and settlement services umbrella organizations from each province.

SAMPLE

The advisory panel set a target number of communities per province to sample, which was proportionate to the number of annual newcomers received per province. Specific communities were then chosen by the provincial advisory panels using the following criteria: the community receives newcomers, had at least one CIC funded SPO, was small and rural, the SPOs in the community were not working in a Local Immigration Partnership, were geographically dispersed across the province, and represented a range of population sizes. In some cases, small towns in close proximity were grouped together as one service region (e.g., Terrace, Kitimat, Smithers, BC). In SK, settlement services are delivered through Gateways (i.e., regional service networks); therefore, SK sampled communities within each Gateway region.

Twenty-nine communities across western Canada were sampled and included ten from BC, eight from AB, five from SK, and six communities from MB. Table 1 lists the number of par-

ticipants by community. The intention during sampling was to maximize the sample diversity; therefore, communities ranged in size from over 1,700 in Arborg-Ashern, MB to over 104,000 in Langley, BC. According to the 2011 Census, the total population in these 29 communities samples was 1,191,228 and had received 37,330 permanent residents between 2009-2013 (CIC, 2015). The number of newcomer arrivals varied from 88 in Virden, MB to more than 4,300 in Brandon, MB between 2009 to 2013 (CIC, 2015), which represents a larger proportion of the population in small communities (e.g., 24 percent for Neepawa, MB). Using a convenience sample, 147 senior officials of SPOs completed telephone interviews that included questions about settlement services in their community (specifically availability), gaps in services, and needs of newcomers. Interviews were conducted by each province's umbrella organization in the fall of 2014. The participants represented a broader range of service providers, from CIC funded primary SPO to those organizations who may not serve newcomers as their primary mandate (e.g., churches, libraries, multicultural organizations). Both the participants and other immigration community stakeholders were given the opportunity to provide feedback regarding the accuracy and validity of the report draft and this feedback was then incorporated into the report (Table 1).

TABLE 1: COMMUNITIES SAMPLED BY PROVINCE, COUNTS OF SURVEYS COMPLETED AND FEEDBACK RECEIVED

Community name	Surveys completed (#)	Feedback received (#)
BRITISH COLUMBIA — 10 COMMUNITIES		
Nanaimo	3	1
Langley	6	2
Kamloops	3	1
Cranbrook, Kimberley	4	2
Terrace, Kitimat, Smithers	6	5
Squamish, Whistler	6	5
Powell River, Sechelt, Gibsons	5	1
Nelson, Trail, Grand Forks	3	0
Port Alberni	2	0
Prince Rupert	5	0
BRITISH COLUMBIA TOTAL	**43**	**17**
ALBERTA — 8 COMMUNITIES		
Red Deer	4	3
Lethbridge	4	4
Wood Buffalo	5	3
Medicine Hat	3	2
Grande Prairie	5	3
Lloydminster	3	3
Fort Saskatchewan	6	3
Brooks	7	2
TOTAL ALBERTA	**37**	**23**
SASKATCHEWAN — 5 COMMUNITIES		
North Central of SK	5	2
South West of SK	12	1
South East of SK	13	2
North West of SK	9	2
North East of SK	7	3
Multiple regions	2	1
TOTAL SASKATCHEWAN	**48**	**11**
MANITOBA — 6 COMMUNITIES		
Brandon	4	6
Thompson	2	6
Dauphin	3	5
Neepawa	4	5
Virden	4	5
Arborg-Ashern	2	2
TOTAL MANITOBA	**19**	**29**
WESTERN REGION TOTALS	**147**	**80**

SETTLEMENT SERVICES AND GAPS

The purpose of this research was to assess the settlement services offered in 29 rural communities across western Canada. Language training was reportedly offered in all 29 communities and was the only service offered universally. Language training is a CIC funded core service for those who are eligible; however, in many communities only basic language training was available. Given language skills are so integral to gaining meaningful employment and for successful settlement, a wider range of language training is necessary, especially for more advanced and workplace specific language training.

Following language training, the most frequently offered services were help finding employment (offered in 27 of the 29 communities), social inclusion and integration supports (26/29) and help with daily living (26/29). Help with finding a job and help with daily life are both settlement support services that SPOs receive core funding from CIC to deliver. The services reported in the fewest number of communities were investment opportunities (offered by 14/29 of the communities), financial supports (16/29), recreation services (16/29), and services for seniors (16/29). All remaining services listed in the survey were offered in the majority (i.e., 17 to 23/29) of communities.

Participants from 25 of the 29 communities suggested that services needed to expand in order to meet current and future demand. Desired expansion could take several forms and include expanding current service offerings, expanding the definition of those eligible for services, and expanding the locations of services offered. The services currently offered that were identified as requiring expansion to meet demand were advanced and job specific language training, help with foreign credential recognition, within community transportation, childcare during service delivery (i.e., during English language class).

Many participants across the four western provinces felt strongly that the definition of those eligible for services needed to expand to include those newcomers who are currently ineligible for CIC funded services, namely naturalized Canadian citizens, refugee claimants, temporary foreign workers, and international students. The needs of newcomers currently ineligible for CIC funded services were reported to be very similar (e.g., language supports, help finding housing and employment, information and orientation, and social inclusion/integration supports) to those who are eligible for services. Many SPOs reported frustration when, in some cases, having to turn ineligible newcomers away without services. More funding from CIC, provincial governments, and NGOs would be necessary to extend support to those newcomers who are currently ineligible for CIC funded services.

Additionally, services also need to be geographically expanded. Some services are not offered within a specific geographic region, which leaves newcomers at a disadvantage when having to travel long distances to reach specific services. For example, Thompson, MB does not have a local language assessor; therefore, language assessment is only available once a year when an agency from Winnipeg comes to conduct assessments in Thompson. Completing a language assessment is required before enrolling in language training; meaning newcomers in Thompson are disadvantaged. Consistently, communities located in remote communities face additional challenges in the delivery of settlement services, which impacts the ease of settlement for newcomers. This suggests future federal and provincial policies related to settlement services need to take into consideration the constraints faced by these remote communities and facilitate more flexibility and support for rural settlement service delivery.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research has inventoried the settlement services available to newcomers and identified areas for possible expansion of settlement services in a sample of rural communities across western Canada. Rural communities are experiencing both an increase in numbers and in diversity of backgrounds of newcomers. Newcomers play a vital role in the economic vitality of rural communities in Western Canada; however, the conditions newcomers experience upon arrival influence their decision to stay in such communities (Pandy & Townsend, 2011). SPOs in rural western Canada are striving to help newcomers successfully settle in their communities; however, SPOs want to extend services to newcomers of all immigrant classes, not just those who are eligible for CIC funded services. Existing settlement services need to be expanded within communities to meet current and growing demands and services also need to be offered in more locations across geographic regions in order to improve access, which will require more funding and support from CIC, provincial governments and NGOs. Finally, supports for newcomers need to expand to include their integration into the community and not just stop at settlement. Settlement is a crucial step for newcomers economic adjustment to Canada, but integration is necessary for newcomers to feel as though they are a member of their community and to feel at home in Canada. If newcomers' settlement needs are not sufficiently met this can have a negative impact on both newcomers' adjustment and the long-term wellbeing of the community; however this impact can be even more pronounced in rural communities where the newcomer population is proportionally larger than in urban centres (Ashton, Pettigrew, & Galatsanou, 2015). Future research could explore newcomers' perceptions regarding availability of and access to settlement services, ease of settlement and finding employment in rural communities in Western Canada, and explore newcomers' potential migration intentions.

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DOES LANGUAGE, EMPLOYMENT STATUS AND REGION OF ORIGIN INFLUENCE ACCESS TO SETTLEMENT SERVICES?

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Canada depends on the settlement service provider organizations (SPOs) to take care of the needs of the newcomers assisting them to integrate within the new society. The main focus of the article is not the immigrants who use the services but the remaining two-thirds of the population of immigrants who need but do not use the available settlement services. This paper tries to reflect on the available immigrants' service use in Western Canada and how the SPO can best assist those immigrants who need settlement services but cannot avail them.

Moving to a new country can be a stressful process that involves an immense learning curve as it presents many challenges and opportunities for newcomers. The purpose of settlement service provider organizations (SPOs) is to ease the challenges associated with settling and positively contribute to integration. Successful settlement should lead to integration and result in immigrants' active participation in all aspects of life. However, despite the availability of government and privately funded settlement resources, supports, and services to eligible immigrants and refugees in Canada, only about one-third of newcomers actually access services from formal organizations (Lo, et al., 2010; Wilkinson & Bucklaschuk, 2014). Such a finding troubles service providers and policymakers since it demonstrates that many newcomers do not access available resources and it is unknown how this large population is faring in society. This paper addresses the nature of immigrants' service use in Western Canada and intends to inform service providers,