Choosing to Stay: Understanding Immigrant Retention in Four Non-metropolitan Counties in Southern Ontario

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Abstract

Every year, Ontario attracts more international migrants than any other province in Canada. The majority of these immigrants settle in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Policymakers at the federal, provincial, and municipal levels have identified a need to reduce the concentration of immigrants and to spread the benefits of immigration more evenly across the province. Despite policy and community interventions, most immigrants continue to move to larger centres. Previous academic research has mostly focused on the challenges smaller cities face in trying to attract and retain immigrants, suggesting that smaller cities lack what larger cities have to offer. We have taken another approach and instead considered what makes some immigrants choose to stay in non-metropolitan areas. Focusing on two sets of adjoining counties in Southern Ontario (Grey & Bruce counties and Lanark & Renfrew counties), we adopted a qualitative case study approach to understand what has led some immigrants to live in one of these regional areas for 3 years or more. The findings reveal that living outside of a metropolitan area comes with many benefits including relative affordability and easy access to nature. Moreover, study participants were inclined to stay in the counties under study because they could meet their needs there, at least for the time being. Interestingly, only some of the study participants viewed social attachments as a reason to stay. These were mostly individuals who had lived in one of the counties for a significant amount of time.

Keywords Immigration to smaller centres · Immigration to non-metropolitan areas · Immigration to small- and mid-sized cities · Immigrant attraction and retention · Place-based approaches to immigration · Immigration to Ontario

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Introduction

Over the last few decades, smaller communities across the country have come to see international migration as increasingly beneficial to offset the negative consequences of population ageing and support local economic development. As a result, federal and provincial government programs as well as community initiatives have been designed and implemented to make smaller communities more appealing and welcoming to international migrants.

Given that immigration has, historically, been associated with cities and continues to be a predominantly urban phenomenon, there are limited models for researchers to understand immigration to non-metropolitan areas. Previous research has identified a number of factors that may contribute to both the attraction and the retention of international migrants, including the availability of employment opportunities, the presence of amenities, personalized settlement services, and social relationships with local community members or a diasporic community (Derwing & Khran, 2008; Guo, 2013; Chadwick & Collins, 2015; Brown, 2017). These are generally easier to provide in urban areas, and for this reason, they are often seen as something smaller communities lack; in short, non-metropolitan areas are encouraged to emulate their metropolitan counterparts.

While we do not deny that the characteristics of larger cities may make them more attractive to some international migrants than smaller centres, our starting point for this research is an awareness that some immigrants lead fulfilling lives in smaller centres and actively choose to stay there. Hence, our research turns the usual question—why do non-metropolitan areas struggle to retain immigrants—on its head and instead considers why immigrants may choose to *stay* in these areas.

The paper begins with a review of recent literature addressing the regionalization of immigration in Canada and immigrant retention in smaller cities. This is followed by a discussion on the value of studying why immigrants stay in smaller communities. We then turn our attention to what adopting a place-based approach can add to understanding immigrant retention. Next, we provide an overview of the methodology used for the current study and introduce the two case studies. We then share the key findings of the research before concluding the paper.

Regionalization of Migration Across Canada

In Canada, regionalization policies have been introduced to encourage the dispersal of immigrants throughout Canada (Brochu & Abu-Ayyash, 2006; Hyndman et al., 2006). Policies of this kind were first introduced in the late 1990s. At that time, immigrant populations were highly concentrated in metropolitan centres, and large cities continued to experience more economic development and increasing political power (Tossutti & Esses, 2012). Smaller cities began to see immigration as a means to boost their local economies and secure more government funding for services and infrastructure. Some of these cities also faced a shortage of labour and declining population numbers (Valade, 2017). To address this imbalance and increase the number of immigrants moving to certain regions or municipalities, government

programs like the Provincial Nominee program, and later the Atlantic Immigration Pilot and the Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot, were implemented. This made it possible for provinces, territories, and in some cases municipalities to play a bigger role in selecting their own immigrant candidates.

These policies have led to some success. In particular, mid-sized or second-tier Canadian cities such as Hamilton and Ottawa have been able to attract growing numbers of immigrants and refugees (Walton-Roberts et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2015). That being said, even now, Canada's three largest cities, Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver, continue to attract the most international migrants in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2017d, 2017e, 2017f). In contrast, many cities, especially those which are small and in more remote locations, struggle to attract immigrants despite their eagerness to do so.

Academic studies have been carried out to understand what makes specific cities attractive to immigrants and refugees, as well as how they act on these preferences when moving to Canada and within Canada (Esses & Carter, 2019). Hyndman et al. (2006) aimed to identify which medium-sized cities outside Greater Vancouver attracted the most immigrants. The authors found that immigrants were more likely to move to cities where they had family, friends, or an immigrant community with which they identified. Similarly, using the Longitudinal Immigration Database, Kaida et al. (2020) examined whether some immigrant groups were more likely to leave their initial destinations than others. They found that refugees were more likely to participate in secondary migration than economic immigrants and hypothesized that it may be because refugees are given less choice of where to settle and their first destination in Canada is often a smaller city. According to the authors, approximately half of resettled government-assisted and privately sponsored refugees had landed in small- or medium-sized metropolitan areas.

These studies are often primarily based on the premise that immigrants and refugees will *leave* smaller cities and that most would prefer to live in a large city (McDonald & Worswick, 2012). There is a dearth in research on why newcomers choose to be immobile or the "…moments in which [their] further movement is renegotiated, resisted, or restrained" (Schewel, 2019, p.330). While some researchers have found that some immigrants do decide to stay in smaller communities (Khan & Labute, 2015), there is little analysis on why they do so and how their decisions are impacted by their experiences in those places over time.

Focusing on Why Immigrants Stay

It is perhaps due to an inherent mobility bias in migration research that few researchers (Nguyen, 2020) have considered why immigrants may choose to stay in a place of destination for an extended period. As Nguyen (2020) points out, in the Canadian context, there has been media coverage highlighting how some communities have been very successful at retaining immigrants over time; however, such reporting tends to foreground what communities have to offer immigrants, rather than how immigrants themselves negotiate the migration decision-making process and, more specifically, the reasons they may choose to live in a smaller community.

There have been some studies on immobility with regard to those who have chosen to stay in their country or region of origin, and these provide useful insights. Schewel (2019), for example, considered the motivations of Senegalese who chose to stay in Senegal, despite so many of their peers choosing to move out. Laoire (2000) similarly considered why some youths in Ireland choose to stay in the countryside, rather than move to a larger centre. These studies emphasize the need for understanding the nuances and complexity behind migration decision-making. Often these studies demonstrate the importance of non-economic factors in influencing people's decisions to stay and rather the priority they may put on social connections, a sense of familiarity, and the importance of life course factors in influencing migration trajectories over time. These insights go beyond helping us to understand why individuals may choose never to move in the first place; they can also help us to understand why immigrants may choose to stay in a place of destination.

Adopting a Place-Based Approach

The interplay of factors influencing immigrant retention is, we believe, best understood by adopting a place-based approach that gives due attention to context (Phillimore, 2020). As argued by Platts-Fowler and Robinson (2015), efforts to understand immigrant integration have tended to focus on specific variables such as employment, services, and housing, without looking at how these variables intersect in specific places to influence integration outcomes and immigrant experiences. In recent years, however, there has been a growing acknowledgement of the role of place (Kärrholm et al., 2022). Researchers have considered how the geographic, demographic, socio-economic, and institutional characteristics of places may work together to influence immigrant experiences in specific localities (Philips & Robinson, 2015; Platts-Fowler & Robinson, 2015). As George et al. (2017) have suggested, it is important to adopt a place-based lens because immigrants' social inclusion is not only facilitated by settlement service provisions but also by the cultural and social dynamics of a place. In understanding why immigrants may choose to stay in a place, a consideration of the uniqueness of a place, or the similarities across different places, is therefore essential.

In addition to looking at how different places are constituted, we think that it is important to view place relationally. A relational approach considers a place's relationship to other places; places may be seen as belonging to spatial networks as well as spatial hierarchies, and this may impact how people experience places, spend time in them, and move between them. Non-metropolitan centres have an important role to play in linking places. As Bell and Jayne (2009: 691) argue, small cities are "important nodes in the networks between places of different scales, and they are seen to mediate between the rural and the urban, the centre and the suburb, as well as between the local and the global." In considering why immigrants choose to stay in smaller centres, we therefore see great value in paying particular attention to the relative location of the communities under study, as well as their relationships to other small and large centres. This deeper level of engagement with concepts of space and place is seldom adopted in the literature on immigrant integration and

retention, but we believe it holds the potential to lead to new insights on how immigrants go about settling into a place and why they may or may not choose to stay.

Immigrants' decisions to stay are not based only on what communities can offer them in concrete terms by way of housing, work opportunities, and services, but also how they *feel* about these places over time. For this reason, the literature on immigrants' place-based attachment is also relevant to studies of retention (Albers et al., 2021). This literature considers what inspires people to identify with a place and consider it home (Le Tourneau, 2022). Some studies in this area focus on immigrants' social relationships (Glorius et al., 2020). The connections that immigrants are able to develop in a place over time may significantly impact their attachment to a place and also their desire to stay in or move away from that place. Other studies have found that having one's needs met in a place is a central precursor to identifying with it (van Liempt & Miellet, 2021), which may impact their desire to stay over the longer term. Carling and Schewel (2018) argue that the value of living in a specific place depends on both the characteristics of that place and individuals' needs, preferences, and longer-term aspirations. More research is therefore needed to understand how the characteristics of specific communities intersect with immigrants' more subjective experiences and imaginaries, and how this impacts immigrant retention.

Methodology

This paper adopts a comparative, case study approach to identifying the place-based factors influencing immigrants' attraction and retention over time. As Creswell (2007) notes, a case study approach uses a variety of data to gain an in-depth understanding of a specific case. It allows researchers to draw out the complexity of a specific phenomenon and to understand it deeply using multiple data sources (Schoch, 2019). A case study approach was appropriate for this study given its focus on studying a phenomenon (immigrant retention) in a specific context (selected counties). Our goal was not to generalize all smaller communities, but rather to understand why immigrants might choose to stay in the specific counties under study. We share the view of Tsang (2014) who postulates that a qualitative case study approach may lead to the identification of underlying mechanisms of a phenomenon, the "how" and "whys", as well as the "whats". Moreover, as Tsang points out, when two similar case studies are undertaken (as we have done for this research project), it is possible to distinguish the idiosyncrasies of a case from observable trends across the two cases. This is useful for testing theoretical ideas and generating new insights which can then be further developed later when applied to other cases.

For the purposes of this research, each case was defined as a set of two adjoined counties in Southern Ontario: Grey and Bruce (GB) counties and Lanark and Renfrew (LR) counties. We approached the study using adjoined county units because the Local Immigration Partnerships (LIPs) in these regions are organized in such a way that they oversee two neighbouring counties rather than one, and most information on immigration as well as efforts to support immigrants in these regions is organized accordingly.

In recent years, it has become increasingly common to study immigration at the sub-national level. Most research (Gibson et al., 2016, Ma et al., 2016), however, focuses on specific cities rather than broader geographical units such as counties. We thought that considering the county level may contribute a new perspective to understanding the importance of place in influencing immigrant attraction and retention. Moreover, in recognizing that there is no "one-size-fits-all" approach to solving the problem of immigrant attraction and retention in small and mid-sized cities, we thought it would be valuable to adopt a comparative lens. This would allow us to consider how similarities and differences between the two regional case studies may impact immigrants' experiences and decisions to stay where they currently live.

We chose to focus on GB and LR specifically because they have much in common, making it possible for us to verify the validity of our findings as noted above. The combined population of Grey (93,830) and Bruce Counties (68,147) is 160,321, while the combined population of Lanark (68,698) and Renfrew (102,394) is 171,092. The populations of the various towns in each of the four counties ranged from a couple hundred to no more than 21,000 people. Both GB and LR are proximate to larger cities. Moreover, while neither GB nor LR have traditionally received large numbers of immigrants, both are eager to recruit more immigrants to address their challenges with an out-migration of youth, a decline in birth rates and an ageing population. Both regions are presently making efforts to promote diversity and ensure that immigrants feel welcomed and well-supported when they arrive.

As we developed our research plan, we partnered with Lanark and Renfrew Local Immigration Partnership and Welcoming Communities Grey and Bruce. These organizations provided input into the research design and helped us to promote the study to local communities via word of mouth and email. This was essential for the successful recruitment of study participants.

Between 2021 and 2022, we conducted focus groups with immigrants who had lived in one of the regions (GB or LR) for at least 3 years. In total, we organized two semi-structured focus groups in LR and three in GB. We chose to conduct focus groups because they are a highly effective and time-efficient mode of data collection. More importantly, however, by doing focus groups, we were able to carry out research in a group setting, which allowed the research participants to interact and build on one another's contributions. The synergy generated by the focus groups allowed us to access information that may not have come to the fore by way of other methods, such as individual interviews (Abrams & Gaiser, 2017; Wilson, 2012).

The focus groups were held virtually, as the research was carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic. To participate in the study, individuals had to have access to the internet and a computer and had to know how to access Zoom. Participation in the focus groups also came with certain risks. The group setting meant that participants were disclosing information in front of other participants (Sim & Waterfield, 2019) and had to trust these participants to keep their information private. Furthermore, there was some risk that participants would be identified by the other participants, especially if video was used. To mitigate these risks, we sought the advice of our institution's research ethics board, which assessed and approved our research plan. We encouraged participants to login to the Zoom meeting using a pseudonym and gave them the option of keeping their screens turned off. They were

Table 1 Demographics of participants (15 participants in total*)

Country of arrival	China (3), Finland (1), Greece (1), Hong Kong (1), India (2), Indonesia (1), Pakistan (1), Scotland (1), Singapore (1), Trinidad and Tobago (1), Turkey (1)
Age	30 to 39 (6), 40 to 49 (3), 50 to 59 (4)
Period of arrival	1960–1969 (1), 1990–1999 (2), 2000–2009 (2), 2010–2018 (8)
Education	Graduate degree (6), associate degree (2), some college but no degree (3), bachelor's degree (2)
Employment	I have a job and am working 1–39 h per week (8); I have a job and am working 40 h or more per week (2); prefer not to say (1); I do not have a job and am not looking for work (1)
Employment sector	Business and financial (3); community and social service occupations (3); life, physical, and social science (1), education, training, and library (3)

*1 participant did not fill out the demographic information survey from Grey and Bruce counties, and 1 participant did not respond to all the questions

also encouraged to skip any questions that made them feel uncomfortable and were told that they could leave the meeting at any time.

Some participants arrived directly at LR or GB when they first came to Canada, while others moved to the area after living in another Canadian city. Due to the interest of these communities to attract and retain a wide range of newcomers, we did not limit the participation of individuals based on their immigration category and instead tried to identify and recruit a diverse cross-section of participants. Convenience sampling allowed us to recruit participants that were willing to share their experiences of living in the counties under study. This was important given the challenges of finding participants who met the study criteria in the small sample population and through virtual means during the pandemic (Robinson, 2014). Nonetheless, we recognize that convenience sampling is not an effective way to capture the perspectives of the entire immigrant population in the case study regions.

Participants in the focus groups were between 30 and 60 years old (Table 1). Most of the participants arrived in Canada between 2010 and 2018, with a few arriving between 2000–2009 and 1990–1999 and one participant arriving between 1960 and 1969. Participants came from a diverse set of countries, including China, Indonesia, Pakistan, India, Singapore, Trinidad and Tobago, Finland, Scotland, Greece, and Turkey. The majority identified as women and had postsecondary education. Most of the participants were employed and worked up to 40 h per week.

In addition to the focus groups, we carried out 14 key informant interviews across the two regions. The purpose of this was to collect more contextual information on the regions under study, information that may not be available in reports and documents. Eight individuals were from GB, while six were from LR. All worked in some capacity to support immigrant settlement and welcome newcomers to the regions under study. As with the focus groups, online interviews were conducted because in-person face to face meetings were not possible during the pandemic. Online interviews reduce barriers to participation as participants do not need to travel to the interview. Nonetheless, we felt

that it may have been easier and faster to build rapport with interviewees if we had been able to organize the interviews in person (O'Connor & Madge, 2017).

Speaking with stakeholders who were highly familiar with the counties under study greatly enhanced our contextual knowledge and informed our place-based approach. The informants included representatives from Local Immigration Partnerships, key local employers, settlement service agencies, refugee sponsor groups, English as a Second-Language programs, advisory boards, economic development agencies, libraries, and agricultural federations. We recognize that as representatives of different organizations, the individuals interviewed had their own experiences and biases that likely impacted how they responded to our questions. Their own views were not inseparable from those of the organizations they represented (Fleming et al., 2022). We took this into consideration when analysing the transcripts generated by the interviews, separating the facts that were relayed, and the views, experiences, and perspectives of the study participants.

Both the focus groups and key informant interviews were transcribed verbatim. We then organized the collected information into codes and then themes. While recognizing that participants have diverse backgrounds and that their age, immigration status, and occupation may have shaped their experiences in the counties under study, we chose not to disaggregate the participants' personal information in our analysis. This was due to the relatively small number of participants in the study and the risks that this might pose to their identities being revealed when the findings were shared. Participants were informed prior to participating in the research that, wherever possible, the findings of the study would be shared at an aggregate level. Moreover, because the research was carried out in a focus group setting, we were more interested in the conversation generated by the participants as a group, and how this reflected their shared experiences in the places under study, rather than their views and experiences as individuals (Sim & Waterfield, 2019).

To supplement the focus groups and interviews, we also reviewed relevant federal, provincial, and municipal documents to better understand the different approaches and responses to migration in each of the regions under study. The documents include reports on regionalization programs, census and community profiles, immigration and international student recruitment strategic plans, reports from labour market planning and diversity and inclusion boards, local employment survey findings, meeting notes from community consultations, and discussion papers from regional forums on immigration.

Overview of the Study Sites

Following an analysis of the relevant documents and statistics, as well as the conversations we carried out with community stakeholders, we built profiles for each of the case study sites. This information is important for understanding how immigrants experience life in these areas and what makes them decide to stay. In what follows, we will provide a brief overview of the geographical context, the socio-economic context, and the efforts made by communities to support immigrants to their area.
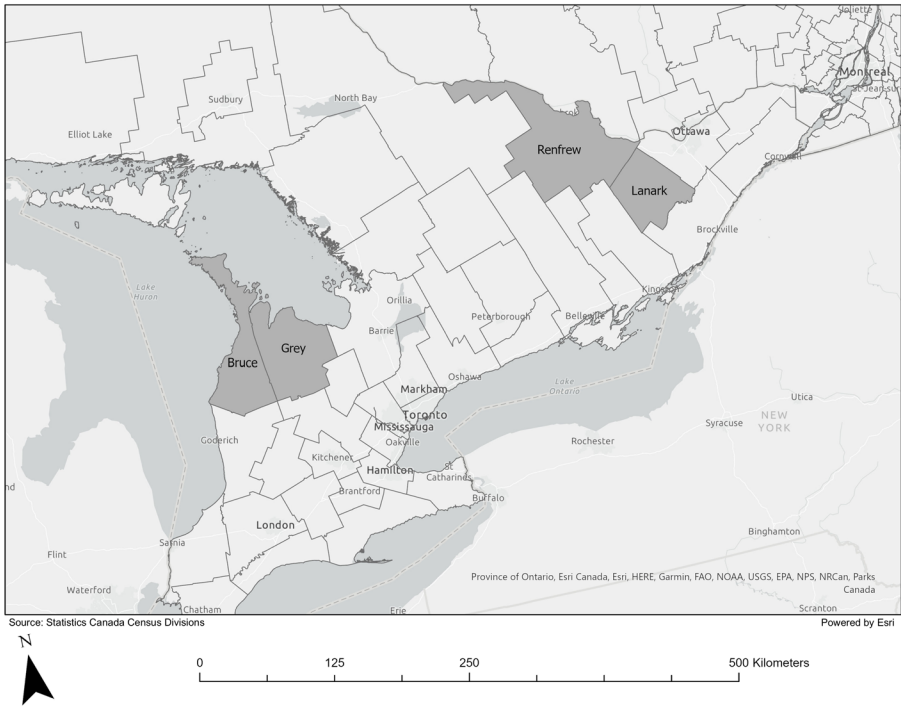
Fig. 1 Grey, Bruce, Lanark, and Renfrew counties in Southern Ontario [map]

Geographical Context

As already noted, LR and GB are both located in Southern Ontario. LR is situated eastwards in the heart of the Ottawa Valley and covers a total of 10,679 km². The region is connected to major river systems, including the Ottawa, Mississippi, and Rideau rivers, and is home to many recreational trails. Meanwhile, GB is surrounded by Georgian Bay on the west side of the province, with an area of 8587 km². The Bruce Peninsula attracts many visitors to its National Park, trails, and beaches for a variety of outdoors activities, including skiing, fishing, and snowboarding (see Fig. 1). LR has a total of 26 municipalities, while GB has 17 (see Figs. 2 and 3). The regional hubs are Pembroke with a population of 13,882 people in the former and Owen Sound in the latter with a population of 21,612 people. In addition to being close to natural attractions, municipalities within LR are within an hour's drive to Ottawa and within 4-h drive to Montreal, while municipalities within GB are within a 2 to 3-h-long drive from Toronto and London.

Social and Economic Context

GB and LR have historically received few immigrants. While immigrants make up 29.1 per cent of Ontario's total population, the counties have significantly smaller
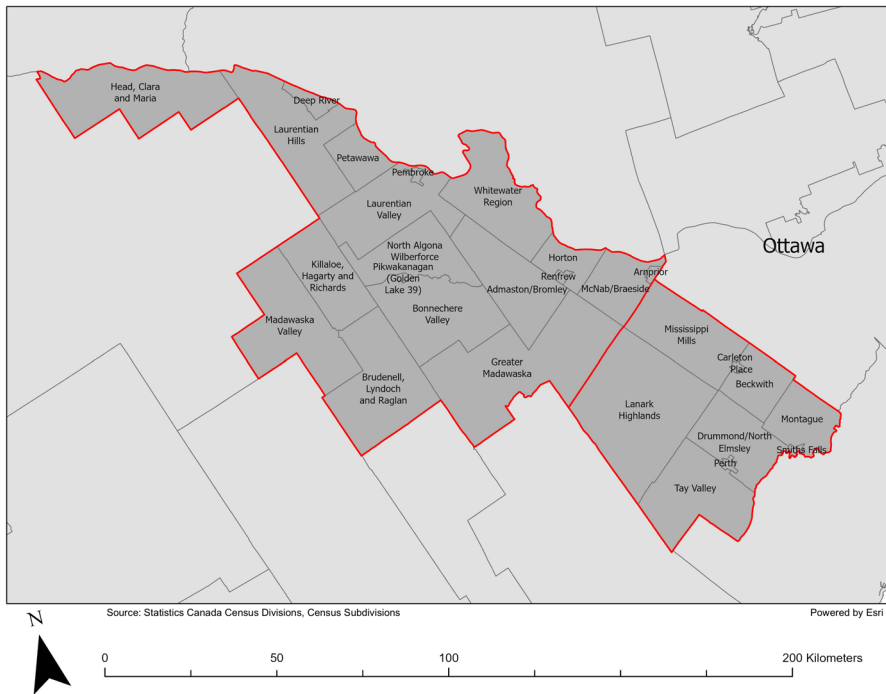
Fig. 2 Lanark and Renfrew counties [map]

immigrant populations at 7–8% for GB and 5–6% for LR (Statistics Canada, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2017d, 2017e, 2017f). Nonetheless, in recent years, the countries from which immigrants come have increased to include India, Syria, the Philippines, and China in both regions. This may be due to the arrival of international students to Georgian College (in GB) and Algonquin College (in LR), as well as refugees arriving through private sponsorship.

In addition to international students and refugees, both sets of counties also receive economic immigrants. A range of employment opportunities attracts immigrants to both areas. Some of the large employers in LR include the Canadian Nuclear Laboratories, infrastructure-building companies, and armed forces at Base Petawawa. The largest regional industries, however, are manufacturing, healthcare and social assistance, public administration, retail trade, accommodation, and food services. In GB, a nuclear operating facility, Bruce Power, recruits both international immigrants and Canadian talent. The agricultural sector employs temporary foreign workers, such as in poultry processing plants and in fruit and vegetable production. Immigrants have also had increased access to remote work during the pandemic and can commute to other nearby larger centres for more variety in employment opportunities. In this way, the communities are not totally remote or isolated. They maintain their connectivity to other regional networks and economic hubs.

Despite the availability of jobs and the need for labour in both regions, stakeholders recognize that there are still some barriers to accessing jobs in the counties under
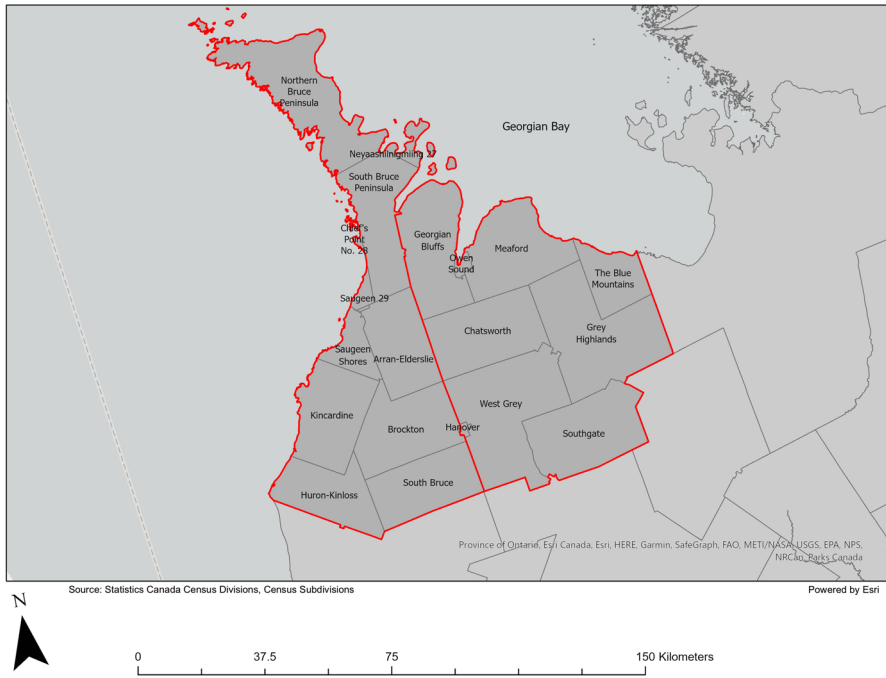
Fig. 3 Grey and Bruce counties [map]

study. Some of the barriers relate to the difficulties of foreign credential recognition, the limited availability of specialized jobs, and discrimination toward those perceived to be visible minorities or newcomers. Community economic development organizations, Local Immigration Partnerships, and Chambers of Commerce in both sets of adjoined counties are making efforts to raise awareness of these issues and to work with employers to facilitate immigrants' integration into local labour markets.

Community Supports for Immigrants

Stakeholders within GB and LR have mobilized to make their communities more welcoming and have worked to coordinate services to better accommodate immigrants' specific needs.

Sponsorship groups in GB and LR have played a particularly important role. In GB, local faith communities have offered personalized support to Syrian, Afghan, and Eritrean refugees since 2015. Similarly, in LR, various groups of private sponsors have organized refugee sponsorship and resettlement efforts and connected refugees to existing ethnic communities in the regions. For example, refugees from Columbia are introduced to other Spanish-speaking individuals in LR.

As immigrants and refugees arrive to GB and LR in increasing numbers, the local communities in each recognize the importance of providing newcomers with essential supports. YMCA Owen Sound in GB, for example, assists permanent residents,

live-in-caregivers, and convention refugees by offering ESL classes, support with education, employment, health services, transportation, community services, and housing. In addition to these services, newcomers in each county can find both educational and cultural programming for their families and build their social networks by participating in EarlyOn Child and Family Centres and through their local libraries. The availability of these services helps newcomers develop a sense of connection to the community.

Furthermore, Local Immigration Partnerships serve as the bridge between all the stakeholders working to welcome newcomers to communities in each of the two regions by coordinating services, conducting research on any gaps or challenges, and promoting the creation of inclusive environments.

Understanding Why Immigrants Stay

Having established an overview of LR and GB counties in terms of geography, social and economic context, and community supports, we will now turn our attention to the perspectives and lived experiences of immigrants living within these counties. In this section of the paper, we will present the main findings of the study, highlighting what the focus group participants regard as the benefits of living outside a larger urban centre, how they go about securing employment and attending to their other needs in a non-metropolitan context, and, finally, how they cultivate a sense of belonging to their new home. Please note that all participant names are pseudonyms that they themselves have chosen. In one case, two participants chose the same name, and we therefore had to select a new pseudonym for this participant for the purposes of writing this paper.

The Benefits of Living Outside a Larger Urban Centre

The majority of the participants liked where they lived and decided to stay there over time on account of the unique combination of attributes that their counties had to offer. They particularly appreciated the relative affordability of housing and the lifestyle available in these areas, as well as the ease with which they could access nature in proximity to where they lived.

In terms of housing, one could acquire a much larger home for a much lower price than would be possible in a larger urban centre. As Linda, a participant from an Asian country now living in GB stated:

> Well I moved [here] in 2017. At that time, the housing price it's very good, it's cheaper than the GTA, much cheaper. I think it's half the price, and you can get the detached home in here and you have lots of space. I think comparing to the city life, that's the one reason I like living here because you have lots of your own space.

Some of the participants had moved to one of the four counties under study specifically for this reason. Having a larger home and yard was often seen as particularly

desirable for those raising children. Moreover, although all the participants had settled in one of the areas under study before the pandemic began, they really came to appreciate having extra space when the provincial-wide COVID-19 lockdowns took place.

According to the participants, some of the other things that made living in a small town more attractive than living in a larger centre were the slower pace of life, and the sense of peace, quiet and safety they experienced there. Many commented on how it was possible to get between places with less traffic and hassle. As Catherine, a resident of GB who was initially from an Asian country noted:

> I can say there's no traffic here, compared to the big city [where I come from]. I can reach my destination within a certain time. I can tell exactly how long will I get there, not like back home…

Finally, the geographical qualities of both LR and GB were emphasized by the participants as a major reason to stay in one of the four counties. In LR, the Ottawa River valley was seen as a beautiful area to be in, while GB offered access to the waterfront, fishing and other outdoor activities. As Mariam, a woman from a Middle Eastern country now living in GB put it:

> The forest, falls, everything, the lakes in Owen Sound. You can spend [time] just driving around the city, just to looking the trees and the falls in the summer, or in the winter, or in spring, or in the falls, multicolour. I love Owen Sound.

Participants from LR were similarly satisfied with their local surroundings and saw it as a reason to stay. As Moy, a woman originally from the Caribbean described it:

> I think the best thing about living here, it's not so much the community, but these surroundings. It's absolutely stunning. It's beautiful. The wide-open spaces, especially now in terms of COVID, you get benefits here that I could never dream to get when I was in [a larger city].

The proximity between smaller towns within the different counties under study, or between these towns and larger cities, also contributed to participants' satisfaction with where they lived. The study participants felt that they were able to strike a comfortable balance between the space and quiet afforded by small-town living while knowing that all the attractions of larger cities were only a few hours away. As Jordy, a resident of LR who was originally from a European country put it:

> We try to go [to Montreal] once a month for a weekend, and we're only two and a half hours away here. So we have the convenience of being able to nip down, spend a weekend there, get the city life out of our system for the rest of the month, and then come back to a beautiful setting where we have lots of space around us.

Interestingly, the general attributes of these areas were not necessarily something that drew the participants to move to these areas initially. In some cases, the

participants had actively sought out an alternative to larger cities, finding these smaller regions more attractive. In other cases, however, they moved to the communities to be with their Canadian-born partners or through refugee sponsorship. They had then subsequently chosen to stay in the areas after adapting to them over time and becoming aware of everything they had to offer.

The findings of the study therefore show that while research often focuses on what smaller communities lack, and why they struggle to attract and retain immigrants, there are a number of place-based factors that immigrants may find appealing about living in smaller centres, and this may contribute to their retention over time. In fact, many had even chosen to leave urban centres behind so that they could enjoy everything that was available to them in LR or GB.

Meeting Needs

A second major reason why the study participants felt content to stay in the counties under study related to their ability to meet their needs there. They had found ways to meet most of their everyday needs as well as those of their family members despite living outside of a major urban centre. The key needs that were discussed in the focus groups included finding employment; meeting the requirements and preferences of dependent children; and accessing services.

Securing income to support their lives in Canada was of course essential to the study participants. Some were drawn to the opportunities on offer in the counties under study. Bruce Power in Bruce county, for example, was a major employer that had attracted a number of people into the area. Others worked in the service industry, social services, or had established businesses, seeing local opportunities for entrepreneurship. Some participants were also willing to drive to larger centres for employment if the smaller communities did not offer them what they were looking for. Some participants drove to Ottawa from LR, for example, until the pandemic allowed them to work remotely, or until they eventually found employment in the communities in which they lived.

Some had already acquired experience working in larger cities and felt that, despite sometimes having more employment opportunities in the metropolitan centres and greater access to support from ethnic communities, they could more easily achieve their life goals of raising a family or purchasing a desirable home in LR or GB.

Ensuring that the needs of dependent children were met was also a key priority of the study participants. This meant ensuring that children had access to suitable schools, daycare, and extracurricular activities. One of the major reasons participants were satisfied with where they lived and had chosen to stay there over the longer term was related to what they believed their communities were able to offer children: a relative degree of safety (which brought more freedom for children), a range of activities that were often more affordable and accessible than they might have been in larger cities, and smaller school classes. As Georgia, a mother from a European country in GB put it:

And now I have my kids. The schools are smaller... there is skiing an hour and half away from us, it's something we can do. If we don't have money for some reasons... we're unemployed, we have vacation for free because we're next to the beach. Our kids can go like tobogganing in a minute... just drive them. The kids can still walk around town safely.

Hence, while many parents lamented the fact that their children would not be exposed to as much cultural diversity in the smaller communities as they might have been in larger urban centres, their communities offered children several other opportunities that might not have been available to them in a larger metropolitan area.

To access services and meet their daily needs, it was often necessary for the study participants to travel to neighbouring communities, and in particular, regional hubs such as Owen Sound in GB and Pembroke in LR. Larger centres such as Toronto, Ottawa, London, and Waterloo could be accessed for more occasional needs. Almost all participants emphasized the need to make infrequent trips to neighbouring urban centres to stock up on goods that they could not easily acquire within LR or GB. Shafra, a woman originally from Asia now living in GB shared the following:

And every summer I have, at least, I think a thousand dollars or $2000 bill on grocery, because we only go to Toronto, maybe twice, in the summer. So what I do is, I really pack whatever I need that will last me for the whole year, until next summer.

Although all four of the counties were not able to offer a full range of government settlement supports to newcomers, this was not seen as a major barrier to the participants. Few participants noted the need to access settlement services partly because they had already accessed such services when first arriving in Canada and living in a larger city or because community organizations, churches and employers had stepped up to offer things like language classes, help with finding housing, and otherwise orienting newcomers to the community. Furthermore, although they did not necessarily have the option of connecting with large diasporic networks in-person in their communities, they could turn to these communities for support online when needed.

It is important to point out that needs evolve over the life course, as well as the life course of families. Hence, the decision to stay was rooted in this temporality. While communities within the four counties under study were seen as good for raising children, for example, several participants acknowledged that it may be necessary to move later in life. The lack of major universities in the area meant that they may wish to follow their children to a larger centre to attend university in the future. Furthermore, many felt that it may be easier to access healthcare services in a larger centre, which could become an important consideration as one became older.

Belonging and Being Part of the Community

While their experiences were variable, most of the study participants did not feel a strong sense of place attachment and did not believe this was necessary for deciding to stay in the counties under study for an extended period. Instead, the benefits of

living where they lived: affordability, opportunities to raise their children in a desirable way, gain work experience, and enjoy the lifestyle on offer, outweighed these other concerns.

Interestingly, most participants expressed great appreciation for the relatively high level of friendliness and neighbourliness they encountered in their communities. They felt that whereas in a larger centre they would have been anonymous, in their current communities they were on a first-name basis with many people. Moreover, they felt that local residents were good at supporting one another as needed. As JJ, a resident of LR who was originally from an Asian country explained:

> Most town people are white, the most majority. Yeah. But I think they are very kind. They're very nice. And when you go to the library, you go to those facility, they know you, they call your name. They say hi to you. How your day? That's so nice. So cozy. So yeah. So, that's really good. Every time my son goes in, they just talk to him and say, oh, what book you read? Blah, blah. So, that's really nice. But think about, if you go to the city, they won't remember your name. They won't know who you are.

Despite these positive statements, developing deeper, more meaningful relationships with local people who were well integrated into existing social networks in the local area was often seen by the participants as challenging. Some were able to connect with other people in their respective counties who shared their country of origin, and this helped them to feel more rooted in the community. Bringing family members to join them from overseas also strengthened their place attachments. Many did not have these opportunities, however, and relied more on their immediate family members or on other social networks- often comprised of other people (including Canadians) who had moved into the community from elsewhere.

Several participants had only moved into their respective communities just prior to the pandemic when lockdowns were imposed, and social interactions were limited. Many of the participants also had busy schedules and were eager to prioritize their professional careers and family lives over other types of social activities. As Linda, a woman originally from Asia working in GB put it:

> I think I'm kind of busy, maybe I'm just not trying to know more people. So I'm kind of have a kids and I know some mom from the EarlyON center, so that's how I make connections. Probably in the future we'll make some connections to meet my daughter's classmates' parents or something like that.

Contrary to our expectations, choosing to stay in the community (at least for a few years) was therefore not something that depended greatly on having strong social ties. At least for some of the participants, a vibrant social life was deemed less of a priority than other considerations at this point in their lives.

Those who had been in the community for a longer time and who were more established were generally more socially connected, however, and indeed saw this as a reason to stay.

Some were also actively working alongside other newcomers and local volunteers to promote interculturalism, diversity, and inclusion. Their involvement in such

initiatives gave the participants a role and sense of purpose in the community that contributed to their overall satisfaction with living there. As Fibi, a woman from Asia living in GB explained:

> If I never come up here to stay, I would've never met the people I met … And to actually feel that I'm contributing to the Canadian community, because I do a lot of community work trying to foster multiculturalism and promote [my original] culture in the area.

While some participants were not able to find a large diasporic community with which they could identify, by virtue of being an immigrant, they found it relatively easy to connect with other individuals who also had immigrant backgrounds. The opportunity to build relationships with people from different cultures was something that many of the participants valued highly.

Conclusion

Most research on immigration to smaller communities in Canada focuses on the challenges smaller communities face when trying to attract and retain immigrants. While we do not deny that these challenges exist and deserve attention, through an analysis of two sets of adjoined counties in southern Ontario, our research has generated new insights into why immigrants might choose to *stay* in smaller communities for extended periods of time. As noted previously, the findings of the study must be understood as indicative, as our goal was not to generalize the experiences of immigrants in all small towns. With more time and resources, we would have liked to have expanded the research to include more case studies, which would have given us even more insight into why immigrants may choose to stay for an extended time in a non-metropolitan place. Nevertheless, the findings generated by these two case studies (LR and GB) may serve as the start of an important conversation on why immigrants may actively choose to live and stay in smaller centres.

In adopting a place-based approach, we found that some smaller communities have characteristics that make them particularly attractive to some immigrants. As our findings reveal, both GB and LR have specific geographical features (access to water, hiking trails, opportunities for fishing, beautiful scenery) that make them desirable places to be. They also offer an air of calm and peace that is often hard to find in larger centres. Based on our findings, those who choose to stay in the regions under study have a great appreciation for these place-specific attributes. Complementary to this, communities in these counties are also relatively affordable, making it possible for immigrants to have a different kind of lifestyle than would be possible in a larger centre. This is a lifestyle that allows them to have more space, and to take advantage of the outdoor environment. Moreover, it is possible for immigrants to meet their needs in these areas in terms of employment, activities for their children, and access to culturally specific resources.

The longstanding appeal of the participants' current communities, and their ability to meet their needs while living outside of a larger centre, is due in part to the

position of their communities in urban networks. There are other communities, and even larger urban centres, that can easily be visited in order to access employment, services, shopping, education, and leisure activities. Hence, participants are able to meet the needs of themselves and their families locally, while still occasionally taking advantage of everything that larger centres have to offer. This is a balance between urban and rural living that they enjoy and it is something that makes where they live particularly appealing.

The welcome and support that immigrants receive are important for their satisfaction in a place, and their ability to settle there long-term. However, our findings show that it is not necessarily conventional settlement services that participants depend upon. Instead, it is resources and services offered by community groups, churches, and even online communities. Through these different means, the participants are able to access things like language training, help with finding a job, and making social connections within the community. The study therefore gives a new perspective on understanding what support means and how it is acquired, thereby building on the findings of other studies (Chadwick & Collins, 2015) that have considered how support networks and institutions function differently in smaller communities. While there may be gaps in service provision, unlike in larger centres with formalized supports, in smaller communities the ad-hoc nature of settlement service provision means that some immigrants are able to develop stronger relationships with service providers and access more individualized forms of support.

Despite the many positive aspects of living in the non-metropolitan counties under study, deciding to stay in these regions should not be seen as a singular decision that occurs at a single point in time. Like other studies (Ahrens et al., 2016; Laoire, 2000) our findings suggest that individuals and families are constantly re-evaluating their decision to live in a place. When choosing where to live, they weigh different factors and decide what is most important to them at certain points in time. The study findings, therefore, reveal that life course factors are a central part of choosing to live and stay in a non-metropolitan area, and the evolving needs and preferences of different family members are considered before a decision is made. Life course factors are mutable and evolving, rather than fixed, and so, too, is the decision to stay in a smaller centre. This means that "retention" must be viewed as a relative concept, as even those who have lived for several years in a place may have reason to move to a different place in the future.

By looking at the perspectives of immigrants who stayed, rather than left, our paper challenges existing perceptions that smaller communities are unable to retain immigrants over the longer term. The study shows the value of looking at smaller communities on their own terms, and not through the lens of immigration to larger cities. Recognizing that smaller communities have attributes that may be appealing to immigrants and contribute to not only their attraction but also their retention, is perhaps the first step to developing new policies and programs that will lead to improved immigrant attraction and retention in non-metropolitan areas. While it is perhaps too soon to make specific policy recommendations based on the findings of this small-scale study, we hope that this paper may serve as a starting point for a new discussion on what makes immigrants want to stay in smaller communities for extended periods of time. More research is needed to understand why immigrants

may choose to stay in smaller communities across Canada and in other countries that are similarly interested in attracting and retaining immigrants in non-metropolitan areas.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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