

Title: The Integration and Inclusion of Newcomers in British Columbia

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Research Questions:

How is the system of settlement services for newcomers structured in British Columbia, and how has that system changed in the past decade? What kinds of services are offered to new immigrants, and by whom? What role do non-government organizations (NGOs) play in service delivery and how has this been changing? Finally, what are the major gaps in the settlement service system?

Importance:

Around the world, Canada is seen as a model of immigrant integration, but the jurisdictional complexity of the Canadian system is rarely understood by people outside the country and, we believe, even by most Canadians. Actually, the system is so complex that it can be bewildering to newcomers. Given that hundreds of millions of dollars are spent each year in Canada to facilitate immigrant integration, it is important to take stock of how the system works in British Columbia and, particularly, to think about possible gaps in service.

Findings:

There have been profound changes in jurisdiction for settlement services in BC. Since 1998, money has been transferred from Ottawa to the provincial government, which has coordinated settlement services for all newcomers, with one exception (the federal government continues to provide direct support for Government Assisted Refugees during their first year in Canada). The BC government signs contracts with NGOs to provide most settlement services. Shortly after taking over this responsibility, following the 2001 election, the province entered into a period of fiscal austerity and instituted neoliberal reforms in all areas of its administration, including settlement services. This led to a period of tension in the sector, characterized by intense effort to provide effective services with limited funding. The situation was particularly difficult in the crucial area of language training. However, in the middle of the current decade, there was a substantial increase in funds transferred from Ottawa to BC for settlement services, and this initiated a period of substantial new investment in this sector, which has led to the introduction of many innovative programs involving a much closer partnership between the state and NGOs. There has also been a shift toward a new sensibility in the way that integration is conceptualized, with more emphasis placed on the receiving society to become more “welcoming” to newcomers. Nevertheless, despite this new investment, several important gaps remain: Temporary Workers do not (yet) have access to settlement services; housing assistance is not included as a core service offered to newcomers; the system has not yet fully adjusted to the increasingly complex needs of refugees; and the capacity of the settlement service system to measure its own effectiveness is limited.

Implications:

From an academic point of view, the study adds to our knowledge of neoliberalism by showing that, under certain circumstances, there can be major investment in social programs despite an overall climate of fiscal austerity. It also reveals a significant shift in the way that integration is conceived by the state. From a practical point of view, the study indicates three critical issues that are not adequately addressed in the current system and also the difficulty of assessing the effectiveness of the system.