

COVID-19, Migration and the Canadian Immigration System: Dimensions, Impact and Resilience

Summary Report

John Shields

(Professor, Ryerson University)

&

Zainab Abu Alrob

(PhD Candidate, Policy Studies, Ryerson University)

July 2020



*Dr. John Shields joined the Department of Politics and Public Administration at Ryerson University in 1988, where he is a Full Professor. Dr. Shields received his PhD in Political Science from the University of British Columbia in 1989.

**Zainab is a PhD student in Policy Studies at Ryerson University, Toronto. She holds an MA in Global Governance from the Balsillie School of International Affairs, Waterloo.



Social Sciences and Humanities
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en
sciences humaines du Canada

Canada

Summary

This report identifies, documents and assesses the many ways that the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has been affecting migration, borders, immigrant populations, and Canada's immigration and settlement system between March, 2020 and June, 2020. COVID-19 does not, at one level, distinguish between citizen and non-citizen nor resident and non-resident. Yet deeply embedded societal discrimination and structural inequalities mean that COVID-19 has negatively affected groups like immigrants, women, visible minorities, the poor far more than others. The report is not exhaustive in terms of analysis or identification of issues, especially given that the pandemic continues to progress and evolve and its effects will take time to comprehend fully. Consequently, this review and analysis is inherently preliminary. Rather it provides a comprehensive initial overview of the challenges COVID-19 has created for migration, immigrants and settlement. While international cases are used, our focus is on the Canadian context.

Given the recentness of the pandemic, we used extensive media sources to document developments related to our subject. We also made use of a wide range of government reports and information sources, including from public bodies such as Statistics Canada, academic and think tank-based studies, numerous webinars and online conference materials, and grey literature from the community sector and civil society. This report is centred on reporting on and documenting the many ways COVID-19 and the reactions to it has impacted migration, immigrants and settlement in Canada. Having gathered and assessed this considerable range and volume of material we offer a critical assessment of what this means for migrants and immigration in Canada. We draw on the concept of social resilience to help frame an understanding of these developments. We highlight the resilience shown by many migrants and the institutions that support immigration and settlement that have responded creatively during this crisis and, in many cases, are helping to mitigate the most negative effects of the pandemic on migrant populations.

Social resilience speaks to how social structures and institutions work to support society to overcome significant obstacles and crises by drawing on collective social resources. In Canada, on the domestic front, the response by public authorities to the pandemic has been a strong marshalling of an array of programs and the utilization of existing institutions to support different segments of the population, the economy, health systems, local governments under financial strain, and much more. Along with giving support to the public to enhance its own resilience to navigate COVID-19, the response has demonstrated the resilience of our health and socio-economic institutions and our political system more generally, including the settlement and immigration system. There has been the adoption of evidence-informed pragmatic approaches to policies rather than overly politicized and ideologically led responses. Nevertheless, the impacts of COVID-19 and access to protections and benefits have been uneven among different categories of immigrants and migrants. Too many have been excluded from supports even though immigrant and migrant populations confront higher unemployment and are generally more financially insecure due to the pandemic. Immigrants face greater risks of COVID-19 because of the types of jobs they work in, many rely on public transit, and they often reside in overcrowded housing. Immigrants confront the unequal burden of COVID-19, demonstrating the precarious position of many within Canada.

In terms of borders and the international movement of migrants, Canadian actions have at various levels been problematic. The closing of borders, of course, has been very disruptive to economies that are now deeply and globally linked. Closures have stemmed the flow of international travel and other population movements, including labour mobility between countries. This has been particularly detrimental to the most vulnerable populations fleeing danger zones for safe havens or entrapped in refugee camps facing grave health and safety dangers. In response to the pandemic, the landing of most immigrants, refugees and international students in Canada has halted. More problematically, Canada has closed its border to asylum seekers crossing from the U.S., returning all such cases to U.S. authorities where they face potential deportation to their countries of origin. The rights of the most vulnerable – refugees and asylum seekers – which have been downgraded in this pandemic, needs to be restored and built into resilient migration policies and emergency responses grounded in social justice. The case of temporary farm workers reveals the dependence of advanced economies, like Canada, on cheap foreign labour. The vulnerability of these farm workers to COVID-19 once in Canada indicates that the conditions of work, a long-standing problem, have not been adequately addressed. Again, the burden of risk from COVID-19 has fallen on the most vulnerable, temporary farm workers.

Border closure, with notable exceptions for workers deemed ‘essential’, has been justified as a protection against virus spread. Restrictions, however, have gone much further, in many cases becoming xenophobic nationalist reactions to ‘the dangerous other’ with calls for more securitization of migration. This response is consistent with government appeals for limited neoliberal forms of resilience and right-wing populist positions that blame immigrants and other vulnerable populations, dividing society into ‘winners and losers’ or ‘insiders and outsiders’. It calls for sacrifice in the pursuit of ‘possessive individualism’ ignoring the differential impacts of COVID-19, and without offering the rewards of solidarity, sharing and mutual accomplishment that can emerge in the context of collective struggle. Neoliberalism seeks to forge paths forward by dividing and polarizing, searching for those who are to be blamed and punished. In fact, such governments’ own shortcomings are projected on to others in blame shifting exercises. Their heavy focus on borders is designed to shift attention away from other areas where government resources to address COVID-19 and post-pandemic rebuilding are greatly lacking.

Even for governments that have pursued more proactive and supportive approaches to COVID-19, the question arises whether the post-pandemic period will include a return to austerity and more neoliberal resilience strategies, as happened after the 2008-09 recession. Or alternatively, does this moment represent a progressive opening that embraces social resilience and addresses precarity and the structural inequities made so evident by COVID-19? Social resilience responses from governments will require an activist state. The pandemic has caused widespread economic dislocation that will not be quickly and easily reversed. Times of crises can open policy windows that provide pathways forward for sweeping structural reforms as happened with the rise of the modern welfare state in the aftermath of the Great Depression and the Second World War.

The importance of advocacy rises to the fore in the post-pandemic period. There will be struggle regarding the shape of the future. However, it is important that migrant rights groups, settlement

agencies and their umbrella support organizations, and other progressive forces, engage in vigorous public advocacy for policies and programs that support open multicultural societies, anti-racism, protection of the most vulnerable migrants, and robust social programs that address structural inequality. The burden of risk must be shifted away from the individual and, through public policy and institutions, placed more squarely within the collective. These are responses centred in solidarity and social resilience.