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**ALBERTA MUNICIPALITIES**

**POPULATION GROWTH  
AND POPULATION  
AGING IN ALBERTA  
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Kevin McQuillan and Michael Laszlo

# POPULATION GROWTH AND POPULATION AGING IN ALBERTA MUNICIPALITIES

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Between 2011 and 2021, a significant number of Alberta's towns, villages and rural areas experienced population stagnation or decline, while the cities and many nearby municipalities continued to grow. As smaller municipalities' populations shrink or fail to grow, they also become disproportionately older—trends that can threaten tax bases and community involvement.

This demographic trend has two main causes. First, Alberta's cities offer increasing employment opportunities in the rapidly growing service sector, while many smaller communities have seen declines in employment in the resource and manufacturing sectors important to their economies and struggle to attract new industries. Thus, as in the rest of the country, towns, villages and municipal districts lose residents, especially young people, to where the jobs are. Second, while the province's birth rate continues to decline, and overall growth has come to depend almost as much on international immigration as on natural growth, newcomers to the province tend to prefer the major urban areas.

Following Alberta's boom years, the last decade saw decreased migration from other provinces into Alberta and a declining fertility rate. The province's economy is now on the mend, with the highest employment rate in Canada; however, the once-high birth rates and elevated rates of internal migration from other provinces are unlikely to return. The pace of growth will depend on Alberta's ability to attract a healthy share of the many new immigrants Canada intends to welcome over the decade ahead. Alberta's smaller municipalities, in turn, need strategies to attract immigrants. For this, they will require employment opportunities and dedicated resources to assist newcomers. Manitoba has had success in doing this and may offer Alberta an example of how to proceed.

Some emerging economic and social trends may work to the benefit of smaller municipalities. For example, industries that require large amounts of land or significant storage facilities often opt to locate outside the big cities. New

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developments in agriculture and energy, especially in geothermal and hydrogen, may open new opportunities for growth in towns and rural areas. While Alberta is unlikely to replicate B.C.'s success in attracting retirees, the popularity of outdoor recreation provides a chance for many municipalities to attract new residents.

Although changes in work practices brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic make future trends difficult to predict, as people continue to work at a distance from their places of employment, it is possible that Alberta could see a demographic shift away from the urban centres. Smaller municipalities may attract both city dwellers and immigrants seeking the benefits of life away from the cities, including bigger and less costly properties.

Nevertheless, slower growth and population aging are likely to continue, and communities must use the coming years to prepare, putting in place necessary services, especially those related to health care. This is especially vital in communities far from the urban centres.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Alberta's municipalities are following different demographic paths. While rates of growth have declined across the province from the pace that prevailed in the first 15 years of the new century, all of the province's cities continue to grow. Many towns and villages, especially those closer to the large cities, are growing as well; however, a significant number of towns, municipal districts and villages are facing stagnation or decline. Many of these communities have experienced an outflow of people, often younger people. In addition, we are seeing a continual decline in birth rates that affects communities large and small. For the province as a whole, international migration now rivals natural increase as the leading source of population growth. But this seldom helps smaller centres; in Alberta, as elsewhere, the overwhelming proportion of newcomers choose to settle in the largest cities. As a result, small cities and towns as well as rural areas across Alberta and Canada are facing a significant demographic challenge that imperils the viability of these communities. Stagnant or declining population totals are invariably accompanied by population aging. These trends can, in turn, undermine the tax base of communities and lead to a decline in community involvement that gives life to towns and villages.

More rapid population growth in the largest cities is not a new phenomenon. In Alberta's case, the share of the population residing in the Calgary and Edmonton Census Metropolitan Areas increased from 56 per cent in 1981 to 68 per cent in

2021.<sup>1</sup> A variety of factors contribute to this trend, but two are most important. The first is the evolving nature of our economy, which has seen more rapid growth of employment in the service sector, especially in industries such as finance, communications, health care and advanced education. Employment in these sectors is disproportionately centred in larger cities.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, a decline in the demand for labour in the resource sector and in manufacturing, industries that are often located outside the big cities, poses a threat to the economies of smaller towns and rural areas. This decline in employment may be linked to decreasing demand for certain products, increasing automation and efficiency in production, and movement of production to other countries. This often results in weakened economies in towns and rural areas that rely on these industries, and may stimulate an outflow of population and make it more difficult to attract newcomers.

The second factor, as alluded to above, is the propensity of immigrants to locate in Canada's largest cities. New policy initiatives, such as the Provincial Nominee Program, have improved the balance somewhat, but it is still the case that a significant majority of newly arrived residents live in the major urban areas.

While these trends work to the demographic advantage of big cities, opportunities arise for smaller municipalities as well. Some industries wish to locate new facilities in mid-size or smaller communities, either because critical resources are located there or because property values and wages are lower. In Alberta, the energy industry has long played this role, and developments involving geothermal and hydrogen may open new opportunities. The boom in storage, whether of goods, for companies such as Amazon, or data involving cloud storage, is an important development; for instance, Amazon has announced that a new facility will be announced in the Calgary area, though the location has not been announced (Canadian Press, November 2021). Many large cloud storage facilities in the U.S. are located in states such as Nebraska and Kansas because of low costs for both land and electricity. McCann (2017), focusing on the U.K., identifies another trend involving what he calls "high amenity coastal or rural" communities, by which he means communities with distinctive offerings that may attract migrants or seasonal residents. Retirement communities are a good example. Many towns on Vancouver Island have seen their populations grow despite a rise in the average age, due to an influx of well-to-do retirees. These new residents inject money into

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Statistics Canada uses the term Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) to refer to an area formed by one or more adjacent municipalities centred on a population centre (known as the core). A CMA must have a total population of at least 100,000, of which 50,000 or more must live in the core. For a municipality to be included in the CMA, adjacent municipalities must have a high degree of integration with the core, as measured by commuting flows derived from census place of work data. The Calgary CMA, for example, includes the municipalities of Cochrane and Airdrie. Most of the analysis in this paper will focus on municipalities rather than CMAs, but it is worth underlining how much of Alberta's population is concentrated around the two major cities. By way of comparison, the Toronto CMA holds 43.6 per cent of Ontario's population, and Vancouver's accounts for 52.8 per cent of B.C.'s population.

2

Although much of the discussion of the forces driving urban growth concerns the U.S., the trends are similar in Canada and many European societies. Moretti (2012) and Florida (2017) provide excellent insight into the forces driving urban growth. On the consequences for small towns and rural areas, see Parker et al. (2018) and Swenson (2019). Prothero and Campos (2020) provide an interesting perspective on the situation in England and Wales.

the local economy that can support a range of local businesses. Some communities in Southern Ontario, such as Collingwood and Midland, are also experiencing this phenomenon as retirees from the Greater Toronto area cash in on their homes in the city and seek attractive and calmer environments to retire in. As they settle into these communities, these retirees may also drive the development of new businesses to serve their needs in areas such as health care, financial services and dining. Given Alberta's colder climate, not many communities are likely to experience this phenomenon, though Canmore is arguably already doing so. In many parts of the province, there may be richer possibilities involving recreation that could provide opportunities for smaller communities to grow their local economies and attract new residents.

Finally, we should note the uncertainty about future trends brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Even prior to the beginning of the pandemic, new technologies were making it possible for people to work in different ways (Florida and Ozimek, 2021). The ease of storing and exchanging documents, and the development of much improved methods for virtual meetings, opened up new possibilities for people to work at a distance from their traditional place of employment. These developments may allow smaller communities, especially those not too distant from large cities, to attract new residents.

## **50 YEARS OF POPULATION GROWTH IN ALBERTA**

Before examining patterns of municipal growth, a short overview of Alberta's recent demographic history is helpful. Over the last 50 years, Alberta has experienced significant growth and increased its weight in the Canadian federation. From a population of just over 1.6 million in 1971, the Alberta population has grown to more than 4.2 million in 2021. As a result, Alberta's share of the Canadian population has risen from 7.5 per cent in 1971 to 11.5 per cent today.

Along the way there have been some sharp ups and downs, reflecting the volatile character of the provincial economy. In the current century, Alberta got off to a roaring start. In each of the three intercensal periods from 2001 to 2016, the population grew by more than 10 per cent, and in each five-year period, Alberta was the fastest growing province in Canada. The most recent period has been different, however. The increase in the 2016-2021 period was just 4.8 per cent. Five provinces, including Ontario and British Columbia, grew at a faster pace.

The drivers of population growth in Alberta have been distinctive as well. Alberta's ability to attract residents of other provinces has played a bigger role in its demographic growth than in that of the other provinces. Through the boom years of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, large numbers of Canadians from the Atlantic region, Ontario and the other Prairie provinces made their way to Alberta. The province also had a somewhat higher birth rate and a growing ability to attract international migrants.

Since the downturn in energy prices that began in 2014, things have changed markedly. Most notably, Alberta moved from a significant annual surplus of interprovincial migrants to a deficit. Table 1 shows the changes in the components of growth in Alberta over the last decade. In 2011-12, with the economy running strong, all three major components of population change were positive. The province had a healthy surplus of births over deaths, and the balances for both international and interprovincial migration were positive. By 2015-16, the number of international migrants had grown significantly, possibly reflecting the arrival of immigrants who had made their plans before the economic downturn. But the interprovincial movement changed more rapidly (see Chart 1), and over 15,000 more people left than entered the province in that period. The most recent data show yet another pattern. Natural increase has declined, partly due to a somewhat lower number of births and partly to the rise in deaths associated with the pandemic. The number of immigrants declined as well, likely reflecting both the weaker economic situation of the province and the disruptions caused by COVID. The interprovincial numbers remained negative. Of special concern has been the outflow of younger Albertans, discouraged by a weaker job market after the downturn in energy prices (Lane and Murray, 2022; Lane et al., 2022). Looking ahead, there is reason for cautious optimism. The Conference Board of Canada (2022) projects that Alberta and Saskatchewan will lead the nation in economic growth in 2022 and 2023. Natural population increase is likely to grow with a decline in COVID-19-related deaths and a possible uptick in births. Canada is committed to increasing the number of immigrants, and Alberta's improving economy should help attract larger numbers than we have seen in the last few years. Furthermore, data for the last quarter of 2021 suggest the balance of interprovincial migrants has turned positive once again. So stronger growth in 2022 and beyond seems likely, though clearly dependent on continued economic growth.

**Table 1. Major components of the growth of Alberta population, 2011-2021.**

Component	2011-12	2015-16	2020-21
Natural Increase	29,787	32,953	18,482
Net International Migration	29,077	51,726	20,378
Net Interprovincial Migration	27,652	-15,108	-11,831
Net Population Change	86,516	69,571	27,029

Source: Statistics Canada, 2022

Chart 1. Net Interprovincial Migration, Alberta, 2001-02 – 2020-21



Statistics Canada: Table 17-10-0020-01

## MUNICIPAL ORGANIZATION IN ALBERTA

Before turning to an analysis of the course of population change in Alberta's communities, we must briefly clarify how municipalities are defined in Alberta. Across the country, municipalities are created by provincial governments, which have far-reaching powers to organize municipalities and to define their powers and responsibilities. The province also plays a critical role in providing financial support to the cities, towns and other municipal entities.

Alberta has a rather complex classification of municipalities, as delineated on the provincial government's website. From a demographic perspective, the urban municipal government category is most important and is subdivided into the following four categories:

**Cities**—To be classed as a city, the community must have a population of at least 10,000 people.

**Towns**—A town must have a population of at least 1,000 people; the community may choose to remain a town once its population exceeds 10,000, but may submit a request to the province to adopt city status. Should the population fall below 1,000, the community may retain its status as a town.

**Villages**—A village must have at least 300 people, and 30 per cent of electors in the community must support a request for village status. An application for town status may be submitted once the population surpasses 1,000. As is true for the towns, a village may retain its status if the population falls below 300.

**Summer Villages**—Demographically, summer villages are the same as regular villages, though with special provisions related to elections. No new summer villages can be created in the province.

The other categories of municipalities consist of:

**Specialized Municipalities**—These structures allow urban and municipal communities to have a single municipal government. There are currently six such units in the province.

**Municipal Districts**—These structures are created for rural parts of the province; the districts may contain small settlements known as hamlets and rural residential areas.

**Improvement Districts**—Such districts include national park areas and typically have small residential populations.

**Métis Settlements**—Established under the *Métis Settlements Act*, these are geographically large areas of land that are home to the Métis people. Approximately 5,000 people currently reside in the eight established settlements.

**Special Areas**—Like the Métis Settlements, the province's three Special Areas include large land areas but few people. Currently, approximately 4,500 people reside in the Special Areas.

**First Nations Reserves**—The Reserves are under the authority of the Government of Canada. They vary significantly in both area and population.

In the analysis that follows, we will begin by looking at the distribution of population across all categories and provide comparative data for the other Prairie provinces, Manitoba and Saskatchewan. Then, a more detailed analysis will focus on the cities, towns, villages and municipal districts of Alberta, where the vast majority of Alberta residents reside.

## POPULATION DISTRIBUTION BY TYPE OF COMMUNITY

Table 2 presents data on the distribution of Alberta's population by community type for the period from 2001 to 2021.<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly, the cities of Alberta hold, by far, the largest share of the provincial population. In 2001, the 18 cities were home to two out of three residents (65.9 per cent), a proportion that rises to just over 70 per cent in 2021.<sup>4</sup> Calgary and Edmonton alone account for more than half (54.3 per cent) of the Alberta total in 2021. This is not unusual in the Canadian

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<sup>3</sup> The data are drawn from the Censuses of Canada. The census numbers for the years 2001-2016 are adjusted to reflect boundary changes and may differ from the original data released from each census. The 2021 numbers have been recently released and may be adjusted at a later date.

<sup>4</sup> Although a case could be made to include Wood Buffalo and Strathcona County in the city category, in this analysis they are classified as Specialized Municipalities.

context. Canada has become a country dominated by a small number of large metropolises (McQuillan and Laszlo, 2021).

**Table 2. Distribution of Alberta Population, By Community Type, 2001-2021**

Community Type	2001	2006	2011	2016	2021
Cities	1,961,702	2,207,686	2,473,572	2,820,734	3,002,753
	65.9%	67.0%	67.8%	69.3%	70.4%
Town	361,421	394,739	437,021	470,583	489,511
	12.1%	12.0%	12.0%	11.6%	11.5%
Municipal District	420,930	432,375	448,398	475,162	474,843
	14.1%	13.1%	12.3%	11.7%	11.1%
Village	35,495	36,456	37,717	36,980	36,012
	1.2%	1.1%	1.0%	0.9%	0.8%
Summer Village	4,092	6,164	4,607	5,162	5,955
	0.1%	0.2%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%
Improvement District	2,559	1,994	2,146	2,055	2,039
	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%
First Nation/Métis	44,408	49,173	53,310	53,715	48,464
	1.5%	1.5%	1.5%	1.3%	1.1%
Special Area	5,314	4,729	4,499	4,295	4,238
	0.2%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%
Specialized Municipality	140,993	163,146	187,000	190,968	202,461
	4.7%	4.9%	5.1%	4.9%	4.8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,976,914</b>	<b>3,296,462</b>	<b>3,648,270</b>	<b>4,067,894</b>	<b>4,266,276</b>

Notes: Some 2016 totals have been revised from earlier releases. Numbers for First Nation/ Métis populations are incomplete. Percentages do not always add to 100.0 per cent due to rounding. Sources: 2001-2011: Censuses of Canada, Final Archived Totals, 2016 and 2021.

The towns and municipal districts are next in importance when considering the distribution of population. In 2021, almost half a million Albertans resided in towns, while 474,843 lived in the province's 64 municipal districts. The population total of the towns increased steadily from 2001 to 2021; nevertheless, given the very rapid growth of the cities, the share of the population living in towns declined slightly over the 20-year period.

It is important to remember that in each category there is a large gap between the largest and smallest communities. Alberta's smallest city, Wetaskiwin, had a population of just 12,594 in 2021, less than 1 per cent of the Calgary total. The towns range in size from Rainbow Lake, with a 2021 population of 495, to Cochrane, a community closely connected to Calgary and part of the Calgary CMA, with a population of over 32,000 residents. This large variability in size is significant, as the challenges facing smaller communities in each category differ significantly from those faced by larger communities as do the likely solutions.

In Table 3, we look at the Alberta situation in comparison to the other two Prairie provinces, Manitoba and Saskatchewan. While definitions of community types differ somewhat across the provinces, it is possible to observe the general shifts in population distribution in the three provinces.<sup>5</sup>

**Table 3. Distribution of Population, By Community Type, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba, 2011-2021.**

Type of Community	2011	2016	2021
<b>Alberta</b>			
Calgary/Edmonton	52.3%	53.4%	54.3%
Other Cities	15.5%	15.9%	16.1%
Towns	12.0%	11.6%	11.5%
Other Municipalities	18.8%	17.8%	17.0%
First Nations/Métis	1.5%	1.3%	1.1%
<b>Saskatchewan</b>			
Saskatoon/Regina	40.2%	42.1%	43.5%
Other Cities	17.5%	17.7%	17.4%
Towns	14.1%	13.7%	13.2%
Other Municipalities	22.8%	21.4%	21.0%
First Nations/Métis	5.4%	5.1%	4.9%
<b>Manitoba</b>			
Winnipeg	54.9%	55.2%	55.9%
Other Cities	10.6%	10.7%	10.6%
Towns	4.4%	4.4%	4.5%
Other Municipalities	24.8%	24.6%	24.3%
First Nations/Métis	5.3%	5.1%	4.7%

Note: 2021 figures are subject to adjustment. Source: Statistics Canada, 2022.

For each province, we look at five types of communities: major cities, smaller cities, towns, other types of municipalities (villages, municipal districts, rural municipalities, etc.) and First Nations/Métis reserves. For Manitoba, Winnipeg is the only major city. For Saskatchewan, Saskatoon and Regina are included in the major cities category and for Alberta, Calgary and Edmonton. In each province, the major cities contain the largest proportion of the population, ranging from a low of 43.5 per cent in 2021 for Saskatchewan to a high of 55.9 per cent for Manitoba. And for all three provinces, the trend is upward.

The changes are modest for the other types of municipalities. Mid-sized cities have generally maintained or slightly increased their share of the total population, while the trends for other municipal types vary, perhaps reflecting, in part, the different

<sup>5</sup> Manitoba has seen significant reorganization of its municipal system. See Ashton et al. (2015) for a good discussion.

forms of municipal organization in the three provinces. It is clear, though, that the largest cities play an outsized role in each province.

## POPULATION GROWTH IN ALBERTA MUNICIPALITIES

In Table 4, we begin to look at the demography of Alberta’s municipalities in more detail. The table contains information on the average rate of growth for communities of each type for two time periods: 2001-2011 and 2011-2021.<sup>6</sup> Not surprisingly, we see major differences across the categories and between the two time periods. Looking at the four major categories of municipalities, the highest rate of growth is in the cities, followed by the towns and municipal districts. The villages experienced modest growth in the 2001-2011 period, but, on average, declined in the most recent period. Although containing relatively few people, the summer villages have experienced significant growth. Alberta’s First Nations and Métis reserves have grown as well. For the communities in specialized categories—improvement districts, special areas and specialized municipalities—the averages are not helpful for our purposes, because particular circumstances have shaped the growth or decline. For most categories of municipalities, the pace of growth was lower in the more recent period, 2011-21, reflecting the decline in the provincial growth rate in the latter years of the decade.

**Table 4. Rates of Population Growth by Community Type, Alberta, 2001-2021.**

Community Type	Indicator	Increase 2001-2011	Increase 2011-2021
City	Average	48.8%	22.8%
	Minimum	12.3%	0.6%
	Maximum	284.4%	74.1%
	N of Communities	18	18
Town	Average	13.1%	4.3%
	Minimum	-18.9%	-43.1%
	Maximum	109.7%	83.2%
	N of Communities	107	105
Municipal District	Average	1.5%	4.6%
	Minimum	-17.7%	-20.8%
	Maximum	30.1%	62.0%
	N of Communities	63	63
Village	Average	3.8%	-2.4%
	Minimum	-37.5%	-30.5%
	Maximum	64.0%	48.5%
	N of Communities	90	83

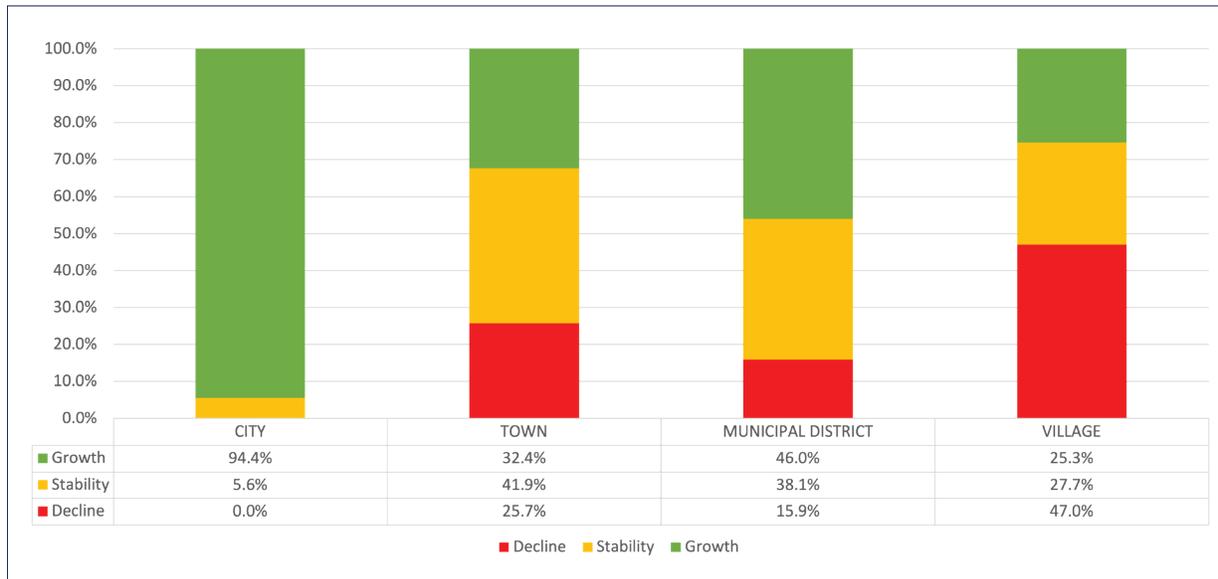
<sup>6</sup> Here and elsewhere, the average (or mean) is unweighted—a growth rate is calculated for each community and the rates are then averaged. Thus, the rate of growth for the smallest community in the category has the same weight in the average as that of the largest community.

Community Type	Indicator	Increase 2001-2011	Increase 2011-2021
Summer Village	Average	19.5%	41.4%
	Minimum	-59.8%	-48.8%
	Maximum	121.6%	170.0%
	N of Communities	51	51
Improvement District	Average	-24.1%	-25.4%
	Minimum	-63.0%	-100%
	Maximum	59.9%	79.6%
	N of Communities	6	6
First Nations/Métis	Average	19.0%	3.2%
	Minimum	-100.0%	-64.4%
	Maximum	160.6%	122.0%
	N of Communities	73	69
Special Area	Average	-15.2%	-5.0%
	Minimum	-23.1%	-8.6%
	Maximum	-10.6%	1.8%
	N of Communities	3	3
Specialized Municipality	Average	16.3%	7.6%
	Minimum	-11.1%	-8.7%
	Maximum	58.2%	17.2%
	N of Communities	6	6

Mean or average rates of growth hide large differences among communities in each category, however, as shown in the figures for the minimum and maximum growth rates. Between 2011 and 2021, Cochrane grew by more than 80 per cent; at the other extreme, the town of Rainbow Lake saw a decrease in population of 43.1 per cent, falling from 870 to just 495 residents recorded in the 2021 census.

To better illustrate the variability by municipal type, we created three categories based on the rate of growth for the period 2011-2021: 1) Growth—an increase greater than 5 per cent during the period; 2) Stability—population change between -5 per cent and +5 per cent; 3) Decline—a loss of population of 5 per cent or greater. We restrict the analysis here to the four major categories of municipalities: cities, towns, municipal districts and villages. The results are shown in Chart 2.

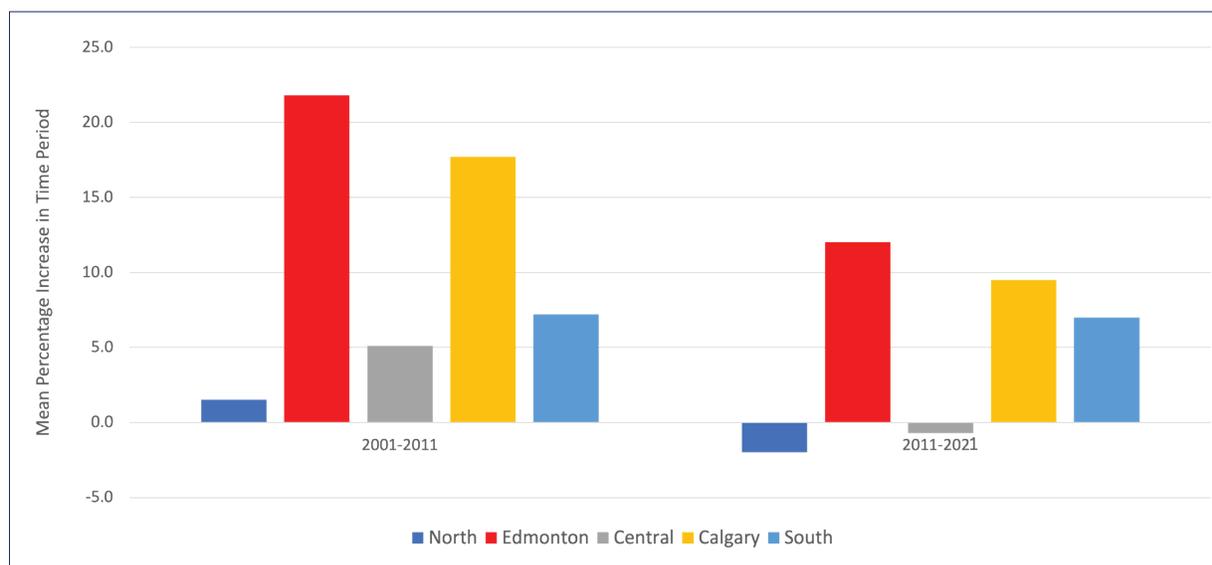
**Chart 2. Growth, Stability and Decline in Alberta's Municipalities, 2011-2021**



Apart from the small city of Wetaskiwin, all cities are in the growth category. The fastest growth occurred in the cities close to the major centres of Calgary and Edmonton—Airdrie, Chestermere, Spruce Grove, Leduc and Fort Saskatchewan. In the other three categories, there is significantly more variation. One in four towns and almost half of the villages saw a decline of more than 5 per cent as did 16 per cent of municipal districts. At the same time, an important share of towns, municipal districts and villages saw their populations grow. Some of the fastest growing towns and villages were in the orbit of the larger cities—Beaumont (Edmonton), Cochrane and Okotoks (Calgary), but also Coalhurst (near Lethbridge) and Penhold (close to Red Deer). We will return to the impact of cities on surrounding communities and consider the potential impact of working from home on the future growth of towns and villages.

Before leaving the issue of growth, in Chart 3 we look at the variation in growth rates for towns, municipal districts and villages from a regional perspective. We do this by comparing growth rates for these communities by their location in one of the province's five health regions. In line with the trend noted above, the communities in the Edmonton and Calgary regions experienced healthy growth in both time periods. The average for the communities in the Southern region was moderately positive in both decades as well. In the Central and Northern regions, average growth slipped from a small positive mean to a negative in the most recent period. Again, it is important to underline the variability in the fortunes of the communities in each region. In the Central region, Blackfalds and Olds saw significant growth, while in the North, several communities saw increases in the past decade, including Redwater and St. Paul. But the North, in particular, had a large number of towns and villages where population declined, and this will pose a challenge for the region in the years ahead.

**Chart 3. Regional Differences in Rates of Population Growth, 2011-2021**



Towns, Municipal Districts, and Villages Only

## **SLOWER GROWTH AND POPULATION AGING**

With declining birth rates, slower population growth is the norm across Canada and in other advanced economies. Alberta has had a somewhat higher rate of fertility than most other provinces, but the birth rate has been declining in this province as it has elsewhere. The most recent Statistics Canada data indicate that the total fertility rate slipped to just 1.51 in 2020. While higher than the rate for Canada as a whole (1.40),<sup>7</sup> it is still well below the rate of 2.1 needed to ensure replacement of the population in the absence of immigration.

Of course, many would argue that slower population growth is a positive. Environmentalists often point to the benefits that result from reduced population growth or even population decline. A key challenge associated with slower growth or decline, however, is population aging. Below-replacement fertility inevitably leads to an older population, a process only partially offset by immigration. This may make it difficult to attract new businesses or sustain existing businesses, and may lead to concern about the availability of people to fill important positions in communities including in local government.

Two measures commonly used to describe the age structure of a population are the median age<sup>8</sup> and the percentage of the population 65 years of age and older. We present these measures in Charts 4 and 5 for Alberta’s cities, towns, municipal

<sup>7</sup> The total fertility rate (TFR) is a measure of the number of children a woman would give birth to in her lifetime if she experienced current rates of fertility throughout her childbearing years.

<sup>8</sup> The median age divides the population into two groups such that half are below the median age and half are above.

districts and villages.<sup>9</sup> The median age is rising in all types of communities, but at 38.0 the median age is lower in the cities than in the three other categories of municipalities, and there is less variation among Alberta’s 18 cities. In 2021, the median age ranged from a low of 32.4 in Cold Lake to a high of 43.2 in Camrose. In Edmonton, the median age in 2021 was just 36.8, while in Calgary it was 38.0.<sup>10</sup>

**Chart 4. Median Age by Type of Municipality, 2021**



The median age is calculated for each community. In the chart, the lowest and highest median age and the mean value (red) for the category are shown.

Source: Statistics Canada, 2021 Census of Population. Table 98-10-0022-01.

For the towns, municipal districts and villages, the median age is higher, and reached an average of 46.1 in the villages in 2021. Communities where half the population is over 50 are no longer uncommon. And, as with growth rates, it is the wide variability across communities that is most striking, as indicated by the minimum and maximum figures presented for each category in the chart. The town of Vulcan, for example, has seen a very sharp increase in median age, which rose from 41.6 in 2001 to 60.8 in 2021, while the town of Coalhurst has seen hardly any increase over this period, such that the median age in 2021 was only 32.0.

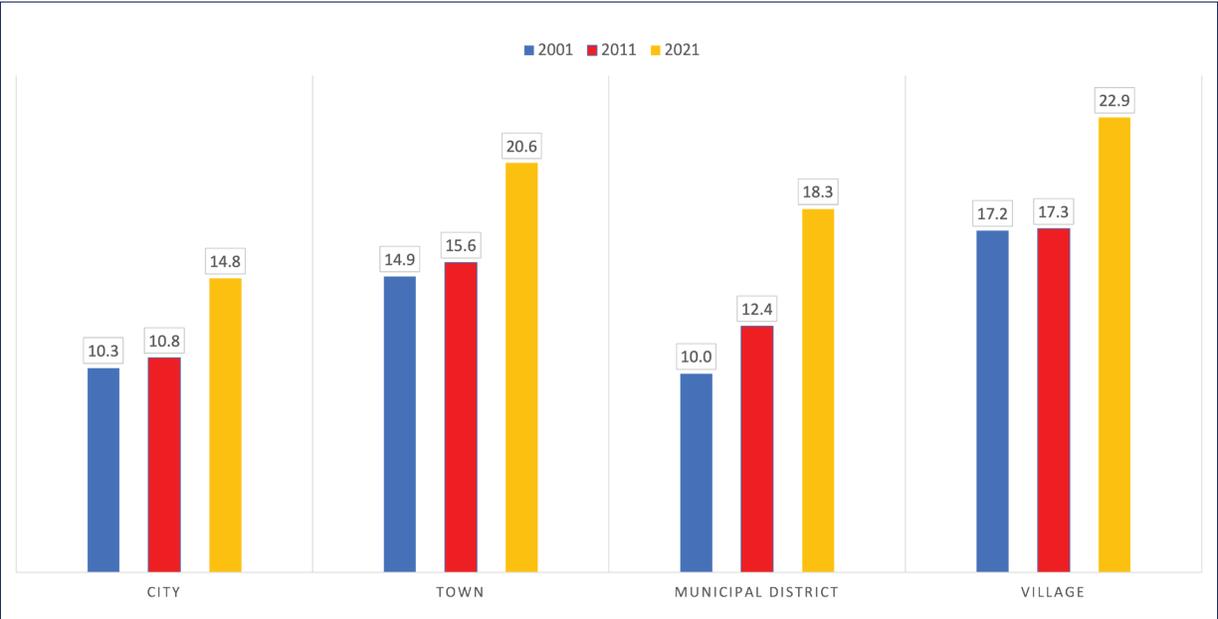
The data in Chart 5 confirm this pattern, but the focus here is on the proportion of people 65 years and older. Although 65 is no longer the magical age of retirement, it is still true that a majority of people begin to withdraw from the labour force in their late sixties and may be less able or willing to take on some of the tasks that need to be performed in local communities. In Alberta’s towns and villages, on

<sup>9</sup> Although we do not present the data for all types of municipalities in the chart, it should be noted that summer villages have the oldest populations while First Nations communities have, on average, populations that are significantly younger.

<sup>10</sup> By comparison, the median ages for the municipalities of Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver are 38.8, 39.6 and 39.6 respectively.

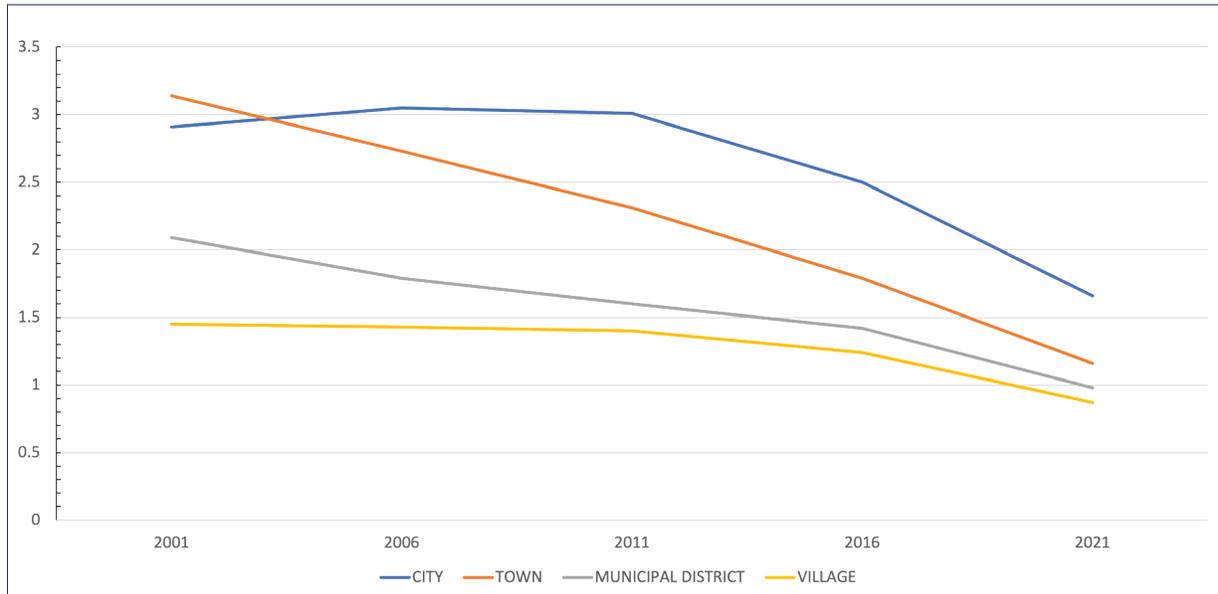
average about one in five residents is now 65 or over. In 31 of these communities, the proportion of seniors in 2021 exceeded 30 per cent, and in three of those more than 40 per cent were 65 or over.

**Chart 5. Per Cent of Seniors (65+) by Community Type, 2001- 2021**



In Chart 6, we add one final indicator of the evolving age structure of Alberta’s municipalities, one that clearly shows the shifting balance of generations. We calculate the ratio of those aged 18-34 to those 65 and over for each municipality. The younger age group contains those who are starting their careers and families. They are likely to be buying homes and starting new businesses. They will become the next generation of community leaders. In Alberta’s cities, at the beginning of the century, there were on average about three young people for each senior; by 2021, this had declined below two. The towns, municipal districts and villages have seen a long-term decline as well, and the mean for these communities is now close to one, meaning the number of young adults is roughly equal to the number of seniors. In 45 per cent of towns and 51 per cent of villages, the number of seniors now exceeds the number of young adults.

**Chart 6. Ratio of Young Adults to Seniors, By Community Type, 2001-2021**



The ratio of persons 18-34 to persons 65+ is calculated for each community; the chart shows the mean score by community type.

## IMMIGRATION AND ALBERTA MUNICIPALITIES

As Canada’s fertility rate has been below replacement level since the 1970s, the gap between births and deaths continues to narrow. In 2020, there were only 62,834 more births than deaths in the entire country. Thus, now more than at any point in Canadian history, immigration is the main driver of population change. Unlike many European countries and the U.S., Canada remains relatively open to immigration, and continues to be the fastest growing country in the G7 group of nations, largely due to our high rate of immigration. The pandemic made entry into the country difficult, and the number of immigrants fell sharply, but plans for the post-pandemic period foresee a return to a higher level of immigration. The goal is to attract 400,000 newcomers to the country per year.

The issue for so many municipalities is that new immigrants are drawn to the big cities. There are exceptions—Winkler, Manitoba grew by 12.9 per cent between 2011 and 2016, fuelled in part by immigration. In 2016, over 17 per cent of Winkler residents had arrived in Canada in the preceding 15 years. In Alberta, Brooks is an example of a smaller city that has attracted a large number of new immigrants; in 2016, almost one-quarter of the population consisted of immigrants who had arrived since 2001. But on the whole, most of Alberta’s towns and villages are home to relatively few recent immigrants. In Chart 7, we show the average per cent of the 2016 total population that was composed of immigrants who arrived in Canada in the previous 15 years by community type.<sup>11</sup> For Edmonton and Calgary, the proportions are high: 16.8 per cent in Edmonton and 16.9 per cent in Calgary.

<sup>11</sup> Data on immigration from the 2021 census will be released in October 2022.

Many of the other Alberta cities are in the 5 to 10 per cent range. The proportions are significantly lower in the towns, municipal districts and villages. There are exceptions, to be sure, particularly in communities with important resource development. But very many communities attract few newcomers, and in some cases, none at all. If birth rates remain low, an inability to attract migrants, whether from other provinces or other countries, will eventually produce demographic stagnation or decline.

**Chart 7. Per Cent of Recent Immigrants by Community Type, 2016**



The per cent of the population composed of persons who arrived in Canada 2001-2016 is calculated for each community; the mean score by community type as well as the lowest and highest percentage are shown in the chart.

Source: Statistics Canada: 2016 Census of Canada, Table 98-400-X2016185.

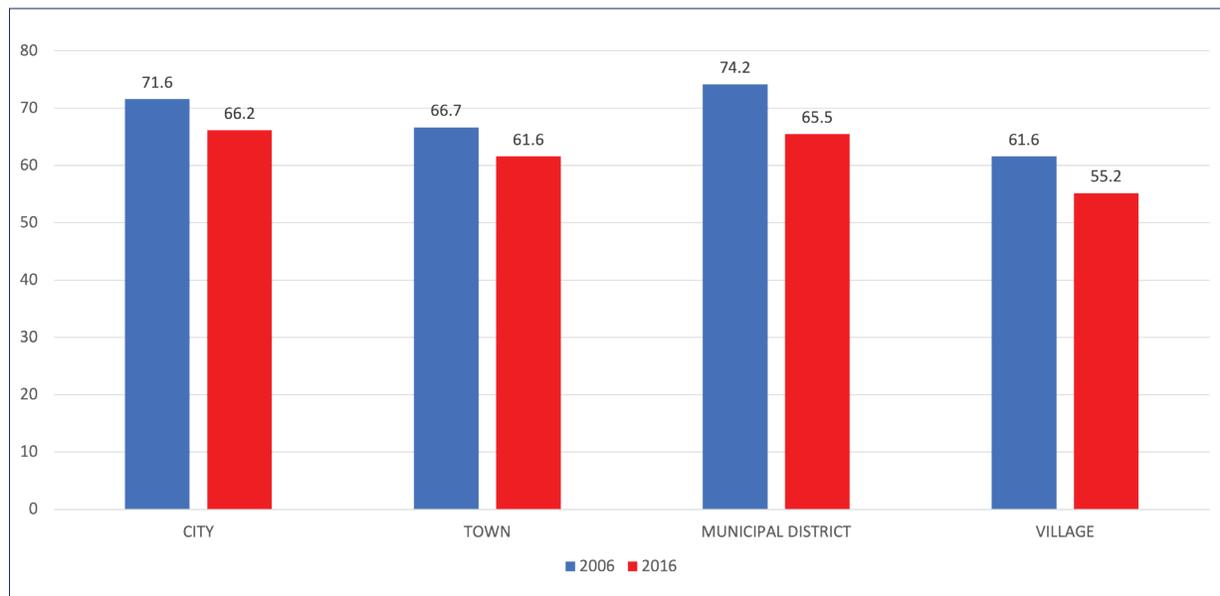
**POPULATION AGING AND EMPLOYMENT**

Vibrant communities with strong local economies have high rates of employment. For Statistics Canada, the employment rate refers to the percentage of persons 15 and older who are either employed or self-employed.<sup>12</sup> With a strong economy and a relatively young population, Alberta has typically had the highest employment rate among the provinces. The economic downturn since 2015 has reduced the rate somewhat, but the most recent data for April 2022 show that Alberta, with an employment rate of 65.1 per cent, still leads the country. Despite the strains on the Calgary economy, the employment rate for the city is still higher than Toronto’s.

<sup>12</sup> While the unemployment rate is a better-known measure, it is more influenced by short-term changes in the economy. The employment rate better reflects both the strength of the labour market and the impact of the age structure on work activity in communities.

In Chart 8, we show data from the 2006 and 2016 census on employment across the province’s municipalities. Although somewhat out of date now, the census is the only source for employment data for the smaller municipalities in the province.<sup>13</sup> As in previous tables, we show the mean rate for the four major categories of municipalities. The rates are higher for all categories in 2006, with the municipal districts and the cities leading the way. At 66.7 per cent in 2006, the towns had, on average, a high employment rate as well. The villages had the lowest rate, but still a healthy 61.6 per cent.

**Chart 8. Per Cent Employed by Community Type, 2006 and 2016**



The per cent of the population 15+ employed or self-employed is calculated for each community; the mean score by community type is shown in the chart.

Source: 2006 Census of Canada, Table 94-579-XCB2006002; 2016 Census of Canada, Table 400-X2016284.

By 2016, employment rates had declined in all four categories. The cities now had the highest average, followed by the municipal districts and the towns. At 55.2 per cent, the villages had the lowest rate, more than six percentage points lower than the average for towns.

Both economic and demographic factors contributed to the decline in employment rates. By 2016, the effects of the downturn in Alberta’s economy were beginning to be felt. In addition, the aging of the population was having an effect as well. It is true that older people are working longer than in the past. Indeed, the labour force participation rate for people 65-69 in Alberta rose from 22.4 per cent in September 2001 to 33.5 per cent in September 2021. People are healthier and are living longer. Many jobs now require mental acuity but not hard, physical work. As the proportion

<sup>13</sup> New employment data will be released in November 2022.

of seniors with post-secondary education continues to increase, this increases their participation in the labour market as well.

Nevertheless, it is still true that labour force participation rates decline with age, and thus the aging of the population across the province, and especially in many smaller communities, will tend to reduce employment. There is a strong correlation (+.47) between the ratio of young adults (18-34) to seniors (65+) and the employment rate. The greater the proportion of young people relative to the senior population, the higher the employment.

As we have seen with almost all indicators, the variability within categories is more striking than differences between municipal types. Among towns, there is an almost 40 percentage point difference between Banff at 80 per cent and Stavely at just 41.1 per cent. Among the villages, there are striking differences as well, such that some resource-based or agricultural communities have very high employment rates and many others have rates below 50 per cent.

The analysis presented so far has contained a great deal of data. To conclude, we present something simple: a portrait of three towns that exemplify different demographic paths. While no individual case is a perfect example, we have chosen three medium-sized towns to illustrate three growth patterns: significant increase, population stability, and population decline. Of course, each community has its distinct history and is often affected by particular circumstances. But the examples illustrate the connections between demographic change and a series of social indicators.

Table 5 presents the measures we have already discussed for Coaldale, Vermilion and Hanna. Coaldale is a medium-sized town in southern Alberta located about 20 kilometres from Lethbridge. It has seen significant growth in the first two decades of this century and is a good illustration of a rapidly growing municipality. Vermilion is a somewhat smaller community that lies approximately 200 kilometres east of Edmonton. Its population has been stable since 2001. Hanna is located northeast of Drumheller and approximately 200 kilometres from Calgary. Its population has declined significantly since 2001.

**Table 5. Social and Demographic Indicators for Towns with Growing, Stable and Declining Populations.**

Indicator	Coaldale	Vermilion	Hanna
Population 2001	6008	3948	2986
Population 2011	7493	3930	2673
Population 2021	8771	3948	2394
Change 2001-2011	24.7%	-0.5%	-10.4%
Change 2011-2021	17.1%	0.5%	-10.5%
Median Age 2001	35.0	35.6	38.1
Median Age 2021	37.2	40.8	49.2
Population 65+ 2001	12.7%	18.2%	19.1%
Population 65+ 2021	17.6%	21.8%	25.1%
Ratio 18-34/65+ 2001	1.69	1.34	1.12
Ratio 18-34/65+ 2021	1.19	0.95	0.71
Employment Rate 2006	68.0%	67.2%	64.4%
Employment Rate 2016	65.9%	65.3%	59.3%
% Recent Immigrants 2006	1.9%	1.0%	0.5%
% Recent Immigrants 2016	3.6%	4.0%	4.9%

Notes: 2001 and 2011 are final numbers; 2021 numbers may be adjusted. Sources: The Censuses of Canada.

Coaldale continues to grow rapidly, boosted in part by its proximity to Lethbridge. Its population increased in the period 2011-21 by 17.1 per cent. Despite this growth, the population is not immune to aging. The proportion of seniors rose from 12.7 per cent in 2001 to 17.6 per cent in 2021. There have been modest declines in the ratio of people 18-34 to those 65+ and in the per cent of persons 15+ who are employed. But on the whole, the town is growing, and the age structure not dissimilar to that in small cities such as Leduc and St. Albert.

Vermilion paints a slightly different picture, one that describes many Alberta towns. The population has been remarkably stable since 2001, and the aging process is gradual though somewhat more advanced than is the case in Coaldale. The median age has increased by 5.2 years since 2001, and the ratio of young adults to seniors has fallen to just 0.95. The employment rate has remained strong at 65.3 per cent in 2016 but is likely to be lower when 2021 data become available.

Hanna illustrates a community further along on the demographic path to an older population. The town lost population in both decades of this century and now sits at 2,394 people. The median age has risen by over ten years and just over one-quarter of residents are past 65. The employment rate fell below 60 per cent in 2016 and is likely lower now. This does not suggest a crisis—the town is thriving and has attracted more immigrants in recent years; but if the population continues to decline and aging accelerates, this will pose new challenges for Hanna and many other communities.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Alberta has experienced significant growth in recent decades as a result of relatively high fertility, success in attracting newcomers to Canada, and strong though volatile rates of internal migration. In the last decade, some of these advantages have begun to diminish in importance. The total fertility rate is significantly below replacement level and only slightly above the national average; the flow of people into Alberta from other provinces has declined; and the pandemic has stalled plans to expand the number of international immigrants arriving in Canada.

Alberta's largest cities—Calgary, Edmonton, Lethbridge and Red Deer have continued to grow, as have many of the smaller cities in their vicinity. Spruce Grove and Leduc in the Edmonton region, and Airdrie and Cochrane near Calgary, have all grown rapidly. Towns such as Beaumont and Okotoks have more than doubled in the last 20 years. Smaller communities like Blackfalds and Penhold, near Red Deer, and Coaldale and Barnwell, close to Lethbridge, have seen rapid growth as well. But as we have seen, the picture is not so bright for all communities, and many towns and villages will face decline in the years ahead.

After some difficult years, the Alberta economy is on the mend. Although unemployment continues to be a challenge, Alberta is again experiencing economic growth, and the most recent labour force data show that the province has the highest employment rate in Canada. As discussed above, future growth will be highly dependent on international immigration. We may see some post-pandemic recovery in the birth rate, but it is unlikely to be dramatic. A stronger Alberta economy may attract new residents from other provinces, but a return to the strong flows of internal migrants from the Atlantic region or the other Prairie provinces, similar to the boom years, is unlikely as well. The pace of growth in the decade ahead will be tied to Canada's ability to achieve its ambitious targets for immigration and Alberta's ability to attract a healthy share of the new arrivals.

The shift to relying on newcomers to Canada for growth will disproportionately benefit the largest cities. But it is certainly possible for mid-size cities and larger towns to increase their immigrant populations. Provided that there are employment options, the lower cost of living in these communities may be attractive to new immigrants. Alberta's towns and smaller cities might well look to the example of Manitoba and its efforts to attract immigrants. The province has invested significant resources to connect with potential migrants, and has established an office dedicated to immigration and an excellent website with detailed information on job opportunities. Manitoba has made effective use of the Provincial Nominee stream of the immigration system, and, in cooperation with communities across the province, has succeeded in recruiting newcomers to settle outside the capital area. Smaller cities such as Morden, Winkler and Steinbach have experienced population growth fuelled in important measure by immigration.

Increased density in the largest cities may also encourage some current residents to opt for a different lifestyle outside Calgary and Edmonton. This is already bringing residents to a number of towns in the orbit of larger cities. Blackfalds, one

of the fastest growing towns in Alberta in the period 2016-21, illustrates well the importance of proximity to a larger urban area. Located less than 20 kilometres north of Red Deer, the community is home to many young families. The population grew by over 12 per cent between 2016 and 2021, and the median age in 2021 was just 31.8. The ratio of young adults to seniors was 4.3. Census data from 2016 on commuting to work patterns indicated that 80 per cent of those who travel to work do so outside the census subdivision in which they live but within their own census division. It is likely that a large proportion of these workers are commuting to Red Deer.

The economic changes flowing from the COVID-19 pandemic may open new opportunities for communities somewhat further away from major cities. The growth of home-based work will make larger properties at affordable prices more attractive to workers who don't need to be in the workplace five days a week. Commuting from Sundre to Calgary every workday is onerous; doing so one or two days a week may seem a good trade-off if attractive and affordable housing is available.

For municipalities further away from cities, opportunities may lie in new developments in industries like energy and agriculture. The huge solar farm under construction in Vulcan Country is one dramatic example of this (Government of Alberta, "Vulcan Solar Project"). Geothermal and hydrogen-based energy are in early stages of development but could also provide a boost to some regions of the province. With growing demand for agricultural products that are safe and produced in sustainable settings, Alberta is well positioned to capitalize. And the huge attraction of outdoor forms of recreation, highly valued by younger people, can produce growth and prosperity for many regions of the province and promote stronger bonds between urban residents and those who live in smaller communities.

All municipalities will need to deal with the consequences of population aging; some will also confront stagnation or decline and the challenges that will bring. Among the most important issues will be providing needed services to people in aging communities, especially ones at a significant distance from a large urban centre. This is especially the case with respect to health, where services are essential but expensive to provide. It is true for post-secondary education and training as well. New technologies like telemedicine and online instruction may help, but to deliver on the promise of these initiatives will require important investment to ensure reliable connectivity for all communities in the province.

Municipalities confronting population aging and, eventually, decline have time to adjust. One of the good things about demographic change is that it unfolds slowly. There will also be time for communities to consider larger questions, such as new forms of governance or service agreements with nearby communities. But it is important to recognize these challenges are coming upon us, and that as a province we begin to explore ways to respond to the needs of residents in all Alberta communities.

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[https://www.policyschool.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/FMK3\\_Big-Bang-Corporate-Tax\\_Mintz.pdf](https://www.policyschool.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/FMK3_Big-Bang-Corporate-Tax_Mintz.pdf)  
Jack Mintz | February 2022

### SOCIAL POLICY TRENDS: TYPES OF HOMELESSNESS

<https://www.policyschool.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/January-SPT-Kneebone.pdf>  
Ronald Kneebone | January 2022

### ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY TRENDS: WHAT'S DRIVING THE COST OF DRIVING?

[https://www.policyschool.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/EFL33\\_EEPT\\_Jan2022.pdf](https://www.policyschool.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/EFL33_EEPT_Jan2022.pdf)  
G. Kent Fellows and Gregory Galay | January 2022