A BMRC RESEARCH DIGEST
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Sanctuary cities in Canada: practices, needs and policies

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What you need to know

Although the term "sanctuary city" is highly evocative and is often used in public debates, there is no official universal or legal definition associated with these practices. In Canada, sanctuary policies refer to interventions that allow migrants access to public services regardless of legal status. The sanctuary city concept appears to encompass other public interventions, such as welcoming city discourses and information distribution. Research shows that their implementation is complex due to limited municipal powers and resources, as well as federal and provincial immigration policies.

What is this research about?

This project aimed to better understand the formal practices and informal approaches associated with "sanctuary city" and "access without fear" policies across Canada. It explored the approaches taken by several cities to address the needs of residents living without immigration status or with precarious status. Because immigrant-serving organizations are the ones engaging directly with these populations, the research explored how these organizations assessed city efforts as well as what are their needs and preferences for municipal policy changes to better support these residents.

How was the research carried out?

This project centered on two data collection activities:

1. a content analysis based on official publications from municipal governments with “sanctuary” or “access without fear” policies in place,
2. a pan-Canadian online survey of immigrant-serving organizations (excluding educational institutions) that receive federal, provincial or municipal funding. We collected 300 responses from cities in every province and territory in Canada, for a response rate of 48.2%.

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What have we learned from the research?

Our research confirmed that since 2013, seven Canadian municipalities have implemented policies to support residents living without immigration status or living with precarious status: Toronto, Hamilton, Vancouver, Ajax, Montreal, Edmonton, and London. Other cities have considered or are still debating the implementation of such policies.

Sanctuary city policies converge around two objectives: 1) the provision of information to migrants and organizations on access to municipal services and 2) the clarification of procedures for accessing municipal services. Municipal implementation of these policies is complicated by limited resources, lack of knowledge from some local institutions, and the limited powers of Canadian municipalities over immigration and policing.

Immigrant-serving agencies are front-line agents responding to residents living without immigration status or living with precarious status. Although 70% of the organizations surveyed reported receiving requests for services from these populations, only 27% of these organizations receive funding to serve them. As such, their assessment of municipal policies and their preference for new municipal intervention are central to an evaluation of municipal "sanctuary city" and "access without fear".

Immigrant serving agencies located in cities that have adopted sanctuary policies report mixed results for their clients. Respondents indicate that the policies have little effect on the sense of belonging, level of fear, or perceived safety of their clients living without immigration status or living with precarious status. Nonetheless, they want to see these policies continue, provided they are better funded, institutionally supported and implemented. Respondents also want cities to improve access to affordable housing, an interesting finding given mixed responsibility in this policy area between different provinces and their municipalities. They also express a desire to see their city government lobby for changes in policing.

How can you use this research?

Our research showed that it is important to increase the provision of services for immigrants without status and those living with precarious status. To achieve this, our results points to the importance of better supporting municipalities, and paying more attention to the dynamics associated with the implementation of sanctuary city policies. The findings demonstrate the need for additional funding for SPOs to address the service needs of migrants inadmissible to federal and provincial programs. For those advocating for municipal "sanctuary city" and "access without fear" in Canada, these results points to the need to explore how cities can provide increase financial support for services to immigrants without status or living with precarious status.

Who is leading this research?

This project is led by Mireille Paquet (Concordia), John Shields (Ryerson University), Meghan Joy (Concordia), Idil Atak (Ryerson) & Graham Hudson (Ryerson). Several students contributed to this project: Catherine Bruneau (Concordia), Gregory Laplante (Concordia), Mathilde Braems (Concordia), Abdullah El-Safadi (Concordia), Dominic Lachance-Royer (Concordia), Lauren Moore (Ryerson) & Patrick Folinsbee (Concordia).

Learn more

The results of this project are currently being published. For more information, contact Mireille Paquet at mireille.paquet@concordia.ca