



Trends in Retaining Skilled Immigrants

Key Findings and Recommendations From the Leaky Bucket 2025

Canada's immigration system is at a pivotal moment. Immigration continues to drive population and economic growth, yet reduced immigration targets mean fewer newcomers will arrive. These lower levels, coupled with persistent onward migration risk, mean economic impacts will compound.

The Leaky Bucket 2025 explores the scale, patterns, and drivers of onward migration—permanent residents who leave Canada—and offers actionable strategies to strengthen retention, particularly among highly skilled immigrants in high-demand fields.

Key findings

- One in five immigrants leaves Canada within 25 years of landing. The risk of onward migration peaks five years after landing, underscoring the importance of early retention efforts.
- Higher education and skill levels are linked to higher onward-migration rates. Immigrants with doctorates are nearly twice as likely to leave within five years compared with those holding bachelor's degrees. Similarly, higher-skilled immigrants (TEER 0–3) are more than twice as likely to leave as lower-skilled immigrants (TEER 4–5) five years after landing.
- Occupations with the highest projected employment growth—such as business and finance management, information and communications technology (ICT), engineering, and some healthcare professions—show some of the highest onward-migration rates.
- Immigrants who experience stagnant or declining earnings while in Canada are more likely to leave, especially those with graduate degrees. Among full-time earners, those with rising incomes show lower onward-migration rates.

- Regional retention varies. The Atlantic provinces have the highest onward-migration rates, followed by British Columbia and Quebec. Most immigrants (83 per cent) leave from the province where they first settled, indicating limited relocation within Canada before departure.

Trends and implications

Canada's average annual onward migration rate rose from 0.6 per cent in 2018 to 0.9 per cent in 2021. While these figures may seem modest, their cumulative impact is substantial. Of the 380,000 immigrants expected in 2026, 20,241 will leave within five years if current trends continue.

Canada's selection system prioritizes highly educated and skilled individuals—yet these are the groups most likely to leave. Economic immigrants, chosen for their growth potential, are more likely to emigrate than refugees or family-sponsored newcomers. This trend challenges the long-term effectiveness of Canada's immigration strategy.

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Occupations with higher projected employment growth in the next 10 years tend to have higher onward-migration rates overall, demonstrated by a small positive correlation between these two variables. Managers in finance and business, ICT professionals, and software developers face the highest onward-migration rates within the top 20 in-demand occupations.

Policy recommendations

To improve retention, the report proposes four strategic actions:

1. Establish a national retention policy framework.

Canada has strong selection mechanisms but lacks a coordinated approach to retention. A national framework would allow provinces and municipalities to set measurable targets, monitor progress, and align immigration policy with long-term integration goals.

2. Invest in tailored settlement supports for highly skilled immigrants.

While economic immigrants rely on settlement services less than others, they can benefit from initiatives such as bridging programs, licensing pathways, and personalized settlement plans that address the specific labour market barriers they face. This is especially so in the first five years.

3. Implement targeted retention strategies for high-demand occupations.

Occupations critical to Canada's future—such as healthcare, construction, and ICT—require focused retention efforts. These could include employer incentives, streamlined credential recognition, and enhanced employment-related supports like job matching and training.

4. Strengthen employer capacity to support immigrant retention.

Employers play a vital role in retention. Creating inclusive workplaces, offering mentorship, and supporting career development—particularly in smaller communities—can improve retention outcomes.

Broader context

Canada's demographic trends heighten the urgency of improving retention. With a record-low fertility rate of 1.26 and an aging population, immigration is essential to sustaining workforce levels and economic growth. However, recent reductions in immigration targets—by up to 24 per cent in the 2025–2027 plan—mean fewer newcomers will arrive.

Retention is about more than numbers—it's about who is leaving and why. Losing highly skilled professionals, scientists, and healthcare workers—many of whom are globally mobile and in high demand—diminishes Canada's strategic human capital. Immigrants make up 57 per cent of Canada's chemists and 42 per cent of its physicists and astronomers. Persistent onward migration weakens Canada's innovation capacity and global competitiveness.

For the full research, see our impact paper [*The Leaky Bucket 2025: Retention Trends in Highly Skilled Immigrants and In-Demand Occupations*](#).

