

# WORKING PAPERS

## Ethnic Diversity, Immigrant Settlement and Integration, and Municipal Planning in a Small Canadian City: The Case of Brooks, Alberta

Ryan Lok & Dr. Zhixi Zhuang  
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Municipal Planning in a Small Canadian City: The Case of Brooks,  
Alberta**

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## **Abstract**

Immigration in Canada has been characterized by an uneven distribution, with a disproportionate concentration of immigrants settling in major gateway cities. Despite numerous policies and programs developed by various levels of government to attract and retain immigrants towards smaller cities, less is known about planning for immigrant settlement through the lived experiences of immigrants in smaller cities. This study explored the place-based experiences of immigrants living in a smaller city and the municipality's role in attraction and retention. Specifically, the questions of inquiry involved: 1) How do racialized immigrants experience settlement and integration in a smaller Canadian city? 2) What are the implications of lived experience when planning for diversity? Case study research of Brooks, Alberta was conducted involving interviews with racialized immigrants, municipal officials, and local settlement agency staff. This study found that the primary reason for immigrant settlement in a smaller city was based on economic or family-related factors. Furthermore, fostering a sense of belonging is critical for retention, and this can be facilitated through inclusive community spaces and partnerships between municipalities and communities. Planners should seek to understand the lived experiences of immigrants in community especially in contexts undergoing processes of social demographic changes.

**Key words:** ethnic diversity, immigrant settlement, municipal planning, small Canadian cities, Brooks, Alberta

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## Introduction

Immigration will continue to be the primary factor of population growth and social diversification in Canada (Government of Canada, 2023a). Canada welcomed 468,817 immigrants and 697,701 non-permanent residents into the country between July 2022-July 2023 which is a record number of immigrants admitted in a single year in Canadian immigration history (Government of Canada, 2023b). In fact, Canada experienced the fastest population growth rate since 1957 (the post-war baby boom) at 2.3% between that annual period in large part due to immigration (Statistics Canada, 2023). The population of Canada is continuing to become increasingly diverse through immigration as 23.0% of the population in Canada are born outside of the country where 26.5% of the population identify as part of a visible minority demographic according to the 2021 census (Statistics Canada, 2022a). By 2041, it is projected that just under half (38.2% to 43.0%) of the population in Canada would be part of a visible minority compared to just over a quarter (26.5%) in 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2022b).

The increasing numbers of ethnic and cultural diversity in the population of Canada is not necessarily surprising given that Canada has historically been a nation of immigrants renowned for its multicultural diversity. Immigrants have been attracted to larger cities such as Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, Calgary, and Edmonton, where the suburbs of those cities have been desirable settlement locations (Agrawal & Kurtz, 2019; Vézina & Houle, 2017; Zhuang & Chen, 2017). Although immigrant settlement in Canada is still predominantly attributed to larger cities, immigrants in Canada are also (re)settling in smaller cities and/or regions less known for multicultural diversity (Patel et al., 2019; Pottie-Sherman & Graham, 2021; Ramsey et al., 2016; Teixeira & Drolet, 2018). Smaller cities are attractive locations for immigrant settlement primarily due to a lower cost of living (Kelly & Nguyen, 2023), enhanced opportunities for housing attainability (Brown, 2016; Teixeira & Drolet, 2018), life course factors (Kelly & Nguyen, 2023), and other place-based attributes such as access to nature (Zhuang & Lok, 2023). Though smaller cities may not necessarily have the adequate experience or infrastructure (e.g., settlement and integration services, ethnic and cultural services, ethnic networks, etc.) to support immigrant settlement and integration (Patel et al., 2019), as those resources and infrastructure tend to be predominately existent in larger, more diverse cities.

Given the increasing numbers of immigration and ethnic settlement in Canada, it is clear that planning for diversity and difference is imperative in Canadian cities should planners consider the importance of addressing a socially diversifying demographic. Yet planning and planners may still inadequately acknowledge or have the capacity in their role to plan for immigrant settlement and integration (Harwood, 2022; Zhuang, 2021). It remains largely unknown as to what smaller cities need to consider when planning for diversity (Fincher et al., 2014). We refer to diversity in this paper to ethnocultural diversity which pertains to ethnicity as a facet of identity and difference. Accordingly, this paper is exploratory in scope and draws on an empirical case study of Brooks, Alberta, a smaller city demographically characterized by diversity, in order to better understand factors that should be considered when planning for diversity in smaller cities. The objectives of this paper and the attending research questions are two-fold. First, this paper seeks to understand the place-based challenges and opportunities experienced by immigrants in a smaller city by asking: How do immigrants experience settlement and integration in Brooks? Second, it aims to explore the role of planning in immigrant settlement and integration by asking: What implications do the lived experiences of immigrants have for diversity planning?

The findings of this study indicated that economic and family-related factors were the primary reasons for immigrant settlement in a smaller city. Beyond those factors, the importance of developing a sense of belonging through the presence of ethnic communities, the availability of urban amenities, and having perceivably inclusive spaces in the community contribute to positive experiences of living in a smaller city. When planning for diversity, we argue that it is

imperative for municipal governments to be proactive in approach when preparing for demographic change. To do so, we emphasize the importance of understanding the lived experiences of immigrants in community. We hope that this effort will contribute to a more holistic understanding of fostering inclusive communities, especially in contexts historically lacking in ethnocultural diversity. Our findings further suggest the importance of municipal and community partnerships towards working together to plan for more inclusive communities within multicultural contexts.

### **Planning For Settlement And Integration In The Context Of Non-Metropolitan Areas**

Planning is a discipline and profession that is attributed to shaping access of social, cultural, political, and economic opportunities and resources, through the management of land-use, environment, and development (Allmendinger, 2017). Accordingly, planning is oriented to an anticipation of future social, cultural, political, economic, and spatial needs and values. Planning is both procedural (involving groups to be involved in the process) and substantive (having an outcome oriented outlook from the process). Planners are actors within the process of planning, thus they may be directly involved in the coordination and engagement with political bodies, stakeholders, developers, and community members. The Canadian Institute of Planners (CIP) acknowledges the importance to address diversity in planning, as evidenced in some of its Statement of Values (2016) acknowledging the importance of diversity such as “To respect and integrate the needs of future generations,” “To value the natural and cultural environment,” “To respect diversity,” and “To balance the needs of communities and individuals.” In spite of planning acknowledging the importance of diversity (CIP, 2016) and for planners to embed values of equity and advocacy into their roles (Davidoff, 1965; Krumholz, 1982; Reece, 2018), the profession has seldom acknowledged immigrant settlement and integration and its implications on planning in particular (Harwood, 2022; Qadeer & Agrawal, 2011; Zhuang, 2020). Yet, municipalities are the primary spaces and places where immigrants directly experience settlement and integration and interact with others in community. Therefore, municipal planning plays an important role in shaping social and spatial experiences. Although Canadian cities are diversifying in large part due to immigration (Statistics 2022b), the role of municipal planning in immigrant settlement and integration remains unclear (Zhuang, 2020).

Multicultural planning emerged as a response to the challenges and the implications of an increasingly diverse population, primarily driven by immigration, and the varied needs of different ethnic and cultural groups. Sandercock’s (1997) seminal text advocates for a paradigm shift in planning that is sensitive to community, environmental, and cultural diversity. Qadeer and Agrawal (2011) summarized multicultural planning as “the strategy of embedding, within the existing planning system, explicit modes of reasonable accommodation of cultural diversity and constructing a common ground of objectives, criteria, and standards that balance pluralistic interests” (p. 152). Multicultural planning takes into account the needs and interests of ethnic minority groups in order to attain equality for those populations in both the process and outcomes of planning (Qadeer, 1997; Qadeer & Agrawal, 2011; Sandercock, 2004).

Despite the promotion of multicultural planning, it has been argued that “there is insufficient empirical evidence that this ethno-cultural awareness provides useful guidance in planning practice” (Zhuang, 2013, p. 94). This exemplifies that planning is reactive to ethnic minority needs and interests, thereby presenting both immediate challenges and opportunities for municipalities (Burayidi, 2003; Harwood, 2022; Qadeer & Agrawal, 2011). Planning processes may unintentionally discourage or exclude newcomers and immigrants to be involved due to its bureaucratic structure of engagement (Allen & Slotterback, 2021). Fincher et al. (2014) discussed how urban planning played a role in regulating experiences of difference and diversity in place. While planning practitioners have primarily focused on ethnocultural diversity

in larger, more heterogeneous Canadian cities (Qadeer & Agrawal, 2011), research on multicultural planning in smaller, non-metropolitan settings remains limited (Shirinova, 2013, Zhuang, 2023). Multicultural planning, tailored to the needs of ethnic diversity in areas with large and relatively established immigrant settlements, does not necessarily take into account the unique contexts of smaller cities, which differ significantly from the larger settings.

Immigrants to Canada have predominantly settled in large gateway cities such as Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal. These cities offer greater access to ethnic networks and cultural amenities (e.g., ethnic grocery stores, restaurants, places of worship, etc.), which serve as competitive attractions for immigrant settlement compared to smaller cities (Agrawal & Kurtz, 2019; Bauder & Sharpe, 2002; Derwing & Krahn, 2008; Hou & Bourne, 2006; Hyndman et al., 2006; Perry et al., 2020; Zhuang, 2021). Accordingly, Canadian research on immigrant settlement have focused on gateway cities such as Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver (Allen et al., 2021; Hiebert, 2017; Rose & Preston, 2017; Zhuang & Chen, 2017), and larger cities such as Ottawa, Winnipeg, Calgary, and Edmonton (Agrawal & Kurtz, 2019; Simpson, 2017; Veronis, 2019). Other factors shaping immigrant settlement decisions include perceptions of quality of life (Derwing & Krahn, 2008) and employment opportunities (Beine & Coulombe, 2018). Immigration status may also be associated with the settlement locations of newcomers as family class immigrants tend to follow the established settlement locations of their family members (Sapeha, 2016), while the initial settlement locations of refugees tend to be federally determined (Kaida et al., 2020).

Researchers have focused on the effectiveness of immigration policies of various scales in facilitating the dispersion of immigrants to lesser populated areas (Carter et al., 2008; Okonny-Myers, 2010; Pandey & Townshend, 2011; Shannon, 2015; Zhuang, 2023). Immigration programs and incentives such as the Atlantic Immigration Pilot Program, and Provincial Nominee Programs play a role in attracting and retaining the settlement of immigrants in smaller cities and regions to stimulate population and economic growth. Labour-based migration also plays a role in the settlement of immigrants in smaller cities (Carter et al., 2008; Pandey & Townsend, 2011; Pottie-Sherman & Graham, 2021). Walton-Roberts (2005) reinforced the importance of the local community and economic context as contributing determinants of retaining immigrants in smaller cities. Pottie-Sherman & Graham (2021) explored aspiring gateways, referring to peripheral cities, such as those in Atlantic Canada, which are proactively striving to attract and retain immigrants as a means to counter demographic challenges. The uneven distribution of immigrants further marginalizes smaller cities and regions affecting their economic prosperity and social stability, hence calling for the need for further inquiry (Brown, 2017; George et al., 2017; Graham & Pottie-Sherman, 2021; Patel et al., 2019; Pottie-Sherman & Graham, 2021; Teixeira & Drolet, 2018; Wagner & Growe, 2021; Zhuang, 2023; Zhuang & Lok, 2023).

There are a multitude of factors that may contribute to the de facto regionalization of immigrants towards smaller cities. Those factors can be economic such as smaller cities being more conducive for housing affordability (Brown, 2017; Teixeira & Drolet, 2018), a lower cost of living (Kelly & Nguyen, 2023), and having employment opportunities (and immigration pathways) for skilled and unskilled labour (Esses & Carter, 2019). Though researchers should be mindful that those factors are relational and contextual as Drolet & Teixeira (2022) highlighted that housing unaffordability was a main concern of immigrants settling in the small cities of Kelowna and Kamloops as an example. Characteristics of a smaller city may play a role in immigrant settlement decisions where those contexts may provide benefits such as the conduciveness for community interaction (Sanchez-Florez, 2018), local proximity to amenities (Zhuang & Lok, 2023), and a quieter lifestyle that is supportive of life-trajectories such as raising a family (Kelly & Nguyen, 2023). Studies of small and medium-sized municipalities inferred that the sense of belonging of immigrants are related to employment security and home-ownership (Kitchen et al., 2015) or can be experienced in specific places such as settlement agencies or



religious spaces (Chai, 2021). Hence, immigrants in part make settlement considerations towards a smaller city based on how they perceive that community (Esses & Carter, 2019).

Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) refer to integration as "a two-way process that involves commitment on the part of immigrants to adapt to life in Canada and on the part of Canada to welcome and adapt to new peoples and cultures" (Government of Canada, 2023c). Hence under this definition of integration, both the host community and newcomer community play a role towards integration. Albeit the benefits of living in a smaller city as perceived by immigrants, studies have also suggested that smaller cities may be challenging settlement and integration locations for immigrants. Relative to larger cities, smaller cities may have deficiencies in service amenities such as public transportation or specialized healthcare services which can be particularly challenging for newcomer integration especially for those with less resources (Dennler, 2022; Esses & Carter, 2019). Other settlement and integration challenges in smaller cities include having less access to ethnic and cultural networks (Pottie-Sherman & Graham, 2021), ethnic goods and services (Zhuang & Lok, 2023), proneness to experiences of social isolation (Chai, 2021), and the inadequacies of culturally-appropriate support systems (Patel et al., 2019). Drolet & Teixeira (2022) had highlighted that immigrant service organizations played a formal role for immigrant settlement and integration in the small cities of Kelowna and Kamloops which is essential in contexts with less informal support infrastructure in place. In a rural settlement context, racialized immigrants tend to report a lower sense of belonging in their community when compared to non-racialized immigrants (Lund & Hira-Friesen, 2013). With consideration of the challenges of immigrant settlement and integration in smaller cities, scholars studying immigrant settlement and integration in those contexts emphasize the importance of taking into account place-based factors which shape the lived experiences of immigrants (Kelly & Nguyen, 2023; Zhuang, 2023). Furthermore, understanding the local context of reception is imperative in acquiring a nuanced perspective towards inclusion and belonging. This notion is exemplified in Banack's (2023) ethnographic study of rural Albertan attitudes towards cultural minorities is attributed in part to rural Albertans' sense of alienation and rural identity.

## **Methods**

This exploratory study utilized a case study approach (Yin, 2009) which involved semi-structured interviews with 10 immigrants, two Municipal Officials, and one settlement worker at a local immigration agency. Case study research is an applicable method for empirical inquiry (Yin, 2009). Case study research is relevant in this study as the research questions pertain to understanding the factors that relate to immigrant settlement and integration experiences in a small city. We acknowledge that there is ambiguity in the literature regarding what the operational definition of a small city in Canada pertains to (Bonafacio & Drolet, 2017). This paper defines a small city in consistency to the Census Agglomeration defined by Statistics Canada (2022c) as a settlement comprising "a core population of at least 10,000." This is an exploratory study of place based on participants' perception of a small city. The case study of Brooks, Alberta which will be contextually discussed aligns with the characteristic of a "new immigrant destination" (Winders, 2014) from the context of relatively recent and rapid immigration towards a context that has not historically settled non-European immigrants. The research was conducted between February 2021 and July 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the COVID-related restrictions and social distancing enforcement at the time of study, the entire research process including recruitment and interviews, was conducted virtually via Zoom or by telephone. All of the research had been approved by Toronto Metropolitan University's (formerly Ryerson University) Research Ethics Board

Regarding recruitment, three semi-structured interviews with municipal officials and a local settlement worker were conducted to better understand the policies and processes related to planning for multicultural diversity in the context of Brooks, Alberta. Municipal officials have a role in municipal governance while their specific role is not disclosed to protect their identity with consistency to the Research Ethics Board. These participants were recruited through an email invitation. Additionally, ten immigrants were interviewed for this study. To be included in the study, the participant must have met all of the following inclusion criteria: participant is an immigrant to Canada, over 18 years of age, identifies as a Visible Minority Person as defined by the Employment Equity Act (Statistics Canada, 2015), and resided in Brooks at the time of the study. Recruitment was facilitated by local immigration agencies, social media posts, and snow-ball sampling techniques. Participants were asked to correspond to interview questions pertaining to reasons for settling in Brooks, and to provide insights about the challenges and opportunities encountered in their living experiences.

Among the immigrant participants, eight out of 10 participants were female. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 56, where the average age was 26. Interviewees originated from six countries: Cambodia, Ecuador, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya and the Philippines. Among the sample, immigrants landed in Canada between 1995 to 2015. Six out of 10 interviewees had directly immigrated to Canada and lived in Brooks upon landing. On average, interviewees had lived in Brooks for 12.5 years; ranging from six to 21 years in the municipality. At the time of the interviews, all 10 interviewees had Canadian citizenship. Eight out of 10 interviewees have a family-member(s), either a parent(s) or spouse, employed at JBS Foods Canada (a meat-processing plant which is the main employer of immigrants in Brooks, Alberta). One interviewee, at the time of study, worked at the meat-processing plant. The variety of occupations of the interviewees included: Post-Secondary Student (n=6), Restaurant Management (n=1), Childcare (n=1), Meat-Processing (n=1), and Unemployed/Non-Styled (n=1).

This study has a limited sample size of 13 interviews due to challenges with recruitment during the COVID-19 pandemic. The recruitment of immigrant participants was limited to snowball sampling, and the responses were primarily reflective of immigrant perspectives based on those who have immigrated and settled in Brooks around 2010. A majority of the participants were immigrant post-secondary students (6 out of 10 participants) where the settlement stories of those participants were attributed to having family members employed at the main employer of immigrants in Brooks: the JBS meat-processing plant. Although there are limitations of this study, the findings from this study is not intended to provide a generalizability of immigrant lived experience in smaller cities. Rather, it is our intention that this study can contribute to the literature around diversity in Canada by sharing the insights and learnings from policy makers, service providers, and immigrant community members living in a uniquely diverse context especially for a smaller city.

## **Brooks, Alberta**

Alberta is a province that attracts immigrant settlement predominately through its competitive economic advantage and opportunity (Bonifacio & Drolet, 2017). Alberta tends to be a secondary migration destination where immigrant and domestic residents in Canada tend to migrate for labour opportunities and the competitive cost of living in comparison to traditional gateway provinces such as British Columbia and Ontario. Brooks, Alberta can be considered a “new immigrant destination” (Winders, 2014) as it is a context that experienced a growth of an immigrant population (see Figure 1) in a relatively short period of time where contextually, Brooks has not been a place that was attributed to non-European immigration. Traditionally a rural settlement of European settlers on Indigenous (Blackfoot and Crow) land (City of Brooks,

2023), the settlement of Brooks has historical ties to settler colonialism and immigration from Europe that was dispossessed from Indigenous people, which is contemporarily known as Treaty 7 Territory. The population of Brooks had been significantly diversified through the migration and settlement of non-European immigrants and refugees, particularly attributed to the locality of the JBS Foods Canada, a meat-processing plant. Secondary migration of newcomer immigrants to Brooks began in the 1990's where immigrants and refugees attained employment opportunities at a labor-intensive meat-processing plant called Lakeside Packers at the time; today known as JBS Foods Canada. The high turnover of domestic laborers, attributed to the physically intensive nature of the work, corresponded with labourforce demands. This prompted the employer to turn to immigrants and refugees for low-skilled labor (Broadway, 2007).

Brooks, Alberta is an ethnically diverse city with a population of 14,904 as of the 2021 Census (Statistics Canada, 2022d). As of the 2021 Census, Brooks (at 37.1%) has a higher proportion of immigrants than Calgary (the largest city in the same province of Alberta) (33.3%), and Canada overall (23.0%). Brooks has a relatively high visible minority population, as nearly half (48.6%) of the population in Brooks are a non-Caucasian and non-Aboriginal person. Accordingly, Brooks is more diverse than Calgary (41.1%) and the Canadian average (26.5%), and it is relatively comparable to the Toronto Census Metropolitan Area (57.0%) in terms of visible minority population. At the time of study, there were multiple settlement and integration services funded by Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) and provided by non-profit organizations in Brooks (City of Brooks, 2023).

Figure 1 outlines the demographic trends of immigration and ethnic diversification from 1996 to 2016, highlighting trends of immigrant settlement and a diversifying population. Compared from 1996 to 2016, the proportion of visible minorities transitioned from 3.12% to 36.8%. Among the visible minority population (48.6%) in 2021, 22.3% were Black, 13.4% Filipino, and 4.4% Latino American. According to the 2021 Census, 37.1% of the population of Brooks was immigrants: 41.8% were economic-class immigrants, 16.4% family-class, and 41.5% refugees.

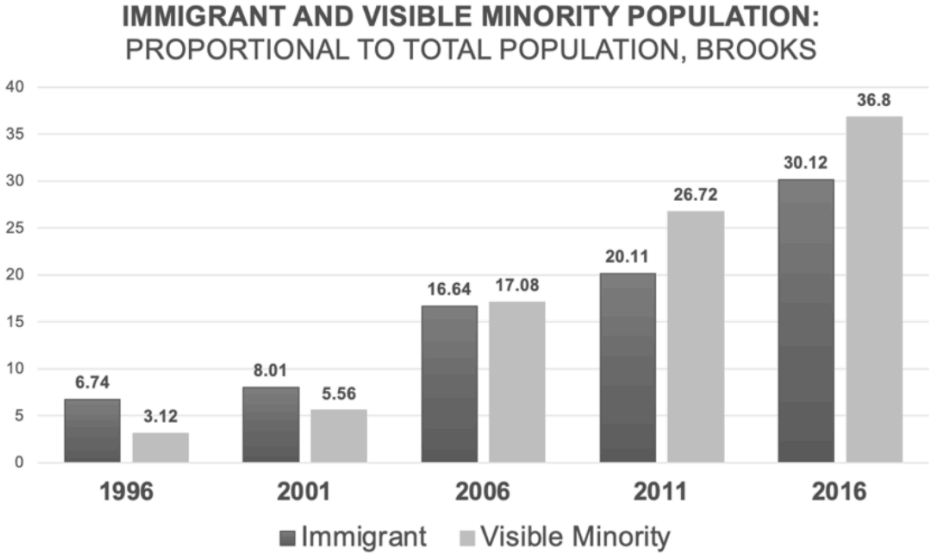


FIGURE 1: Immigrant and Visible Minority Population: Proportional to Total Population, Brooks, Alberta. (Source: 2016 Census)

## Findings

### ***Employment and family: catalyzing immigration to small cities***

Immigrant interviewees reinforced that employment opportunities and family (re)unification were the main factors towards settlement in a smaller city. Although this study had only one participant (Immigrant B) who was directly working at the meat-processing plant at the time of interview, the locality of the JBS Foods Canada meat-processing plant was a primary factor of immigrant settlement in Brooks as emphasized by various interviewees. Immigrant B had immigrated to Canada via family-sponsorship and had directly settled in Brooks since their arrival to Canada in 2003. This interviewee described that a “job opportunity and place to work” was an important consideration for settlement in a small city, as they perceived that larger cities tend to have a more competitive labor market with newcomers with limited English proficiency.

Similarly, another interviewee (Immigrant A) also based their settlement decision on employment considerations. Initially, they resided in Medicine Hat, a city 100 kilometres away. The interviewee’s spouse, who worked at the meat-processing plant, had a daily round-trip commute of two hours. Due to the closer proximity to the workplace, they decided to relocate to Brooks. The role of the employer as a catalyst for immigration had been discussed as a factor for migration to Canada and particularly, settlement in a small city by other interviewees. Immigrant G, the daughter of a JBS Foods Canada employee, mentioned that her immigration to Canada was attributed to family sponsorship. This originated from a family member who was initially sponsored by the employer.

These personal narratives reveal that (re)location decisions in a smaller city are influenced mainly by economic and personal factors, such as employment prospects and family reunification. The following sections will discuss other factors at the community level to further illustrate the nuances of immigrants’ lived experiences and the place-based challenges they faced, as well as the implications for smaller municipalities.

### ***Presence of ethnic communities fosters a sense of belonging***

Immigrant interviewees were asked to reflect on their experience as an immigrant living in a smaller city. When being asked, “What made Brooks an attractive place for you to migrate here as an immigrant, beyond employment opportunities,” one immigrant interviewee (Immigrant D) who initially landed in a smaller, remote city in New Brunswick and moved to Brooks due to family in search for better employment opportunities mentioned that the existence of a compatriot community was a considerable factor for settlement in Brooks (see Figure 2): *“I can relate more to people. There’s more [of the same ethnic people] here. There [are] more ethnic and cultural events where you can gather with each other and celebrate your culture. In New Brunswick...you’re pretty much isolated from other people.”*



FIGURE 2: Two individuals are seen interacting outside of the “Madina Shopping Centre” and “Africa SuperMarket.” Ethnic stores are common areas for immigrant interaction in Brooks. (Image Source: Ryan Lok)

Beyond ethnocultural similarities and the presence of compatriots, the existence of a diverse community in Brooks was an important catalyst for immigrants to feel belonged. People from various ethnic, cultural or religious backgrounds could collectively resonate with newcomers, sharing similar settlement and integration experiences in a smaller city. The role of a multicultural population in Brooks was described by an immigrant interviewee (Immigrant C) as: *“Brooks is well-diverse. It is multicultural. There are a lot of people from...like your home, back in your home country, [but] different, you know, a lot of different countries...So it can make you feel like you’re home, even though it is not a home, home.”* The importance of finding people who share similar experiences in integration is an imperative aspect of settlement in smaller cities, whether sharing the same ethnocultural background, or experience as a visible minority which was similarly described by an interviewee (Immigrant E): *“So because Brooks is so diverse, now, I think one of the good things is that if you are going to immigrate anywhere, and go to Brooks, you will find someone like you, eventually, because everyone is here.”*

The role of places of worship is a considerable aspect for immigrant retention in Brooks. Figure 3 depicts a former residential home (Figure 3: middle building) was first purchased by the Muslim community and converted into a Mosque. It was later expanded in 2013 into a second building (Figure 3: building on the right). The Mosque is located, relatively in isolation from the main commercial areas, on the periphery of the municipality. When being asked, “How satisfied are you with the stores and services available in Brooks related to your ethnic, cultural or religious needs,” one immigrant interviewee (Immigrant A) who had relocated from Medicine Hat, Alberta to Brooks in 2000 highlighted the establishment of a mosque and place of worship is paramount for a sense of connection in the community.



FIGURE 3: The Mosque (the building in the middle and on the right) in Brooks, Alberta was expanded in 2013 which provides a place of worship for the local Muslim population. (Image Source: Ryan Lok)

### ***Place-based challenges faced by immigrants in the small city***

Immigrant interviewees discussed the pros and cons of living in Brooks. Advantages included the proximity to work and services, quiet neighbourhoods, and a perceived sense of safety. Disadvantages encompassed a lack of urban amenities, such as a variety of shops, restaurants, and places to visit. While the experiences of immigrant interviewees in Brooks may align with those of native-born residents in many ways, immigrants faced unique challenges, impacting their sense of belonging and inclusion within the broader community. One major challenge addressed by interviewees was related to experiences of prejudice and implicit unwelcoming attitudes by the host community whether real or perceived. Many immigrant interviewees felt that, while the municipality strives to appear welcoming to attract immigrants, there are subtle unwelcoming attitudes embedded within the mainstream community, as commented by one interviewee (Immigrant H) who had immigrated to Canada and settled in Brooks to reunite with family: *“So I think that Brooks is a spectrum. And there’s a lot of...people that maybe [are] against immigration...but there’s definitely two sides, because we are super multicultural, but we also have this group of people that maybe don’t really like that, but they lived here their whole life...So those are some challenges, you’re always going to seem like an outsider...”*

Although Brooks’ multicultural community indicates a welcoming and tolerant environment, the influx of immigrants to this traditionally homogenous small town has presented challenges towards fostering inclusion and intercultural connections. This was described by an interviewee who also immigrated to Brooks to reunite with family (Immigrant I) as *“Some challenges I think, like when you first get to Brooks, is that feel like you’re left out because you’re different than others, you speak a different language, you can’t communicate as well. So people just see you as an outsider. And, you start to feel like that you don’t belong in Brooks. But then you realize that there’s also nice people in this area, you start to feel welcomed, and you start to feel at home and like it’s a new place that you can also make your own.”*

There were a variety of responses to the question: “where are some places that you feel connected to the community.” Some immigrant interviewees referred to their workplace, school, or the community recreational center as a place where they feel connected to the community. Two interviewees noted that places of worship, such as mosques and churches, play a significant role in connecting individuals to the community. However, various immigrants mentioned that there is not a place, or lack of places, that they feel a connection with. This

suggests the lack of gathering community spaces that is conducive for intercultural interactions in the small city, beyond formal environments such as the workplace or educational/religious facilities. Immigrant interviewees indicated that despite the presence of annual multicultural celebrations and events which recognize multicultural diversity, there is a lack of an everyday gathering space in the community to engage the diverse population, promote intercultural interactions, and enhance a sense of belonging.

### ***Importance of municipal and community partnerships***

Interviews with municipal officials and a settlement worker highlighted the importances of building partnerships between municipalities and communities. One municipal official noted that the municipality does not proactively seek to attract or retain immigrants, but rather, it follows a market-driven strategy, relying on the private sector to attract and handle the immigrant workforce. When being asked, “Has the municipality focused on any policies in attracting and retaining immigrants,” the municipal official emphasized that the approach of the municipality was not to focus on strategies towards attracting or retaining immigrants. Instead, their focus was on being responsive to demographic changes as a whole, without giving special consideration to the ethnocultural components of the population.

Regarding collaboration between local immigration agencies and the municipality, it was highlighted as an important factor to support immigrant settlement and retention. When being asked, “How does your organization collaborate with other stakeholders in the community,” the importance of collaboration was reinforced towards effective integration of immigrants into the local community, as noted by the interviewed settlement worker: “...we work very closely...we believe that although we are an agency we are providing services [which] cannot be provided in a silo. Because at the end of the day, what we are trying to do is to integrate newcomers into the community.”

Although the municipality recognizes the need to accommodate the growing population of racialized immigrants through the ‘celebration’ of diversity, substantial challenges such as fostering a sense of belonging and inclusion and ensuring representation in political and spatial facets of the community persist in smaller cities despite economic opportunities that serve to attract immigrants. When being asked, “What is the role of immigration and settlement agencies in working with municipal programs and organizations,” a settlement worker from a local immigration agency reinforced the importance of community partnership and the strategic need for better approaches to welcoming immigrants and representing diversity in the community: “I do believe that Brooks has done a lot in terms of becoming a welcoming community...I think if there is some improvement, we need to look into maybe some sort of systemic policy-level improvement that may address some of the long-term goals. Yes, we celebrate our diversity. Yes, we have these [cultural] events, we have these education programs, we have these celebrations. But what are we doing, for example, to address some of the systemic issues? Whether it is around representation, whether it is around changing attitudes of some people?”

When being asked, “What is the role of the municipality that can make Brooks a better place to celebrate its diversity,” the settlement worker identified the municipality as an imperative stakeholder towards enabling the wellbeing of the immigrant community, as elaborated in the following statement: “[I] believe that the municipal government has a significant role here, even more than the provincial and the federal government. Because at the end of the day, this is their community. This is the wellbeing of their citizens”

Consistent with the perspectives of immigrant interviewees and the settlement worker, the municipality also recognizes systemic issues related to discrimination and prejudice that exist implicitly in the community. The municipal official (A) explained: “I still think there’s racism

*and discrimination that happens in a small community. We fight that regularly. And we do that through all kinds of means. But we continue to do that.”*

Additionally, the municipality recognizes the role of collaborative partnership with community stakeholders and settlement agencies towards building a welcoming and inclusive community. When being asked, “How does the municipality of Brooks understand the needs and challenges of ethnic communities and immigrants,” the municipal official (A) emphasized the importance of welcoming newcomers along with local immigration agencies. Another municipal official (B) pointed out that funding constraints act as a barrier to creating spaces conducive to intercultural interactions, as they elaborated: “*..at the conclusion [the community and municipality do recognize that], ‘yes, your community does need a space for the community.’ But there’s no funding currently to fund the actual space for the community.”*

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This study is exploratory in scope as it seeks to understand factors that contribute to the experiences of racialized immigrants residing in a smaller city in Canada. The case study of Brooks, Alberta is an example of how employment and family-related reasons had played a prominent role in driving immigrant settlement into a small city which differs from the context of *aspiring gateways* (Pottie-Sherman & Graham, 2021) where those municipalities and regions tend to be more proactive towards attracting and retaining immigrants. This case study affirms that municipalities are largely responsive (Walton-Roberts, 2005; Wiginton, 2014) to immigrant settlement and integration as it occurs rather than proactively planning for immigrant settlement and integration. Interviews with municipal officials and a local settlement worker suggested that the formal role of the municipality in addressing immigrant settlement and integration has been mainly neutral. Municipalities must play a proactive role in preparing for immigrant settlement by addressing the long-term implications of integration in the community. This was exemplified in this case study where immigrants may voluntarily migrate to a small city for economic or personal-related decisions. Yet the challenge and opportunity for municipalities regards conversations about how to foster a sense of belonging and inclusion in place as real or perceived experiences of being an outsider persists for immigrants settling in a small city. Municipal planning and policy-making must reflect the lived experiences of immigrants.

This study illuminates that the implications of settlement and integration are in part influenced by *place* and a sense of belonging. Interviews with immigrants in Brooks highlighted that there were varying experiences of belonging and inclusion where for the most part, immigrants did experience a sense of belonging attributed to the presence of ethnocultural diversity in a small city that has largely been tied to the private sector in facilitating this settlement. The findings of this study further suggest that beyond employment and family-related factors, factors related to a sense of belonging, specifically a multicultural and ethnic community dynamic, was realized as a positive factor after moving into Brooks. The presence of compatriots and those sharing ethnocultural similarities in language, culture, religion, and immigrant status enabled a more positive experience of integration to both Canadian society and a small city in particular. Although there were a variety of perspectives regarding the preference for residence in smaller cities or larger cities by participants in the study, the implications of preference for smaller cities realized through the experience of moving into a smaller city must be acknowledged as a retention strategy particularly for immigrants in smaller municipalities. Immigrants integrating into a pluralistic society face challenges towards integration into not only a new country, but also experience settlement in the context of community. As Sanchez-Flores (2018) suggested how smaller cities may foster an environment that is conducive for immigrant interaction with the host population due to the smaller nature of the community, it is imperative that municipalities ensure that there are spaces and *places* that



are inclusive. This requires the municipality to be proactive in addressing immigration as demographic change.

When planning for diversity, it must be acknowledged that various constraints within the planning process may hinder planners' capacity to meaningfully engage with lived experiences of community members. These challenges can be logistical, such as lack of resources, budgeting constraints, and competing timelines in planning, or they can be systemic, such as barriers to immigrant participation in the planning process (Allen & Slotterback, 2021). The Canadian Institute of Planners recognizes the importance of equity, diversity, and inclusion more broadly (CIP, 2016). They also call for competencies in the profession that further acknowledges the demographic realities of communities of all sizes across the country, that is, living with difference and ethnocultural diversity in Canada. Fostering community partnerships between planners and local organizations serving immigrants, such as the settlement sector, can break down silos. This collaborative approach and partnership will support efforts to create inclusive and equitable communities for all members. Municipalities should seek to understand processes of growth through immigrants' perspectives as a way to retain immigrant populations effectively. Leveraging the lived experiences of immigrants in policymaking while recognizing constraints to participation (Allen & Slotterback, 2021) and enabling innovative methods of participatory engagement of immigrant communities is fundamental towards planning *with* diversity, rather than *for* diversity.

Canadian cities of all sizes are diversifying in large part due to immigration. The small sample size and the unique status of Brooks as a highly diverse, small city limit the extent to which this study's findings on diversity and integration can be generalized to other small cities in Canada. Despite its limitations, this study's findings — garnered from the perspectives of immigrant community members, municipal officials, and settlement agency staff — highlight the value of having diverse perspectives towards building more inclusive and equitable communities. Understanding immigrants' perceptions and lived experience, such as the reasons and factors of settlement in a smaller city is crucial for planning because it takes into account the lived realities of community members. This is becoming increasingly important given that Canada will continue to diversify ethnically and racially, underscoring the need to reflect the varied experiences of all community members in order to inform equitable policies and shape inclusive communities.

Future studies should seek to understand the varying lived experiences of immigrants residing in smaller cities across different settlement stages and life courses. This would be valuable for better understanding and critically examining the factors of attraction and retention of immigrants in smaller cities. If federal and provincial policymakers deem to redistribute the share of immigrants and economic growth towards smaller cities, it is imperative to consider and understand the processes of voluntary settlement and preferences of immigrants from a place-based perspective. Alberta remains a popular destination for immigrant (re)settlement. As Banack's (2023) ethnographic study of rural Albertan attitudes towards cultural minorities have indicated, planners and policymakers should take into account a holistic community perspective of both the host community and newcomer populations towards fostering a sense of belonging for all in the community; with emphasis that each place is contextually unique. Municipal planners are vital in incorporating and understanding the everyday lived experiences of those affected by planning policies and decisions. This understanding is essential to achieving more inclusive and equitable outcomes for the entire community. Immigrants' settlement trajectories are in part economic and subjective decisions as immigrants in this case have migrated to a smaller city primarily for employment prospects and family reunification. However, to foster inclusive and equitable communities, municipalities must strive to collaborate with immigrant communities, valuing the richness of their lived experiences, and ensuring ethnocultural diversity is represented in space and place.

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