

POLICY BRIEF



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Provincial Nominee Programs and the Retention of Immigrants

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Provincial Nominee Programs (PNPs) have become a fundamental part of Canada's immigration system and support a more balanced geographic distribution of immigrants. Their effectiveness, however, depends not only on attraction but also on retention within nominating provinces and territories. Retention outcomes vary across provinces, with some facing challenges keeping provincial nominees long-term.

While provinces nominate immigrants to respond to regional economic and demographic priorities, permanent residents have full mobility rights under the Canadian Constitution's Charter of Rights and Freedoms, making secondary migration their inherent choice. Provinces have tailored PNPs to enhance retention, using policy levers such as selecting temporary residents with provincial ties, assessing "intention to stay," and requiring settlement plans. However, limited systematic evidence exists on how specific program design choices impact long-term settlement outcomes. Gaps in data collection, policy evaluation, and understanding of migrant decision-making all constrain the assessment of PNP effectiveness in supporting retention.

This policy brief argues that applying a retention lens to PNPs adds a critical dimension to Canada's regionalization strategy. Improving outcomes means strengthening governments' capacity to anticipate, measure, and respond to mobility patterns through policy design and allocation decisions.

This brief recommends:

- At the **Federal/Provincial/Territorial level**, establishing a coordinated retention monitoring framework, and incorporating retention-relevant contextual factors into multi-year PNP allocation decisions; and
- At the **Provincial/Territorial level**, strengthening the integration of program evaluation with retention outcomes, and incorporating migrant perspectives into PNP design and settlement strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Canada's [Provincial Nominee Programs \(PNPs\)](#) enable nine provinces (all but Quebec, which operates under a separate agreement) and two territories (Northwest Territories and Yukon) to “nominate” economic immigrants for selection as permanent residents to Canada. Introduced in the early 2000s, the [PNPs](#) were designed to address the uneven distribution of immigrants across Canada, and to allow provinces and territories to tailor economic immigrant selection to their economic and demographic needs. Over the subsequent two decades, as [provinces became invested](#) in these programs and provincial allocations expanded, PNPs grew from a [marginal instrument](#) into the [largest economic immigration selection channel in Canada](#). This trajectory was disrupted in [2025](#), when the federal government cut PNP admissions by half and used this reduction as leverage in federal-provincial negotiations linked to the [redistribution of asylum seekers](#). Yet, the [2026-2028 immigration levels plan](#) has restored the PNPs as the second-largest economic immigration channel, after the federal high skilled worker programs.

Beyond these recent ups and downs, a central issue remains: while [PNPs aim to attract newcomers to a broader set of geographic destinations](#), their ultimate success depends on keeping them there. This is where the tension arises: mobility rights under [section 6\(2\)](#) of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms allows anyone with Canadian citizenship or permanent residence (PR) to move freely within Canada. While some regions benefit from dynamic economic conditions, attracting both internal and international migrants, others – particularly smaller or more rural jurisdictions – experience out-migration and struggle to retain newcomers. [Five years after their admission in 2017](#), over 85 percent of provincial nominees remained in British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario – provinces that offer dynamic economies and robust immigrant support systems. In contrast, Prince Edward Island had a five-year retention rate of only 21.6 percent, while Saskatchewan, New Brunswick, and Newfoundland and Labrador recorded rates between 46–47 percent (see Table 1). If nominees – processed and selected through provincial streams and allocations – subsequently [leave](#) or relocate, the nominating province fails to reap the long-term demographic and economic benefits of their investments in selecting and integrating those individuals.

These disparities in retention rates intersect with provincial nominees' geographic distribution: the provinces with the lowest retention rates are those most reliant on PNPs to grow their population and labour force, and address skills shortages. Provinces like Manitoba, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island, where over 80 percent of economic immigrants were selected through a PNP or the regionally analogous [Atlantic Immigration Program \(AIP\)](#) in 2024, face greater challenges in keeping newcomers long-term, which directly impacts their ability to meet regional development goals.

The retention debate is not simply about tracking immigrants after their arrival; it requires a more comprehensive understanding of how provincial policies – selection criteria, settlement services and retention incentives – interact with broader economic and social contexts to influence the migration decisions of nominees over time. Unfortunately, the current evidence remains fragmented, and gaps in both data collection and policy evaluation prevent a clear assessment of which factors have the most impact on migrants' choices to stay or leave and what policies and programs actually improve retention.



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Table 1: Most recent five-year retention rates of immigrants admitted through Provincial Nominee Programs, by province and territory and by admission year, 2013 to 2017 ([Statistics Canada](#))

Province	Admission year				
	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Newfoundland and Labrador	53.7%	44.8%	47.5%	40.6%	47.2%
Prince Edward Island	39.0%	25.5%	19.5%	24.7%	21.6%
Nova Scotia	58.7%	64.0%	61.8%	57.0%	57.8%
New Brunswick	41.3%	38.1%	41.3%	40.9%	47.1%
Ontario	91.6%	91.5%	94.1%	93.7%	91.4%
Manitoba	79.0%	75.4%	71.8%	68.5%	65.6%
Saskatchewan	64.6%	61.7%	63.4%	56.7%	46.6%
Alberta	92.9%	89.6%	90.1%	90.4%	88.4%
British Columbia	88.6%	86.9%	87.3%	88.6%	85.5%
Yukon and Northwest Territories	62.5%	70.8%	68.6%	61.5%	66.7%

Sources: Longitudinal Immigration Database, 2023 ([5057](#)), table [43-10-0018-01](#) (consulted October 2, 2025).

BACKGROUND: PNP AND THE CHALLENGES OF RETENTION

PNPs are a cornerstone of Canada’s [decentralized immigration system](#). They give provinces the ability to select immigrants who are more likely to meet local labour market and demographic needs – and, crucially, to remain in the province over time. Yet the relationship between policy design and actual retention outcomes is far from straightforward.

PNPs are designed to fit provincial needs

Each province manages its own Provincial Nominee Program within the federal allocation. Provinces design nomination criteria to reflect their economic, demographic and linguistic priorities. Across Canada, there are about [80 provincial and territorial economic immigrant selection streams and pathways](#). Certain commonalities exist across provinces, indicating [some degree of shared interests](#). Most provinces, for example, operate streams for graduates of Canadian post-secondary institutions, though eligibility often requires graduating within the province. Almost all provinces target temporary workers with local experience, with variations in the required duration or sector of employment. At the same time, provinces

use PNPs to pursue more specific objectives like recruiting Francophone immigrants (e.g., [Northwest Territories](#)), addressing occupational shortages (e.g., health professionals in [Saskatchewan](#) or [physicians in Nova Scotia](#)), or attracting highly educated candidates (e.g., PhD graduates in [Ontario](#)). Most streams require pre-arranged employment, reflecting a shift toward a demand-driven immigration model.

Beyond these patterns, the pathways and streams within a Provincial Nominee Program reveal a remarkable degree of customization. Rather than a unified program, PNPs encompass a wide range of policy instruments. They are distinct from federal programs, for example, as certain PNPs are open to lower-skilled workers (e.g. to work in tourism/hospitality, food processing, agriculture, trucking). This diversity illustrates the extent of provincial autonomy and experimentation within Canada’s immigration system. PNPs have become increasingly popular, supported by [active provincial recruitment and promotion strategies](#). For candidates, provincial nominations represent additional avenues for accessing PR. They can provide [faster processing](#) and 600 extra points if processed through the federal Express Entry system. Their value lies in their flexibility and responsiveness – allowing provinces to tailor selection to labour market conditions, demographic objectives and retention goals.

Intention does not ensure retention

A common feature of PNPs is that nominees must intend to remain in the province that nominated them. This is explicitly embedded in Section 87(2) (b) of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations, which states that “[a foreign national is a member of the nominee class if \[...\] they intend to reside in the province that nominated them](#)”, and echoed across [bilateral agreements](#) and provincial program guides: For example, “You must intend to and be able to live and work in Alberta”; “You must demonstrate that you have the intent to live, work and economically establish in British Columbia”; “Demonstrate the intention and ability to settle permanently in Newfoundland and Labrador”.

However, upon arrival at a Canadian port of entry, nominees receive PR status, along with mobility rights under [section 6\(2\)](#) of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Although provinces can set [reasonable residency requirements for accessing certain social and welfare benefits](#), immigrants with PR status can legally seek to live or work anywhere in Canada, creating opportunities for secondary migration. Thus, although provincial nominees are expected to settle in the province that nominated them and must demonstrate a genuine intention to reside there – failure to do so potentially constituting [misrepresentation](#) – there is [no enforcement mechanism](#). This means that deliberate efforts to [redirect migration flows operate within a context of full mobility for permanent residents, constraining their impact](#). Consequently, policy attention has shifted toward designing PNPs that not only attract immigrants, but that explicitly promote retention.

Policy-driven retention: What public policy levers do provinces use?

The objective of retention increasingly encroaches on adjacent policy areas, as provinces fine-tune their “upstream” selection processes to identify candidates most likely to stay.

Selecting temporary residents with provincial ties

One major strategy uses nomination programs to transition temporary residents, especially international students and temporary foreign workers, into permanent residency. Provinces thereby contribute to a [two-step migration model](#), selecting those who have



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already formed ties in the province, have employment and are more likely to stay. [Picot, Hou and Crossman](#) found that 72 percent of provincial nominees aged 20 to 54 receiving permanent residency in 2021 had previously been temporary foreign workers. They also show a sharp increase in the share of PNP immigrants with prior Canadian study experience: [38 percent in 2019, up from 7 percent in 2010](#). Analysis of immigration streams reveals that there is increasingly a requirement for post graduate permit holders to have studied within the nominating province, indicating concern about graduates from an institution in one province applying to another province’s PNP to take advantage of lower human capital requirements for PR or more numerous provincial nominee spots. Provincial experience has therefore become an important criterion for PNP selection, either as a prerequisite or as a weighted factor in the selection grid.

Assessing “intention to stay”

Provinces view the intention to stay as a predictor of later retention. To establish intent, they employ a range of mechanisms that differ in stringency and administrative complexity. These can be grouped into three main categories.

1. **Adaptability factors:** Many provincial programs award points for “adaptability”, a catch-all category that includes having family members in the province, prior residence, work or study

experience, or property ownership.

2. **Demonstrated connections:** Some provinces require more specific evidence of intention to stay, such as job applications or offers, proof of volunteering or prior work or residence in the province, or previous visits. For example, Manitoba only accepts skilled foreign workers who can demonstrate the support of a family member or friend (“Manitoba supporter”), previous education or work in the province (“Manitoba experience”), or an invitation to an interview and exploratory visit as part of a Strategic Recruitment Initiative (“Manitoba invitation”).
3. **Formal settlement plans:** The most demanding approach requires applicants to submit detailed settlement plans that demonstrate their seriousness and readiness to settle. For example, New Brunswick’s Strategic Initiative Stream for French-speaking immigrants requires a settlement plan to help evaluate the applicant’s economic and social integration potential. Nova Scotia requests information on where the applicant plans to live, where their children will go to school, how they plan to improve their French or English, and how they will become part of their new community. Saskatchewan also requires a settlement plan from certain applicants in lieu of a job offer.

Yet the central question remains: do these retention-oriented policy tools translate into higher retention over time?

Retention varies significantly across provinces and programs

The primary tool for assessing immigrant retention is the [Statistics Canada Longitudinal Immigration Database](#), which calculates retention rates by cross-referencing immigrants’ intended destination at arrival with the province of residence declared in their income tax filings in subsequent years. Five-year retention rates provide a stronger measure than one-year outcomes, as they capture the “[longer-term likelihood that immigrants will settle, establish networks and relationships, and contribute to the economy in their intended province](#)”. As shown in Table 1, retention rates among provincial nominees vary significantly across provinces and territories.

A central premise of the PNP is that [it facilitates the](#)

[allocation and retention of immigrants across provinces](#)

more effectively than other federal economic programs, such as the Federal Skilled Worker Program (FSWP), the Canadian Economic Class (CEC), or the Federal Skilled Trades Program (FSTP). This prompts a comparison of retention outcomes across major immigration programs.

National-level data from [Statistics Canada \(2024\)](#) show that retention rates differ across economic selection programs. The CEC – requiring prior experience in Canada as a student or worker and thus fostering pre-existing ties – exhibits high retention rates (88.3 percent). Federal Skilled Workers and Skilled Trades programs record 78 percent. At first glance, PNPs appear to perform less well: only 69.1 percent of nominees admitted in 2017 remained in their intended province five years later. However, this national picture obscures important regional dynamics.

A more comprehensive analysis by [Picot, Crossman, and Hou \(2023\)](#), examining retention rates at the provincial level, provides additional insight which minimizes the difference. Except for Prince Edward Island – a relatively small program – five-year retention rates for provincial nominees (2010-2019 cohorts combined) were similar to or higher than those of CEC or FSWP (see Table 2). As the authors explain, the lower national retention rate for PNPs is largely driven by program composition effects: provincial nominees are more numerous and likely to settle in areas with lower overall retention rates (see Table 1). Once province of residence, sociodemographic background (e.g., age, education) and local economic conditions (e.g., provincial unemployment rate) are taken into account, PNPs exhibit [a modest retention advantage](#) – approximately 1 to 3 percentage points higher than federal programs one year after landing. However, this advantage diminishes over time and becomes negligible after five years.

Table 2: Retention rate among economic immigrants aged 20–54 at landing, by years since landing, 2010–2019 cohorts combined.

Initial province	Federal Skilled Worker Program		Provincial Nominee Program		Canadian Experience Class	
	1 year	5 years	1 year	5 years	1 year	5 years
Newfoundland and Labrador	86.6	56.8	84.4	61.2	83.9	52.2
Prince Edward Island	84.4	61.9	75.8	38.5	84.9	x
Nova Scotia	88.6	62.5	90.4	76.1	86.6	64.5
New Brunswick	84.9	56.3	89.2	60.6	85.2	66.5
Ontario	98.0	94.4	97.8	94.2	98.2	95.3
Manitoba	90.6	73.3	94.4	84.7	85.5	66.1
Saskatchewan	88.7	71.4	90.7	77.7	85.9	65.0
Alberta	96.5	90.5	97.0	93.5	96.5	92.2
British Columbia	96.4	90.9	96.7	92.0	96.8	91.9
Yukon and Northwest Territories	88.4	59.7	89.8	81.4	83.6	55.7

x: suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the Statistics Act

Source: Statistics Canada, Longitudinal Immigration Database.

Reproduced from [Picot, Crossman, and Hou \(2023\)](#).

These figures capture only part of the story. Retention rates are often interpreted without adequate attention to broader demographic and economic contexts. This decontextualized approach risks misrepresenting the challenges faced by some provinces. For example, the Atlantic provinces report some of the lowest retention rates, but these figures need to be understood against higher out-migration of non-immigrants, smaller immigrant intakes, weaker labour markets and limited settlement infrastructure.

PNPs have succeeded [in channeling more immigrants to provinces that historically received few newcomers](#). These programs also enabled provinces that historically received few newcomers to attract and select candidates aligned with local needs. In many cases, PNPs have not only been the primary vehicle for attracting immigrants but have also played a foundational role in establishing immigrant communities – critical assets for attracting and retaining future immigrants, even where overall retention remains lower than in larger provinces.

Finally, retention should not be treated as a binary outcome – stay or leave – but rather as a continuum

shaped by economic cycles, family decisions and iterative policy actions. Comparing provinces without accounting for differences in population size, demographic pressures, economic structures or institutional capacities risks a one-size-fits-all interpretation of retention success.

GAPS IN KNOWLEDGE AND POLICY EFFECTIVENESS

To get the most out of PNPs, provinces wish to retain the migrants they select. While secondary migration is inherent in a constitutional system that guarantees mobility rights, it complicates provincial planning and service delivery for both the nominating province of initial settlement and the secondary province of relocation. Understanding how forces shaping retention interact with policy design is central to effective policymaking and achieving a core objective of PNPs: to address the uneven distribution of immigrants across Canada and align immigration with regional development goals. Yet, our understanding

of what drives provincial long-term retention and whether PNPs are adequately designed to achieve it, is undermined by persistent data, analytical and conceptual gaps.



Understanding how migrants make decisions – what attracts them to a province, and what motivates them to stay or leave – is key to building durable retention strategies.

Limited insight into the interaction between policy design and outcomes

Retention statistics from tax filings offer snapshots rather than continuous tracking of immigrant mobility, with substantial time lags: the most recent five-year retention data reports on immigrants admitted in 2017. Beyond data availability, comprehensive analysis must remove distortions and generate valid comparisons across demographic groups, provinces and immigration programs. Meaningful analysis requires situating retention outcomes within economic, social and policy contexts as retention is shaped by labour market conditions, housing availability, social and physical infrastructure, and regional development dynamics, which are rarely integrated into existing analyses.

Several provinces have started partially tracking retention, particularly for provincial nominees. British Columbia includes retention statistics as a performance measure [BC2020c:15]; Alberta tracks the share of newcomers “still residing and working in Alberta one year after obtaining permanent residency” as an indicator of its “ability to retain a skilled,

resilient, and productive workforce” [AB2020:38]; Saskatchewan has introduced retention indicators to gauge “how many immigrants to Saskatchewan are attaching to the province and staying long-term”, along with targets [SK 2021a:15]. These initiatives signal growing awareness of retention as a policy concern.

Yet, monitoring efforts remain fragmented. There are no consistent metrics across jurisdictions, and data are not systematically collected or shared across provinces or with the federal government. Retention indicators are scarce, rarely comparable and lessons learned in one jurisdiction are difficult to transfer.

Provinces have increasingly experimented with retention-oriented policy levers by adjusting selection criteria, designing retention incentives and diversifying their nominee streams. However, these policy inputs are not systematically linked to policy outcomes in available data. Current monitoring frameworks do not allow for disaggregated analysis by provincial stream or pathway, or for assessments of specific program changes, or particular demographic characteristics of immigrant population groups.

The absence of integrated data and evaluation mechanisms limits policy learning. Program changes tend to be made in isolation, without feedback loops or coordinated evaluation. Without stronger data infrastructure and shared evaluation frameworks, both provincial and federal actors lack the evidence needed to understand which policy levers effectively support retention, and how evolving PNP designs and allocations shape long-term outcomes.

Overlooking migrant agency

Researchers have identified structural [determinants of retention](#) – including job-market conditions, housing affordability and availability of health, social, and education services – and individual characteristics, like education, family status and language competency. Family, friends or other immigrants from their countries, and welcoming communities attract and retain newcomers. While these factors are crucial, this perspective often underplays “[migrant agency](#)” – how individuals actively navigate Canada’s layered immigration system. Although migrants are the recipients of [provinces’ strategies](#), they are [not passive: it is not only about how policies shape their decisions to stay or leave but what migrants ‘do’ with policies](#). They may strategically use the PNP as a pathway to permanent residence or as a stepping-stone to settling elsewhere.

This also shapes provincial behaviour: some governments have tightened selection processes to screen out applicants perceived as more likely to move elsewhere. Yet little is known about how migrants perceive or adapt to these evolving constraints to reach their goals, such as permanent residency, better employment, or better services and supports for their family. Policy design needs to consider these mobility dynamics. Understanding how migrants make decisions – what attracts them to a province, and what motivates them to stay or leave – is key to building durable retention strategies.

Limited understanding of how PNPs shape immigrant distribution within provinces

While the proportion of new immigrants in Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver has decreased in recent years, the majority of recent immigrants still disproportionately reside in Canada's Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs). In 2021, [over 90% of recent immigrants \(admitted within the five previous years\) lived in one of Canada's 41 CMAs](#). Unlike urban areas, small communities and rural areas – already affected by youth out-migration toward urban centres – face significant challenges in attracting and retaining newcomers.

Medium-sized cities tend to [retain immigrants more than small towns or rural areas](#). Over time, this has led to mid-sized cities becoming important gateways to settlement. As shown by [Hiebert](#), cities with populations between 250,000 and 2 million now attract a share of newcomers that more closely matches their share of the Canadian population, a change from the early 2000s. Regionalization policies such as PNPs have contributed to this diversification of destinations, but their impact remains limited in smaller communities (those with fewer than 100,000 residents).

Despite this intra-provincial differentiation, limited evidence exists on how PNPs interact with broader regionalization efforts within provinces (except [Haan et al.](#)). Retention assessed at the provincial level obscures variation between metropolitan centres, mid-sized cities, and rural areas. It remains unclear to what extent PNPs support intra-provincial dispersion and retention or reinforce existing urban hierarchies. This gap constrains the provinces' ability to align immigration policy with [place-based approaches](#) and to design retention policies for smaller and rural communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that:

1. The Federal government in collaboration with Provinces and Territories:

a. Establish a coordinated retention monitoring framework.

Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) and Statistics Canada should work with provincial and territorial governments to develop harmonized retention and secondary migration reporting and analysis to track migrants' mobility trajectories over time. The framework should enable contextualized analysis, linking retention and mobility outcomes to regional economic, social and demographic conditions. This would support using context-sensitive comparators, comparing provinces of similar size and accounting for intra-provincial differences (e.g., rural versus urban retention) to provide a more accurate assessment of retention effectiveness.

b. Incorporate retention-relevant factors into multi-year PNP allocation decisions.

PNP allocation frameworks should be planned on a three-year basis and systematically take into account regional labour market conditions, population size, internal mobility patterns and demographic pressures, with particular attention to smaller and emerging destination provinces. Embedding these factors into multi-year allocation discussions would support greater predictability and planning for provinces, ensure that all regions, particularly smaller or emerging destinations, benefit from immigration, and that allocations respond to regional realities.

2. The Provinces and Territories with Provincial Nominee Programs:

a. Establish regular program evaluations of their PNP with a focus on the impact of program inputs on retention outcomes

Establish evaluation mechanisms that assess the components of their PNP program inputs (e.g. stream eligibility criteria, retention incentives, settlement supports, employer involvement, personal characteristics) against actual retention outcomes, enabling evidence-based policy adjustments.

b. Incorporate migrant perspectives into program design.

Actively seek feedback from provincial nominees through consultations, surveys, or follow-up interviews to understand reasons for continued residence in the nominating province or onward migration in order to inform improvements in both selection, retention and settlement policies.

About the Author

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Suggested readings

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