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Leaving the Big City: New Patterns of Migration in Canada

Kevin McQuillan

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Big cities have always been attractive places for people to settle. However, recent trends, including work-from-home and hybrid work arrangements, along with the rising cost of housing in big cities, mean more Canadians of all age groups are relocating to smaller communities. Much of this movement is to smaller areas within the same province, so that communities which traditionally saw an out-migration of population are now dealing with the challenges created by a significant influx of new residents. Focusing on the exodus from the three largest Canadian Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) of Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver, this paper examines the challenges and consequences for smaller communities.

The proportion of people living in these three CMAs has grown from 28.9 per cent in 1981 to 35.5 per cent in 2021. This increase reflects the fact that the fastest growing industries, such as finance, technology and communications, are located in major urban areas. However, the pandemic, combined with the technology that allows people to work from anywhere, means that more people are moving to smaller communities where they can enjoy lower housing costs and other benefits that less dense places offer. While younger people willing to tolerate the occasional commute to the city in hybrid working arrangements are relocating to smaller communities, some retirees are downsizing and also leaving the big city behind.

This out-migration has created challenges for big cities. With workers resisting a return to the downtown office, urban cores are left with vast amounts of empty office space. Companies are thus reducing the size of their leased space or not renewing current leases. Public transit and shopping malls have seen usage drop, and a subsequent rise in crime and social disorder in some cities is encouraging even more people to consider moving elsewhere.

The COVID-19 pandemic certainly contributed to the increasing exodus from the largest cities. A post-pandemic return to normal economic activity could slow departures from the big cities. The largest CMAs are still growing, due to an increasing number of immigrants, many of whom prefer to settle in big cities where people who arrived previously from their homelands have located. Canada's commitment to expanded immigration has meant continued growth for major urban centres while the exodus of people from those centres has renewed the growth of mid-size and smaller communities.

For the community of Cowansville, Quebec, for example, the flow of people out of Montreal has produced renewed growth. The newcomers, especially those who bring significant resources with them, stimulate the local economy. Greater demand for products and services helps local businesses and can create employment opportunities for local residents.

It will be important to monitor these migration trends in the coming years in order to ensure that infrastructure, funding and services adapt to the challenges so that everyone, whether they choose to live in a big city or in a small community, has access to the services and infrastructure they need in order to enjoy an optimum quality of life.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- In contrast to international immigration, internal migration is unregulated and should remain so. It underscores the importance of up-to-date and accurate information on migration patterns to allow for planning, especially in smaller communities that are receiving large numbers of newcomers.
- The connection between new patterns of work and residential choices continues to evolve. If more people are commuting longer distances, but only a few days a week, it will be important to monitor the impact on public transit. Longer commutes may support investment in new forms of collective transit to offset the environmental impact of car travel that covers longer distances.
- A significant part of out-migration from large cities involves the retired population. This may strain services in smaller communities, especially health care. Appropriate planning and adaptation of current services will be important.

INTRODUCTION

Canada's largest cities have been magnets for people from across the country and around the world. The share of the national population living in the three largest Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) — Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver — has risen from 28.9 per cent in 1981 to 33.6 per cent in 2001 to 35.5 per cent in 2021. The largest cities' increasing demographic weight reflects the economy's evolution. Many of the fastest growing industries — finance, technology, communications, research and advanced education — locate in major urban areas.

Increasing numbers of immigrants to Canada have given an important boost to growth in all three cities. The desire for higher education and plentiful employment opportunities as well as the presence of family members or an established community of earlier immigrants from their homeland all increase the appeal of the largest cities to new arrivals. More than half (53.4 per cent) of the immigrants who arrived in Canada between 2016 and 2021 were living in Toronto, Montreal or Vancouver at the time of the 2021 census.

The big cities also attract many younger Canadians to pursue their education or to take up employment. Census data show that in 2021, the proportion of residents in the three largest cities aged 25–34 who had lived elsewhere in the same province five years earlier ranged from 19.5 per cent in Toronto to a high of 28.6 per cent in Montreal.

While Canada's largest urban areas continue to flourish, a growing number of their residents are choosing to leave, mostly for other communities in their home province. This trend is surprising as the lure of the big city has been powerful in recent decades. The largest cities have often benefited from what economists call agglomeration — the concentration of workers in particular industries that allows knowledge to spread rapidly and fuels innovation. The benefits of agglomeration are greatest in fields like technology and finance. This works to the advantage of the largest cities (Moretti 2013; Muro and You 2022) but it's not economic factors alone that promoted the big cities. Popular culture glorified downtown living and the goal of many young people was to live at the centre of the action. Urban growth and enormous investments in real estate and infrastructure followed.

New developments have brought challenges for large cities. The spiralling cost of housing in major urban centres and the growth of new technologies that have enabled employees to work away from the office have led some to question the value of big-city living. These trends were

accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which fostered the spread and continuous improvement of technologies that allow for remote work (Florida et al. 2021). As the pandemic has subsided, workers have resisted a return to the old order, leaving vast amounts of empty office space in urban cores. Companies are reducing the amount of space they lease or declining to renew existing leases (CBRE 2023). The resulting decline in traffic has posed huge challenges for support industries, especially public transit and shopping malls. At the same time, many big cities have seen a disturbing rise in crime and social disorder that stokes fears among residents about public safety and leads some to consider a new start elsewhere.

Amid these changes in urban life, new patterns of migration have begun to emerge. We examine these trends in this paper with a particular focus on the striking changes occurring in migration to and from Canada's three largest metropolitan areas and on the consequences of these developments for the cities and towns that are seeing large influxes of those cities' former residents.

EXAMINING CANADIAN MIGRATION TRENDS

People move about for many reasons and so all communities see both arrivals and departures. Even communities facing hard times will see people coming for family reasons or to take up specialized job opportunities. On the other hand, booming communities will experience some outflow of residents who are moving away for personal reasons or fleeing the high cost of living. The difference between the numbers moving into a community and those moving out — net migration — gives us a sense of a community's overall attractiveness to current and potential residents.

This paper focuses primarily on Canada's three largest urban centres. In the analysis, we use data based on Statistics Canada's classification of communities. Urban centres fall into two categories: Census Metropolitan Areas (CMA) and Census Agglomerations (CA).¹ "A CMA is formed by one or more adjacent municipalities centred on a population centre or core" (Statistics Canada 2022). The CMA must have a total population of at least 100,000 residents and the core must contain at least 50,000 of those residents. Note that the CMA generally includes a significantly larger area than the political boundaries of a city. The Toronto CMA, for example, includes the communities of Brampton, Markham and Mississauga.

Census Agglomerations are smaller urban areas. They may contain one or more adjacent municipalities and must have a core of at least 10,000 residents. Smaller population centres and rural areas are grouped together in the rural category.

The migration data used in this paper are based on the 2016 classification of communities and include 35 CMAs and 117 CAs as well as Canada's rural areas.

This paper's central objective is to examine the changing migration patterns of Canada's three largest CMAs — Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver — and the consequences of these changes for other Canadian communities. We focus on these cities for two reasons. First, they stand well above other Canadian cities in size: Vancouver, the third largest CMA, recorded a 2021 census population of 2,642,825 residents, while the population of Ottawa-Gatineau, the fourth largest CMA, was 1,488,307. Second, the three largest cities have seen a significant outflow of residents in recent years, but this has not been the case for Canada's other large urban areas. The next three CMAs by size — Ottawa-Gatineau, Calgary and Edmonton, all with populations close to 1.5 million — have not seen a significant increase in the number of people leaving for other Canadian destinations.

¹ Full details on the definitions of CMA and CA are available in the Dictionary for the 2021 Census of Population, <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/ref/dict/az/Definition-eng.cfm?ID=geo009>. Unless otherwise noted, when we use the term "cities," we are referring to the CMA and not the municipality.

We begin the analysis in Table 1 with data on net migration for three types of movement: migration between provinces, migration within a province and migration to and from international destinations. The data are presented for two five-year periods defined by the censuses, 2011-16 and 2016-21 as well as the most recent data for the year 2021-22. Four categories of communities are included:

- The country's three largest CMAs (Toronto, Montreal² and Vancouver);
- The other 32 CMAs, ranging in size from Belleville-Quinte West at 111,184 to Ottawa-Gatineau;
- 117 CAs, with Elliot Lake, Ontario being the smallest at 11,372 residents;
- Nanaimo, B.C. the largest at 115,459³; and
- Canada's rural areas, which include all communities smaller than the requirements to be considered a Census Agglomeration.

Table 1: Net Migration Totals by Community Type, 2011-2022

	Interprovincial	Intraprovincial	International	Total
2011-16				
TMV	-39 267	-187 708	713 903	486 928
CMAs	46 474	206 106	399 540	652 120
CAs	-257	31 917	66 435	98 095
Rural	-6 950	-50 315	39 335	-17 930
2016-21				
TMV	7 780	-436 873	781 224	352 131
CMAs	-19 838	264 097	454 469	698 728
CAs	2 701	106 016	74 744	183 461
Rural	9 357	66 760	45 464	121 581
2021-22				
TMV	-22 625	-121 884	271 479	126 970
CMAs	7 918	56 940	168 738	233 596
CAs	4 368	28 403	27 104	59 875
Rural	10 339	36 541	16 220	63 100

Source: Table 17-10-01, 36 Release Date: 2023-01-11

The data show a complex picture, but several findings stand out:

- As early as 2011-16, well before the pandemic and the dramatic shift to working from home, the three largest CMAs were losing residents through intraprovincial migration. The net outflow has accelerated over time. Of course, the pandemic influenced the 2021-22 results and a return to normal economic activity may see a reduction in departures from the large metropolitan communities⁴;

² The CMA of Montreal expanded to include the former CA of Saint Jean-sur-Richelieu in 2016.

³ The 2021 census results will produce a revised classification and add six new CMAs: Fredericton, NB, Drummondville, PQ, Red Deer, AB, Kamloops, BC, Chilliwack, BC and Nanaimo, BC. Five new CAs will also be created while two will be "retired" due to population decline.

⁴ The pandemic appears to have affected migration patterns differently in the three CMAs. Vancouver experienced only a small increase in 2020-21. Montreal and Toronto saw a significant increase. 2021-22 data point to a decline for Montreal, but not for the Toronto CMA.

- Despite the large losses via intraprovincial and, to a lesser extent, interprovincial migration,⁵ the largest CMAs continue to grow due to the rising number of immigrants who settle in these cities. The international migration gains more than offset the losses through internal migration and support continued growth in Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver; and
- Much of the outflow from the largest cities goes to other CMAs; however, both CAs and rural areas are also attracting larger numbers of the out-migrants. The net gain for CAs more than tripled between 2011–16 and 2016–21, while rural areas swung from a net loss in the earlier period to significant gains in both 2016–21 and 2021–22.

These new patterns of migration provide some good news for all types of communities. Canada's commitment to expanded immigration has ensured continued growth in the major urban centres, while for many mid-size and smaller communities, the flow of people from the three largest cities is producing renewed growth.

NET MIGRATION PATTERNS FOR TORONTO, MONTREAL AND VANCOUVER

Table 2 presents the results for the three different forms of migration separately for the Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver Census Metropolitan Areas. There are important similarities across the three locales. All are seeing significant losses through movement to other communities in their province and the net losses are growing over time. The results for interprovincial movement are mixed, though notably, Montreal runs a deficit for each time period. Still, the high numbers of new immigrants to Canada continue to offset internal losses in all three CMAs. Toronto and Vancouver saw significant increases in net arrivals between the first two time periods and the one-year data for 2021–22 suggest larger gains may lie ahead. Montreal, by contrast, saw a decline between 2011–16 and 2016–21. And while the 2021–22 figure implies an increase in net arrivals, it is striking that the number is significantly lower than the net immigration total for Vancouver.

Table 2: Net Migration Totals, Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, 2011–2022

	Interprovincial	Intraprovincial	International	Total
2011-16				
Toronto	-7 326	-120 891	381 494	253 277
Montreal	-43 846	-40 311	208 247	124 090
Vancouver	11 905	-26 506	124 162	109 561
2016-21				
Toronto	6 460	-272 614	458 402	192 248
Montreal	-25 596	-100 661	174 492	48 235
Vancouver	26 916	-63 598	148 330	111 648
2021-22				
Toronto	-21 388	-78 077	159 489	60 024
Montreal	-5 408	-29 480	48 668	13 780
Vancouver	4 171	-14 327	63 322	53 166

Source: Table 17-10-01, 36 Release Date: 2023-01-11

⁵ Canada has surprisingly low rates of interprovincial migration and the rates have been declining (Haan and Cardoso 2020). Rates have declined in the United States as well (Frey 2023), but there has been significant movement from northern and midwestern states to southern states. This migration has fuelled the rapid growth in cities such as Dallas, Houston, Atlanta and Phoenix.

LEADING DESTINATIONS FOR OUT-MIGRANTS

The movement of big-city residents to communities in their home provinces has been the most striking development of recent years. Table 3 presents data on intraprovincial out-migration from the CMAs of Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver by community type. Here, we are no longer looking at net migration figures but at the estimated number of out-migrants, residents who left each of the three cities for another community in their province. To simplify the presentation, we present only the figures for the 2016–21 period.⁶

Table 3: Destinations of Intra-Provincial Out-Migrants from Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, 2016–21

Destination	Toronto		Montreal		Vancouver	
	Out-Migrants	Intra-provincial Distribution (%)	Out-Migrants	Intra-provincial Distribution (%)	Out-migrants	Intra-provincial Distribution (%)
CMAs	380 537	76.8	45 396	17.0	57 902	40.3
CAs	46 344	9.4	59 592	22.3	55 347	38.5
Rural	68 438	13.8	161 873	60.7	30 568	21.3
Total	495 319	100.0	266 681	100.0	143 817	100.1

Source: Statistics Canada: Table 17-10-0141-01

All three cities have seen a very significant outflow of residents to other communities in their provinces. The rate of out-migration is similar across the three cities, ranging from a low of 54 per 1,000 in Vancouver to a high of 77 per 1,000 in Toronto.⁷ With respect to the kind of communities that migrants are choosing, however, the differences among the cities are striking. They reflect both differences in the situations of the three cities but also the very different geography of the three provinces.

Out-migrants from Toronto are most likely to relocate to other CMAs; over three-quarters of migrants settle in urban areas of at least 100,000 while just 13.8 per cent relocate to rural areas.⁸ Montreal's case is the opposite. Only 17 per cent of out-migrants move to another CMA, while over 60 per cent choose a community smaller than a Census Agglomeration.⁹ Vancouver was different yet again, with similar proportions choosing a CMA or a CA, while about one in five settled in a rural community.

The observed differences likely reflect real differences in the migrants' motivations but also the differences in the provinces' urban networks. Toronto is surrounded by a set of medium-sized cities that provide alternatives for people looking for a less dense and lower cost urban setting. As we will see below, a number of these cities are close enough to allow out-migrants to retain a connection to Toronto. In Montreal's case, however, there is no CMA close by. The closest CMA is Sherbrooke, located 150 kilometres away and with a population of only 227,000. Still, it is

⁶ The pattern is substantially the same for the 2011–2016 period, though the totals are lower. Data for 2021–22 are not yet available.

⁷ The rate is computed by dividing the five-year total of out-migrants by the estimated mid-point population of each CMA.

⁸ Recall that the term "rural" here refers to all areas outside CMAs and CAs.

⁹ Bézy and St-Amour (2023) provide a detailed analysis of Quebec migration trends that focuses primarily on regions rather than cities.

surprising that the number of out-migrants from Montreal relocating to a community of less than 10,000 people was more than double the number for Toronto.

The data for Vancouver point to a more balanced pattern of out-migration than in the other two cases, with the proportion going to CMAs and CAs roughly equal. This is somewhat misleading, though, as it reflects the arbitrary dividing line between a CMA and a CA. As noted above, three B.C. cities will move into the CMA category based on the 2021 census data – Kamloops, Chilliwack and Nanaimo. Were we to include these three cities in the CMA category in this analysis, the per cent of migrants moving from Vancouver to a CMA would rise to 58.8 per cent, closer to the pattern observed in Ontario.

In Table 4, we expand the analysis by examining migration flows to the leading recipients for each city in both the CMA and CA categories. We also add data on in-migrants to these destinations, which allows us to examine both gross and net migration trends.

Table 4: Leading Destinations of Out-Migrants from Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver, 2016–21

	# In-Migrants from		% From	# Out-Migrants to		% To	Total Net Migration	
ONTARIO	Ontario	Toronto	Toronto	Ontario	Toronto	Toronto	Ontario	Toronto
Oshawa	98 843	81 148	82.1	69 508	28 753	41.4	29 335	52 395
Hamilton	116 422	77 801	66.8	99 897	33 772	33.8	16 525	44 029
KWC	86 185	42 900	49.8	75 534	20 811	27.6	10 651	22 089
Barrie	58 922	38 020	64.5	46 522	14 582	31.3	12 400	23 438
Ottawa-Gatineau	91 820	30 283	33.0	71 153	18 687	26.3	20 667	11 596
Kawartha Lakes	19 327	6 394	33.1	12 437	2 011	16.2	6 890	4 383
Wasaga Beach	10 350	4 096	39.6	6 040	969	16.0	4 310	3 127
Collingwood	8 926	3 694	41.4	5 727	908	15.9	3 199	2 786
Woodstock	15 455	3 629	23.5	10 141	716	7.1	5 314	2 913
Centre Wellington	9 094	2 866	31.5	6 007	678	11.3	3 087	2 188
QUEBEC	Québec	Montréal	Montréal	Québec	Montréal	Montréal	Québec	Montréal
Quebec (Ville)	82 071	20 878	25.4	74 876	17 871	23.9	7 195	3 007
Sherbrooke	39 572	13 468	34.0	32 620	9 271	28.4	6 952	4 197
Trois-Rivières	30 785	7 560	24.6	25 727	4 669	18.1	5 058	2 891
Saguenay	16 548	3 490	21.1	15 613	2 974	19.0	935	516
Granby	23 110	9 095	39.4	17 624	4 301	24.4	5 486	4 794
Salaberry-de-Valleyfield	13 199	8 717	66.0	9 830	5 347	54.4	3 369	3 370
Joliette	18 950	7 714	40.7	14 860	4 715	31.7	4 090	2 999
St. Hyacinthe	16 606	6 987	42.1	15 282	4 790	31.3	1 324	2 197
Drummondville	18 931	4 959	26.2	15 556	2 907	18.7	3 375	2 052

BRITISH COLUMBIA	# In-Migrants from		% From	# Out-Migrants to		% To	Total Net Migration	
	BC	Vancouver	Vancouver	BC	Vancouver	Vancouver	BC	Vancouver
Abbotsford-Mission	38 985	28 495	73.1	37 130	17 859	48.1	1 855	10 636
Victoria	43 500	17 177	39.5	34 138	11 593	34.0	9 362	5 584
Kelowna	32 638	12 230	37.5	24 312	6 148	25.3	8 326	6 082
Nanaimo	22 306	6 282	28.2	17 632	3 725	21.1	4 674	2 557
Kamloops	20 207	5 449	27.0	16 259	3 854	23.7	3 948	1 595
Squamish	6 205	3 962	63.9	5 471	1 897	34.7	734	2 065
Courtenay	12 760	3 231	25.3	9 710	1 246	12.8	3 050	1 985

Source: Statistics Canada: Table 17-10-0141-01 Release Date 2023-01-11

ONTARIO

Panel A presents data on movement to and from Toronto for the five CMAs and five CAs with the largest inflow of migrants from Toronto.¹⁰ Not surprisingly, the contiguous communities of Oshawa and Hamilton have by far the largest number of arrivals. While there is also a significant flow of residents from these cities to Toronto, the balance is strongly in favour of the two cities. Over the five-year period, the net gain for Oshawa was over 52,000 and more than 44,000 for Hamilton. Barrie, though somewhat farther from Toronto, was also a major recipient of those leaving the city. And like Oshawa and Hamilton, the majority of its new arrivals came from the Toronto CMA.

The proximity of these cities to Toronto suggests that some of the people leaving are not cutting their ties to the larger city. Commuting data for Oshawa from the 2021 census show that 42,720 people, or 32.8 per cent of those who report commuting to a workplace travel to Toronto.¹¹ For Hamilton, the figures are 36,795, or 17.2 per cent of commuters. Similarly for Barrie, 17,510 people, more than one-quarter of Barrie commuters, reported travelling to Toronto for work. Of course, not all these commuters were former Toronto residents, but it is likely that a significant proportion of commuters are those who moved to Barrie but retained their jobs in Toronto.

The other two leading recipients of outbound Torontonians, Ottawa-Gatineau and Kitchener-Waterloo-Cambridge (KWC), are more distant and the proportion of migrants coming to these cities from Toronto is lower. Of the 91,820 Ontario residents who relocated to Ottawa-Gatineau, only about one-third came from Toronto. That proportion is higher for KWC; almost half arrive from Toronto. And though located about 100 kilometres to the west of Toronto, still just over five per cent of commuters reported travelling to Toronto for work.

The leading CA recipients are quite different communities. The top three are in areas that have long been attractive vacation spots while Centre Wellington is a largely rural municipality about 100 kilometres west of Toronto. All four communities might be especially attractive to older Toronto residents who are retired or moving towards retirement, and all are close enough to allow for regular travel to the city for occasional business trips or family visits.

¹⁰ For consistency, we use the data for the Ottawa-Gatineau CMA though the intraprovincial figures for Gatineau refer to movement within Quebec.

¹¹ Commuting data are available in Table 98-10-0457-01 of the 2021 Census, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=9810045701>.

Woodstock is a different case. A booming city of over 45,000 in southwestern Ontario, its factories, particularly in the auto industry, are a lure to migrants from many parts of the province. The 3,629 migrants from Toronto made up less than one quarter of the more than 15,000 who moved to the city over the five-year period from all over Ontario.

QUEBEC

As noted above, Montreal does not have adjacent municipalities similar to Hamilton or Oshawa. Thus, it is not surprising that Quebec City, which received only 20,878 migrants from Montreal over the five-year period, would not have made the top-five list of CMAs in Ontario. Note also that the proportion of intraprovincial migrants to these CMAs who are coming from Montreal is far smaller than is true for the leading CMAs in Ontario.

The movement of over 13,000 people from Montreal to Sherbrooke is striking given the city's relatively small size.¹² Moreover, it shows the popularity of destinations in the region for those leaving Montreal. Granby, St. Hyacinthe, Drummondville, Cowansville and other communities north and east of the city have seen a significant inflow of people from Montreal. Indeed, Granby has the largest positive net migration total of any city in the province. In some ways, this stream of migration resembles the exchange of migrants between Toronto and the smaller communities north of the city such as Collingwood and Wasaga Beach. More of those moving to these communities are likely making a definitive move and for many the move likely occurs later in life. Aside from Salaberry-de-Valleyfield, a distant suburb of Montreal, and to some extent St. Hyacinthe and Joliette, commuting to Montreal from any of the leading destinations is quite limited.

BRITISH COLUMBIA

British Columbia had just three CMAs outside of Vancouver under the 2016 classification, and only Abbotsford-Mission was in easy commuting distance to the city. Between 2016 and 2021, over 28,000 Vancouver residents moved to Abbotsford-Mission and the net gain for the city was over 10,000. Almost three of four in-migrants came from Vancouver and more than 18,000 residents indicated they commute to Vancouver for work. Victoria and Kelowna are farther from Vancouver. The number of new residents coming to these two cities from Vancouver was modest and the proportion of Vancouver residents among new arrivals was significantly lower than was true for Abbotsford-Mission. Both cities had a positive balance of migration with Vancouver.

Among CAs, Chilliwack was far and away the most common destination and helped drive the significant growth in the city that has moved it into the CMA category in the 2021 classification. The drop-off in numbers from Chilliwack to second-place Nanaimo was very significant. It should be noted, however, that Nanaimo and Courtenay also receive significant numbers of migrants from outside British Columbia.

¹² We present data on the absolute numbers of migrants in this table, which are important for planning purposes. When making comparison among cities or provinces as to the volume of migration, it is important to use rates of migration. If we divide the number of in-migrants from Montreal by the total population, the in-migration rate for Quebec City is 25 per 1,000; for Sherbrooke it is 61 per 1,000. The in-migration rate for Oshawa (for migrants from Toronto) is 198 per 1,000.

AGE PATTERNS OF MIGRATION FOR CANADA'S CITIES

The likelihood of moving to a new community varies significantly by age. Rates of migration are typically highest for young adults who are moving for education or to take up a new job. Young adults have fewer commitments such as home ownership or children in school that often impede movement. Rates tend to decline through middle age and then experience a modest increase as people approach retirement. By then, children are grown up and starting lives of their own and those looking towards retirement may be attracted to a different type of community.

In exploring migration patterns in Canada today, it is important to consider how the major drivers of migration might affect age groups in different ways. Escalating housing costs in our major cities have the greatest impact on young adults seeking to purchase their first property. It may lead some who feel priced out of the market to move to communities where costs are lower. By contrast, for older adults who have likely paid off their mortgages and built up substantial equity in their homes, it may be the right time to sell. Some may downsize and stay in the same community, but others may choose to move to smaller communities with different amenities and perhaps a slower pace of life.

A second consideration is the changing work patterns in many industries. The rise of work-from-home or hybrid work arrangements are likely influencing migration patterns as well. For younger workers, it may facilitate a move to a community further away from their normal place of work. A longer commute may seem tolerable if it is only necessary a few days a week. For older workers, the hybrid work model may allow for a move to a desired location prior to full retirement.

Table 5 provides data on net migration by community type for two key age categories that are likely most affected by developments in work patterns and in the housing market: young adults 25–34 and older adults aged 55–79. Our primary focus is again on intraprovincial and international migration. For the three largest CMAs, intraprovincial data show net losses in each time period for both age groups. Moreover, the net losses increase over time. It is important to remember that the pandemic and subsequent closure of schools and workplaces undoubtedly contributed to some of the outflow of big city residents. It will be important to examine data for 2022 and beyond when many restrictions on activity ended to see if the numbers leaving return closer to the pre-pandemic figures.

Table 5: Net Migration Totals by Community Type, Selected Age Groups, 2011-2022

Community Type	Interprovincial		Intraprovincial		International		Total Net Migration	
	25-34	55-59	25-34	55-79	25-34	55-79	25-34	55-79
2011-16								
TMV	-13 546	-3 563	-29 769	-51 655	237 190	63 420	193 875	8 202
CMAs outside TMV	16 942	-2 868	32 489	35 769	130 969	24 082	180 400	56 983
CA	-2 010	4 230	-3 947	20 142	20 388	2 081	14 431	26 453
Outside CMA/CA	-1 386	2 201	1 227	-4 256	13 660	436	13 501	-1 619
2016-21								
TMV	9 410	-3 043	-87 879	-107 287	323 339	60 976	244 870	-49 354
CMAs outside TMV	-8 716	-3 842	47 424	44 193	165 824	33 482	204 532	73 833
CA	-618	2 527	11 998	48 118	24 716	3 209	36 096	53 854
Outside CMA/CA	-76	4 358	28 457	14 976	15 826	2 292	44 207	21 626
2021-22								
TMV	-4 682	-3 072	-26 921	-24 954	111 833	17 164	80 230	-10 862
CMAs outside TMV	2 014	-314	11 795	7 678	61 062	9 841	74 871	17 205
CA	894	887	4 333	9 983	9 874	850	15 101	11 720
Outside CMA/CA	1 774	2 499	10 793	7 293	5 604	659	18 171	10 451

Source: Table 17-10-0136 Release Date: 2023-01-11

When we turn to the data on international migration, however, the picture changes in an important way. In the younger age group, sharp increases in new arrivals are offsetting the losses from intraprovincial migration. Despite a net loss of over 87,000 young adults via intraprovincial migration between 2016 and 2021, the net gain of more than 300,000 young immigrants ensured continued growth of the 25–34 age group in the big cities. The 2021–22 data show a continuation of this trend, though the pace of both outflows to other parts of the provinces and in the arrival of new immigrants accelerated.

For the 55–79 age group, the situation is different. Far fewer new immigrants fall into this age group, and their numbers are no longer sufficient to offset the growing losses via intraprovincial movement. For the 2016–21 period, all three cities experienced a net loss of residents in this age group. One result of these trends may be a slowing of population aging in the major cities and an intensification of the process in some receiving communities.

Having decided to leave a big city, do younger and older migrants prefer different destinations? The available data are limited but they suggest an important change over time. In the 2011–16 period, the CMAs were the favoured recipients for both age groups. The CAs had a small net loss of younger adults but a small gain in the 55–79 age group. In the 2016–21 period, as the size of the outflow from the largest cities increased, the net gain for the CMAs increased modestly while the gains for both CAs and rural areas were larger. For the CA category, the balance for young adults went from a small net loss to a significant gain; for older adults, the net gain for CAs more than doubled. For rural areas of the three provinces, the changes were significant in both age groups. For young adults, a small surplus in 2011–16 shifted to a significant gain of over 28,000 new residents. Among older adults, a net loss of over 4,000 in the earlier period changed to a net gain of almost 15,000 in the later period. 2021–22 data point to a continuation of these trends with significant gains for areas outside the CMAs and CAs. To be sure, these results are likely influenced

by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Smaller communities may have been perceived to be safer and the virtual shutdown of many workplaces during the 2020–22 period made it easier for employed people to relocate to areas farther away from their usual place of work. However, it may also point to the growing attraction of smaller communities with a lower cost of living for both young workers and those in the later stages of their careers or already in retirement.

Within the categories of communities used in Table 6, we find, not surprisingly, that there are differences in the preferred destinations of younger and older migrants. As we are working with net migration data, calculating a measure of the popularity of a community to a particular age group is not straightforward.¹³ A community might experience a net gain of population due to migration (i.e., more people move into the community than move out), yet for a particular age group the balance may be negative. We need to keep this in mind when looking at the data in Table 6, which show the percentage of the net total migration for the communities accounted for by a particular age group. In the table, we show the communities in Ontario, Quebec and B.C. with the highest percentage of migrants from both the young adult (25–34) and older adult (55–79) categories for 2016–21. We limit the analysis to communities with a positive intraprovincial migration balance of at least 2,000.

Table 6: Communities with Highest Percentage of Migrants, by Age Group, 2016–2021

	25–34		55–79
Ontario			
Hamilton	31.6	Collingwood	42.3
Oshawa	29.3	Owen Sound	39.5
Kitchener-Waterloo	29.2	Brockville	39.3
Ottawa	28.4	Chatham-Kent	39.3
Woodstock	26.8	Belleville	37.6
Quebec			
Shawinigan	16.6	Granby	48.4
Drummondville	16.3	Joliette	47.3
Salaberry-de-Valleyfield	14.1	Trois-Rivières	42.7
Granby	12.1	Sherbrooke	41.8
Sorel-Tracy	11.8	Drummondville	41.0
British Columbia			
Chilliwack	24.7	Vernon	53.3
Kelowna	18.2	Duncan	46.8
Courtenay	18.0	Abbotsford-Mission	44.7
Campbell River	16.6	Campbell River	44.0
Nanaimo	12.8	Courtenay	43.6

Net migration total for migrants in each age group % of Net Migration Total

*Communities with Net Intraprovincial Migration of 2,000+

Source: Table 17-10-0136 Release Date: 2023-01-11

¹³ Unfortunately, data on the number of in-migrants by age for CMAs and CAs are not available at this time.

For the younger age group, the results are quite different by province. In Ontario, the most attractive destinations are the CMAs close to Toronto, Hamilton and Oshawa.¹⁴ A lower cost of housing as well as proximity to Toronto are important for those who are moving there. Kitchener-Waterloo-Cambridge, though farther away, also has a high proportion of migrants from the young adult group. Again, cost-of-living issues likely play a role as does the region's strong economy.

In Quebec, by contrast, there are no destinations where young migrants account for more than 20 per cent of net migration and none of the top five are CMAs. Shawinigan, a community of just 50,000 located 165 kilometres from Montreal, has the highest percentage of younger migrants, but that amounts to just 16.6 per cent of the total. In British Columbia, Kelowna is the only CMA among the leaders. Chilliwack, where young adults account for about 25 per cent of the net total, plays a role similar to several of the Ontario communities given its proximity to Vancouver.

When we turn to the older adult category, the situation in all three provinces is more similar. In Ontario, smaller CAs north and east of Toronto appear especially attractive to older migrants. Locations near Georgian Bay including Collingwood, Owen Sound, Wasaga Beach and Midland have become attractive destinations for retirees, many from the Toronto area. In Quebec, too, small and mid-sized communities east of Montreal draw a large proportion of their intraprovincial migrants from the older adult category. In British Columbia, those in the 55–79 category account for a large share of the migration to communities on Vancouver Island.

THE IMPACT OF MIGRATION ON SMALLER COMMUNITIES

Most discussion of the out-migration from big cities has focused on the effects on the cities themselves and especially the central city areas. Less attention has been paid to the impact of migration patterns on the smaller communities that receive the migrants. For many communities, the impact of new migration patterns has been substantial.

In Table 7, we show the CMAs and CAs in Ontario, Quebec and British Columbia with the highest positive rates of net intraprovincial migration in the 2016–21 period. In Ontario, Oshawa leads with a rate of 71 per 1,000; the next four highest are smaller CMAs somewhat further from Toronto than Oshawa but all within 200 km. Belleville and Peterborough are attractive destinations for older migrants, while Barrie and Brantford have higher percentages of younger adults among their newcomers. When we turn to the CAs, we note immediately the significantly higher rates of migration, underlining the growing impact of intraprovincial movement on smaller communities.

¹⁴ In Oshawa, the net gain for the 25–34 group was 8,509 and for the 55–79 category just 2,613; by contrast, for Belleville, the net gain for the younger group was 719 and for the older group 2,602.

Table 7: Communities with Highest Rates of Intraprovincial Migration, 2016-2021

	CMA		CA
Ontario			
Oshawa	71	Wasaga Beach	189
Belleville	63	Carleton Place	176
Barrie	59	Collingwood	136
Peterborough	55	Midland	123
Brantford	53	Woodstock	119
Quebec			
Trois-Rivières	32	Cowansville	134
Sherbrooke	32	Joliette	81
Québec	9	Salaberry-de-Valleyfield	78
		Granby	62
		Shawinigan	52
British Columbia			
Kelowna	39	Chilliwack	92
Victoria	23	Parksville	88
Abbotsford	9	Port Alberni	58
		Campbell River	55
		Courtenay	54

Net Intraprovincial Total Divided by Mid-point Population (Expressed per 1,000)

Excludes communities with less than 1,500 migrants in period

Source: Table 17-10-0136 Release Date: 2023-01-11

In Quebec, the rates for the three CMAs shown are lower. As we are using net migration figures here, a low rate could reflect either a limited population exchange among the province's cities or a more balanced flow between Montreal and the three CMAs. For smaller communities, it is a different story, however. A number of CAs have experienced marked increases in migration. Although somewhat lower than in Ontario, the rates for many small and medium-size communities east of Montreal are significant. The results for British Columbia are similar to Quebec's, though it is worth underlining the fact that the communities on Vancouver Island, in particular, attract a considerable number of interprovincial migrants as well.

To illustrate the effects of changing migration patterns on the demography of smaller communities, in Table 8 we present population indicators for two communities identified in Table 7 as having high rates of in-migration: Belleville, Ontario and Cowansville, Quebec. We show the measures for 2005-06, before the recent rise in intraprovincial migration, and the most recent data for 2021-22. In 2005-06, both communities had a small excess of births over deaths, little or no international migration gain, small losses via interprovincial migration and a modest intraprovincial migration surplus. By 2021-22, two important changes had occurred: Both communities now experienced more deaths than births and the gains from intraprovincial migration soared, more than tripling for Belleville and increasing more than four-fold in Cowansville. In the absence of the gains from intraprovincial migration both communities would have experienced population decline.

Table 8: Components of Population Change in Belleville and Cowansville, 2005-06 and 2021-22

Year	Natural			Migration			Net Change
	Births	Deaths	Increase	International	Interprovincial	Intraprovincial	
Belleville							
2005-2006	1 013	935	78	73	-88	536	599
2021-2022	1 088	1 312	-224	282	-438	1 737	1 357
Cowansville							
2005-2006	128	122	6	-2	-11	122	115
2021-2022	138	220	-82	26	-5	552	491

Source: Table 17-10-0136 Release Date: 2023-01-11

In our final table, we take a closer look at the development of these two communities using census data from 2001 to 2021. In the first decade of the century, both experienced very slow growth, but the rates increased sharply in the 2011-21 period. The proportion of seniors continued its steady rise and by 2021 almost three in 10 residents in Cowansville were 65 years of age or older. This suggests that a large proportion of the new arrivals in these communities were in the older age groups, a fact that would also contribute to the steady decline in the employment rate in both communities. Finally, the data on place of work point to a trend that is likely contributing to the growth of these communities. From 2001 to 2016, the proportion reporting working from home was remarkably steady at about five per cent; however, over the last five years, the percentage roughly triples in Belleville to 15.4 per cent and doubles in Cowansville to over 10 per cent. The ability to work at a distance has probably made a number of smaller communities like Belleville and Cowansville more attractive to some currently employed people.

Table 9: Census Indicators for Belleville and Cowansville, 2001–2021

	2001	2006	2011	2016	2021
Indicator	Belleville				
Population	96 051	100 494	101 668	103 472	111 184
Intercensal Rate of Growth	-0.3	4.6	1.2	1.8	9.4
Median Age	39.0	41.5	43.5	44.7	45.2
% 65+	15.9	16.7	18.1	20.1	22.7
% Immigrant	8.6	8.2	6.9	7.3	8.3
% Immigrant Last 10 Years	1.3	1.2	1.0	1.0	1.4
% Intraprovincial Migrants*	15.9	16.7	15.4	14.7	23.1
Employment Rate	58.1	59.7	56.4	56.2	50.7
% Worked from Home	5.3	5.4	4.6	5.7	15.4
	Cowansville				
Population	12 032	12 182	12 489	13 656	15 234
Intercensal Rate of Growth	-0.2	1.2	2.5	9.3	22.0
Median Age	39.7	43.6	45.5	46.2	48.8
% 65+	15.1	17.3	19.7	22.4	28.2
% Immigrant	2.3	3.2	2.6	3.5	3.4
% Immigrant Last 10 Years	0.4	0.4	0.5	1.1	0.5
% Intraprovincial Migrants*	19.1	18.3	15.3	19.4	27.4
Employment Rate	60.5	59.6	57.8	53.6	54.1
% Worked from Home	4.3	5.0	5.2	5.5	10.7

*Based on Census Question on Residence Five Years Prior to Census
Source: Censuses of Canada, Community Profiles.

CONCLUSION

Canada and many other advanced industrial nations are experiencing surprising changes in migration patterns. The high cost of living in the largest cities, in both money and time, along with technological changes that have allowed many jobs to be done outside the traditional workplace have encouraged many big city residents to relocate. For some older residents, rising real estate prices have been a boon, allowing them to cash in their investment and move to less expensive communities. These developments have had important consequences for both the large cities that migrants are leaving and for the smaller communities where they are making their new homes.

Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver have all seen a significant outflow of their residents to other communities in their respective provinces. As our analysis showed, the exodus began well before the COVID-19 pandemic, with all three cities showing net losses as early as 2011. The pace has increased over time and the pandemic no doubt accelerated this trend. Unlike the situation in the United States, however, where a number of the largest cities have seen population decline,

Canada's three largest cities continue to grow at a healthy pace, fuelled in large part by the growing numbers of new immigrants settling within their boundaries.¹⁵ Moreover, as a large proportion of new immigrants are in the younger age groups, population aging has proceeded slowly. The median age in the three cities rose by only about one year between 2011 and 2021.

The impact of new migration trends on the core areas of the largest cities is harder to gauge. Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver are all dealing with a slowing of activity in their downtowns and elevated vacancy rates in office towers. While some of the out-migrants from the cities were likely downtown workers, their exodus probably plays a small part in the changes taking place in urban cores. Many more workers who still live in the metropolitan areas are working more from home. Yet if we continue to see broader acceptance of hybrid working along with deterioration in the quality of urban life, this may influence others to consider leaving our large cities.

That said, Canada's three largest cities remain vibrant and growing places with young and highly diverse populations. They are centres of higher education and home to many of Canada's leading employers. The years ahead will bring challenges but the evolving choices their residents are making about where to live are unlikely to threaten these cities' continued growth and prosperity.

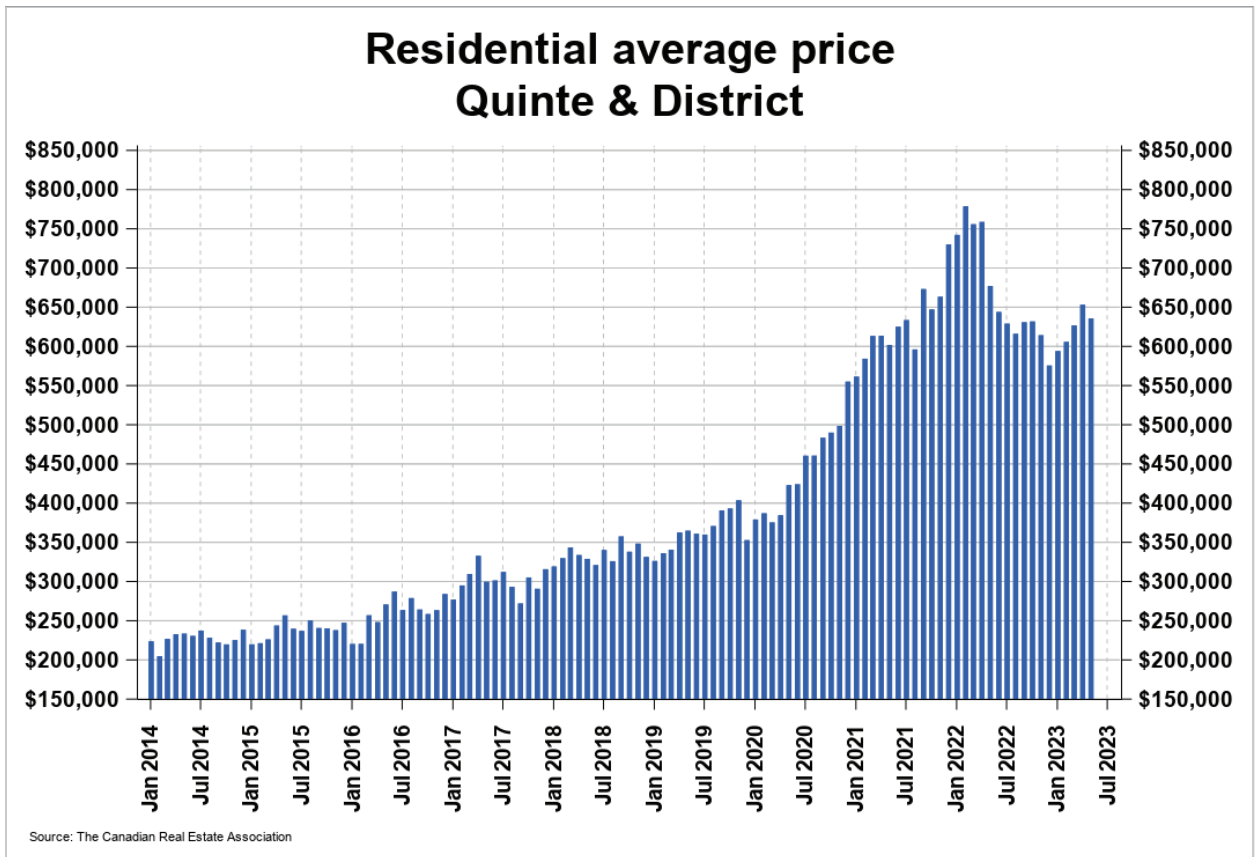
The environmental consequences of new migration patterns will be important to monitor as well. Limited time in the office and concerns about safety on public transit may encourage more workers to drive to their workplaces rather than use subways or buses. As noted above, the numbers commuting by car from localities outside the major cities are surprisingly high and most of these commuters report driving alone. Whether several days a week working from home offsets the longer commutes by car on the days people are required to be in the office needs to be assessed.

For many communities across the country, and especially small and mid-sized locations in Ontario, Quebec and British Columbia, the benefits of increased in-migration are likely to outweigh the costs. As we saw in the case of Cowansville, without the rise in intraprovincial migration the community's population would have begun to decline. Communities that experience population decline encounter challenges to their continued viability. Falling revenues make sustaining local infrastructure and supplying services more difficult. The boost that newcomers bring to smaller towns and cities, especially those who bring significant resources with them, can help stimulate the local economy. Greater demand for products and services helps local businesses and can create employment opportunities for local residents.

The integration of newcomers will also bring challenges for communities. Migrants who have lived most of their lives in major cities may bring different values and make demands on communities that long-term residents resist. But perhaps the biggest challenge will come from rising prices. Newcomers with significant assets, especially those who have sold homes in the cities for substantial sums, are likely to bid up the price of local accommodation as well as for goods and services that put long-time residents at a disadvantage. Figure 1, produced by the Canadian Real Estate Association, shows a stunning increase in the price of houses in Belleville, likely driven in large part by the arrival of older migrants from Toronto, Ottawa and Oshawa. Growth always brings challenges and demands adaptation. But the challenges of growth are always less daunting than the challenges posed by decline.

¹⁵ New York, Los Angeles and Chicago, the three largest Metropolitan Statistical Areas (roughly equivalent to a Canadian CMA) in the U.S., have seen population declines in recent years. The New York MSA lost over 400,000 people between 2020 and 2022. See: United States Census Bureau, Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas Totals: 2020-2022, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/popest/2020s-total-metro-and-micro-statistical-areas.html>.

Figure 1: Residential Average Price, Quinte and District



Source: Quinte & District Association of Realtors Inc., Canadian Real Estate Association, <https://creastats.crea.ca/board/quin>. Accessed July 28, 2023.

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About the Author

Kevin McQuillan was born and raised in Montreal. He studied at Loyola College and the University of Toronto, where he received his B.A. in 1973. He did his graduate work at Princeton University and received his Ph.D. in Sociology in 1978.

He joined the Sociology Department at the University of Western Ontario in 1977 and served as Department Chair from 1997-2002. He was a Research Associate and Director of the Population Studies Centre. In 2007, Dr. McQuillan moved to the University of Calgary as Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences. In 2010, he was appointed the first Dean of the Faculty of Arts and from 2014-2018 served as Deputy Provost. In 2018, he became Academic Director of the School of Public Policy. Following his retirement in 2022, he was appointed a Research Fellow at the School.

Kevin's major interest is in demography. His work has focused on migration, changing family structures and the effects of religion on fertility and the family.

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