



Title: An Assessment of the Role Community Services Play in the Attraction and Retention of Immigrants in the South Okanagan

Authors: Wolfgang Depner, University of British Columbia - Okanagan

Contact: depner72@shaw.ca

WP Number: 11-14

Research Question:

The research pursued three goals. First, it sought to identify gaps in the delivery of services to immigrant populations living in the South Okanagan. Second, it sought to develop recommendations that would remedy identified service gaps. In turn, this research agenda unfolded against the background of a broader query: what role do community services play in the successful attraction and retention of permanent immigrants to areas such as the South Okanagan?

Importance:

The research responds to a gap in the geography of social provision as immigration continues to reshape the social geography of Canada. As the literature notes, Canadian immigration has a distinct urban dimension, as new arrivals prefer to settle in major metropolitan areas for a variety of reasons, for example, the availability of jobs and the presence of co-ethnic networks. At the same time, rural, rapidly aging regions like the South Okanagan face the prospect of economic and demographic decline. This prospect has, as a result, generated interest in the regionalization of immigration, and this research offers a qualitative assessment of the role community services may play in the attraction and retention of immigrants to such regions.

Research Findings:

The report concludes that immigrants in the South Okanagan face two major obstacles in the use of community services. The first concerns their physical access to such services. As the report notes, the near absence of an effective public transportation system compounds the physical distances that often separate immigrants in different parts of the region from relevant services, particularly settlement services. The second obstacle concerns the financial instability facing immigrants. Many of the surveyed immigrants rely on low paying 'survival jobs' in the region's cyclical tourism and service industry. This, in turn, limits their ability to reliably use settlement services. Overall, the report found that the region's high living costs and low supply of economic opportunities discourages immigrants, even as they report general satisfaction with the level of available services. The report also highlights future lines of research.

Implications:

The findings of the report have fed a number of recommendations that highlight the importance of improving the broader social and economic conditions of the region. Practically, they call on local stakeholders to improve planning and coordination on matters that impact immigrants, focus efforts on economic development, and build additional community capacities in a number of social policy areas such as transportation and housing. The report, however, also reminds stakeholders of potential alternatives and limits to the regionalization of immigration as a response to the economic and demographic problems confronting the region. Potential alternatives include increasing the region's growing reliance on imported labour from Mexico and elsewhere. Limits include the region's history of racism and its stressed ecological capacity.