Shifting Grounds

Understanding recent interregional migration to the Maritimes and Northern Ontario

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Understanding recent inter-regional migration to the Maritimes and Northern Ontario

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Executive summary

Over the past ten years, there has been a notable shift in Canada's population dynamics. For generations, Canada's population has been growing increasingly urban. This has been driven in part by *internal* migration: migration within Canada. Drawn by economic growth and job opportunities, people tended to move from rural and peripheral areas to more urban, central, and rapidly growing regions.

As a result, while the country as a whole was growing, in some regions population growth was growing much more slowly, stagnating or even declining. **But in recent years, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, many people chose to move *away* from the country's major urban centres,** reversing longstanding patterns of outmigration for some regions. Although there were many media stories about this trend, we knew relatively little about the scale of this migration, what was driving it, or how it was playing out in receiving communities.

This report provides detailed information about this trend based on a study of two regions that were popular destinations for inter-regional migration during COVID-19: Northern Ontario and the Maritimes.

We analyzed census and administrative records and conducted interviews with 67 inter-regional migrants and 47 key stakeholders from receiving communities. This information allowed us to document where people were moving within each region, who was moving to slower-growth regions and why, how migrants were making a living and integrating socially, and how receiving communities were experiencing the influx of new residents.

Where did people move within each region?

Between 2016 and 2021 **inter-regional migration to Northern Ontario was concentrated in the near north** (Parry Sound, Manitoulin and Nipissing) followed by Northeastern Ontario more broadly. Other regions in Northern Ontario continued to see no growth or negative growth. **In the Maritimes, population growth resulting from inter-regional migration was more pronounced and widespread,** though more isolated regions with fewer amenities experienced less growth.

Who moved?

In most respects, people who moved into Northern Ontario or the Maritimes between 2016 and 2021 were similar to the pre-existing population. Some exceptions include that movers to both regions tended to be **younger** and slightly **more highly educated** than the pre-existing population. Movers were also **more likely to identify as a visible minority.**

Household incomes of those moving into the Maritimes declined post-migration. In Northern Ontario increases in household income were modest and similar to the pre-existing population. This suggests that, in general, migration was not motivated by high paying job opportunities.

The number of people working from home increased between 2016 to 2021. **The growth in working from home,** however, was **particularly strong for movers.** A greater share of movers and non-movers, however, reported working on-site at their place of employment, than working remotely from home.

Motivations for moving

Households who participated in the study typically described more than one motivation for moving. **Proximity to family and housing affordability** were the most common drivers of migration. Such motivations were **often intertwined with other motivations.** These included the desire to **slow down and work less or to pursue a passion project** like starting a new business or homesteading. Moving was also pursued as a way to i**mprove health and well-being.** A small number of movers to the Maritimes were attracted by what they perceived to be a **community-focused culture and more open political climate.** Some movers to both regions were seeking **safe housing and communities.**

What made the move possible?

A variety of factors made moving to Northern Ontario or the Maritimes economically feasible for our interviewees, since most were not moving in search of employment. These included the **ability to work remotely, the relative affordability of housing** in Northern Ontario and the Maritimes relative to large urban centres, and **retirement or COVID-related job loss.** In other cases, households sought out local employment prior to taking the leap or moved in with family or friends and searched for local employment after moving.

PICTURED ABOVE: A study participant's farm in Annapolis Valley, NS. Photo by Katie Mazer.

Life after moving

Experiences of life after moving were diverse. **While most people who moved reported that their quality of life had improved, a significant number were ambivalent about their move,** identifying unexpected economic and social challenges post-migration.

Interviewees recounted a number of benefits that flowed from their move to a more affordable locale. These included the ability to: improve their housing situation (buy a house or land or secure a more affordable rental); decrease working time or leave a stressful job; or spend more time with family or in nature. Many reported that their physical or mental health had improved as a consequence of their move.

At the same time, many migrants faced unexpected challenges after moving. A lack of local employment options in the Maritimes created economic uncertainty for some participants who worked remotely or lost employment post-move. Higher than anticipated food, energy, and renovation costs in the Maritimes also left some households economically strapped. Others faced challenges integrating in their new communities and/or experienced xenophobia, creating a sense of social isolation. Lastly, many interviewees described difficulties accessing needed services, particularly healthcare.

Remote workers often faced distinct benefits and challenges. Working remotely allowed people to keep a steady flow of employment income. Surprisingly, however, several remote workers described taking onsite employment after their move to counter social isolation or meet people in their new community.

Effects of in-migration on receiving communities and regions

Community leaders were generally optimistic about in-migration. Many described how new residents were making **positive contributions** to the economic and social life of their communities. These included **voluntarism and civic engagement, starting businesses, filling job vacancies, shopping at local businesses, and boosting local tax revenues.** The influx of people and accompanying revenue made it possible for some municipalities to increase investment in infrastructure. Those moving from other regions in Canada were also transforming communities demographically, bringing a new degree of **ethnic and age diversity** that was welcomed by community leaders.

This sense of optimism was tempered by new **challenges,** however, particularly in regions with higher levels of population growth. These included **insufficient and unaffordable housing, rising homelessness, and a lack of family doctors.** In some cases, respondents noted that internal migrants were not filling the most critical labour needs in healthcare, trades, or low-wage services. Community integration was also presented as an emergent challenge that some communities sought to address through targeted programs or events.

Ultimately, rapid population growth represents a paradox for receiving communities. Increased housing prices have led to crises of housing availability and affordability, but they have also increased the tax base on which municipalities depend to expand and maintain infrastructure and provide services.

New, diverse, and affordable housing development is needed to accommodate population growth and ease the crisis, but, in the Maritimes, development has been contentious, including among newcomers who want to preserve certain features of the rural setting to which they have moved.

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1. Introduction

Over the past ten years, there has been a notable shift in Canada's population dynamics. For generations, Canada's population has been growing increasingly urban. This has been driven in part by *internal* migration: that is, migration within Canada. Drawn by economic growth and job opportunities, people have long tended to move from rural and peripheral areas to more urban, central, and rapidly growing regions.

As a result, while the country as a whole was growing, in some regions population was growing much more slowly, stagnating, or even declining. In recent years, however, an increasing number of people have been moving *away* from the country's most populated cities and regions. The COVID-19 pandemic only amplified this bourgeoning trend. News reports have suggested that shifts in personal priorities, affordability crises in larger centres, and the rapid adoption of remote work popularized the idea of moving to smaller, more rural, and relatively affordable places.[i] After decades of population decline, many rural and peripheral places in Canada were recast in the media as desirable places to live, offering affordability, access to nature, a slower pace of life, and ultimately, the ability to centre 'life' over work.[ii] In many cases, places that had seen decades of population decline began to grow again.

PICTURED ABOVE: Lake Timiskaming, Temiskaming Shores, ON. Photo by Suzanne Mills.

While this surprising trend was widely reported in the media, we knew relatively little about who was moving to slower-growth regions and why, how migrants were making a living and integrating socially, and how receiving communities were experiencing this unexpected influx of new residents. This report aims to answer these questions by examining two regions that were especially popular destinations for inter-regional migration during the COVID-19 pandemic: the Maritimes and Northern Ontario.[iii]

Between 2016 and 2021 (Figure 1.1), generations of decline or slow growth in the Maritimes gave way to population growth rates not seen in 50 years. While much of this growth was due to an increase in international immigration to the region, inter-provincial migration was also a significant source of growth (Figure 1.2). For the first time since the early 1980s, more people moved to the Maritimes *from other parts of Canada* than left the region.[iv]

Figure 1.1 Population change in the Maritimes 2001-2024.[v]

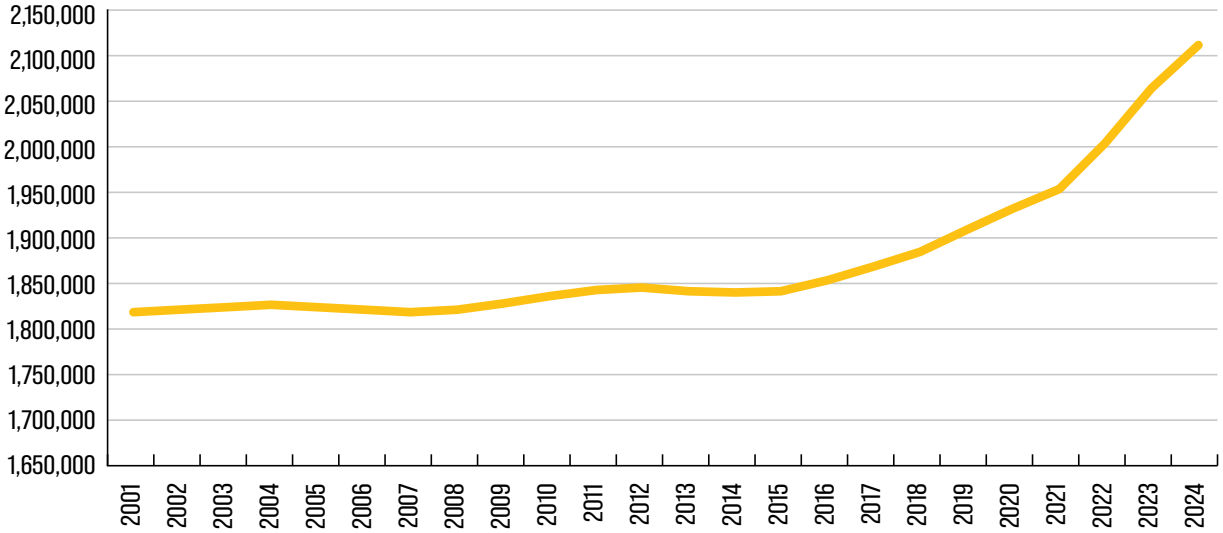
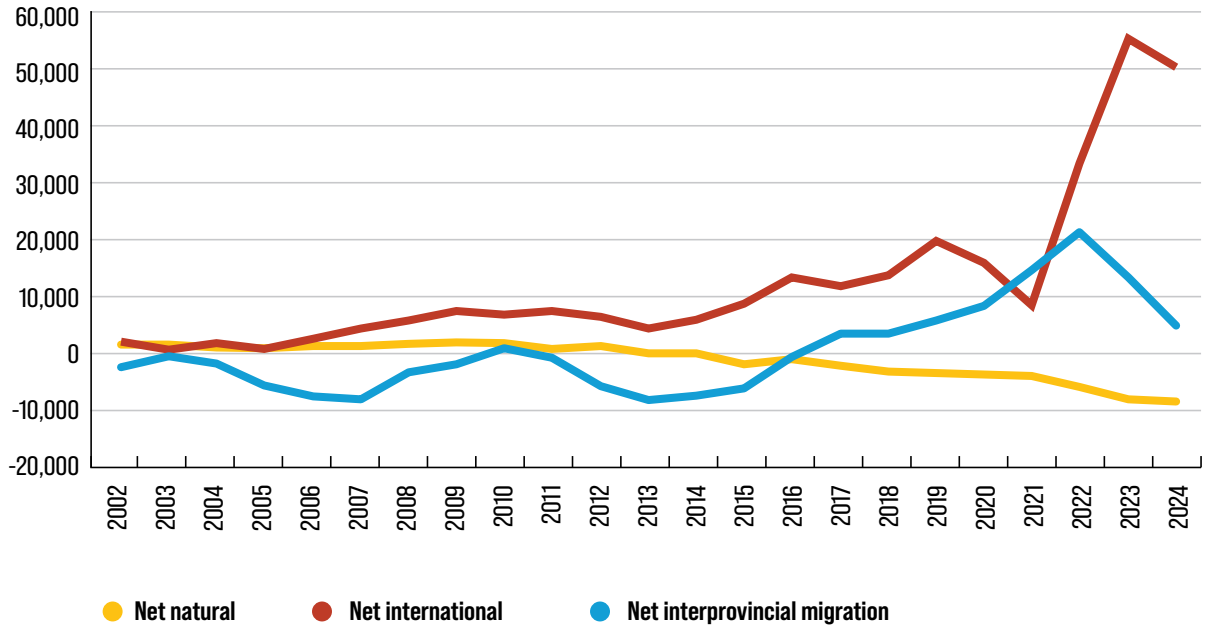


Figure 1.2 Components of population change in the Maritimes [vi]



A similar trend, albeit less pronounced, can be observed in Northern Ontario. In Northern Ontario, longstanding population trends began to reverse in 2015/16 (Figure 1.3). Like the Maritimes, this shift was fueled by a combination of internal and international migration. Whereas internal migration to the Maritimes was fueled by people moving from other provinces, however, internal migration to Northern Ontario was predominantly fueled by intra-provincial migration from Southern Ontario (Figure 1.4).

Figure 1.3 Population change in Northern Ontario 2001-2024 [vii]

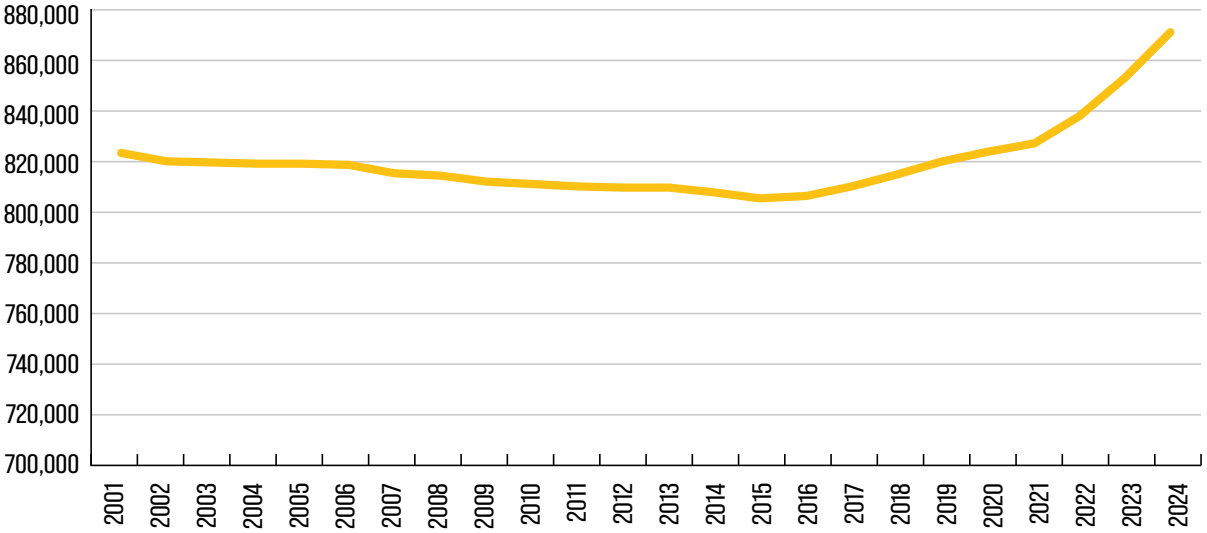
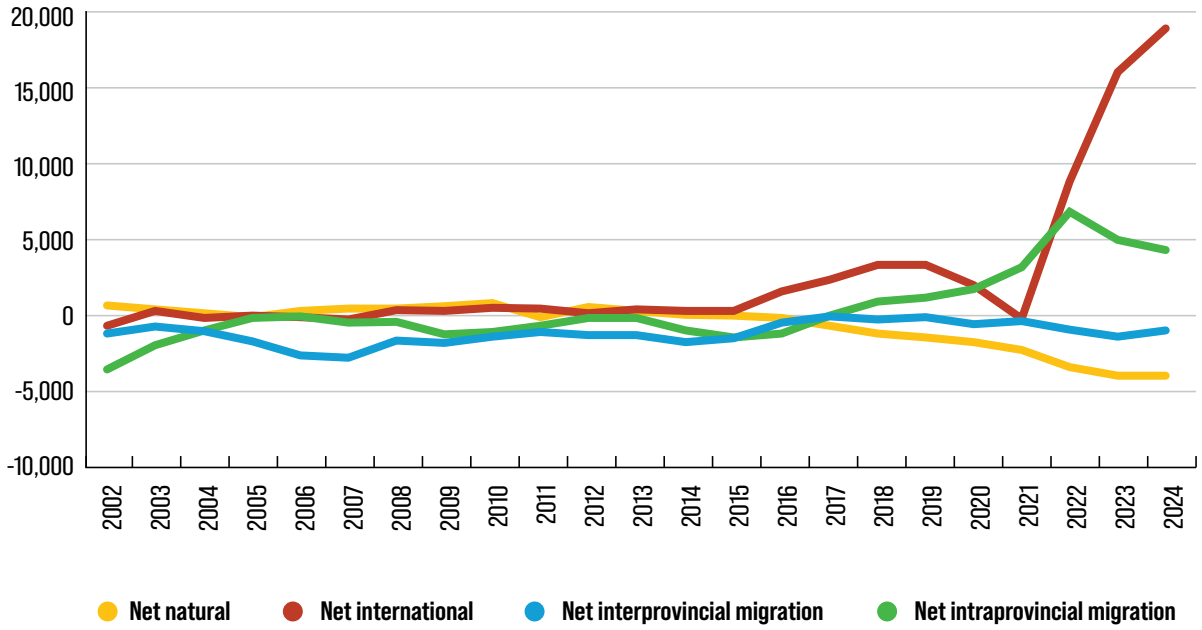


Figure 1.4 Components of population change in Northern Ontario



Understanding the social causes and impacts of these demographic changes requires investigating the motivations and experiences of movers, as well as how the changes are playing out in receiving communities.

Our research shows that people moving to Northern Ontario and the Maritimes from other regions in Canada during this period were overwhelmingly moving away from more urban and less affordable places. Their decisions to move were often *motivated* by concerns about housing affordability, a desire to be closer to family, aspirations to work less or differently, and the pursuit of a new and better way of life. Their *ability* to relocate was often linked to the option to work remotely and the relative affordability of housing in Northern Ontario and the Maritimes relative to large urban centres. Inter-regional migrants recounted a wide range of experiences in their new communities: from improved quality of life related to affordability, less work pressure, and time in nature, to precarious employment, poor access to services, social isolation, and xenophobia. For receiving communities, the recent surge in migration has ultimately brought both opportunities and challenges, creating new economic activity while also placing pressure on housing, social services, and job markets, and triggering social tensions.

Our study examined the demographics, drivers, and impacts of inter-regional migration to the Maritimes and Northern Ontario. The findings in this report challenge some of the taken-for-granted assumptions about people who moved into more affordable regions through the pandemic. They also highlight the real challenges and benefits unfolding in receiving communities. In sharing these details with community practitioners and the public, we hope to shed light on the causes of this migration shift and consequences for movers and receiving regions in a way that improves understanding, bolsters effective policy responses to current challenges, and helps plan for the future. For communities, our results can inform planning for economic development by providing insight into how to attract migrants, but also by providing information about how to foster greater integration while also meeting housing and service provision needs.

2. Methods

The research was conducted by an interdisciplinary team of professors and graduate students from McMaster University, Acadia University, Brock University, and Western University. We used a multi-sited, mixed-methods approach to investigate inter-regional migration trends in Canada and their relationship to work and livelihoods, focusing on Northern Ontario and the Maritimes.

Our approach involved the collection and analysis of qualitative data as well as the analysis of quantitative data from the Statistics Canada 2016 and 2021 Censuses. We sought to capture the objective details of this migration trend: who moved, from where, to where; inter-regional migrants' lived experiences; and the broader socio-economic implications of these migration patterns. Qualitative data collection took place in the summer and fall of 2024, and data analysis took place in 2025.

PICTURED ABOVE: Team members walking, Blomidon, NS. Photo by Suzanne Mills.

2.1 Data collection and analysis

Quantitative analysis: To generate maps and population component figures we used estimates of population change from Statistics Canada's Demography Division, measured at the level of Census Division. To compare total migrants, internal immigrants, and internal emigrants with non-movers we used 2016 and 2021 Census of Canada Master Files using two techniques. First, using migration data in the 2021 Census, we compared the demographic characteristics of those who moved into each region in 2020 and in 2016 with the demographic characteristics of pre-existing residents. Second, we used place of residence data in the 2016 and 2021 Census of Canada Master Files to: a) identify the size of communities internal migrants were leaving and moving to and b) compare the demographic characteristics of those who moved into each region from another region in Canada with that of pre-existing residents who did not move and those who moved out of each region.

Qualitative data collection and analysis: We conducted 57 in-depth narrative interviews with individuals and households who moved to Northern Ontario and the Maritimes between 2019 and 2024. We recruited participants using social media, posters placed in key localities, and referrals from interviewees to other potential participants from their own networks. In-person (76%) and virtual (24%) interviews allowed us to capture people's stories about work, migration decisions, and life after moving. We also conducted 47 interviews (32 in Northern Ontario and 15 in the Maritimes) with local stakeholders, including elected officials, planners, local economic development officers, real estate agents, business leaders, and social service providers. These interviews provided information about how internal migration was affecting the broader social and economic wellbeing of each region. All interviews were transcribed and coded thematically using qualitative analysis software (NVivo) to extract key themes.

2.2 Who we heard from

2.2.1 Inter-regional migrants to Northern Ontario and the Maritimes

We conducted 57 interviews with a total of 67 people who had moved to Northern Ontario (52%) or the Maritimes (48%). Almost all migrants to Northern Ontario who participated in our study had moved from *within Ontario* (94%). Participants who had move to the Maritimes, meanwhile, had more diverse source communities, moving from Ontario (58%), British Columbia (16%), Quebec (10%), and the Prairie provinces (9%). Most migrants interviewed were between 30 and 49 years old, with an average age of 45. Six participants identified as racialized, three identified as Indigenous and 10 identified their sexual orientation as other than heterosexual. Six participants identified as a person with disabilities.

PICTURED ABOVE: Community leader and team member in Temiskaming Shores, ON. Photo by Suzanne Mills.

Table 2.2.1 Demographic characteristics of migrant interview participants by region

	Northern Ontario	Maritimes	Total
Gender identity			
Male	14	11	25
Female	22	20	42
Age			
20-29	5	0	5
30-39	12	8	20
40-49	9	10	19
50-59	6	4	10
60-69	4	9	13
Sexual orientation			
Heterosexual	32	25	57
Gay or Lesbian	1	3	4
Bisexual/Pansexual/Queer	3	3	6
Racialized			
White	31	30	61
Racialized as non-white	5	1	6
Indigenous identity			
Indigenous	3	0	3
Not Indigenous	33	31	64
Ability/disability			
No disabilities	31	30	61
Person with disabilities	5	1	6
Highest level of education			
Graduate School or Professional deg.	8	14	22
Undergraduate degree	14	11	25
Some University	0	1	1
College or trade diploma	8	5	12
Some college	5	0	5
Highschool diploma or less	1	0	1

Most interview participants reported incomes between $60,000 and $140,000, however six households had household incomes below $40,000 and five had household incomes of $200,000 or higher. A slightly greater share of interview participants in the Maritimes reported household incomes above $180,000 than in Northern Ontario. At the time of our interviews, most participants (52) were working for pay. Our interview sample included a significant number of people who were working remotely from home (17) or were self-employed (12). Interviewees who were not working for pay were either retired (11), unemployed (2), or engaged in performing care work (2).

2.2.2 Key informants

Interviews with 47 key informants (32 in Northern Ontario and 15 in the Maritimes) included local elected officials (12), planners, economic development officers (8), real estate agents (6), social service providers (5), and 16 other community leaders including teachers, provincial representatives, and business leaders.

PICTURED ABOVE: Team member walking in Mattawa, ON. Picture by Suzanne Mills.

3. Who moved where?

Our analysis of Census data shows that migration was uneven within each region and that migrants were diverse geographically, demographically, and socioeconomically. Although many households moved from metropolitan areas to rural areas, a significant number moved to similarly sized communities. Demographically, movers to both regions tended to be younger, more highly educated, and more likely to identify as a visible minority than the pre-existing population. Movers also represented a range of income levels. Furthermore, economic indicators suggest that those who moved into either region from other regions in Canada were not motivated by high paying job opportunities.

3.1 Where did people move?

People who moved into the Maritimes and Northern Ontario between 2016 and 2021 were often moving away from larger centres and to cities and municipalities with smaller populations. Almost 30% of migrants moving into the Maritimes and Northern Ontario were moving from a Census Metropolitan Area (CMA)—a municipality of over 100,000 people—to a non-Census Area (non-CA)—a municipality with less than 10,000 people (Table 3.1). Moves from CMAs to Census Areas—municipalities from 10,000 to 100,000 people—were also common among in-migrants. In contrast, people leaving both regions were often moving to more populated municipalities. Not everyone who moved into these regions was making an urban to rural transition, however. Just over 10% of movers were moving from other rural areas in Canada and almost a quarter of in-migrants were moving from CMA to CMA. Internal migration was also uneven within each region.

PICTURED ABOVE: Blomidon, NS. Photo by Suzanne Mills.

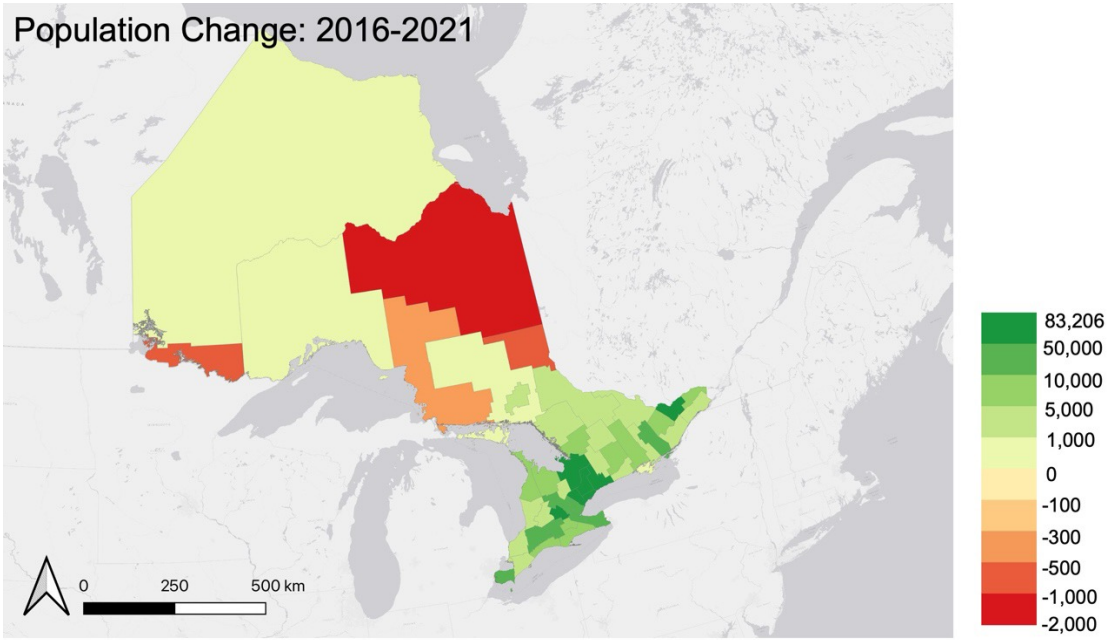
Table 3.1: Geographical size of source and receiving communities for migrants in and out of the Maritimes and Northern Ontario from 2016 to 2021, aged 25 or older in 2016 [viii]

	Maritimes		Northern Ontario	
	In-Migration	Out-Migration	In-Migration	Out-Migration
From CMA to CMA	14.93%	23.24%	16.01%	23.78%
From CMA to CA	16.89%	4.3%	17.43%	4.45%
From CMA to non-CA	29.18%	5.11%	27.51%	5.1%
From CA to CMA	2.31%	18.8%	2.46%	19.17%
From CA to CA	3.24%	4.13%	3.36%	4.17%
From CA to non-CA	5.23%	5.96%	4.93%	5.42%
From non-CA to CMA	2.59%	20.32%	2.74%	20.57%
From non-CA to CA	3.98%	5.73%	4.1%	5.92%
From non-CA to non-CA	10.43%	12.42%	10.13%	11.42%
External (Outside Canada)	11.22%	N/A	11.34%	N/A

3.1.1 Northern Ontario

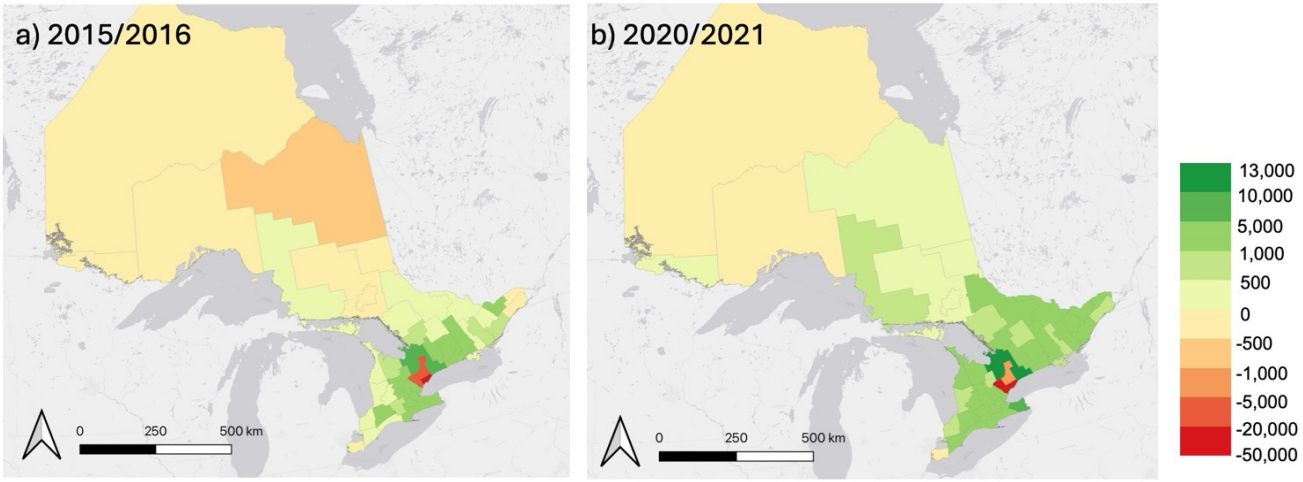
Population growth between 2016 and 2021 in Northern Ontario was largely concentrated in the near north (Parry Sound, Manitoulin and Nipissing) and northeastern Ontario more broadly (Figure 3.1.1.1). Other regions in Northern Ontario, continued to see no growth or negative growth.

Figure 3.1.1.1 Population change in Northern Ontario 2016-2021 [ix]



Maps of intra-provincial net migration between 2015 and 2016 and 2021 and 2022, show a flow of people away from Toronto, first to the suburbs and cottage country, and second to the near north and northeastern Ontario more broadly (Figures 3.1.1.2 a, b).

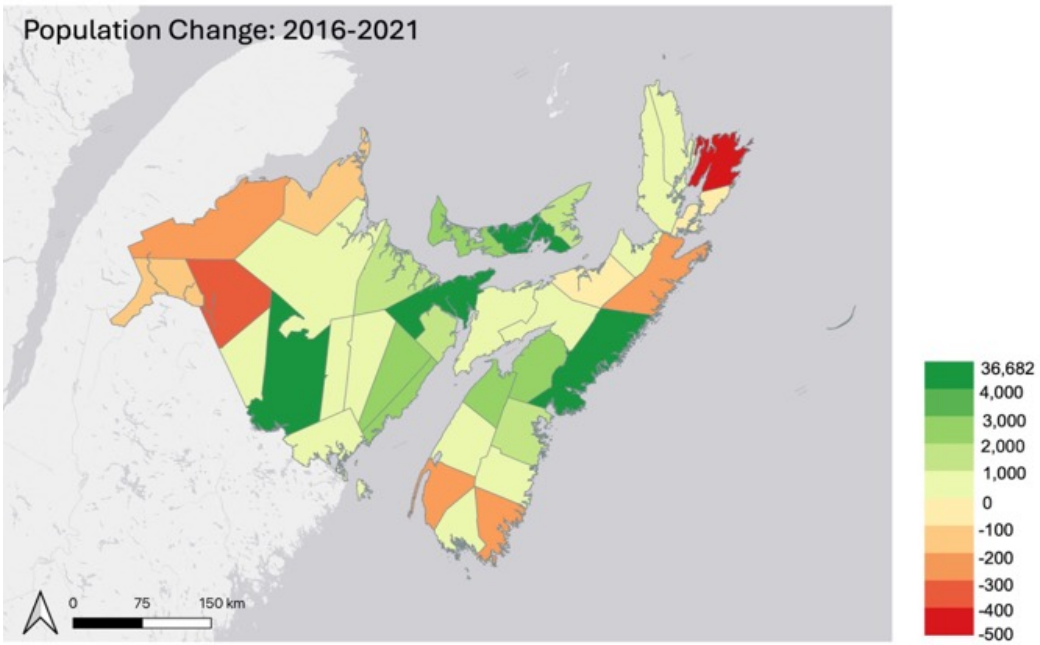
Figure 3.1.1.2 a, b Intra-provincial migration in Northern Ontario between 2015/2016 and 2020/2021 [x]



3.1.2 Maritimes

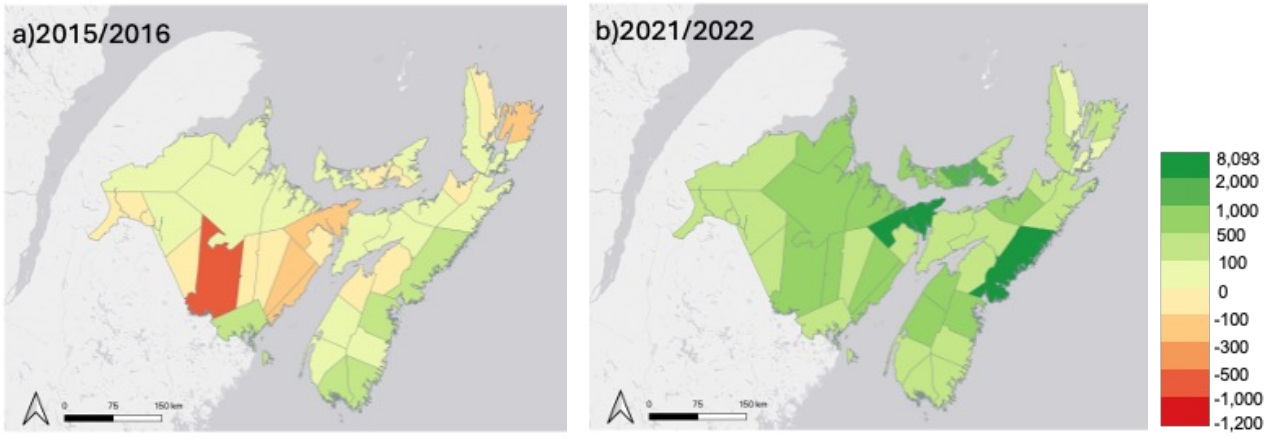
Population growth in the Maritimes from 2016 and 2021 was greatest in more populated sub-regions. These include, for example, census divisions including Halifax, NS, Fredericton NB, and Charlottetown, PEI. Other regions experienced net negative population, with Cape Breton experiencing the greatest decline.

Figure 3.1.2.1 Population change in the Maritimes 2016-2021 [xi]



Net inter-provincial migration in the Maritimes between 2015 and 2016 was slightly positive in some census divisions and neutral or slightly negative in others. Between 2020 and 2021, however, inter-provincial migration was positive in all census divisions with very high growth in the same regions that demonstrate population growth between 2016 and 2021.

Figure 3.1.2.2 a, b Inter-provincial migration in the Maritimes between 2015-16 and 2020-21 [xii]



PICTURED ABOVE: Pigs on study participant's property. Picture by Suzanne Mills.

3.2 Who moved?

In general, the people who moved into Northern Ontario or the Maritimes were quite similar to the pre-existing population. In both regions, migrants tended to be more ethnically diverse, more highly educated, and younger than those who did not move.

3.2.1 Demographic characteristics

When compared with pre-existing residents, a greater share of migrants into the Maritimes between 2016 and 2021 and between 2020 and 2021 were visible minorities and permanent residents (Table 3.2.1.1). Migrants were also younger and more likely to have a university degree than the non-migrant population, but less likely to have an apprenticeship or trades certificate. These trends were also true when internal migrants—those moving from other regions in Canada—were isolated in the analysis.

Table 3.2.1.1 Demographic characteristics of migrants into the Maritimes in 2016 and 2021 [xiii]

	Migration status (All)		
	Non-Migrant	**5 years ago**	**1 year ago**
Immigration Status in 2021			
Canadian-born	93.82	61.33	65.5
Permanent residents	5.92	25.14	19.04
Temporary residents	0.26	13.52	15.46
Gender			
Female	52.14	49.89	49.74
Male	47.86	50.11	50.26
Age in 2021			
25 to 34	14.12	33.98	36.21
35 to 44	15.16	26.42	22.28
45 to 54	17.73	14.42	15.26
55 to 64	22.19	13.78	15.05
65 or older	30.8	11.4	11.2
Visible Minority			
White	92.01	65.94	69.5
Visible minority	3.92	30.89	27.38
Indigenous	4.07	3.17	3.12
Highest Education Level in 2021			
Secondary or less	42.96	26.99	26.74
Apprenticeship or trades certificate	9.15	6.46	6.29
Some post-secondary education below bachelor's degree	26.15	22.69	23.37
Bachelor's degree	14.71	25.13	27.05
Above bachelor's level	7.04	18.73	16.55

Demographic trends among migrants were similar in Northern Ontario. A higher share of recent migrants were permanent residents and visible minorities than the non-migrant population (Table 3.2.1.2). Migrants were also, on average, younger than non-migrants. Similar to migrants to the Maritimes, a greater share of migrants had a bachelor's degree or higher than non-migrants. Once again, these trends were also evident among internal migrants.

Table 3.2.1.2 Demographic characteristics of migrants to Northern Ontario in 2016 and 2021 [xiv]

	Migration status (All)		
	Non-Migrant	**5 years ago**	**1 year ago**
Immigration Status in 2021			
Canadian-born	93.35	76.89	77.78
Permanent residents	6.56	14.26	14.04
Temporary residents	0.09	8.85	8.18
Gender			
Female	51.32	48.83	50.11
Male	48.68	51.17	49.89
Age in 2021			
25 to 34	14.51	32.94	35.52
35 to 44	15.07	19.32	18.79
45 to 54	16.63	14.05	14.41
55 to 64	22.82	18.24	18.17
65 or older	30.97	15.45	13.12
Visible Minority			
White	83.30	73.79	73.85
Visible minority	1.97	17.76	16.71
Indigenous	14.73	8.44	9.44
Highest Education Level in 2021			
Secondary or less	45.47	35.48	34.29
Apprenticeship or trades certificate	8.72	7.15	6.79
Some post-secondary education below bachelor's degree	29.36	27.17	26.86
Bachelor's degree	11.85	18.67	19.70
Above bachelor's level	4.59	11.53	12.37

3.2.2 Economic characteristics

Available indicators suggest that the economic situation of people who moved into Northern Ontario and the Maritimes between 2015 and 2020 was not very different from the pre-existing population in these regions. Levels of home ownership in 2015/2016 and average household incomes were relatively similar between these populations.

In Northern Ontario, both movers and non-movers had almost identical average levels of home ownership in 2015/16, 69.5% versus 68.9% respectively. In the Maritimes, movers had a slightly higher level of home ownership in 2015/16 than the non-migrant population (73.1% versus 69.5%).

Household income

Figure 3.2.2.1 shows how average total household after-tax income in the Maritimes changed between 2015 and 2020, broken down by migration status. In 2015, non-migrant and in-migrant households had similar income levels, while out-migrant households were somewhat lower. By 2020, incomes for non-migrant and in-migrant households had both declined slightly, averaging around $74,800 and $74,650. In contrast, out-migrant households experienced a substantial increase, reaching $107,100. This suggests that households leaving the region tended to have higher incomes by 2020, while those staying or moving into the region saw stagnant or declining after-tax incomes.

Figure 3.2.2.1 Average total household after-tax income by migration status in the Maritimes [xv]

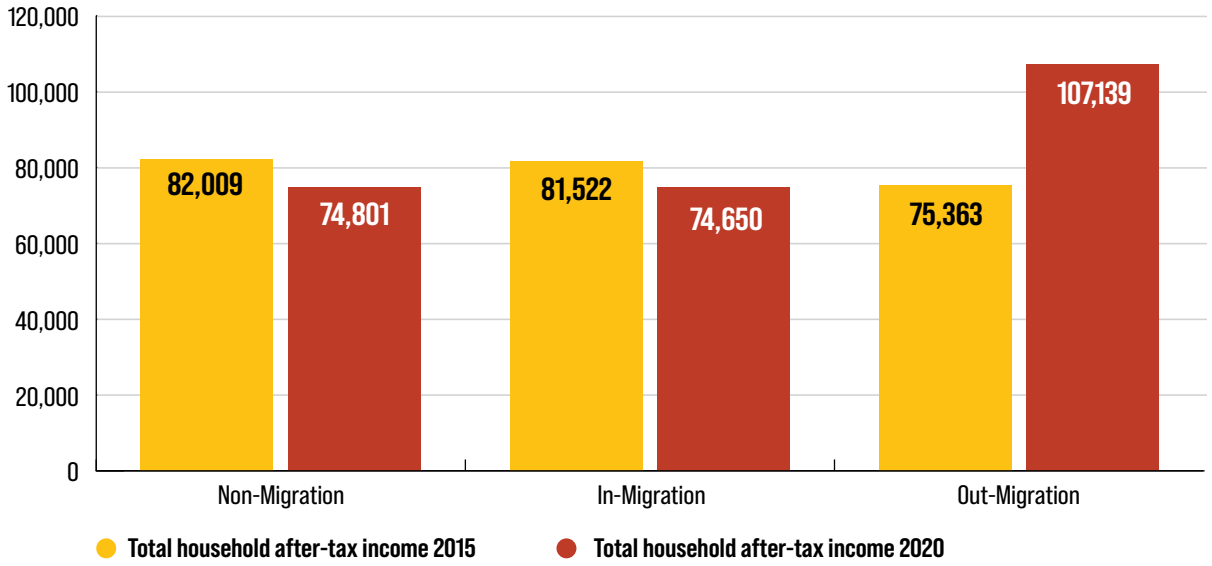
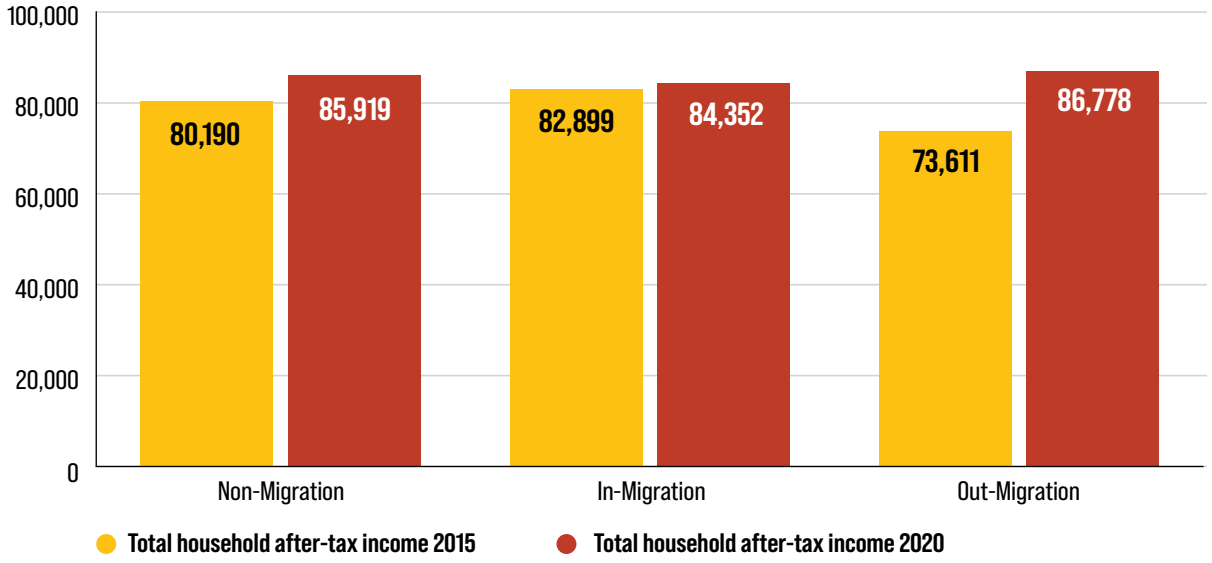


Figure 3.2.2.2 shows the same information for Northern Ontario. In Northern Ontario, average total household after-tax income shifted differently across migration groups between 2015 and 2020. Non-migrant households saw more substantial income growth, rising from about $80,200 to $85,900, while in-migrant households experienced only a modest increase, from $82,900 to $84,400. Out-migrant households, however, showed the most dramatic change: their incomes were the lowest in 2015 at $73,600 but grew sharply to $86,800 by 2020, making them the highest-income group overall. This pattern highlights that households leaving Northern Ontario experienced the greatest financial gains, while those staying or moving in had smaller income increases.

These results suggest that people are still leaving these regions in search of higher paid employment. In contrast, those moving into each region were not likely motivated primarily by economic considerations.

Figure 3.2.2.2 Average total household after-tax income by migration status in Northern Ontario[xvi]



3.2.3 Employment characteristics

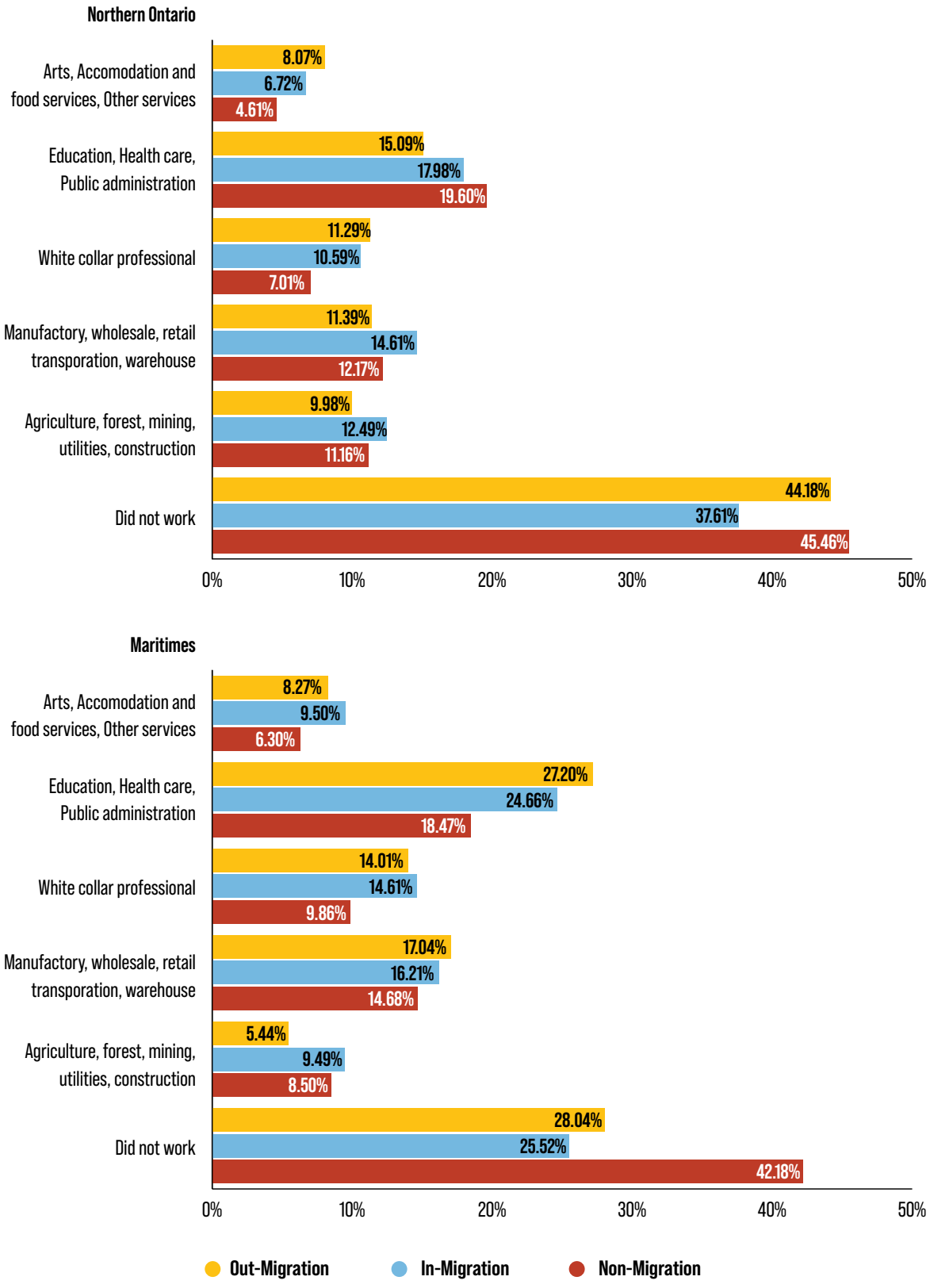
Industry sector

Figure 3.2.3.1 shows the distribution of industry sectors among Northern Ontario and Maritime residents in 2020/21, broken down by migration status.

In Northern Ontario, a large share of all groups reported not working in 2020/21, with rates ranging from 37.6% among in-migrants to 45.5% among non-migrants. Education, health care, and public administration were the most common sectors for employment, particularly for non-migrants (19.6%). Out-migrants were more represented in agriculture, forestry, mining, utilities, and construction (10%) compared to other groups, while in-migrants were more concentrated in manufacturing, retail, transportation, and warehousing (14.6%). White-collar professional roles were also more common among in-migrants (10.6%) and out-migrants (11.3%) than non-migrants (7.0%). Overall, the data suggest that while non-migrants were more likely to work in public sector roles, in- and out-migrants showed stronger ties to professional and goods-producing industries.

In the Maritimes, non-migrants had the highest share reporting they did not work (42.2%), compared to 28.0% of out-migrants and 25.5% of in-migrants. Education, health care, and public administration was the dominant employment sector for all groups, particularly among out-migrants (27.2%). In- and out-migrants were also more represented in white-collar professional roles (14.6% and 14.0%, respectively) than non-migrants (9.9%). Meanwhile, in-migrants had the largest share in manufacturing, retail, transportation, and warehousing (16.2%), slightly ahead of out-migrants (17.0%). Employment in arts, accommodation, and food services was higher for in-migrants (9.5%) than the other groups, while agriculture and resource-based work was relatively small overall but most common among in-migrants (9.5%). Overall, migrants tended to be more engaged in professional, service, and goods-producing sectors, while non-migrants showed higher reliance on public sector jobs and had a larger proportion not working.

Figure 3.2.3.1 Industry sector of employment 2020/21, migrants, non-migrants, and out-migrants in Northern Ontario and the Maritimes[xvii]



Location of work

As anticipated, a higher percentage of the population reported home as their primary location of work in 2021 than in 2016. Out-migrants from both regions were most likely to report working from home in 2021 followed by in-migrants. Those who did not move were least likely to report working from home in 2021. Somewhat surprisingly, however, many of those who moved were working onsite in 2021/2022.

Figure 3.2.3.2 a Percent of workers reporting working from home as primary location of work by migration status in Northern Ontario, 2016 and 2021 [xviii]

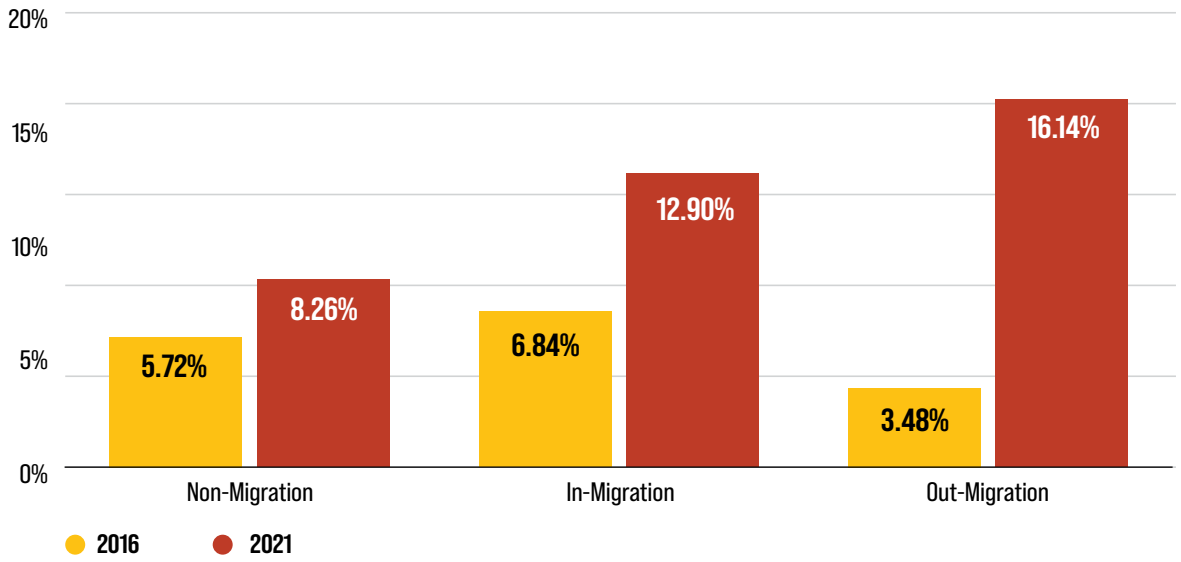
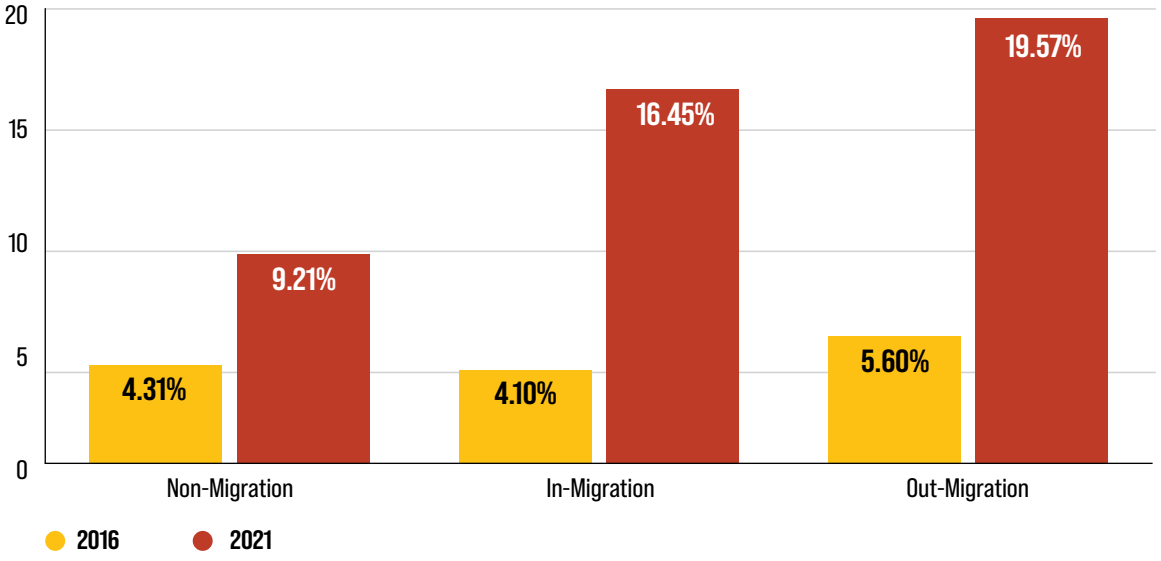


Figure 3.2.3.2 b Percent of workers reporting working from home as primary location of work by migration status in the Maritimes, 2016 and 2021.



4. Why did people move?

Across interviews, COVID-19 often acted as a catalyst for moving, granting new weight to priorities that had been simmering beneath the surface of everyday, busy, urban life. Participants described an increased pull toward re-emphasizing family and rebalancing work, often alongside a slower pace of life and improved well-being. These aims interacted with the possibilities of working remotely and reducing housing costs, both of which made the moves possible. In this section, we distinguish between motivating factors for migration and factors that made it economically feasible to move, since most of those we interviewed were not moving to take up specific jobs in their new communities.

PICTURED ABOVE: Beach in North Bay, ON. Photo by Bonnie Evans.

4.1 Motivations for moving

Motivations for moving were diverse and multi-fold, although proximity to family (39 interviews) and housing affordability (35 interviews) were most common. In fact, 23 households were motivated by both the desire to find more affordable housing (or reconfigure housing costs) and to be close to family. In the Maritimes, proximity to family was a more pronounced consideration, whereas in Northern Ontario, housing affordability was slightly more salient. These motivations were often intertwined with other goals. For example, proximity to family was often accompanied by a desire to work differently and pursue a different lifestyle (11 interviews). Moving to a region with a slower pace of life was often seen as an antidote to poor health and well-being related to work and everyday life in more urban settings (reported in 12 interviews). We also found some unexpected motivations for migration. For example, safety was a motivation for six households, and political climate prompted three households to move to the Maritimes.

4.1.1 Proximity to family

The desire to live closer to family was a widespread motivator for internal migration; 39 interviews mentioned it as a motivation factor, even if not the primary one.

Many participants described a desire to return to a place where they or their partners grew up and still had relatives. In some cases, return migration was motivated by a desire to return to the landscapes and home communities of their youth. In other cases, movers wanted to live close to family in order to ease care demands. Several households with young children moved to be closer to grandparents so that they could be more present in their children's lives and, in some cases, help with childcare. Others moved so that they could provide care for aging parents. Both of these motivations were heightened by pandemic lockdowns.

PICTURED ABOVE: Wolfville, NS. Photo by Katie Mazer.

> **"The whole connection to [community] is because this is where my husband is from. He grew up here."**
>
> (Interview 105_NO)

> **"...when the pandemic kind of took place, we had just had our daughter, and PEI was, you know, there was the Atlantic bubble. We just struggled to find opportunities for our daughter to meet her grandparents and that sort of thing. And we kind of realized, you know, if we're ever gonna move home, now is the time...We wanted our daughter to have a relationship with her grandparents.... So we were really thinking about that as our #1 objective."**
>
> (Interview 40_M)

> **"My mom has a lot of chronic pain and various health stuff going on.... So, I came back...because I knew that my mom had a couple surgeries and kind of worked out for me as well."**
>
> (Interview 31_NO)

For some households who were moving away from family in Southern Ontario in their quest for affordability, proximity to family influenced *where* they chose to move. This meant choosing to relocate to areas in northeastern Ontario that were within a half-day drive to connections further south rather than to the Maritimes or northwestern Ontario.

4.1.2 Housing affordability

Housing affordability was a significant motivator for people moving to Northern Ontario (18) and the Maritimes (17). Participants described being motivated by the desire to secure cheaper rents, the prospect of buying their first home, or the possibility of leveraging a regional divergence in the cost of housing to reduce debt and improve their lifestyle by buying land or working less. Escalating housing prices in urban areas in Ontario and British Columbia, before and through the pandemic, acted as a significant driver of internal migration to Northern Ontario and the Maritimes.

In several cases, renters were motivated to move to more affordable regions for cash-flow relief, to arrest debt accumulation, to escape poor housing conditions or to find an affordable apartment after being evicted.

One woman who lived in an expensive city in BC, moved to find an apartment with affordable rent after being evicted from her apartment:

> **"The bottom line, the reason I moved was economic. I looked for probably two months straight. I can't remember how many places I looked at trying to find a place and, I mean, I had lived there for 30 years. But the rents were just getting stupid."**
>
> (Interview 16_M)

In other cases, people moved to escape poor housing conditions. One social media worker from Ontario explained her and her partner's motivation to move up north:

> **"We just wanted kind of a fresh start. The building that we were living in was not great. It was a really crappy one-bedroom apartment that was right above a dumpster. We had cockroaches so we were constantly getting fumigated. It was just a terrible situation.... But there really wasn't anything else in [city] that was affordable, but not like a total slum, you know. So, we were like sinking so much money into accommodation, not getting ahead, not paying down any debt, actually accumulating debt because like, at one point, we were using credit cards for everything else because so much of our money was going to rent bills.... We couldn't even probably afford to live there now. Just like we're totally priced out."**
>
> (Interview 7_NO)

In these cases, and others, moving to a more affordable region was a strategy to escape the price squeeze of housing in expensive markets and, in many cases, to improve the quality of their rental housing.

The ability to buy a first home was a motivating factor for many migrants, especially young people in their 20s and 30s who felt that owning a residence in their previous cities was impossible. As one young couple explained, the affordability of housing in northeastern Ontario made it possible to own a home for their growing family:

> **"I opened Realtor.ca, I scrolled, and my jaw almost hit the floor. And then messaged [partner's name], and I said, 'Hey, we're moving to [city in Temiskaming region]'.... We had been looking a couple of times around [previous community in Southern Ontario].... We were actually pretty hopeless, to be honest, about the housing situation...and we were at the point where, it was like, okay, well, whatever, let's dive in. We want to own a house."**
>
> (Interview 21_NO)

Besides being able to buy a house, some participants were motivated by the opportunity to purchase cheaper plots of land, guided also by the motivation to lead a different way of life, have more open space, and to farm or homestead. These examples reflect a common pattern observed across both regions. Lower rents and housing prices provided migrants with multiple attractive options: the ability to reduce debts, purchase a first home, buy land, or as we will see in the next section, work less or differently.

Homesteading

The lower cost of land in the Maritimes and Northern Ontario made it possible for several households to pursue homesteading. These households sought greater self-sufficiency by producing more of their own food.

"Obviously, it [dream of farming] wasn't going to happen in Southern Ontario," he explains, "I had travelled to Nova Scotia before and I thought it was very lovely and I knew that land up there was cheap."

(Interview 20_NO)

"Having the ability to provide for ourselves, and means other than financial, was a huge motivator for us, and that was, I guess, the huge motivator for me, moving up full-time and kind of going very limited with my business, so that I can [do farm work]."

(Interview 1_NO)

Another participant described how moving allowed her husband to leave his desk job:

> **"[He was] just wanting to be more of a farmer. He got into goats. Now he keeps goats and breeds them, and we use them for food. He was milking one of them at one point but hasn't done that recently. He's essentially, you know, worked in the bush a good part of his life, but for the past 10 or so years before we came up was pretty much, you know—he was a manager. He was on the desk. And so I think being up here allows him to have both of those things. He still does his same job. But he can, you know, go out and work in in the bush. You can work with the animals still have that kind of lifestyle."**
>
> (Interview 105_NO)

These quotes illustrate how the decision to move to more remote areas, especially in Northern Ontario, was also influenced by the desire to work differently, not in paid work on the labour market, but on their land, providing for themselves. This desire became feasible when affordable acreage, a regional divergence in the cost of housing, and remote work allowed for financial security.

4.1.3 Ability to work less or differently

Often enabled by a cheaper housing market, the desire to work less or differently was also a key motivator for many migrants to Northern Ontario (7) or the Maritimes (14).

In several cases, the lower price of housing made it possible for individuals to leave jobs that were stressful or that had long work hours or both. In several cases, it meant a deliberate income/quality of life trade off. The move to PEI, coupled with the sale of a lucrative property in British Columbia enabled one participant to leave a high-pressure job and work part-time as a consultant, prioritizing his health and time with family:

> **"I was losing my temper with my kids. I was not the same person. And so, having the financial stability to be able to step aside… I've gone from making well north of $150,000 a year to under $40,000."**
>
> (Interview 100_M)

Several couples described how the ability to be mortgage-free after moving to their new destination made it possible for one member of the household to take time away from paid work to focus on family or healing. As one participant described:

> **"So, we had a long journey with [child who passed away] and then the grief afterwards, and it all kind of rolled into we need a simpler life…. So, we actually came with no mortgage… So, that way, my husband could have time off…. Had we not moved, we'd probably be divorced.**
>
> (Interview 12_M).

Although, in this case, the break from work was temporary, in others it was permanent. Moving to a lower cost region allowed some participants to retire earlier than expected or work less and dedicate a greater share of their time to unpaid work in the home or community.

4.1.4 Way of life

Many participants were also attracted by what they perceived to be a slower and more community-centric way of life in their new locales. Interviewees often linked this desire to aspirations for improved health and wellbeing. One participant described how she moved to escape the fast pace of an urban area that she felt was negatively affecting her health:

> **"So essentially, I wanted to get away from the city hustle and bustle. Like, it was just getting too much for me for my mental health. I suffered from a lot of anxiety, and I thought that came from something else, but I think it came from just traffic, just everything combined."**
>
> (Interview 11_NO)

Other participants were pulled by a culture that they perceived as down to earth and honest. As one participant described:

> **"There's no filters, there's no manipulation, there's no hidden agendas."**
>
> (Interview 15_M)

When asked why they moved to Northern Ontario, another respondent replied:

> **"Mindset. [Back in the city] I just, sometimes, I felt like you had to keep up with the Joneses, so you had to have all. Now here, we are the Joneses. They're keeping up with us. That's what our neighbour always tells us."**
>
> (Interview 5_NO)

However, as this quote illustrates, the participants also (unintentionally) brought with them aspects of the very culture they were trying to escape.

Access to nature in Northern Ontario and the Maritimes was seldom the primary motivating factor, although it was often discussed as an added benefit, with several participants describing the allure of snowmobiling, being surrounded by nature, or having close proximity to water.

4.1.5 Safety and political climate

Several participants, particularly those who moved from low-income neighbourhoods, described how the desire to live in a safer community or to find safer housing motivated their move:

> **"We were getting people breaking into our cars. We had to step over a guy who was passed out on heroin in the morning, walking our kids to school. There were all these little things that sort of added up."**
>
> (Interview 100_M)

For another participant who moved from a low-income neighbourhood of the GTA to Northern Ontario, the move provided the opportunity to obtain safter housing.

> **"But then these guys in their mid-20s, who were heavy, heavy, heavy drug addicts started showing up. And we were finding needles in the garbage area on our floor. There was one day that there was blood streaked across the wall from the elevator to his room.... We had my daughter while we lived there, and I started getting increasingly nervous about home invasion."**
>
> (Interview 30_NO)

PICTURED ABOVE: A multi-use trail in the Annapolis Valley, NS, shares space with local farms. Photo by Katie Mazer.

In three cases, rising hostilities and shifting community norms that hindered feelings of safety and belonging motivated relocation. For one heterosexual couple living in western Canada, increasing hostility in their small town towards members of the 2SLGBTQAI+ community influenced their decision to move the Maritimes:

> **"I was on the committee where we decided to paint rainbow crossing in the town.... Anyway, we needed police escorts to paint this crosswalk. Yes, it was that bad, I know.... We couldn't find any like-minded people. We had to search far and wide and that really helped us decide to just pull the plug there and go somewhere else."**
>
> (Interview 103_M)

Similarly, a lesbian couple reported that their move to the Maritimes was in large part driven by a desire to feel more welcome in their community.

> **"We've seen Alberta over the last couple of years, it just taking a dive, and we weren't feeling as safe as we once felt in Alberta.... People were getting a lot more aggressive and targeting queer communities. And we're part of that. And so, it made the decision so much easier. Because we saw a real increase in hate crime during that time. So, we're out of there."**
>
> (Interview 102_M)

As these quotes illustrate, for some, the move was also motivated by a search for everyday acceptance, linking political climate to personal and family well-being and safety.

PICTURED ABOVE: Overlooking the Bay of Fundy, NS. Photo by Katie Mazer.

4.2 What allowed people to move?

Many factors lessened the risks associated with migration and made the move economically feasible for households. These included the ability to exploit the gap in the cost of housing between regions, the ability to work remotely, job flexibility, or retirement. In other cases, moving to live with family or to a locale with lower costs lessened the economic insecurity resulting from job loss or leaving work.

4.2.1 Divergence in regional housing costs

Selling in a high-priced market and buying in a lower-priced destination enabled the move for many participants (24 interviews) by unlocking equity and creating a cash buffer for transition. In some cases, this buffer meant that migrants did not need to have jobs lined up before the move:

> **"We found a rental here…because we were literally kind of going in blind. We did lots of research, but we don't know if we'll find jobs in this area. So [we decided] we'll rent for a year and then see how it works out, and we were very fortunate that the sale of our house gave us that cushion! You know, not have to work for a little bit until we figured out life here, and so we just took the plunge and went for it."**
>
> (Interview 102_M)

In Northern Ontario, another participant emphasized how the timing of his home sale during the height of the market transformed his family life, allowing him to retire early and live a slower pace of life:

> **"[We] had a big mortgage. So we decided to sell our house right at the peak. We made a ton of money on it, which was good and got rid of our mortgage…. So, we bought the house in [Northern Ontario community] for cash. So, we're sitting down there trying to figure out what to do with lots of money in the bank and no expenses."**
>
> (Interview 3_NO)

In both regions, participants described how proceeds from the sale of their homes allowed them to buy property outright, downsize monthly costs, or live off the proceeds while settling into a new location. This lowered barriers to moving and sometimes made it possible to move without immediate local employment.

4.2.2 Remote work and job flexibility

For many households (24), the ability for at least one person to work remotely increased the feasibility of the move by providing income security. One interviewee moving back to her home community in Nova Scotia described remote work as a safety cushion for her and her husband. *"Yeah…I'm not like the most risky person,"* she describes, *"so I feel for us to be able to keep our jobs and not completely give up everything."* (Interview 96_M).

Other respondents described how the pandemic had prompted their organization to normalize working remotely, making it possible for them to "make the leap" to a new destination.

> **"… It was really easy to translate to doing everything online, like for our team to all be working online. And then it meant that when we were able to… when we were thinking about moving up here, it was kind of a non-issue because I work remotely."**
>
> (Interview 21_NO)

PICTURED ABOVE: Sign in Nipissing region, ON. Photo by Suzanne Mills.

One participant who bought a small house and land in the greater Nipissing region sought out remote work because it would allow him the flexibility to pursue farming:

> **"I was working an in-person job and, I knew that if I could go to fully remote—that you could very easily strike a balance between being outside and doing farm work and then just heading inside on lunch breaks and stuff. And then of course, also being remote means, even if you're in a remote location as in living rurally, you can have access to jobs that wouldn't be available within a 30 or an hour of that type of house."**
>
> (Interview 20_NO)

Similar to remote work, job flexibility often enabled relocation (13). Participants in entrepreneurial or freelance roles were often able to work remotely and serve clients at a distance. Some participants who moved to Northern Ontario negotiated hybrid work arrangements in which they returned to the office weekly or monthly. In other cases, fly-in, fly-out work or the ability to transfer within a provincial or federal organization made the move possible. Finally, workers with skills in fields with high demand (such as nursing) were often very confident in their ability to find work in their new locale. In a minority of cases, migrants opened local businesses in their new locales, ventures which both allowed the move and were part of the draw of moving.

4.2.3 Retirement/Job Loss

Leaving work voluntarily or involuntarily also freed migrants from the need to live close to their prior place of employment. Participants who retired post-move were often able to get by on different combinations of pensions, RRSPs, severance packages, and proceeds from property sales. In other cases, moving to lower cost destinations provided households with more financial security after a member had lost their job.

One household, for example, decided to move to the Maritimes after the main income earner was laid off close to retirement age. Retirement savings, coupled with more affordable housing in the new locale, made it feasible for both members of the couple to retire earlier than expected:

> **"I was an engineer, so I was paid reasonably well.... Even when the company didn't give me a raise for five years, we were OK. So, in terms of moving, even though [spouse] was working part-time, it wasn't as though we would be taking a major economic hit. We were planning on retiring. We were working towards retiring. We could have maybe used a couple of more nails, but we were OK."**
>
> (Interview 36_M)

Loss of employment also acted as a catalyst for six participants who were not nearing retirement to move. In these cases, job loss prompted moving by either facilitating a more substantial change of lifestyle or by helping reduce costs. One Northern Ontario mover's decision to downshift was initially driven by job loss:

> **"I was a senior executive at [company], a US company. Anyway, that didn't work out so good. And, before COVID, I got restructured out of the business sort of unexpectedly... That precipitated a lot of the things that happened...so the job thing happened and sort of had the opportunity to sort of look at what else can we do in life."**
>
> (Interview 3_NO)

In some cases, income support that accompanied job loss provided a financial cushion that eased the process of relocation. Severance packages, employment insurance (EI), and the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) created short-term income bridges for households as they looked for local or remote employment in their new locale. In one case, severance packages were used for a downpayment on a house. In another case, participants' ability to relocate was made possible by a CERB-related cushion after layoffs.

4.2.4 Family support

Family support also enabled households to move to Northern Ontario (7) and the Maritimes (8). Family often provided access to temporary or permanent housing, property, childcare, and other everyday supports.

Many participants stayed with their parents, in-laws, siblings, or other relatives upon arrival in their new destinations or relocated into family-owned properties. Moving in with family allowed households to save money or mitigate debt in a time of economic uncertainty and transition. As one couple explained, moving in with parents cushioned the blow of job loss:

> **"I officially got let go at the end of September. And at the beginning of December, but by that time, I moved into a friend's home from Toronto in October and decided, 'You know what, let's just move back,' because there was no job opportunities in Ontario at the time. Let's just go back to Nova Scotia. We were living with my parents... for about four months."**
>
> (Interview 45_M)

Family also played an important role in coordinating the everyday logistics of the move, through providing storage, sharing vehicles, and offering on-the-ground knowledge to find rentals, trades, and even jobs. Similarly, family served as a local support network when migrants needed support with childcare.

While not universal, family support served as a safety net for movers across regions and life stages, often working in tandem with other enablers, such as remote work and the rent gap. This support also smoothed the path to participants' broader goals of securing affordable housing and adopting a slower, more community-oriented way of life.

PICTURED ABOVE: Scots Bay, NS. Photo by Katie Mazer.

5. Life after moving

Participants reported that their lives changed in many ways after moving. Many shifted the structure of their work lives, supplementing remote work with local jobs or starting something new. With more time and greater affordability, most participants experienced improvements to their standards of living and quality of life. Some participants felt less beholden to paid work and reported having more time for other things. While most participants encountered friendly neighbours and local hospitality, forming meaningful relationships was more difficult. Isolation and loneliness were not uncommon, and some reported experiences of social exclusion, racism, and homophobia. Across both regions, participants were struck by the poor quality of and access to services and infrastructure.

PICTURED ABOVE: Forest near Temagami, ON. Photo by Suzanne Mills.

5.1 Work and livelihood

The precise ways in which working life changed after moving varied greatly across our interviews. Some participants continued to work remotely in the jobs they had held prior to moving. Others pursued passion projects, switched to local in-person jobs, or engaged in a combination of these activities, often supplemented by remote work. Those who had found work in their fields in their new communities often reported benefiting from a healthier work culture. Almost 40% (26) of participants reported working locally in some capacity, while 40% (27) reported working remotely at some point over the course of their move. For many interviewees (40%) their earnings had decreased since moving.

While many participants continued to work remotely after moving, they often supplemented this employment with other activities. For many of these workers, taking a local on-site job in addition to their remote work was a way to meet people and get to know the community. For these participants, their local jobs—including retail work, service jobs, and municipal roles—were typically modest in terms of hours and income.

Other participants, feeling unhappy with remote work, transitioned completely to local jobs after moving. This was generally a strategy for reducing isolation and feelings of dissatisfaction related to working remotely. Transitioning from remote to local work often required taking a pay cut, but for these migrants the social connection of working on-site was worth the financial sacrifice.

As noted in the previous section, some participants used their remote jobs or the sale of a higher priced property to transition into lower-paid but more meaningful local work (e.g., social service or non-profit) or passion projects (e.g., farming), or to enable their spouse to make such a transition or take time away from paid work altogether. Several migrants who had used the move to reduce their working hours or leave a stressful job also ended up transitioning to local employment post move to help with household finances.

The pivot from remote to local work was sometimes prompted by post-pandemic changes to workplace policy that reduced access to remote work. For one participant from the Maritimes, for example, while remote work had allowed them to move to the region to care for a parent, subsequent changes in workplace policy forced them to quit and develop a strategy for working locally:

> **"They wanted me to be able to go into the office more often because, you know, return-to-office is a thing now. So, I just quit.... Last year, 2023, Nova Scotia had this thing... where NSCC, the government, will pay for... certain courses. I'm taking a course now at the Community College."**
>
> (Interview 43_M)

While remote work played a major role in facilitating inter-regional migration, it doesn't tell the whole story. For many participants, remote work served as the bridge that made relocation possible, but it did not provide a local anchor after the move. Seeking daily contact, integration, a stronger sense of belonging, or more gratification from their work, many participants sought out local jobs. Importantly, however, these transitions to local work were often only available to people with other sources of income: whether supplementary remote work, a spouse's steady income (often through remote work), disposable income resulting from decreased housing costs, or the availability of other assets. For others, lower wages and lack of available local work were barriers to making such a transition.

5.2 Affordability

Moving resulted in a significant perceived improvement in the standard of living for most participants in our study. In 60% of our interviews (57% in Northern Ontario and 62% in the Maritimes), participants described greater affordability related to smaller or no mortgage payments, lower rent, lower property taxes, and fewer incidental expenses. Even for households that did not see an increase in disposable income, interviewees often *felt* better off because of increases to their space or assets, or reductions to their debt. Despite this overall trend, some participants in both regions conveyed an ongoing sense of "financial precarity" (Interview 13_M), particularly those who were unable to find stable employment in their new locale. Homeowners reported greater improvements to their standard of living than renters.

Especially in Northern Ontario, many participants described how the financial gains from the move showed up in their everyday budgets. Participants often reported that a lower cost of living, coupled with lower fixed costs, allowed more room for discretionary spending and left participants with a feeling of economic relief. As one participant living in the Mattawa region recounted:

> **"Like just overall, it's affordable and you have kind of money to spend how you kind of want to, right? Either that's saving it or spending it or whatever. You feel like your hard work pays off. I felt in the city, no matter what I did, I was in a loop of constantly trying to figure it out. Am I saving enough? Maybe I'm not. Do I have money for this? I didn't know what the cause of that was until I was out of it. It's hard to see when you're in it."**
>
> (Interview 11_NO)

In contrast, movers to the Maritimes were more likely to report that budgets remained tight despite cheaper housing prices. While the move may have improved their housing situation and afforded them more space, for many movers the high cost of living, including food, electricity, oil heating, and taxes, reduced disposable income, sometimes offsetting other financial gains. Many interviewees reported being surprised by the high cost of living, and some felt these unanticipated costs had dashed their hopes that moving would liberate them from financial stress. This situation was made more difficult by the frequent divergence between movers' expectations and the reality on the ground. This was especially true for renters who wanted but were unable to buy a house upon moving. As one renter who moved to Nova Scotia from BC recounted:

> **"The dream was to move here and it was more affordable and I still had money in the bank for a down payment and maybe I could buy a house. Well, what I'm finding, what I'm learning is—and people moving here may or may not know—there's a harsh reality that's hidden. Right now, I'm feeling as though a house that I could afford to buy is not one I could afford to live in because it's a fixer-upper or whatever."**
>
> (Interview 16_M)

In addition to the ability to afford more secure or spacious housing, interviewees reported taking on building and renovation projects. These construction projects, supported by lower carrying costs, equity release, and sometimes the ability to take time away from paid work, ranged from DIY fixes to major upgrades and, in a few cases, building from scratch.

5.3 Quality of life

In addition to enhanced economic well-being, participants also reported improvements to their quality of life: lower stress, improved health, calmer routines, better access to nature, and more time for family, recreation, and personal projects. These improvements to quality of life were generally connected to movers' ability to slow down and to their perceptions of their new communities as quiet, green, or safe.

Ten participants (15%) specifically highlighted how the move improved their mental well-being. One participant in their thirties described the impact of leaving the dense, high-pressure environment of the GTA:

> **"It's the best decision that I think I made for my husband and I, especially for myself. Again, I've only been able to recognize how bad my mental health was. And now that I'm so much better, I wouldn't change it for the world. Because now I'm…just at peace, and that's just priceless."**
>
> (Interview 11_NO)

Participants who left stressful jobs also described how moving had given them more time for activities beyond work and commuting, and better access to nature, contributing to improvements in overall health. As this mover to the Maritimes explains:

> **"It's hard to explain how amazing it's been, because… it's just been a totally different mindset. Like I've been able to garden this year…. I've been outside…. So, you know, just things like that where I'm able to, you know go and be present. Be part of my kids' activities every single time like I'm there. It's been so good. I can't even describe to you."**
>
> (Interview 100_M)

Not all participants, however, recounted such dramatic improvements to wellbeing, with a small number (3 interviews) reporting declines in personal health and well-being after the move, generally related to social isolation and a reduced range of activities. In other words, improvements in overall wellbeing were linked to participants' success integrating into the community.

5.4 Integration into community

Community integration was the most contested aspect of the move in both regions: while 70% (47) of respondents expressed positive impressions about integrating into their new communities, 57% (38) expressed negative impressions.

Many movers reported forming social connections easily, often with other newcomers or neighbours. The most frequent positive impression participants shared with us was that people in their new communities were friendly. Participants frequently contrasted the hospitality, mutual aid, and culture of "showing up" in their new communities with the lack of neighbourliness in their previous communities. Some participants reported this left them with a sense of security and comfort they hadn't experienced in their previous homes. For some participants, who anticipated being marginalized in rural and small-town contexts, the friendliness was surprising:

> **"I remember the first week I was here living in [town], my neighbor across the street, who I had never met… they came by, knocked on my door. They're just like, 'Oh, I see you guys have recently moved up here, and I have this present for you.' And it was a giant basket filled with fresh produce…. It's just everyone was so lovely."**
>
> (Interview 23_NO)

But not all participants experienced this friendliness and, even among those who did, it did not necessarily lead to meaningful social integration. Especially among racialized and 2SLGBTQIA+ movers, some felt more a sense of ostracization than neighbourliness. And even for participants who felt their new communities were friendly, this friendliness was sometimes experienced as superficial and didn't always translate into the ability to form meaningful relationships. Participants reported a flipside to small-town social life that made integrating difficult: insider-outsider dynamics, gatekeeping, gossiping, and episodes of racism and homophobia. While the factors shaping peoples' experiences of belonging are complex and multi-faceted, participants generally had better luck integrating if those around them *perceived them as belonging* in their new community, based on their demographics and class.

Experiences of racism spanned experiences of repetitive subtle commentary, bullying and slights, and overt racist rhetoric on social media. One participant living in the Timmins region describes the casual racism they have encountered since moving:

> **"I've had people say, 'Oh, your English is very good.' Initially, that was a compliment.... Then you keep hearing, keep hearing, keep hearing and then you're like, what is happening? And then yeah, at one point...[this] lady is like, 'Oh, your English is very good.' I was like, 'Your English is good too'."**
>
> (Interview 32_NO)

One gay participant, who had moved to the Maritimes, describes how racism and homophobia intersected with local suspicion of outsiders and generalized xenophobia:

> **"And two months into the [new] job, I started looking for another job because of just how mean and cruel people were. Yeah. I was othered.... It was people like me that brought COVID, it was people like me who are moving from Ontario and Alberta and they're buying up all the homes and they are and they're making it unaffordable for people here.... All that stuff, you know, multiculturalism and LGBTQ, obviously... it was really hard coming into a culture where it was...so in your face, the isolationist attitude of, you know, we take care of ourselves.... [My husband] has one friend who is from Ontario and...she said to me, be prepared to go through it for about five years because they won't give you a chance. They won't give you a chance unless you [have] been here for five years."**
>
> (Interview 29_M)

Even among participants who were not otherwise marginalized, many movers to the Maritimes felt there was some local suspicion and resentment toward recent in-migrants for their perceived role in driving up the cost of housing. While some participants put this sentiment in context, expressing concern about the housing affordability crisis, other participants struggled with the sense of not being fully welcome. One participant, who grew up in the Maritimes and moved back during the pandemic, described a sense of being socially ostracised:

> **"When we moved in here...not a single neighbor from anywhere...came by to say, like, welcome.... [At work] I often, you know will, you know, say 'In my experience working at [a workplace in Ontario]' or whatever, and I think a lot of people just hear that and go like, 'Oh, here we go again. This guy from Ontario telling us how to do it in PEI.' And, you know, so I've really tried hard to, like, get that out of my lexicon."**
>
> (Interview 40_M)

On top of these social dynamics, work and family structures also impacted participants' ability to integrate socially. Isolation, loneliness, and struggles with community integration were more common among remote workers, retirees, and participants who defaulted to family rather than forming new ties. By contrast, finding ways to be out in the world and connecting with people helped with social integration. Participants in almost half our interviews (42%) reported using volunteering and community involvement as a strategy to integrate socially. Many of these movers recounted how community activities had helped them meet people, contribute to local life, and become part of the community more quickly.

5.5 Service and infrastructure challenges

Study participants consistently reported limited access to essential services. This manifested most obviously in a lack of reliable healthcare, but extended to municipal services, shopping, and other aspects of daily life. Overall, while these service and infrastructural challenges did not erase the overall benefits of moving, they did temper them.

Participants in 72% of our interviews reported challenges accessing healthcare. In both regions, people described years-long waitlists for family physicians. Those who had been able to secure a provider had often done so through personal connections, luck, or medical urgency (e.g. pregnancy). Participants without doctors relied on walk-in or nurse practitioner clinics, telehealth and, in some cases, family doctors in their previous home communities.

Participants reported long wait times at emergency rooms, out-of-pocket costs, and the stress of uncertainty. That is, participants were less concerned with the inconvenience of poor access to healthcare, and more worried about the transfer of risk, time, and costs to households—especially those with elderly family members or chronic conditions. One participant who moved to the North Bay region from Southern Ontario described how these interconnected challenges play out in that context:

> **"Basically…there's a couple of walk-in clinics, but they're not staffed by doctors. The doctors are telehealth. So, you would go to a walk-in clinic and talk to the nurse there, and then the nurse would relay your concerns to a doctor over a video feed. And that's the extent of it. And they can't really do much for you. So, for most things, they're going to send you to the hospital anyway…. You just go straight to the hospital. There are nurse practitioners, but because they're not covered by OHIP, you have to pay to see them. So, it's like $130 per [visit]."**
>
> (Interview 7_NO)

Movers' lack of access to primary care providers may often be more a function of their relocation than of the places they moved. Communities across the country are facing doctor shortages but, in moving, many gave up family doctors and landed at the back of horribly long waitlists. Participants also noted regional differences in quality of care: most notably, the diminished availability of specialist care in more peripheral regions relative to major urban regions. Participants noted that major procedures and specialist care sometimes required travelling to the region's larger cities. Some even recounted preferring to travel to see specialists in their previous community rather than risk waiting for an appointment locally. For some, the regional divergence in availability of care came as a shock. While the need to travel for care is often normalized in rural regions, movers were more likely to see it as a deficit. As one participant, who had moved to the Maritimes, said: *"I pray every day [that] I'm healthy"* (Interview 101_M).

Beyond healthcare, 60% of interviews—an equal number from both regions—highlighted other service and infrastructural challenges, related to childcare, municipal and professional services, recreational programs, and consumption opportunities. For a small number of interviewees, access to some services (e.g., childcare) improved after the move.

In some cases, as with the general shortage of childcare or public transit, these challenges flowed in part from a failure of local services and infrastructure to expand in step with population growth. Poor access to these and other services can make basic activities like working or grocery shopping difficult or impossible. In other cases, participants were frustrated by a lack of amenities and services—like delivery services or longer business hours—they had taken for granted while living in well-resourced metropolitan areas. Finally, in cases where sports or other recreational activities had been an important part of participants' lives and identities prior to moving, some experienced the reduced access to organized activities as a meaningful loss.

PICTURED ABOVE: Rail bridge, Mattawa, ON. Photo by Suzanne Mills.

5.6 Regrets and return migration

Most participants in the study stood by their decisions to move, but a meaningful minority (19% of interviews) voiced ambivalence or clear regret.

One participant, who had quit her job in Southern Ontario and, with her spouse, purchased a farm in rural Nova Scotia aiming to do something creative, interesting, and good for the earth, described feeling conflicted about whether she would make the same decision again. While she embraced the opportunity to reframe her life and pursue her values, they had encountered unanticipated environmental and business challenges and, at the time of the interview, were anticipating having to sell the farm in the coming years. She explained:

> **"Yeah, I don't know. The thing is, part of me is, you know, you only live once, and you've gotta seize things. Seize opportunities as they come up and do them, like that part of me operates on that. But then the other part of me is very realistic and…I guess there are two, you know, the two people sitting on the shoulder. I can't honestly answer."**
>
> (Interview 39_M)

Other participants felt overwhelmingly negative about their moves. Seven interviewees had returned or planned to return to their previous communities. These participants were isolated and/or bullied, forced to return to in-person work, struggling to find local work, or worried about their poor access to services. Some people also struggled with cultural and class differences in their new communities, while some recounted that they had held romantic or false impressions of the place they were moving. Among those considering or desiring to go back to their previous communities, some worried about whether they could even afford to live in the inflated urban housing markets they had previously left.

Overall, regrets and returns were not the dominant outcomes in our study, but when they did occur, they followed a consistent pattern: the factors that made the move possible eroded, essential services proved too thin, and participants struggled to integrate or fit into their new communities.

With these household trajectories in view, we now turn to the receiving communities themselves, their capacities, strains, and the policies that shape them.

6. Effects of in-migration on receiving communities

Community leaders and officials in our study communities were generally optimistic about the increase in inter-regional migration. Notably, while our study was focused on internal migration, in both Northern Ontario and the Maritimes, key informants often did not differentiate between international migration and internal migration; rather, they described the benefits and challenges of *population growth* generally.

Interviewees described how new residents were contributing to the economic and social vibrancy of their communities through volunteerism and civic engagement, and by starting businesses, filling job vacancies, shopping locally and boosting local tax revenues. These newcomers were also transforming regions and communities demographically, bringing welcome ethnic and age diversity.

In addition to social benefits, community key informants described how in-migration could spur investment in local infrastructure, including housing, recreational facilities, and internet services. However, in areas that had seen dramatic population growth, key informants were clear that, in addition to these widely reported benefits, their communities were also facing some acute challenges: namely, insufficient and unaffordable housing, rising homelessness, shortages of family doctors and other social service capacity, infrastructure deficits, and social divisions.

PICTURED ABOVE: Downtown Mattawa, ON. Picture taken by Suzanne Mills.

6.1 Local responses to population growth

Prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic, some municipalities and provincial governments were already focused on attracting newcomers as a response to their aging populations. Most of these efforts focused on increasing international migration through a range of programs and immigration pathways.

But some municipalities in Northern Ontario and provincial governments in the Maritimes developed programs that explicitly sought to draw new residents from elsewhere in Canada. These campaigns expanded with the onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic, as governments worked to capitalize on the shift to remote work and people's desires to escape city life. One municipality in Northern Ontario, for instance, rented billboards in Toronto in their attempt to attract residents.

While both Northern Ontario and the Maritimes began to see increased population growth in the mid-2010s—resulting from internal and international migration—key informants in both regions noted that, with the onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic, spikes in inter-provincial and intra-provincial migration fundamentally altered the scale and pace of population growth.

Importantly, population growth has been uneven *within* both regions, with some towns growing rapidly while many more remote areas continue to crave more growth. Key informants from areas that did not see as high levels of population growth, more commonly in Northern Ontario, often reflected on the benefits that flowed from additional in-migration. Those from high growth regions of Northern Ontario or from the Maritimes, in contrast, often spoke of both the benefits and challenges that have resulted from rapid and unforeseen population growth. Among these interviewees, many recounted the acute pressure population growth has placed housing, services, and infrastructure, emphasizing that sustainable and just development requires ensuring that investment in social and physical infrastructure keep pace with demographic change.

Real-estate agents in both regions described how interest in buying properties increased dramatically in their regions during the pandemic:

Northern Ontario:

"It was almost like a tsunami, like a huge wave of people that came up." (Interview 65_NO)

Maritimes:

"And COVID just was like lighting a match, it just went insane there." (Interview 72_M)

6.2 How in-migration has benefited communities

Key informants in both regions described how people moving into their regions were making positive contributions to community social and economic life in a number of ways. As one real-estate agent in Nova Scotia remarked:

> **"I look at the mix of people who live in the Annapolis Royal area right now, and you know, there's some very, very intelligent, highly skilled people that that are involved in the community. And spend their money locally.... It's a different community than it was, but I think for the most part it's a better community than it was."**
>
> (Interview 95_M)

6.2.1 Volunteerism and community engagement

Community leaders from both regions noted the high levels of volunteerism and community involvement among recent internal migrants.

Not only are new residents eager to fill important volunteer roles in the community, but they also bring renewed energy to community clubs and institutions that have experienced a decline in activity in recent years. For example, as one key informant explained, some of the community halls in the Annapolis Valley, Nova Scotia have been revitalized due to the *"influx of new people who are interested in going back to that old model of community halls where you hold card games and have potlucks"* (Interview 90_M).

Some municipalities actually used volunteering to foster civic engagement and inclusion through partnerships with settlement agencies and community organizations that connect new migrants with local volunteering opportunities, clubs and services. Events such as "Welcome North Bay" and "Lunch and Learn" are examples of such efforts happening in Northern Ontario.

Key informants from both regions also reported that new residents have injected their communities with new ideas, diversity and vibrancy. One municipal elected official in the Maritimes recounted this sentiment, which was shared by elected officials in both regions:

> **"I think once we get over the hump of 'You're changing my town,' yeah, there's lots of positive things. You bring a vibrancy, you bring people with different ideas, new—you know, new ideas about what a library could be like, or… a rec centre."**
>
> (Interview 71_M)

In some aging communities in the Maritimes, the younger age profile and family structure of recent in-migrants is seen as a community asset.

6.2.2 Increased consumer activity

Key informants reported that one positive effect of in-migration was increased consumer activity. Informants noted that, even when new migrants are not directly engaged in the labour market, they stimulate demand for goods and services and support existing businesses and municipalities through their consumption. As house prices and property taxes have risen, newcomers have contributed to expanding the local tax bases that funds municipal services and infrastructure.

Reflecting this increased consumer activity, interviewees recounted that new businesses had been opening in their communities. In Northern Ontario, one participant described how in-migration and new interest from investors has catalyzed the expansion of the retail sector, both in terms of new businesses and franchises opening and the revitalization of long-term vacant commercial properties. One informant estimated that the service industry had expanded by 25%. As demand has increased with population growth, trades businesses—contractors, roofers, plumbers, etc.—are also expanding more into northern communities.

6.2.3 Starting businesses and working local jobs

In-migrants are also investing in local businesses in Northern Ontario and the Maritimes. The local benefits of these new businesses flow outward to the community when they hire staff and buy local goods and services.

One senior economic development officer for a regional economic development organization in the Maritimes described how the ability to work remotely allowed some new residents to take the risk of making a major life transition and establishing a local business:

> **"I'd see the businesses, folks that were coming and bringing like a knowledge-based remote job with them, and maybe trying to—in using that as like a backbone so that they could then pursue a dream or a passion, like getting into farming, or tourism and hospitality, or running that cute little general store, or even a restaurant and things that oftentimes were very different from their career background."**
>
> (Interview 70_M)

PICTURED ABOVE: New housing development in Wolfville, NS. Photo by Katie Mazer.

In both regions, key informants described return migration of locals who had left for education and work opportunities, emphasizing the skills, capital, and experience they brought back to the region.

Respondents in both regions were hopeful that in-migrants from within Canada would increasingly fill local labour needs. Despite persistent vacancies in key sectors (e.g., healthcare, professional services), community leaders—particularly in Northern Ontario—noted that internal migrants were filling local vacancies in a variety of sectors. As one economic development officer from Northern Ontario emphasized, increasing labour supply was necessary to foster an economic environment that can support new business activity:

> **"If you don't have that—the people either investing within the community starting new businesses, you know, obviously supporting existing businesses, supporting the companies in terms of for labour relation…then you don't really have anything. If a company is looking for 25 or 30 employees, and they can't fill those spots, that's massive right. Like, who knows if a company can survive that way? But at least now with the population growth, at least, hopefully, we're filling those roles as much as we can."**
>
> (Interview 68_NO)

6.2.4 New community resources

In some cases, local communities gained new community resources as part of municipalities' broader attempts to appeal to new residents and the increased tax revenue that accompanied this population growth. As one participant explained, *"We're putting in a pool and rec center, which may help make things a little more appealing for professionals wanting to come up here"* (Interview 68_NO). While such investments were a strategy to attract new residents, they were also made possible by increases in tax revenue resulting from migration.

These investments, however, were sometimes uneven. For example, while informants in the Maritimes described widespread investment in rural internet infrastructure—including in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic—similar initiatives were not available in many municipalities in Northern Ontario. As one key informant in the Mattawa-Nipissing corridor described:

> **"Fiber optic is like a delusion. Like that's never coming here. That's sort of the mentality. We don't matter enough, but we're not a big enough center for them to invest."**
>
> (Interview 65_NO)

As interviewees emphasized, quality internet is a primary consideration for remote workers looking to relocate, but it also brings broader community benefits.

6.3 Challenges of population growth

6.3.1 Labour market mismatch

While new migrants participate in the labour market in diverse ways, their presence has not resolved longstanding labour shortages in specific sectors. In both regions, key informants described a labour market characterized by persistent skills mismatches and recruitment challenges. As one interviewee from the community sector in Northern Ontario described:

> **"There's lots of jobs and lots of job vacancies. But hiring specific talent is really hard. I don't get the sense that the people who have moved up are people who have those designations…we have hardly any lawyers, any accountants."**
>
> (Interview 85_NO)

Remote workers, semi-retirees and small business owners moving to Northern Ontario and the Maritimes did not always have the technical skills, professional credentials or availability most needed in local labour markets. In some areas, key informants noted that most in-migrants were retired and not actively participating in the labour market. In both regions, interviewees noted ongoing labour shortages in healthcare, education, skilled trades, and professional services. Informants in the Maritimes speculated that in-migration has exacerbated these shortages by increasing demand for services. As one of participant observed, *"there is still a nursing shortage and teaching shortage and middle-class job shortages that may be driven by increased economic activity of remote work"* (Interview 74_M). Labour shortages are also present in low-wage sectors, including seasonal and service-sector jobs, where local demographic shifts, particularly aging populations and youth out-migration, have reduced the available labour force.

As population growth has failed to resolve certain labour shortages, governments have taken more focused measures to fill these gaps. In PEI, for example, the provincial government has worked to raise local awareness about professions in high demand and recruit workers, conducting international recruitment missions focused on nursing, construction, and other in-demand areas. In both regions, temporary and permanent international migrants were filling labour market gaps in retail, food, and accommodation sectors. In Northern Ontario, international migrants were also filling trades vacancies in mining services and other sectors. Some informants highlighted their communities' desire to facilitate international migrants on temporary work permits staying in Canada over the long term, emphasizing the importance of creating a clear path to permanent residency for temporary foreign workers.

While most migrants to Northern Ontario were able to find on-site employment if it was desired, even if not in their field, in the Maritimes remote work has created new vulnerabilities for workers because it has allowed a pool of workers to move to the region that is more diverse and skilled than the local job market. Specialized or highly skilled in-migrants facing job loss or transition may confront a choice between relocation or underemployment. Return-to-office mandates and hybrid work arrangements also threaten to disrupt these migration patterns. While some migrants have adapted by changing jobs or commuting long distances, informants reported that some have returned to their prior communities once unable to work remotely.

6.3.2 Lack of social integration

Key informants reported that in-migrants sometimes face challenges with social integration. In some cases, they related these challenges to the "cliquey," "narrow-minded," or "difficult to break into" nature of some communities. Interviewees described parts of the Maritimes, in particular, as only superficially welcoming. One real-estate agent in the region recounted that she frequently hears that, **"people [here] are very friendly, but they don't want to be your friend"** (Interview 72_M).

Social isolation was sometimes exacerbated by migrants' unrealistic expectations about the place to which they were moving. This was especially the case with migration to the Maritimes. Informants reported that romantic preconceptions lead to disappointment and "sober second thoughts" among inter-regional migrants when their realities ultimately did not match this image. Some speculated that this dynamic had driven some migrants to return home.

Sometimes social tensions are rooted in cultural differences between rural and small-town communities and the larger urban centres from which in-migrants have often moved. As key informants described it, urbanites sometimes have expectations of individual privacy and private entitlement to space and resources that clash with the cultural norms in their new communities, and this can make social integration more difficult.

While our research was focused on inter-regional migrants, some informants spoke to the distinct challenges facing international newcomers in both regions, including racism and xenophobia. One business owner in Northern Ontario described his as **"such a narrow-minded community,"** explaining that, **"They do not like any outsiders. Unless you're white-skinned"** (Interview 59_NO). Temporary migrant workers, meanwhile, face structural barriers to social integration. In Northern Ontario, informants reported that international students often leave the region upon graduation due to a lack of opportunities. Key informants are aware that lack of social integration leads to people leaving their new communities. One participant in Northern Ontario described it as a "revolving door": **"We'll bring in four newcomers… three leave, one stays. We'll bring in another four…three leave, one stays"** (Interview 84_NO).

Municipalities and community organizations are taking steps to support the integration of inter-regional and international newcomers, sometimes through the same programs. In the Maritimes, for example, the Annapolis Valley Welcome Network uses volunteering as both a settlement strategy and a community-building tool. In Temiskaming Shores, the municipality began providing funding to One Light Diversity, a settlement organization created by an inter-regional newcomer. These networks connect newcomers to long-time residents to build relationships and share practical knowledge about life in the region while fostering a welcoming environment to support quality of life and retention of newcomers in the community.

6.3.3 Housing and affordability crisis

Rapid population growth in both regions has intensified pressures on housing and social services, heightening concerns about affordability, displacement, and increased housing insecurity and homelessness. Respondents in both regions described how the lack of housing availability and affordability has reached crisis levels.

While lack of new housing construction and public investment in affordable housing are longstanding trends that pre-date this wave of inter-regional migration, increasing investment churn and the influx of new residents to these regions brought a budding housing crisis to an apex. This was exacerbated by the differential in house prices between inter-regional migrants' home communities and the regions into which they moved. Key informants shared the common perception that many in-migrants were able to pay unprecedented prices for local houses because they had made significant earnings on property sales in their previous communities. One real-estate agent from Northern Ontario captured this sense that in-migrants **"could sell their box in the sky in Toronto and walk away with hundreds of thousands of dollars in cash and come up here and buy a castle and live like kings"** (Interview 86_NO).

While new residents coming from more expensive housing markets might continue to see Northern Ontario and the Maritimes as affordable relative to their previous communities, home ownership has quickly slipped out of reach for many local residents. In turn, as more people are priced out of buying homes, the rental market has also become increasingly unaffordable. This trend is more pronounced in the Maritimes, where population growth, and subsequent pressure on the housing market, have been more dramatic.

Across communities in Northern Ontario, interviewees emphasized the growing tension between rising demand and the region's limited capacity to expand its housing stock. Many informants noted that their communities lack infrastructure, funding, or interest from developers. Here, the crisis has been exacerbated by speculative property purchases, investments in high-end housing, and conversion of short-term rentals.

In the Maritimes, informants emphasized that the housing supply is constrained not only by limited development capacity and a shortage of skilled labour, but also by restrictive zoning regulations and local resistance to densification and new development, including from new residents. While some municipalities have approved large-scale developments, these are not generally affordable for most. The prohibitive cost of housing means that housing insecurity now also affects middle-income earners, including those who are in high-demand occupations, like teachers and nurses. In Nova Scotia, some participants emphasized that the provincial government should play a more active role in changing regulations across the province to accelerate the pace of appropriate housing development.

Perhaps the most visible impact of the housing crisis is a notable increase in homelessness and social service use in both regions. Key informants in both Northern Ontario and the Maritimes generally described shifting patterns of inequality and a marked increase in more extreme levels of poverty as their communities have grown more bifurcated. In both regions, participants noted a dramatic increase in unhoused residents, recounting that many towns had seen encampments established, often for the first time, and unprecedented levels of service use. Given the rapid escalation of this crisis and the small size of many municipalities, towns are scrambling to provide supports to unhoused residents while feeling significantly under-resourced.

Elected officials from both regions commented on the rise of housing insecurity and heightened poverty:

"Our poor have gotten much poorer. Typically, in areas like this, in small towns and rural areas, poor people used to be the people who inherited the house that had been in the family forever. And that's what they had. And they had the old car. They probably grew a garden, but now it's more than that. There is a lower level of poverty. And it's people who aren't housed.... So, when I first started here in 2016, downtown Kentville was a real anomaly because we had Open Arms shelter on our main street.... And there was probably, at the time, ten people who were unhoused. Now I wouldn't even want to guess. I would say it's probably 40s and 50s."

(Interview 76_M)

"Now we're seeing it [unhoused population] very visibly in our community. As much as we might see more homes being built, we're also seeing more people who are unhoused and the costs that are associated with helping, supporting and providing services for individuals who require assistance.... We really struggle with trying to balance providing services that are municipally mandated, but then also having more expectations from the community."

(Interview 73_NO)

Ultimately, rapid population growth represents a paradox. Increased housing prices have led to crises of housing availability and affordability, but they have also increased the tax base on which municipalities depend to expand and maintain infrastructure and provide services. New, diverse and affordable housing development is urgently needed to accommodate population growth and ease the crisis, but development is often contentious, including among newcomers who want to preserve the rural setting to which they have moved. These conditions are more acute in the Maritimes and in the more southern parts of Northern Ontario, where population growth was far beyond what anyone had anticipated. But the situation in these areas offers a sober lesson on the dire consequences that ensue when upper levels of governments fail to create conditions that can support population growth by investing in housing and services.

7. Key conclusions

The aim of our study was to provide a more in-depth understanding about recent inter-regional migration to the Maritimes and Northern Ontario. Some of our findings conformed to stories depicted in the media and common-sense assumptions about the move. Other findings, however, complicate or question these assumptions. Our key conclusions are as follows:

1. Inter-regional migrants are demographically and socioeconomically diverse. Migrants in our study represented a greater diversity of income levels than what was typically presented in the media.
2. Housing affordability, family, and work-life balance are becoming important drivers of inter-regional migration in Canada. In our study proximity to family, housing affordability and the desire to work less or slow down were the main motivations for migration.
3. Remote work and flexible work arrangements allow people to move to places without onsite employment opportunities that match their skills.
4. Reliance on remote work to live in small communities introduces new forms of precarity. Remote workers in our study were more vulnerable to job loss and unemployment.
5. Movers are typically active participants in community life. Participants were eager to integrate in their new communities, often joining clubs or volunteering.
6. Movers who did not match the demographic profile of dominant groups in their new community had a harder time integrating socially.
7. Inter-regional migration has endowed previously declining municipalities and regions with renewed energy and resources.
8. Inflated housing markets can have far reaching impacts. As housing became less affordable in more populated regions, out-migration had ripple effects on housing markets in other regions.
9. The influx of new residents in some communities made longstanding under-investment in services, housing, and infrastructure across Canada visible.
10. In both regions, inter-regional in-migration unrelated to work began before and continued after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Notes

[i] Lukas Althoff et al., "The Geography of Remote Work," *Regional Science and Urban Economics* 93 (March 2022): 103770, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.regsciurbeco.2022.103770; Laura Churchill Duke, "Remote Work Boom: Lifestyle, Lower Costs Making Nova Scotia Attractive Location for New and Relocating Businesses," PNI Atlantic, April 14, 2021, https://www.saltwire.com/atlantic-canada/remote-work-boom-lifestyle-lower-costs-making-nova-scotia-attractive-location-for-new-and-relocating-businesses-100575874; Julie Gordon, "So Long Toronto: COVID-19 Pandemic Hastens Canada's Urban Exodus," Reuters, January 14, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/so-long-toronto-covid-19-pandemic-hastens-canadas-urban-exodus-2022-01-13/.

[ii] Nicole Bogart and Heather Wright, "What's behind the Rapid Population Growth in Regions in B.C. and the Maritimes?" CTVNews, February 9, 2022, https://www.ctvnews.ca/lifestyle/article/whats-behind-the-rapid-population-growth-in-regions-in-bc-and-the-maritimes/; Darren MacDonald, "Greater Sudbury, North Bay Post Strong Population Growth in Latest Census," CTVNews, February 10, 2022, https://www.ctvnews.ca/northern-ontario/article/greater-sudbury-north-bay-post-strong-population-growth-in-latest-census/; Michael MacDonald, "'Remarkable Turnaround': Census Figures Show the Maritimes Are Growing Rapidly" Global News, February 9, 2022, https://globalnews.ca/news/8606454/remarkable-turnaround-census-figures-show-the-maritimes-are-growing-rapidly/; CBC News, "How One Northern Ontario Village Is Luring Big-City Escapees," CBC Sudbury, May 23, 2022, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/sudbury/burk-s-falls-weekend-opening-1.6461347; Adam Ozimek, Remote Workers on the Move (October 29, 2020). Available at SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=3790004 or http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3790004.

[iii] The Maritimes includes the provinces of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island. In this report Northern Ontario includes the following census divisions: Nipissing, Parry Sound, Manitoulin, Sudbury, Greater Sudbury, Timskaming, Cochrane, Algoma, Thunder Bay, Rainy River, and Kenora.

[iv] Statistics Canada. *Table 98-10-0001-01 Population and dwelling counts: Canada, provinces and territories.* https://doi.org/10.25318/9810000101-eng; Statistics Canada, "Maritimes Population Growing at Its Fastest Pace since the Mid 1970s," StatsCAN Plus, March 3, 2022, https://www.statcan.gc.ca/o1/en/plus/478-maritimes-population-growing-its-fastest-pace-mid-1970s.

[v] Statistics Canada. *Table 17-10-0005-01 Population estimates on July 1, by age and gender.* https://doi.org/10.25318/1710000501-eng.

[vi] Calculated for Maritime provinces using data from Statistics Canada. *Table 17-10-0153-01 Components of population change by census division, 2021 boundaries.* https://doi.org/10.25318/1710015301-eng. Net natural increase = Births – Deaths, Net international immigration = Immigration + Net non-permanent residents – Net emigration.

[vii] Calculated for Northern Ontario Census Divisions using data from Statistics Canada *Table 17-10-0152-01 Population estimates, July 1, by census division, 2021 boundaries.* https://doi.org/10.25318/1710015201-eng. Net natural increase = Births-Deaths, Net international immigration = Immigration + Net non-permanent residents – Net emigration.

[viii] Calculated from linked 2016 and 2021 Census of Canada Master Files.

[ix] Statistics Canada *Table 17-10-0152-01 Population estimates, July 1, by census division, 2021 boundaries.* https://doi.org/10.25318/1710015201-eng.

[x] Statistics Canada *Table 17-10-0152-01 Population estimates, July 1, by census division, 2021 boundaries.* https://doi.org/10.25318/1710015201-eng.

[xi] Statistics Canada. T*able 17-10-0153-01 Components of population change by census division, 2021 boundaries.* https://doi.org/10.25318/1710015301-eng.

[xii] Statistics Canada. *Table 17-10-0153-01 Components of population change by census division, 2021 boundaries.* https://doi.org/10.25318/1710015301-eng.

[xiii] 2021 Census of Canada Master Files.

[xiv] 2021 Census of Canada Master Files.

[xv] Calculated from linked 2016 and 2021 Census of Canada Master Files.

[xvi] Calculated from linked 2016 and 2021 Census of Canada Master Files.

[xvii] Calculated from linked 2016 and 2021 Census of Canada Master Files using North American Industry Classification System [NAICS] Canada 2017 version 3.0. https://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p3VD.pl?Function=getVD&TVD=1181553. Industry sectors were grouped. *Arts, Accommodation and food services, Other Services* includes: 71 (Arts, entertainment and recreation); 72 (Accommodation and food services); 81 Other services (except public administration). *Education, Health Care, Public Administration* includes 61 (Educational services); 62 (Health care and social assistance); 91 (Public administration). *White collar professional* includes: 51 (Information and cultural industries); 52 (Finance and insurance/management of companies and enterprises); 53 (Real estate and rental and leasing); 54 (Professional, scientific and technical services); 56 (Administrative and support, waste management and remediation services), *Manufacturing, wholesale, retail, transportation, warehouse* includes: 31 (Manufacturing); 41 (Wholesale trade); 44 (Retail trade); 48 (Transportation and warehousing). *Agriculture, forest, mining, utilities and construction* includes 11 (Agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting); 21 (Mining, quarrying, and oil and gas extraction); 22 (Utilities); 23 (Construction).

[xviii] Calculated from linked 2016 and 2021 Census of Canada Master Files.