

A few “big players”: Systems approach to immigrant employment in a mid-sized city

Mary Crea-Arsenio¹  | K. Bruce Newbold¹ | Andrea Baumann² | Margaret Walton-Roberts³

¹School of Earth, Environment & Society, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

²Global Health, Faculty of Health Sciences, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

³Geography and Environmental Studies, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

Correspondence to / Adresse de correspondance

Mary Crea-Arsenio, School of Earth, Environment & Society, McMaster University, 1280 Main St. W., Hamilton, ON L8S 4K1.
Email/Courriel: mcrea@mcmaster.ca

Abstract

Canada's immigration policy is regarded globally as a best practice model for selecting highly skilled migrants. Yet, upon arrival many immigrants face challenges integrating into employment. Where immigrants settle is one factor that has been shown to impact on employment integration. In Canada, regionalization policies have resulted in more immigrants settling in small to mid-sized cities. It is important to understand how these local systems are organized to promote immigrant integration into employment. Using a systems approach, this paper presents a case study of immigrant employment in a mid-sized city in Ontario, Canada. Through a document review and stakeholder interviews, a systems map was developed, and local perspectives were analyzed. Results demonstrate that in a mid-sized city, few organizations play a large role in immigrant employment. The connections between these core organizations and the local labour market are complex. Any potential challenges to the system that interfere with these connections can cause a delay for newcomers seeking employment. As cities begin to experience growth driven by immigration, there is a need to ensure local services are not only available but also working effectively within the larger employment system.

KEYWORDS

employment integration, immigrants, mid-sized cities, systems approach

Résumé

La politique d'immigration du Canada est considérée dans le monde entier comme un modèle de pratique pour la sélection de migrants hautement qualifiés. Pourtant, à leur arrivée, de nombreux immigrants ont du mal à s'intégrer sur le marché du travail. Il a été démontré que le lieu d'établissement des immigrants est un facteur qui affecte leur intégration professionnelle. Dans ce contexte, les politiques de régionalisation ont fait que davantage d'immigrants s'installent dans des villes petites ou moyennes. Il est important de comprendre comment ces systèmes locaux d'emplois sont organisés pour favoriser l'intégration des immigrants. En utilisant une approche systémique, cet article présente une étude de cas sur l'emploi d'immigrants dans une ville de taille moyenne en

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2023 The Authors. *Canadian Geographies / Les géographies canadiennes* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC on behalf of Canadian Association of Geographers / l'Association canadienne des géographes.

Ontario. À travers un examen de documents et la tenue d'entreviens avec les parties prenantes, une carte de ces systèmes a été élaborée et les perspectives locales ont été analysées. Les résultats montrent que dans une ville moyenne, un petit nombre d'organisations jouent un rôle important dans l'accès à l'emploi d'immigrants. Les liens entre ces organisations centrales et le marché du travail local sont complexes. Toute interférence entre le central et le local peut entraîner des délais pour les nouveaux arrivants à la recherche d'un emploi. Alors que les villes petites et moyennes commencent à connaître une croissance alimentée par l'immigration, il est nécessaire de s'assurer que les services locaux sont non seulement disponibles mais qu'ils fonctionnent efficacement au sein du système d'emploi plus large.

MOTS CLÉS

approche systémique, immigrants, intégration professionnelle, villes petites et moyennes

Key messages

- An important focus of Canada's immigration policy has been to improve employment integration locally.
- Using a systems approach allows mid-sized cities to identify local services and how they are connected to promote employment integration of newcomers.
- Greater connectivity between services can streamline the employment process for immigrants settling in mid-sized cities.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on international migration globally as receiving countries closed their borders to limit the spread. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), permanent migrant flows to member states decreased by more than 30% in 2020 (OECD, 2021). In Australia, Canada, and the United States, the number of new immigrants fell by more than 40% (OECD, 2021). This decline in international migration has placed immigration as a central issue for host countries worldwide. In Canada, immigrant selection is a federal responsibility while settlement is shared between federal and provincial/territorial governments (Government of Canada, 2022). The federal government funds a network of settlement service providers across the country who support immigrant integration at the local level (Shields et al., 2016; Walton-Roberts et al., 2019). As Shields et al. (2016, p. 15) note, “contemporary immigration is primarily an urban affair where cities and municipalities ... are drawn into settlement service delivery.”

Canada's immigration policy is regarded globally as a best practice model for selecting highly skilled and educated immigrants, yet many face challenges finding commensurate employment. Studies demonstrate that where immigrants settle has an impact on how effectively they integrate into employment (Ali & Newbold, 2020; Frank, 2013). Regionalization policies have resulted in a redistribution of immigrant populations away from Canada's gateway cities to small and mid-sized communities across the country (Bonikowska et al., 2017; Statistics Canada, 2022e). To understand the impact of shifting settlement patterns on cities, an analysis of the local system is required. Walton-Roberts et al. (2019, p. 350) contend that “settlement happens at the local level and is characteristic of a place-based process where success depends upon having all policy actors operating effectively together.” This paper presents the results of a systems analysis of immigrant employment in one mid-sized city in the province of Ontario, Canada. A map of the local system is developed, and stakeholder perspectives are analyzed to identify challenges and opportunities for system change.

Regionalization and immigrant settlement

In Canada, regionalization emerged out of the need to “address population decline in remote and rural areas” and as a way to boost “economic development” (Walton-Roberts, 2007, p. 4). The goal is to encourage local governments to actively engage in developing initiatives that will attract immigrants to small and mid-sized cities (Kaushik & Drolet, 2018). In 2001, the federal government tabled the report, *Towards a more*

balanced geographic distribution of immigrants to document a growing interest to evenly disperse immigrants across the country (Citizenship and Immigration Canada [CIC], 2001). At that time, it was recognized that policy levers could be used to encourage a shift in the distribution of the immigrant population. However, it was also noted that to be successful economic growth and employment opportunities needed to be considered (CIC, 2001). As a result, provinces were given a greater role in selecting immigrants through various initiatives such as the Provincial Nominee Program (PNP) and the Atlantic Immigration Pilot (AIP).

Launched in 1998, the PNP allows provinces and territories to nominate individuals based on their economic and labour market needs (Government of Canada, 2022). Initially the program was intended to include a modest share of the total immigrant landings in Canada. But over time the number grew as provinces began to show more interest in attracting immigrants (Seidle, 2013). Bonikowska et al. (2017) examined the impact of the PNP on the geographic dispersion of immigrants during the 2000s and found significant increases in the number of immigrants settling in the smaller provinces of Manitoba, Prince Edward Island, and New Brunswick. Based on the success of the program, the government created the AIP in 2017 to increase skilled migration to the Atlantic provinces of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland and Labrador (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2021). According to Statistics Canada (2022e), the share of recent immigrants settling in one of the four provinces tripled from 1.2% in 2006 to 3.5% in 2021.

The trend in shifting settlement patterns is also evident at the city level. In 2021, 90% of immigrants resided in one of Canada's 41 census metropolitan areas (CMAs), defined as urban centres with over 100,000 residents (Statistics Canada, 2022d). Although the largest share of immigrants settle in Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver, this trend has been decreasing over time. For example, in 1980, 75% of recent immigrants settled in Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver but by 2021 the proportion had decreased to 53.4% (Statistics Canada, 2022e). Table 1 displays the top 15 CMAs with the largest percentage change in the share of recent immigrants (i.e., those who arrived between 2016 and 2021). As noted, 14 out of the 15 CMAs were located outside the largest urban centres.

The implication of increasing immigration to non-traditional settings is the need for services to assist in the settlement and integration process (Esses & Carter, 2019; Mukhtar et al., 2016; Shields et al., 2016). Government-funded settlement services are available in cities for areas such as language and skills development, assessments and referrals, community connections, and employment. However, they are primarily delivered by the non-profit sector based on contractual agreements with the government (Flynn & Bauder, 2015; Shields et al., 2016; Thomas, 2015). Programs are funded on a competitive basis and to be successful require a large network of services (Drolet & Teixeira, 2022). According to Flynn and Bauder (2015, p. 546), the decentralization of the settlement sector has created gaps in services and a "spatial mismatch" between the location of service providers relative to the residential location of immigrants. In many cases, cities outside the largest urban centres are underfunded to provide the necessary services required for increased immigration (Drolet & Teixeira, 2022; Flynn & Bauder, 2015).

TABLE 1 Geographic distribution of recent immigrants by census metropolitan areas, Canada, 2016 and 2021.

CMA	2016 Census number	2016 Census %	2021 Census number	2021 Census %	2016 to 2021 percentage difference
Ottawa–Gatineau	38,015	3.1	58,295	4.4	1.3
Kitchener–Cambridge–Waterloo	13,975	1.2	27,785	2.1	0.9
Hamilton	17,420	1.4	26,545	2	0.6
Halifax	9510	0.8	18,135	1.4	0.6
London	11,955	1	20,490	1.5	0.5
Oshawa	4550	0.4	11,555	0.9	0.5
Windsor	10,800	0.9	15,830	1.2	0.3
Moncton	2840	0.2	6460	0.5	0.3
Victoria	7690	0.6	10,080	0.8	0.2
St. Catharines–Niagara	4990	0.4	8220	0.6	0.2
Guelph	3680	0.3	6000	0.5	0.2
Toronto	356,930	29.4	391,680	29.5	0.1
Kelowna	2995	0.2	4295	0.3	0.1
Fredericton	2635	0.2	3730	0.3	0.1
Barrie	2045	0.2	4155	0.3	0.1

Source: Statistics Canada, (2022c).

Immigrant employment in small and mid-sized cities

Much of the research on immigrant employment focuses on Canada's three largest cities: Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver (Akbar, 2019; Branker, 2017; Frenette, 2018). A few studies compare employment, wages, and earnings between immigrants residing in these metropolis areas to those residing in small and mid-sized cities (Bernard, 2008; Fong et al., 2015; Sano et al., 2017). Findings from this research suggest that immigrant employment outcomes are better in smaller urban centres (Fong et al., 2015; Frank, 2013; Haan, 2008; Sano et al., 2017). For example, Bernard (2008) revealed that immigrant incomes were highest in small and mid-sized centres and lowest in the largest urban centres. Fong et al. (2015) also found that immigrant earnings were higher in non-gateway cities compared to gateway cities. Finally, Sano et al. (2017) demonstrate that immigrant returns to post-secondary education are higher in smaller regions of Atlantic Canada compared to Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver.

Scholars argue there are many factors contributing to the regional differences in employment outcomes. Some studies suggest there is less competition for jobs and fewer immigrants to compete with in smaller cities (Fong et al., 2015; Haan, 2008; Sano et al., 2017). Others indicate that regional recruitment of immigrants through various government initiatives has resulted in improved economic integration (Sano et al., 2017). Additionally, some researchers posit that employment barriers such as limited language proficiency are not significant in the employment integration of immigrants in non-traditional settings (Bernard, 2008; Sano et al., 2017). Despite the data to suggest that immigrants fare better economically in smaller urban centres, many choose to settle in one of the three largest centres based on the misconception that jobs are easier to find (Bonikowska et al., 2017). Cities outside the metropolis areas have an important role to play in creating a system that will contribute to the rapid uptake of newcomers into employment.

Employment is a complex process that includes a range of community services and engaged political and economic systems (Caidi et al., 2010). One way to examine this complexity is to analyze the local system to identify the individuals, the organizations, and how they are interconnected (Carey et al., 2015). Systems approaches have been used in public health research to address health issues by examining the system rather than its individual parts (De Savigny & Adam, 2009). According to Public Health England (2019, p. 89), "a local whole systems approach enables stakeholders, including communities, to consider how the local system is operating and where there are the greatest opportunities for change." Carey et al. (2015) further emphasize that a systems approach shifts the focus from the individual to the structures, mechanisms, and elements of the system. This approach is needed as current policies and practices place responsibility on the individual to integrate into employment (Anwar, 2014; Chatterjee, 2019; Thomas, 2015).

Research consistently shows that a significant barrier to employment for skilled immigrants is a lack of Canadian education and experience (Boyd & Tian, 2017; Bhuyan et al., 2017; Crea-Arsenio et al., 2022; Hira-Friesen, 2018). In response, the government has invested heavily in retraining programs to bridge the gap between foreign credentials and the Canadian workplace (Chatterjee, 2019). The goal is to improve the individual's skills to solve the challenge of immigrant underemployment (Thomas, 2015). By focusing on the individual, government programs reinforce discriminatory practices and ignore widespread systemic issues that exclude immigrants from the workforce (Chatterjee, 2019).

By taking a systems approach, the focus shifts away from the individual and towards an analysis of how local systems create a context within which immigrants can effectively integrate into employment. The purpose of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the immigrant employment integration process in one mid-sized city. The objectives were to develop a systems map to identify key stakeholders and how they are interconnected, and to analyze local perspectives about potential challenges and opportunities for system change.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A case study design was used to explore the process of immigrant employment integration in the city of Guelph, Ontario, Canada. Case study is an inductive approach to research that focuses on the examination of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2009). This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of a city's immigrant services system and how it relates to the employment context. Following a systems approach, a map of key stakeholders and the connections between them was developed. The mapping technique was used to visually depict the services in the system and how they are interconnected (Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse, 2014). The map was populated through a document review of grey and published literature and interviews with local stakeholders. The interviews were further analyzed to identify potential challenges and opportunities for change.

Case selection

The city of Guelph, with a population of 165,588, is a CMA located in southwestern Ontario (Statistics Canada, 2022b). Based on Bernard's (2008) classification of urban centres in Canada, Guelph is considered mid-sized. The city is surrounded by other large urban centres including Toronto (95 kilometres east), Hamilton (52 kilometres south), and Kitchener-Cambridge-Waterloo (29 kilometres west). According to the 2021

TABLE 2 Guelph immigrant population, place of birth, before 1980 and 2021.

2021 N = 6005			Before 1980 N = 8450		
Place of Birth	Number	Percent	Place of Birth	Number	Percent
India	810	22.0	United Kingdom	2685	31.7
Eritrea	460	12.5	Italy	1500	17.5
Philippines	365	9.9	Netherlands	555	6.6
Syria	190	5.2	Germany	465	5.5

Source: Statistics Canada, Census Profile Tables (2022b).

Census, Guelph was one of the fastest growing cities in Ontario, with a 9% growth in population between 2016 and 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2022b). This growth is higher than the provincial (5.8%) and national levels (5.2%). Immigrants comprise 22.7% of the population which is less than the provincial level of 30% and slightly below the national level of 23% (Statistics Canada, 2022a; 2022b). Since 2016, there has been a 17% increase in the number of immigrants residing in Guelph. This is higher than both the provincial level of 13.9% and the national level of 15.9% (Statistics Canada, 2022a; 2022b).

The composition of immigration to Guelph has changed over time (see Table 2). In 2021, the place of birth for most immigrants in Guelph was in countries located in Asia and Africa (Statistics Canada, 2022b). In contrast, before 1980, the immigrant population in Guelph was primarily from European countries. Although the immigrant population in Guelph has become more diverse over time, the visible minority population (23.4%) remains below the provincial (34.3%) and national (26.5%) levels (Statistics Canada, 2022b).

Among immigrants in Guelph, the largest percentage arrived as economic applicants (45.7%), followed by family class (29.9%) and refugees (23.8%) (Statistics Canada, 2022b). It is interesting to note that the percentage of refugees in Guelph is higher than both the provincial (17.6%) and national (15.2%) levels, despite not being a designated city under the Resettlement Assistance Program.

Guelph is one of the leading cities in Canada in terms of job growth and low unemployment (Singer, 2022). In September 2022, the unemployment rate was 3.9%, which was far below the provincial (5.8%) and national (5.2%) rates (Statistics Canada, 2022f). Additionally, the workforce participation rate was 67.9%, one of the highest in the province (Statistics Canada 2022f). Three key sectors dominate Guelph's economy, including advanced manufacturing, agri-innovation, and biotechnology (City of Guelph, 2022). These industries have been identified as having above average proportions of employment based on labour force location quotients (City of Guelph, 2022). Combined, these sectors provide opportunities for both skilled and unskilled employment.

The city is also home to the University of Guelph, a leading public research university with two world-renowned colleges: Ontario Veterinary College and Ontario Agriculture College. The university has over 30,000 students, including 1750 international students from across 30 countries (University of Guelph, 2022). It is one of the city's largest employers, providing diverse opportunities to work in education, administration, or the life sciences.

Guelph was chosen as a case study because it exemplifies the key characteristics that research has shown to be attractive to immigrants. The presence of a large immigrant population, the high-performing labour market, and its location relative to other large urban centres including Toronto make it an ideal case to study the employment integration of newly arrived immigrants (Esses et al., 2010; Haan, 2008; Hyndman et al., 2006).

Data collection and analysis

Government and non-government organizational (NGOs) websites were searched for policy documents, research reports, and any other relevant information that could be used in the development of the systems map. A Google search of all existing immigrant-related organizations in the city of Guelph was conducted to identify services that support employment for newcomers. The information gathered was used to develop a list of stakeholders, construct the interview guide, and assess key policies and programs relevant to immigrant employment in the city.

A stakeholder analysis was conducted to obtain the perspectives of key actors in the employment integration of newcomers. Stakeholders are actors with a vested interest in a policy or program and include individuals or groups who influence policy or are affected by policy (Schmeer, 2000). A stakeholder identification framework was used to ensure a systematic approach that included representation of diverse perspectives (Schiller et al., 2013). Five categories with sub-groups were identified: (1) policymakers and governments, (2) settlement service providers,

TABLE 3 Interview participants by stakeholder groups.

Category	Number	Percent
1. Policymakers and governments	2	14.2
2. Settlement service providers	2	14.2
3. NGOs	3	21.4
4. Language services	1	7.1
5. Employers	6	42.8
Total	14	100

(3) NGOs, (4) language services, and (5) employers. Purposive sampling was used to recruit 14 stakeholders from across the five groups (see Table 3).

Stakeholders were contacted via email and asked to participate in a virtual interview using Zoom. All participants were emailed an information letter in advance and consent was obtained verbally before each interview. Ethics approval was received from the McMaster Research Ethics Board (MREB#: 5302).

Stakeholder interviews were conducted to obtain their perspectives of potential challenges and opportunities for system change. The interviews were held between March and August 2021. Interview guides were constructed according to stakeholder analysis guidelines (Schmeer, 2000). Service providers and representatives from NGOs were interviewed about their role in the employment process, their perspectives on the challenges in the system, and their ideas for system-level improvements. Employers were asked about their strategies for hiring and integrating newcomers into their workplaces.

Interviews lasted 40 to 80 minutes and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. All interview data were coded into QSR NVivo 12.0. Themes were abstracted using a constant comparative method of analysis (Fram, 2013). Initially, interviews were coded using line-by-line analysis to name categories relevant to the research question. Preliminary coding was carried out by two members of the research team who coded several texts independently. Team members then collaborated to develop a refined scheme for coding the texts. As new categories emerged from the data, relationships between salient themes were connected and integrated. Key findings were then categorized appropriately under each thematic heading. The results from the document review and stakeholder interviews were triangulated to complete the systems map. Findings were shared with service providers to validate the map and obtain feedback on its relevancy.

RESULTS

The map is organized around three categories: governments, services, and the local labour market (see Figure 1). These categories are representative of interconnected systems that support immigrants through the process of settlement, pre-employment, and employment integration. The following sections examine the key features of the map including a description of the local stakeholders, how they are connected, and what they contribute to the employment integration of immigrants.

Levels of government

Federal, provincial, and municipal governments were identified as significant actors in the employment integration of newcomers in the city (see Figure 1). At the federal level, Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada was identified as providing core funding to immigrant settlement services, the local employment agency, and the Guelph-Wellington Local Immigration Partnership. At the provincial level, the Ministry of Labour, Training, and Skills Development was reported to fund employment services and programs through settlement services and the employment agency. At the municipal level, the city's economic development department worked with settlement services and businesses to promote opportunities for economic growth, which included initiatives to integrate immigrants into the local labour market. A city interviewee described how they "monitor the types of job opportunities available and the types of businesses that can ideally thrive. [They] can then identify where there might be some assistance needed and develop programs to address those areas of need" (A11).

Additionally, the city collaborates with immigrant services to provide free services directly to new immigrants. An example identified was a transportation initiative that offers a free bus pass for one year to all new refugees settling in the city. As one service provider described, "we have initiated a collaboration with the city of Guelph that provides free public transportation for refugees in their first year in Canada" (A6). The program entitled "Welcome to Guelph" was designed to reduce an identified barrier to employment for new refugees in the city.

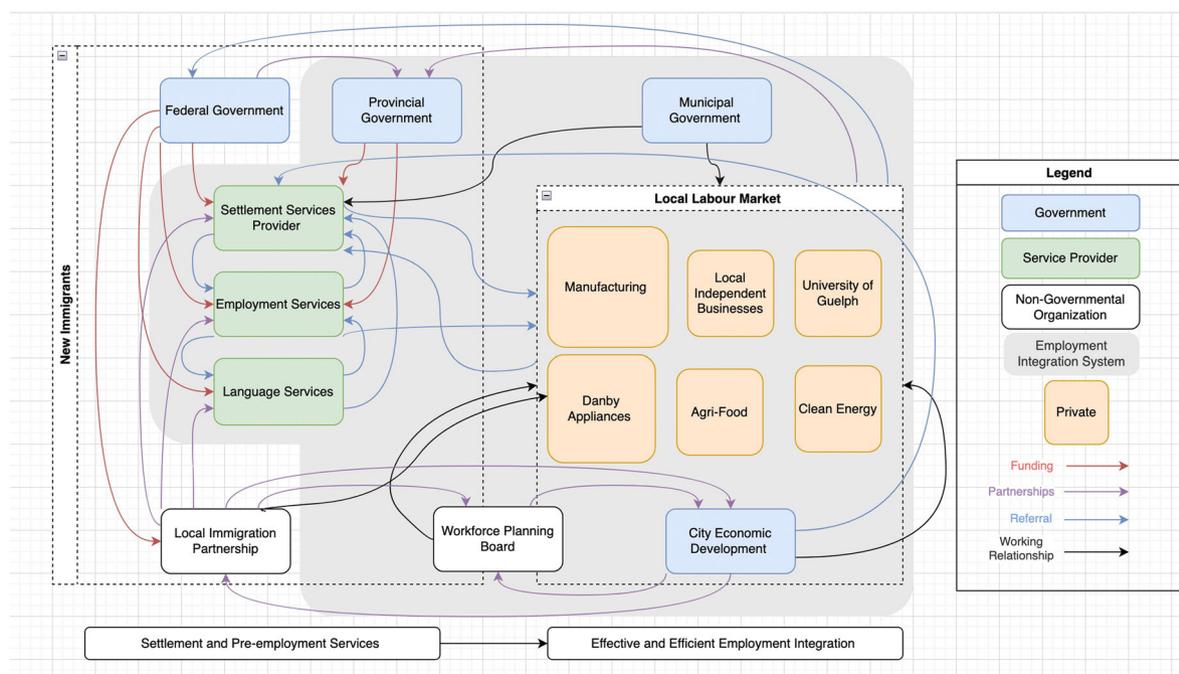


FIGURE 1 Systems map of immigrant employment integration.

Services

In this mid-sized city, there are three main organizations providing services to assist immigrants in finding employment (see Figure 1). These organizations work together to help clients navigate the system, beginning with language training and resume building through to attaining their first Canadian job. Service provider interviewees described a synergistic relationship between the organizations that included assessing and referring clients to the programs that best fit their employment needs. An employment counsellor identified this as a strength of the local system: “Guelph is small, and we all know each other so we work together all the time. Frontline staff are in touch with frontline staff at least weekly and there's a lot of cross referrals happening to make sure that clients are supported” (A2).

Interviewees noted that most immigrants learn about services through word-of-mouth referrals from family and friends. Once they access services, they are referred to programs based on their unique needs. Any client who requires language services is automatically referred to the only language school available in the city, which is administered through the local public school board's continuing education. For those seeking employment, counsellors at either immigrant services or the local employment agency provide the necessary support in the journey towards employment.

In addition to the three immigrant-serving services, two NGOs work with local stakeholders and community organizations to promote capacity-building within the region. Interviewees indicated that the primary role of these organizations is to provide research and consultation and support local initiatives aimed to improve immigrant employment integration in the city. An NGO interviewee stated, “our work is mostly with community partners that would include non-profit organizations, service providers, government whether municipal or others, school boards, and other key stakeholders locally to bring them together, and enhance the coordination and collaboration across the city” (A7).

Another NGO interviewee reported, “we often get requests for data on what industries are hiring, who they are hiring, what are the sorts of skills that are in demand so that those organizations that work directly with immigrants can start to look at what people are coming in with and where there might be matches” (A1). They also engage in initiatives that can be used by immigrants to find employment. For example, one NGO created an online local job portal called “findyourjob.ca.” The site allows newcomers to search for employment based on occupation codes and regions.

Local labour market

Key stakeholders in the labour market included local employers connected to the immigrant-serving agencies (see Figure 1). Many of the service providers interviewed identified three companies as “big players” in immigrant employment. These companies were from the manufacturing sector and reported to hire any newcomer to the city. As the city was described as having a labour market characterized by “a very low unemployment rate” and “a very high-performing workforce” (A9), employers struggled to fill vacant positions. The employers interviewed described a variety of strategies used to mitigate labour supply challenges. First, they worked closely with service providers to actively recruit

immigrants. As one interviewee indicated, “if a new immigrant wants a job in the city, they could have one, even with limited English skills” (A2). Second, they supplemented language services with on-site support to ensure new immigrant employees were learning English skills required in the workplace. Third, they paired new employees with colleagues who spoke the same language as the new hires in order “to start with training” (A3).

Local system challenges

Stakeholders identified several challenges in the system that they believed had negative consequences for new immigrants seeking employment. These included episodic and limited funding, lack of timely data, challenges in reaching all immigrants, inadequate supply of local labour, and a frayed connection to employers.

Episodic and limited funding

Interviewees reported that changes in funding over time have led to decreased services for immigrants in the city. An example of this change was a decrease in funding for language services that resulted in only one local provider. As an interviewee described, “there used to be two different language providers in the city. But because of cuts in funding now there is only one and it's more of a traditional school. They are not as nimble to pivot to the needs of individual clients because they have large class sizes” (A2).

Other challenges identified included a lack of funding for retraining programs in the city. It was reported that the only option for immigrants to upgrade their skills was through a community college in a neighbouring city. Even if courses were available online, there was often a cost associated with enrolling. Larger urban centres across the province have various funded programs in place to support upgrading for highly skilled immigrants. However, in the city of Guelph, this was identified as a significant gap in the services provided. One interviewee described how increased funding for upgrading and retraining could be a “quick fix” for some newcomers: “someone might be an accountant, but they don't know quick books. Offering a free micro-course would be a quick fix for them and, as we've seen with people who take these courses on their own, their chances of employment improve greatly” (A4).

Service providers also identified gaps in funding and flexibility of programs to meet the needs of the immigrant population. Many of the programs funded through the federal and provincial governments limit services based on immigrant class. For example, federal services are only available to permanent residents or convention refugees; whereas provincial services are available to individuals who've entered through other streams such as the Provincial Nominee Program, live-in caregiver program, or refugee claimants. Additionally, individuals who enter Canada on a work permit or student permit are not eligible for any pre-employment program. As many of the service providers indicated, these limitations posed a challenge for them in offering the best available support to match newcomer needs. This can change as governments change. One interviewee noted, “for example, one government wants only internationally trained professionals, so they fund all sorts of programs for them. The next government comes in and wants all refugees and so they fund those and then you're left with these programs that don't meet the needs of the people coming in” (A2).

Lack of timely data

Another gap identified by most interviewees was the lack of timely data on new immigrants to the city. Although service providers collect data on program participants, they reported not having access to information about new immigrants choosing to settle in the city. Most interviewees reported using 2016 Census data to identify the number of immigrants in the region. Although useful for general information, Census data do not provide detailed information about new immigrants settling in the city or those that come to the city via secondary migration. With the limited data available, the providers must rely on new immigrants contacting them directly before they can provide services. As one interviewee reported, “the ones who reach out to [immigrant services], I think are more successful and gain a better and quicker understanding. But what percentage of immigrants go to immigration services?” (A13).

“Falling through the cracks”—Reaching all immigrants

Stakeholders identified challenges in the local system for certain groups of immigrants. One interviewee reported, “services do well for low skilled and some high skilled newcomers but not the middle group” (A4). Service providers described two distinct groups of immigrants that access their services: Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSRs) and economic immigrants. The two groups include individuals with a variety of skills

upon arrival, and although both are successful, their path to employment is very different. For example, in the most recent wave of PSRs, many arrived from Eritrea and were identified as low-skilled and with limited education. They came to the city and are immediately hired into one of the local factories. For economic immigrants, it often takes more time to find employment and may include moving across different positions. The individuals who “fall through the cracks” are often those who enter Canada through the family class, can be highly skilled and educated but are reported to be working in manufacturing. One interviewee noted, “they don't see other opportunities, because they're working 10, 12 hours and they're exhausted” (A9). Service providers believed that this group would benefit the most from immigrant services but were the most difficult to reach, so many remain underemployed.

Inadequate supply of local labour

With a consistently low unemployment rate and a high number of vacant positions, the need for local labour is not a new issue for the city. For the past several years, the local economy has had significant employment growth, but the increase in population has not kept pace. As a result, many of the interviewees were concerned that the city has no formal strategy to attract immigrants. For many stakeholders, this was viewed as a lost opportunity. One NGO representative explained, “with over 400,000 immigrants entering the country annually, you need to compete for those individuals and as a city, position yourself and market the jobs available” (A1). Employers were particularly concerned about the labour shortage in the city. As many described, they are forced to engage in creative recruitment strategies to ensure supply issues can be managed effectively. For example, one local employer in manufacturing paid monetary incentives to any employee who referred an individual to a job. It was reported that many refugees working in the factory took advantage of the incentives and often referred friends and family who were new to the city.

Frayed connection with employers

A challenge identified by employers was the lack of consistent referrals from immigrant services. An employer reported, “you would think the service providers would reach out to you more often, but if you don't reach out to them, they're not necessarily calling you, which is a part of the system that should be improved” (A12). When employers did receive referrals, some reported that there was often a mismatch between the immigrant's skills and qualifications and the jobs available. As one employer commented, “why send me a family law lawyer for a maintenance position? I can't help that person” (A9). Employers believed there should be better communication with local businesses about newcomers arriving to the city. An employer reported, “I think the government could do a better job of communicating to employers in terms of who's out there. If they did, people would have jobs when their feet hit the ground” (A12).

Opportunities for change

Stakeholders agreed that better coordination and connectivity “between all of the moving pieces really needs to happen” (A2). As one NGO representative described, “there needs to be a flow of information, there needs to be a flow of expectations, and there needs to be a feedback loop” (A2). In order to improve the system, strategies should target those areas identified as potential challenges. For example, employers noted that a lack of language services in the city could be ameliorated by offering incentives to local businesses for on-the-job language training. One employer reported, “I don't believe generally in government incentives but maybe there has to be incentives for employers to pay for either English as a Second Language (ESL) classes or the time for ESL training” (A10).

Additionally, it was reported that “service providers need to go beyond counting the number of people who get a job and start looking at the quality and appropriateness of those jobs” (A7). To do this, service providers should focus on understanding the needs of the local labour market and creating stronger connections to employers outside the manufacturing sector. By improving the connectivity between pre-employment services and local employers, services can be streamlined to enhance newcomers' experiences as they transition into employment.

Finally, as many interviewees noted, the Canadian workforce is shrinking, and immigrants will be the driving force of economic growth. For employers to be competitive, they must be engaged in the process to recruit and integrate immigrants efficiently and effectively. One local employer-led strategy that proved successful was the sponsoring of over 200 Syrian refugees in 2015. The CEO of a manufacturing company led the initiative and enlisted 800 community volunteers to support the refugees through the settlement and integration process. As reported by stakeholders, a key principle of the initiative was to quickly integrate refugees into employment. The belief was that the sooner they were able to gain meaningful employment, the sooner they would become self-sufficient, contributing members of society. It was noted that the model could be replicated in other cities if “companies and cities had the passion to do it” (A10).

DISCUSSION

This study used a systems approach to examine immigrant employment integration in the mid-sized city of Guelph. While research has addressed barriers to immigrant employment more broadly, this study provides new insights into how the local system functions to influence immigrant transition into the labour market. It is one of few studies that examines in-depth the key actors, the relationships between them, and the structures formed because of those relationships. The findings move beyond identifying the main factors that affect labour market integration of newcomers in small and mid-sized cities. They provide an approach to creating change within the system that will support integration practices locally to improve immigrant transition into employment.

This study makes several distinct contributions to the literature. First, it demonstrates the use of a systems mapping technique to analyze immigrant employment integration in a mid-sized city. Mapping the system involves connecting the actors and their relationships to the larger context to examine its response to external factors (De Savigny & Adam, 2009). The system is assumed to be self-organizing, dynamic, governed by feedback, history-dependent, and resistant to change (De Savigny & Adam, 2009). Focusing on the system draws attention away from reductionist problem solving to transforming systems in the service of improving immigrant employment outcomes (Kiekens et al., 2022). In the case of small and mid-sized cities, applying a systems approach provides a comprehensive understanding of what exists and where there may be gaps in services. The information could then be used by cities to inform policy and planning for immigration and integration of newcomers once they arrive.

Second, findings from this study build on the emerging literature about immigrant employment in small and mid-sized cities. Much of the research in this area focuses on how cities can attract and retain newcomers (Esses & Carter, 2019; Hyndman et al., 2006). This study expands our understanding of immigrant employment in smaller urban centres by revealing the important role of the local system in the integration process. It demonstrates that in a mid-sized city, relationships are important and community engagement is essential. Research demonstrates that cities that provide meaningful employment fare better in attracting newcomers (Esses & Carter, 2019). Findings from this study suggest that creating conditions for success requires more than job opportunities. It necessitates an interest by municipal governments, community leaders, institutions, and employers to actively engage in the integration of immigrants locally.

Third, findings from this study validate existing literature that suggests small and mid-sized cities are largely underfunded to support immigrant integration. In the case of Guelph, gaps in services were related to limited resources and a lack of flexibility in funding that resulted in a more fragmented system. Research has documented that cities outside Canada's three largest urban centres lack the infrastructure and organizational capacity to provide necessary services to newcomers (Drolet & Teixeira, 2022; Flynn & Bauder, 2015). With limited access in those critical first few years after arrival, immigrants will continue to struggle to find employment and may choose to migrate elsewhere.

Finally, this study provides new insights into the challenges facing service providers to integrate highly skilled immigrants into commensurate employment. Although studies suggest that immigrants fare better economically in small and mid-sized cities (Fong et al., 2015; Frank, 2013; Haan, 2008; Sano et al., 2017), findings from this study indicate that the types of jobs do not always align with the skills and qualifications of the immigrant. In the case of Guelph, low unemployment and steady job growth meant there were many employment opportunities available to immigrants. However, the types of jobs were driven by the few big players in the manufacturing sector who dominated the labour market. As a result, immigrants were often placed in low-skilled jobs where their skills and education were underutilized. The challenge facing service providers in small and mid-sized cities is to expand their network of employers to include those in high-skilled sectors. This requires targeted planning and innovative community-based strategies unique to the local context.

Results of this study have important implications for government policy. There is a need for increased funding for immigrant employment services. In a mid-sized city with few immigrant-serving organizations, any change in funding can have a substantial impact on service provision. In the case of Guelph, a decrease in funding for language services resulted in only one service provider in the city. The loss of a second language program meant that new immigrants had limited opportunities to increase their language skills for the workplace. Furthermore, there is a critical need to improve information and data sharing between governments and local service providers. Although there are several immigrant databases available to service providers, many smaller centres are not aware or do not have the capacity to access the required information. In this study, providers reported a need for information about new immigrants settling in the city. However, many reported that they lacked resources to hire staff with the technical skills in data access and analysis. A solution could be to enhance collaboration between neighbouring urban centres around data sharing for regional planning and programming.

Finally, there is a need for municipal governments to become involved in the development of an immigration strategy that includes input from local employers. Findings from this study demonstrate that the lack of coordination between service providers, the municipal government, and local businesses created a significant gap in the system and a lost opportunity for the local labour market. Formalizing a strategy to attract immigrants that includes the numerous employment opportunities available could provide a clearer pathway into employment for immigrants.

Applying a systems approach is useful for decision makers to develop a shared understanding of the system, how it works, where gaps may exist, and the various factors influencing immigrant employment integration. However, generating the map can be labour-intensive, time-sensitive, and difficult without the aid of local stakeholders. A systems approach allows cities to tailor strategies to the local context to improve the system surrounding immigrant employment integration.

CONCLUSION

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the unanticipated disruption in immigrant flows has provided renewed interest in international migration globally, and in Canada specifically. Findings from this study suggest that creating system change that includes adapting local structures to align with the needs of the labour market would enhance the employment of recent immigrants and act as one step in improving the integration of newcomers to mid-sized cities. As cities begin to experience growth driven by immigration, there is a need to ensure local services are available and working effectively to meet the needs of their immigrant population and to support the labour demands of the local economy.

ORCID

Mary Crea-Arsenio  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1578-881X>

REFERENCES

- Akbar, M. (2019). Examining the factors that affect the employment status of racialized immigrants: A study of Bangladeshi immigrants in Toronto, Canada. *South Asian Diaspora*, 11(1), 67–87.
- Ali, W. K., & Newbold, K. B. (2020). Geographic variations in precarious employment outcomes between immigrant and Canadian-born populations. *Papers in Regional Science*, 99, 1185–1213.
- Anwar, A. (2014). Canadian immigration policy: Micro and macro issues with the points-based assessment system. *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 46(1), 169–179.
- Bernard, A. (2008). Immigrants in the hinterlands. *Perspectives on labour and income*, January 9(1). Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 75-001-X200810113201. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/75-001-x/2008101/pdf/10505-eng.pdf?st=r9n-wf9e>
- Bhuyan, R., Jeyapal, D., Ku, J., Sakamoto, I., & Chou, E. (2017). Branding 'Canadian experience' in immigration policy: Nation building in a neoliberal era. *International Migration and Integration*, 18, 47–62.
- Bonikowska, A., Hou, F., & Picot, G. (2017). New immigrants seeking new places: The role of policy changes in the regional distribution of new immigrants to Canada. *Growth and Change*, 48(1), 174–190.
- Boyd, M., & Tian, S. (2017). STEM education and STEM work: Nativity inequalities in occupations and earnings. *International Migration*, 55(1), 75–98.
- Branker, R. R. (2017). Labour market discrimination: The lived experiences of English-speaking Caribbean immigrants in Toronto. *International Migration and Integration*, 18, 203–222.
- Caidi, N., Allard, D., & Quirke, L. (2010). Information practices of immigrants. *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology*, 44(1), 491–531.
- Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse. (2014). *Systems approach workbook: System mapping tools*. <https://www.ccsa.ca/sites/default/files/2019-04/CCSA-Systems-Approach-System-Mapping-Tools-2014-en.pdf>
- Carey, G., Malbon, E., Carey, N., Joyce, A., Crammond, B., & Carey, A. (2015). Systems science and systems thinking for public health: A systematic review of the field. *BMJ Open*, 5, e009002.
- Chatterjee, S. (2019). "What is to be done?": The hegemony of solutions in immigrants' labour market integration. *Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education*, 31(1), 1–13.
- Citizenship and Immigration Canada. (2001). *Towards a more balanced geographic distribution of immigrants*. <https://publications.gc.ca/collections/Collection/Ci51-109-2002E.pdf>
- City of Guelph. (2022). *Economic development and tourism strategy, 2022–2026*. https://guelph.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022-2026_EDT_Strategy.pdf
- Crea-Arsenio, M., Newbold, K. B., Baumann, A., & Walton-Roberts, M. (2022). Immigrant employment integration in Canada: A narrative review. *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 54(2), 99–117.
- De Savigny, D., & Adam, T. (2009). *Systems thinking for health systems strengthening*. Alliance for Health Policy and Systems Research: World Health Organization. https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/44204/9789241563895_eng.pdf?sequence=1%26isAllowed=y
- Drolet, J., & Teixeira, C. (2022). Fostering immigrant settlement and housing in small cities: Voices of settlement practitioners and service providers in British Columbia, Canada. *The Social Science Journal*, 59(3), 485–499.
- Esses, V., & Carter, C. (2019). *Beyond the big city – How small communities across Canada can attract and retain newcomers*. Public Policy Forum. <http://p2pcanada.ca/wp-content/blogs.dir/1/files/2019/08/Beyond-The-Big-City-Report.pdf>
- Esses, V., Hamilton, L. K., Bennett-AbuAyyash, C., & Burstein, M. (2010). *Characteristics of a welcoming community*. <http://p2pcanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Characteristics-of-a-Welcoming-Community-11.pdf>
- Flynn, E., & Bauder, H. (2015). The private sector, institutions of higher education, and immigrant settlement in Canada. *International Migration and Integration*, 16, 539–556.
- Fong, E., Jeong, J., Hoe, A., & Tian, S. (2015). Earnings of immigrant entrepreneurs and paid workers in Canadian gateway and non-gateway metropolises. *Population Research Policy Review*, 34, 279–305.
- Fram, S. M. (2013). The constant comparative analysis method outside of grounded theory. *The Qualitative Report*, 18(1), 1–25. <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1569&context=tqr>
- Frank, K. (2013). Immigrant employment success in Canada: Examining the rate of obtaining a job match. *International Migration Review*, 47(1), 76–105.
- Frenette, M. (2018). *Economic immigrants in gateway cities: Factors involved in their initial location and onward migration decisions*. Analytical Studies Branch Research Paper Series, Statistics Canada. Catalogue No. 11F0019M No. 411. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/11f0019m/11f0019m2018411-eng.pdf?st=uVkt-ZVL>
- Government of Canada. (2022). *Federal-Provincial/Territorial Agreements*. <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/mandate/policies-operational-instructions-agreements/agreements/federal-provincial-territorial.html>
- Haan, M. (2008). The place of place: Location and immigrant economic well-being in Canada. *Population Research Policy Review*, 27, 751–771.
- Hira-Friesen, P. (2018). Immigrants and precarious work in Canada: Trends, 2006–2012. *International Migration and Integration*, 19, 35–57.

- Hyndman, J., Schuurman, N., & Fielder, R. (2006). Size matters: Attracting new immigrants to Canadian cities. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 7(1), 1–25.
- Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. (2021, 17 December). *Permanent Atlantic Immigration Program to attract workers and drive economic growth*. <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2021/12/permanent-atlantic-immigration-program-to-attract-workers-and-drive-economic-growth.html>
- Kaushik, V., & Drolet, J. (2018). Settlement and integration needs of skilled immigrants in Canada. *Social Sciences*, 7(5), 76–90.
- Kiekens, A., Dierckx de Casterle, B., & Vandamme, A. (2022). Qualitative systems mapping for complex public health problems: A practical guide. *PLoS ONE* 17(2), e0264463.
- Mukhtar, M., Dean J., Wilson K., Ghassemi E., & Wilson, D. H. (2016). "But many of these problems are about funds...": The challenges immigrant settlement agencies (ISAs) encounter in a suburban setting in Ontario, Canada. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 17(2), 389–408.
- Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2021). *International Migration Outlook 2021*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/29f23e9d-en>
- Public Health England. (2019). *Whole systems approach to obesity: A guide to support local approaches to promoting a healthy weight*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/820783/Whole_systems_approach_to_obesity_guide.pdf
- Sano, Y., Kaida, L., & Swiss, L. (2017). Earnings of immigrants in traditional and non-traditional destinations: A case study from Atlantic Canada. *International Migration and Integration*, 18, 961–980.
- Schiller, C., Winters, M., Hanson, H. M., & Ashe, M. C. (2013). A framework for stakeholder identification in concept mapping and health research: A novel process and its application to older adult mobility and the built environment. *BMC Public Health*, 13(1), 428.
- Schmeer, K. (2000). Stakeholder analysis guidelines. In *Policy toolkit for strengthening health sector reform* (Vol. 2) (pp. 1–43). Regional Office of the World Health Organization.
- Seidle, F. L. (2013). *Canada's Provincial Nominee Immigration Programs*. Institute for Research on Public Policy Study. IRPP. <https://irpp.org/wp-content/uploads/assets/research/diversity-immigration-and-integration/canadas-immigration-programs/Seidle-No43.pdf>
- Shields, J., Drolet, J., & Valenzuela Moreno, K. A. (2016). *Immigrant settlement and integration services and the role of non-profit service providers: A cross-national perspective on trends, issues and evidence*. Ryerson Centre for Immigration and Settlement. RCIS Working Paper No. 2016/1. https://rshare.library.torontomu.ca/articles/educational_resource/Immigrant_Settlement_and_Integration_Services_and_the_Role_of_Nonprofit_Service_Providers_A_Cross-national_Perspective_on_Trends_Issues_and_Evidence/14652747
- Singer, C. M. (2022, 10 March). *Ontario City of Guelph leads way in Canada's best performing labour markets*. <https://www.immigration.ca/ontario-city-of-guelph-leads-way-in-canadas-best-performing-labour-markets/>
- Statistics Canada. (2022a). *Census of Population, Canada and Ontario*. https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/index-eng.cfm?utm_campaign=statcan-statcan-census-dissemination-22-23%26utm_medium=sem%26utm_source=ggl%26utm_content=ad-text-en%26utm_term=census%20information%26adv=2223-242950%26id_campaign=17543548464%26id_source=14360062288%26id_content=605388530567%26gclid=CjwKCAjw5P2aBhAlEiwAAAdY7dL82YNuEoyISOWCzSbTiZfjgmz9oWmyIUeD04JXyFgBEJp87A6e1hoCQwMQAvD_BwE
- Statistics Canada. (2022b). *Census Profile, Guelph CMA*. <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E%26SearchText=guelph%26GUIDlist=2021S0503550%26GENDERlist=1,2,3%26STATISTIClist=1%26HEADERlist=0>
- Statistics Canada. (2022c). *Geographic distribution of recent immigrants by census metropolitan areas (CMAs), Canada, 2016 and 2021*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221026/t001a-eng.htm>
- Statistics Canada. (2022d). *Illustrated Glossary - Census metropolitan area (CMA) and census agglomeration (CA)*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/92-195-x/2021001/geo/cma-rmr/cma-rmr-eng.htm>
- Statistics Canada. (2022e). *Immigrants make up the largest share of the population in over 150 years and continue to shape who we are as Canadians*. The Daily. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221026/dq221026a-eng.htm>
- Statistics Canada. (2022f). *Labour Market Indicators, September 2022*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/71-607-x/71-607-x2017001-eng.htm>
- Thomas, J. (2015). "Teaching somebody to fish": Implications for immigrant-serving organizations and employment in Edmonton and Winnipeg. *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 47(1), 157–177.
- University of Guelph. (2022). *About U of G*. <https://admission.uoguelph.ca/about>
- Walton-Roberts, M. (2007). *Immigration regionalization in Ontario: Policies, practices and realities*. *Our Diverse Cities*, Number 4, 13. https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2008/cic/Ci2-1-4-2007E.pdf
- Walton-Roberts, M., Veronis, L., Wayland, S. V., Dam, H., & Cullen, B. (2019). Syrian refugee resettlement and the role of local immigration partnerships in Ontario, Canada. *The Canadian Geographer/Le Géographe canadien*, 63(3), 347–359.
- Yin, R. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods* (4th ed.). Sage.

How to cite this article: Crea-Arsenio, M., Newbold, K. B., Baumann, A., & Walton-Roberts, M. (2023). A few "big players": Systems approach to immigrant employment in a mid-sized city. *The Canadian Geographer / Le Géographe canadien*, 1–12.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/cag.12833>