

Successful Stayers

## Successful Stayers: Understanding the settlement needs of recent immigrants and refugees who decide to stay in rural Nova Scotia



A report produced for the Antigonish Guysborough Immigrant Support Program and the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre

Dr. J. Adam Perry, St. Francis Xavier University  
Diane Scott, Memorial University of Newfoundland

## Successful Stayers

### About the authors

**J. Adam Perry** is an Assistant Professor of Adult Education at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia. Dr. Perry's research agenda seeks to understand what kind of learning international migration and other forms of mobility provoke, and how this learning may influence life course aspirations and life course trajectories of individuals and communities. Recent publications include: "Frenzied synchronicities: Reworking the rhythms of international labour migration" (2020, *Applied Mobilities*), "'Escaping' managed labour migration: Worker exit as precarious migrant agency" (2020, *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*), and "The negotiation of new family formation post-migration among low-wage migrant workers: The case of Canada" (2021, *International Migration*).

For further information on the *Successful Stayers* project, contact Adam at [aperry@stfx.ca](mailto:aperry@stfx.ca).

**Diane Scott** is a Master's student in the Department of Sociology at Memorial University of Newfoundland in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador. She worked as a research assistant on this project. Her interests include gender, eco-feminism, climate justice and social movements.

May 2021

St. Francis Xavier University  
Antigonish, Nova Scotia

This output draws on research supported by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Partnership Engage Grant #892-19-0001.

**Table of Contents**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ..... 1**

**INTRODUCTION: THE *SUCCESSFUL STAYERS* PROJECT ..... 2**

**METHODS: COLLECTING DATA FOR SUCCESSFUL STAYERS..... 4**

**RESULTS ..... 6**

**1. WHY ARE IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES DECIDING TO STAY?..... 6**

1A. PERCEPTION THAT RURAL LIVING IS SAFE ..... 6

1B. PERCEPTION THAT RURAL LIVING IS MORE CONDUCTIVE TO BUILDING COMMUNITY ..... 9

**2. WHAT ARE THE SETTLEMENT NEEDS OF THIS COMMUNITY?..... 13**

2A. SETTLEMENT IS ABOUT NOT ABOUT ‘SERVICES’, IT’S ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS..... 13

2B. NEWCOMERS SUPPORTING NEWCOMERS ..... 15

2C. NEED FOR MORE ADVANCED-LEVEL LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION ..... 17

**CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS ..... 19**

**REFERENCES ..... 22**

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ..... 25**

## **Executive Summary**

The *Successful Stayers* project aimed to better understand what is working and what needs to be improved with regards to the immigrant settlement and integration process in rural North-eastern Nova Scotia in order to support the development of evidence-based services and programming for local agencies.

This report uses interview data to understand the factors that influence the successful integration of immigrants and refugees to rural Nova Scotia. In order to increase our understanding of immigrant retention in rural areas, we recruited project participants based on their decision to stay in Nova Scotia permanently. Thematic analysis reveals how participants reported two main reasons for deciding to stay in rural Nova Scotia long-term: a broad **perception that rural living is safe** and a **perception that rural living is conducive to community-building**. With regards to participants' views of the settlement experience, three themes emerged as important: **successful settlement is about building relationships, successful settlement involves established immigrants supporting recent immigrants**, and finally, participants reported **need for more advanced language instruction services in rural communities**.

The problem of attracting and retaining immigrants and refugees to rural and remote parts of Canada has recently emerged as a policy response to declining population growth outside of urban areas, with particular attention focused on immigration to the Atlantic Provinces (Atlantic Growth Advisory Group, 2018; El-Assal & Goucher, 2017; Report of the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, 2017). In addition to these policy initiatives, rural communities, including those in North-eastern Nova Scotia, have been integral to Canada's Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program (McGregor, 2017; McNally, 2020; Ray, 2016).

Given this evolving landscape, moving into the future, rural communities must develop robust processes to help facilitate immigrant settlement and which mitigate the systemic barriers that may inhibit newcomers' integration into a society with historically low levels of international in-migration.

**Introduction: The Successful Stayers project**

Funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Partnership Engage Grant (PEG), the Successful Stayers project evolved as a partnership between Dr. Adam Perry (St. Francis Xavier University) and the Antigonish Guysborough Immigrant Support Program (AGISP), a free service provided through the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre and Sexual Assault Services Association and which is funded by the Nova Scotia Office of Immigration.

The goal of the AGISP is to provide services aimed at welcoming newcomers to Antigonish and Guysborough counties and supporting their long-term social, cultural and economic integration to the region. Settlement workers at AGISP have noticed an increase of clients since the program began in 2014. This anecdotal evidence of increased immigrant and refugee settlement to the area is in keeping with current Canadian policies and initiatives that encourage newcomer settlement outside of major cities (Akbari & Haider, 2018; Bonifacio & Drolet, 2017; Yoshida & Ramos, 2013). While this increase is portrayed as a positive development by both local and national leaders (CBC News, 2016; Ray, 2016), in the past five years, AGISP staff and clients report how successful social and economic integration is a constant struggle. In response, the AGISP has been developing community-based programming aimed at sparking critical conversations related to newcomer inclusion.

The overall goal of *Successful Stayers* was to determine the factors that influence the successful social, cultural and economic integration of immigrants and refugees to rural North-eastern Nova Scotia. There is a perception that newcomers prefer to settle in major urban areas and that immigrants and refugees who initially settle in rural regions will eventually move to bigger cities. Recent data, however, suggests that most new immigrants and refugees remain in their initial destination even 10 years post arrival, regardless of whether they arrive in big cities or smaller communities (Kaida, Hou, & Stick, 2020). The project thus aimed to understand how immigrants and refugees made the decision to stay in a rural area, and how they conceptualized the rural settlement and integration process.

## Successful Stayers

The expectation was that understanding the social, cultural and economic determinants surrounding immigrants' and refugees' decisions to stay in the area permanently could inform the development of effective rural settlement and integration services.

**Methods: Collecting data for Successful Stayers**

Data collection for the *Successful Stayers* project took place between November 2019 and February 2020. We chose two sites: Antigonish (Antigonish County) and New Glasgow (Pictou County) (Figure 1).

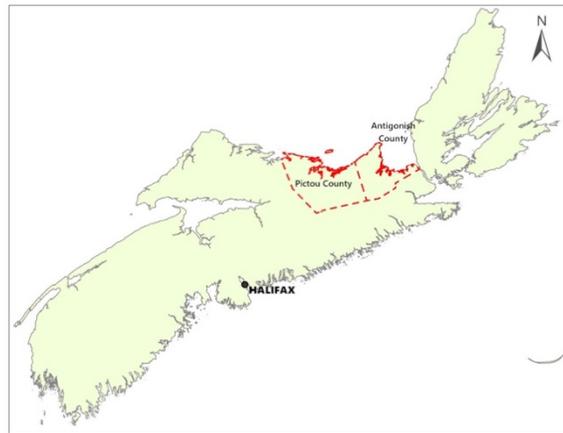


Figure 1 Antigonish and Pictou Counties

We conducted recruitment in Antigonish in partnership with the AGISP and in partnership with YREACH in New Glasgow. We invited immigrants and refugees who had decided to stay in the region permanently to participate in an interview. In total, we conducted interviews with 14 participants. Demographic characteristics are detailed in Figure 2 and Figure 3.

Gender	Age	Country of Origin
Female = 8	30-39 = 5	Syria = 3
Male = 6	40-49 = 4	Brazil = 2
	50-59 = 2	Russia = 2
	60-69 = 1	South Korea = 2
	70-79 = 1	DRC = 1
	80-89 = 1	Honduras = 1
		India = 1
		Indonesia = 1
		Thailand = 1

Figure 2: Select demographics for research participants

## Successful Stayers

Program of Entry
Privately-sponsored refugee = 4
Sponsored spouse or partner = 4
Skilled worker and skilled trades, spouse and dependent = 2
Sponsored parent or grandparent = 1
Business programs, principal applicant = 1
Skilled worker and skilled trades, principal applicant = 1
NS PNP, principal applicant = 1

Figure 3: Select demographics for research participants

The principal investigator, Dr. Adam Perry, conducted all the interviews with the support of the research assistant, Diane Scott. Each participant took part in one interview that focused on developing a contextual understanding of each interviewee's story of moving to the region, and of their decision to stay in the region permanently. Each interview began with the participant being invited to create a 'life map' (Worth, 2011), a participatory qualitative research method that involved interviewees taking 20 minutes at the beginning of the interview to create a visual diagram of their migration story on flip chart paper (e.g. Figure 4). The life maps offered a means of graphically organizing the semi-structured interviews that followed.

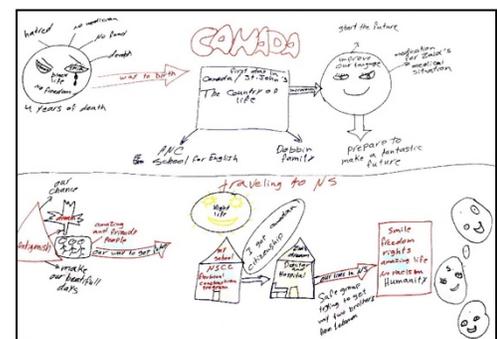


Figure 4: Life Map example

Interviews were conducted in Antigonish and New Glasgow prior to the implementation of COVID-19 restrictions.

The project received Research Ethics Board approval from St. Francis Xavier University. We replaced all participant names with pseudonyms for this report.

## Results

### 1. Why are immigrants and refugees deciding to stay in North-eastern Nova Scotia?

There are various reasons why participants initially arrived in North-eastern Nova Scotia, for example: following a spouse, getting a job, or being sponsored by a local refugee sponsorship group, such as Syria-Antigonish Families Embrace (SAFE) or Canadians Accepting Refugees Everywhere (CARE). Despite these differences among research participants' stories of arrival, there emerged two themes related to the decision to stay permanently that resonated across the sample: **the perception that rural living is safe** and **the perception that rural living is conducive to building community**.

#### *1a. Perception that Rural Living is Safe*



Across the sample, there was a general perception that living in a rural area was safer than living in the city. The majority of participants moved to the region from big cities (i.e. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Seoul, South Korea), and had never lived in a rural community before arriving in Nova Scotia. Several participants had the idea that they would

## Successful Stayers

eventually move to a bigger city, but after living in the area for a while, felt that they wanted to stay. For many, a general sense of security contributed to this decision. This was particularly the case for participants who were raising young families, as they felt that they did not have to worry as much about their children's safety. The following quotes capture this sentiment.

*Last year I rent car and go with my friend and go to Toronto. I see... big city. But I not like big city because I am scared too much. Here very safe and big city I think problem... so I no like that. Maybe in the city future problem for my children. Here I think safe.*

YUSUF

*"I CAN WALK THE STREETS WHENEVER I WANT. DOESN'T MATTER THE TIME. I DON'T HAVE TO LOOK OVER MY SHOULDER. YOU DON'T LIVE WITH STRESS. MY BOY, THE YOUNGEST ONE, CAN RIDE THE SCHOOL BUS. I DON'T HAVE TO TAKE HIM TO SCHOOL MYSELF BECAUSE IT'S NOT SAFE."*

Carlos

*Interviewer: So, you never wanted to move to the city?*

*Aksana: That's a good question. So, when I first came, I saw the lights of the big city. So, Halifax, I said: 'Oh, some day we will live there.' But nope, as soon as the kids were born, it's safe. They walk and I'm not worrying about them. You can do so many things. Everything is here.*

For many participants, the perception of safety was the most important reason for deciding to stay in rural Nova Scotia permanently. On this point, while immigrants and refugees agreed, the reasons behind this sentiment were slightly different for each group. All immigrant participants interviewed came from big cities. While some participants expressed how they missed particular aspects of living in a big city (for example having access to public transportation), they each expressed how they were less anxious and not as worried about dangers that they perceived to be associated with urban living (petty crime, drugs, etc.). For the privately-sponsored refugees that we interviewed, feeling safe in a new home had a particularly acute resonance, as they were comparing their current lives to their previous lives in a refugee camp or prior to that in a region experiencing a civil war. In the words of Omar:

## Successful Stayers

*"We try too many ways to apply to go to Canada or any other countries, just we wanted to finish that life and start a new life with good people, with good countries and country that can give us our rights. At least treat us like humanity. We didn't want to get any money, just for life. We want only safety... I sometimes cry for just when we remember our life in Lebanon and Syria and how was our life there and how became our lives here. It's very big different. Here we found everything and more."*

OMAR

**1b. Perception that Rural Living is more Conducive to Building Community**



The other most prominent theme that arose with regards to participants' decisions to stay in the region permanently is their perception that rural Nova Scotia is friendly and that it is easier to build a social network in a rural area than it would be in the city. Participants gave many examples of how they were initially surprised at how easy it was to meet people and make connections. For example, Ji-Hoon (from South Korea) and Sarah

(from Indonesia) each moved to North-eastern Nova Scotia from major cities in Canada. As an aspiring chef and farmer, for Ji-Hoon, living in the city meant he was stuck working in low-end and precarious service sector jobs. When he moved to rural Nova Scotia, he was able to join a community of like-minded individuals who supported him in achieving his career goals.

*It was better to settle down in Antigonish because I met a lot of nice people and I pushed myself to get into the community.*

*Ji-Hoon*

For her part, Sarah compared her life in Pictou County to her previous life in Toronto. When her husband first got a job in Nova Scotia she did not want to move out of the big city, but after being here for a while she changed her mind. She talked about how in Toronto she felt isolated in a high-rise apartment building, but in Pictou County she felt more connected to her neighbours. In Toronto she had only one friend, who was also from Indonesia. In Nova Scotia, she was able to join a women's group with fellow newcomers from different countries. Called the 'Monday Morning Tea', they meet weekly

## Successful Stayers

to socialize. She talked about how much easier it was to meet new friends in a small town.

*Sarah discussing recruiting new friends to the Monday Morning Tea:*

*Sarah: Sometimes we meet in the Superstore, with the cashier. We talk with them: "Hi you are new here, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah". Yes.*

*Interviewer: And then what happens?*

*Sarah: And they, we keep in touch, yeah.*

*Interviewer: With just people that you meet on the --?*

*Sarah: Sometime, yeah.*

*Interviewer: Just randomly?*

*Sarah: Randomly.*

*Interviewer: Okay.*

*Sarah: And because sometimes, this is a small city, right.*

*Interviewer: Yes.*

*Sarah: Because when we met in the Superstore coincidentally, they knew our friends. Like this time, I'm planning to have sort of like dinner for the, all my friends from the Philippines. So, we could arrange for that.*

Sarah also discussed her relationship with her neighbours:

*Sarah: One day three years ago, when we have a very incredibly snow, because in Toronto, the snow, it's not as much as here, right. So, my boys, both of my boys and me, three of us, just do the shovel. And we have a long driveway. Couldn't imagine. What a surprise, my neighbors, sometime he has so much snow they have very big snow blower. After finish*

## Successful Stayers

*there, they just come to us to help. That's surprising, yes.*

*Interviewer: Why is that surprising?*

*Sarah: I don't think in Toronto, nobody cares about you, right. Yes, nobody cares. You don't even know who lives next to you.*

*Interviewer: Do you do things to help your neighbors too?*

*Sarah: Yes.*

*Interviewer: Like what?*

*Sarah: Sometime I cook something, give it to them. They try, yeah. When their family visit them, I make, usually make something, introduce the Asian food to them.*

Sophia and Miguel, a married couple originally from Brazil, similarly talked about how they were surprised at how easy it was to meet people:

MIGUEL: YEAH AND WE'RE ONLY FIVE MONTHS HERE. TODAY I HAVE A SOCCER TEAM.

SOPHIA: HE IS GOING TO START PLAYING SOCCER WITH SOME GUYS THAT HE JUST MET.

MIGUEL: YEAH, SOME GUYS WHO ARE FROM HERE.

INTERVIEWER: HOW DID YOU MEET THEM?

MIGUEL: AT THE PUB. FRIDAY AND THE GUY INVITED ME. HE HEARD 'BRAZIL', "OH DO YOU LIKE SOCCER? YOU WANT TO PLAY WITH US?" I THOUGHT OKAY, I'M NOT A GOOD PLAYER BUT I CAN.

INTERVIEWER: YOU'RE PROBABLY BETTER THAN THEY

## Successful Stayers

ARE.

SOPHIA: WELL THEY JUST ASSUME THAT IF YOU'RE BRAZILIAN, YOU KNOW HOW TO PLAY SOCCER, WHICH IS NOT TRUE, BUT --

MIGUEL: BUT I'LL GO.

Overall, the themes of security and community building were the most prominent themes that contributed to participants' decisions to stay in the region permanently. In what follows we discuss their perceptions of settlement needs.

## 2. What are the Settlement Needs of this Community?

Reading through the interviews, it became clear that there were three themes that emerged in relation to how participants talked about settlement. The first and most important theme related to this topic is how participants did not think about settlement in terms of 'services', but rather as 'relationships'. Second, and relatedly, participants did not just see themselves as recipients of, but also as *providers of*, settlement support. Finally, participants, particularly those located in Antigonish County, expressed the need to develop more advanced language instruction services.

### 2a. Settlement is about not about 'Services', it's about Relationships

The first theme in this section is a bit abstract. We decided not to include specific quotes from participants in this section, as this theme is not so much related to *what* interviewees said, but more related to *how* they said it, and in some instances, to what they *didn't* say. In short, we make the case that immigrants and refugees to the region don't think about organizational settlement supports in terms of 'services', but rather in terms of 'relationships'.



When we first conceived of the interview guide we included a section where we planned to discuss particular settlement services in detail. This idea was developed in collaboration with AGISP. The notion was to share a settlement service chart with interviewees and have them discuss which services they received from AGISP, and their experience of each (e.g. employment counselling, Unity in Diversity Walk,

accompaniment to services, information sessions, etc.).

## Successful Stayers

What we discovered in the first couple of interviews was that participants had trouble discussing the settlement experience in terms of discrete 'services'. Instead, participants focused on the people involved and the relationships developed when accessing organizational supports. Interviewees perceived the settlement experience not so much as a process of accessing services, but rather as one of building long-lasting relationships with settlement providers and other volunteers, such as those involved with refugee sponsorship groups. Importantly, interviewees experienced these relationships as much more emotionally meaningful than just your average client-provider interactions.

For example, when we asked one participant (Yusuf) about his experience with settlement services in Antigonish, his first reaction was to interrupt the interview and share with us a socio-cultural experience that he felt represented his personal settlement experience. He opened his phone and showed us pictures of people at a local event enjoying pistachio cookies that he had made especially for this occasion. When we probed him to talk about his experience with specific services, he told us about his relationship with a particular settlement worker and with members of his sponsorship group, but did not elaborate on any specific supports he may have received. In short, the relationships were more important than the services received.

Many participants who had had interactions with settlement services, broadly defined (e.g. services supported by AGISP, YREACH for language instruction, and supports provided by sponsorship groups) shared this sentiment. New Glasgow participants emphatically discussed the importance of the relationship with their English language instructors, who would regularly go out of their way to support newcomer students. For example, one participant (Angelica) talked about how a teacher would offer rides to the grocery store or to English classes to students if they didn't have access to a private vehicle. More than the delivery of any specific services, for interviewees, these relationships exemplified the settlement experience.

## 2b. Newcomers Supporting Newcomers

THE PEOPLE, THEY ALREADY ASK FOR SO MANY THINGS AND IF ANYONE HERE NEED ANY HELP FROM ME AND FROM US FOR ANYTHING, WE WILL BE READY TO DO ANYTHING FOR THOSE PEOPLE.

OMAR

WHEN I COME TO ANTIGONISH I VERY SHY TO SPEAK ENGLISH BUT I LOVE TO HELP. SOMEONE HERE COME TO A NEW FAMILY FROM SYRIA. THEY CAN'T SPEAK ENGLISH. WHEN THEY HAVE AN APPOINTMENT, SOMEONE CALLED ME: "ARE YOU SURE TO GO WITH HIM TO HELP?" I SAID, "YES. I KNOW I'M NOT GOOD TO SPEAK ENGLISH BUT YES I LOVE TO HELP." YES, I GO TO HELP. NO PROBLEM.

HAFSA

Based on the findings, we make the case that more established immigrants and refugees should be thought of as important resources to be incorporated into the settlement and integration plan for new arrivals. One main commonality among all interviewees who had been in the region for a while (more than 1 year) was that most were actively involved in supporting immigrants and refugees who came to the region after them. In some instances, interviewees identified gaps in settlement services (e.g. driver's education supports), and took it upon themselves to fill these perceived gaps.



Many participants discussed how once they are established they want to give back to the community, and that they can draw from their own settlement experience to help fellow newcomers. A good example is Nisha, who has been living in the region for many years. When she initially arrived in Antigonish, there were no established support programs in place for immigrants to the region, and she was left to figure things out on her own. In response to the support gap that she experienced on arrival, she has made it her mission to support

## Successful Stayers

newcomers to the area. She started a Facebook group for South Asian newcomers in an effort to combat the isolation that she felt when she first came here. She said:

*My idea of creating this Facebook was look we are all in a strange country, we all need a support system, today I might need it and you tomorrow you might need it. So, if we there for each other, if there's unity in us it's important. So anytime I found out anyone is a newcomer I say "Please welcome this person".*  
*Anytime I find out anything is happening I post it. Now when these six – I have met some of these six because they are very distinguished in the shopping mall, in the Walmart or in Superstore. I stop them and I'll say "Beta", beta means son. "Where are you from?" And I'll talk to them in Punjabi because I'm fluent in four languages, English, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu.*

NISHA

The desire to support new arrivals was not limited to those participants who had been here for many years, but was shared across the sample. For example, Angelica discussed how once she got her driver's license she helped fellow language learners by driving them to class or other errands:

*She just move here and her family did not have a car... I just offer her if she want to go to grocery shopping, or want to stop somewhere, or she want to come to the class if I am available I can pick her up. I appreciate because my teacher, she used to offer me a drive before when I went to her class. And so, I want to give back.*  
Angelica

Another participant (Yusuf) discussed arranging airport pick-ups for newly arrived sponsored refugees, and going to Halifax to buy ethnically appropriate food for fellow Syrians new to the area:

*A new family here I help like go for grocery. I buy break like Lebanon bread in Halifax. Maybe I go for Halifax and they need some mean, halal lamb, and chicken because very expensive in Sobey's. In Walmart in Halifax it's half price.*

Yusuf

### ***2c. Need for More Advanced-level Language Instruction***

English language instruction is one of the most important aspects of immigrant and refugee settlement. The participants for this project reported how a lack of resources in this area is detrimental to their social and economic integration. While all participants reported that they were satisfied with the currently available beginner-level instruction, most reported a lack in the area of more advanced language training. This was particularly the case for participants in Antigonish County.



Not investing in advanced language instruction resources means that once language learners reach a basic level of language literacy, they have limited opportunities for continuing education. Given how intermediate to advanced language skills are necessary components of the settlement process, this perceived oversight may unintentionally increase the likelihood of secondary migration out of the region.

For example, one interviewee in Antigonish (Hafsa) was planning on applying to the Cosmetology program at the Nova Scotia Community College, but felt limited in her capacity because this required completing Canadian Language Benchmark level 4. She felt that that achieving this level would not be possible given the current language instruction opportunities available in Antigonish. Hafsa and Omar, who did their

## Successful Stayers

interviews together, lived in a bigger Canadian city before coming to Antigonish County, and they compared these two experiences with language instruction thus:

*Hafsa: There I have one teacher and every month I have four tests about reading, speaking and writing. When I got 250 hours, I get a certificate for a level and move to another level. But here, nothing. Just I go and writing, speaking and different levels all at once.*

*Omar: Over there, that was five hours a day but here only one hour or two hours maximum. That is not enough to get good English.*

For his part, Ji-Hoon decided to stop attending classes in Antigonish because he felt that the level of the classes was too basic. He said:

*IF THE LEVELLING [OF THE STUDENTS] IS PRETTY MUCH SIMILAR WITHIN THE CLASS THAT IS GOOD BUT IF AT A DIFFERENT LEVEL OF ENGLISH SKILL AND THEN THEY FOCUS ON THE BOTTOM PERSON.*

*JI-HOON.*

Generally speaking, the interviewees in New Glasgow did not express the same complaints. Likely, this is due to the fact that New Glasgow is a bigger town and it is easier to allocate more resources in that area as there are more students. Moving forward, the challenge will be to find a way to support intermediate and advanced level language learners in smaller rural communities, such as Antigonish.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Settlement is considered a process that newcomers experience upon arrival to a new country that comprises of the following three stages: initial adjustment to a new environment, learning to adapt to a new situation, and finally integration, which involves becoming an active participant in social, economic and political life (Sheilds, Drolet, & Valenzuela, 2016). Settlement services are meant to help facilitate this process and to mitigate the systemic barriers that may inhibit newcomers' integration to the host society. Research shows that access to adequate settlement services is critical to the successful integration process (George, 2002) and that a community-based, client-centred approach to newcomer integration is an essential component of effective settlement work (Rast & Ghorashi, 2018; Nash, 2005).

Since rural immigration in Canada has been largely associated with temporary foreign labour migration, historically there have been very few, if any, settlement service supports available for rural newcomers (Preibisch, 2007). While there is increasing scholarship that examines the challenges of newcomer settlement in small second-tier cities (Bonifacio & Drolet, 2017), there remains a need for researchers and practitioners to address the unique challenges associated with developing effective settlement services in rural areas marked by decades of local out-migration and economic decline. This project has aimed to make a small contribution to this area of scholarship and practice.

Grounded in interviews with immigrants and refugees who decided to stay permanently in rural North-eastern Nova Scotia, the findings suggest that rural regions are desirable places for newcomers to settle long-term. Based on this exploratory study, the two main reasons why interviewees decided to stay in the region permanently are: **the perception that rural regions are safer than urban areas** and **the perception that rural areas are more conducive to building community**. That being said, for the past number of years federal and provincial policy-makers have been developing settlement pathways for immigrants to come to Atlantic Canada as a way to mitigate problems related to decades of out-migration. At the same time, rural parts of the region have played an important role in Canada's Private Sponsorship Refugee Program. If these trends continue, then

## Successful Stayers

robust investments in rural settlement services and language instruction for newcomers will remain crucial.

With regard to the settlement process, this project reports three main findings.

First, for participants, **successful settlement is about building relationships**. Interviewees did not think about the settlement process in terms of accessing services, but rather in terms of building relationships.

- ▶ Recommendation: That in addition to established settlement services (trauma counselling, accompaniment services), rural settlement agencies continue to offer social and cultural programming for immigrants and refugees. Agencies could also continue to partner with local organizations as a way to broaden newcomers' access to established social and cultural activities. These could include for example the Highland Curling Club in St. Andrews (Antigonish County), Keppoch Mountain, or the Antigonish County 4-H Club.

Second, interviewees talked about how once they became more established, they felt the need to support newcomers who came after them. We therefore suggest that **successful settlement involves established newcomers supporting recent newcomers**.

- ▶ Recommendation: For settlement agencies to remain in touch with established immigrants and refugees and to develop organizational pathways for these individuals to become important members of the settlement and integration community, for example as volunteer settlement support workers. Doing so will strengthen the community-based approach to settlement, an approach that research has shown to be a key component of successful long-term integration.

Third, interviewees highlighted how **there is a need to support intermediate and advanced-level language instruction services**, particularly in smaller rural communities, such as Antigonish. This finding is in itself a recommendation, and one that comes directly from research participants. Proficiency in English is crucial for the long-term social and economic well-being of newcomers to the region. If the federal and provincial

## Successful Stayers

governments continue on the pathway to recruit immigrants and refugees to rural parts of the province, the authors consider this recommendation to be a matter of some considerable urgency.

- ▶ Recommendation: Establish more advanced level English-language instruction, particularly in Antigonish County.
  
- ▶ Recommendation: That settlement agencies develop workshops for English speakers in the region focused on improving listening skills in order to increase locals' understanding of accents which are different from their own, with a particular focus on employers (MacDonald, 2020).

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**Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to thank the interviewees for their participation in *Successful Stayers*. Without their perspectives, this project would not have gotten off the ground.

The authors would also like to thank Jubanti Toppo from the Antigonish Guysborough Immigrant Support Program and Lilly Selveraj from YREACH New Glasgow for their support with recruitment.

The authors would also like to thank Rachel Caroline Darrah for creating the corresponding images.



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