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Navigating Precarity: Social Services, Belonging, and the Lived Experiences of Migrants in the Greater Toronto Area

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Executive Summary

Based on a survey of 994 migrants with precarious legal status, including refugee claimants, international students, and temporary migrant workers as well as non-status migrants, this study highlights the need for improved social services and support¹ in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). It aims to inform policy and practice by articulating the lived experiences and critical support needs of this population.

The survey findings underscore the socioeconomic precarity among migrants, characterized by financial insufficiency, precarious employment, and housing insecurity, particularly for women. This precarity is not a set of isolated problems but an interlocking web of structural disadvantages, in which precarious legal status (e.g., lack of citizenship or permanent residency) undermines stability across all other domains of life. Since arriving in Canada, most survey participants have experienced unfair treatment and discrimination. Feelings of isolation appear to weaken their sense of belonging. Accessible and effective social services and support are crucial to breaking this cycle: they help migrants navigate housing, employment, language acquisition, mental health, cultural adjustment, and ultimately, support pathways to secure legal status.

While most survey participants reported accessing information about available services relatively early in their settlement process, significant gaps remain. Many expressed a need for more centralized and accessible information. Key services such as housing support, legal aid, employment assistance, and healthcare were cited as the most difficult to access. The primary barriers identified included restrictive eligibility rules, lack of culturally and linguistically appropriate support, as well as long wait times, limited service hours, and complex application processes. Moreover, service availability does not guarantee equitable access or consistent quality. Essential services such as legal support and healthcare receive a higher proportion of negative user experience ratings. Participants reported that settlement services do not always effectively meet their needs and expectations. Barriers faced by migrants indicate a disconnect between the migrant-centered protection and integration objectives of Canada's immigration system and the capacity of the support infrastructure.

This study comes at a critical time, as the federal government intensifies efforts to restrict immigration, while simultaneously reducing support for migrants and the settlement sector. These policy shifts heighten migrants' social and economic precarity. Across Canada, and especially in Ontario, funding cuts threaten the accessibility and capacity of settlement services at a time when community needs remain high and increasingly complex. The findings of this study highlight the urgent need for sustained and increased investment in the settlement sector and the broader social support for migrants. Funding decisions should not be tied only to lower immigration targets or reduced admission levels, as these figures do not reflect the ongoing needs of migrants already living in Canada. For many migrants, the demand for settlement, legal, housing, employment, health, and crisis-support services continues to grow. Reducing funding risks increasing wait times, limiting access to essential assistance, and placing further pressure on already strained community organizations. Stable, long-term investment is therefore essential to strengthen service capacity, improve coordination, and ensure timely, accessible, and culturally responsive support. This study makes other concrete recommendations to address the issues identified. These include the need for expanded service capacity, universal eligibility for essential services regardless of status, and stronger outreach and navigation support to help migrants understand

¹ We use the term "social services and support" to refer to the settlement sector, immigrant-serving organizations and other social and legal support agencies and networks.

and access available services. In addition, structural reforms are required to address discrimination and guarantee equitable access to social services and support.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	1
Table of Contents.....	3
Introduction	5
Methodology and Limitations.....	6
Key Findings.....	7
Survey Respondents: Demographic Data and Legal Status in Canada.....	8
<i>Demographic Data.....</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Reasons for Moving to Canada.....</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Length of Time in Canada</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Legal Status in Canada Upon Arrival in Canada</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>Legal Status at the Time of the Survey</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>Current Legal Status versus Initial Legal Status.....</i>	<i>12</i>
Socioeconomic Precarity of Migrants	13
<i>Employment, Income Sources & Financial Stability.....</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>Housing Instability</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Migrant Women’s Socio-Economic Precarity</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>Mental Health Conditions.....</i>	<i>17</i>
Overview of Social Services and Support Available for Precarious Status Migrants in the GTA.....	18
<i>Language Support.....</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>Housing Support.....</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>Healthcare Services.....</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>Access-Without-Fear Policies.....</i>	<i>21</i>
Sources of Information and Access to Social Services and Support	21
<i>Access to Information About Available Services and Support</i>	<i>21</i>
<i>Use of Social Services and Support</i>	<i>22</i>
<i>Accessibility of Social Services and Support.....</i>	<i>24</i>
Experiences with Social Services and Support.....	27
<i>Perceived Usefulness of Specific Social Services and Support</i>	<i>28</i>
Sense of Belonging.....	31
<i>Challenges: Isolation, Discrimination, and Unfair Treatment</i>	<i>35</i>

Solutions: Respondent Recommendations	37
Conclusion	40
References.....	42

Introduction

This report examines the perspectives and lived experiences of precarious status migrants concerning their access to and effective enjoyment of essential social services and support within the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), one of Canada's leading immigration destinations.² Precarious status migrants are a diverse group encompassing refugee claimants, international students, temporary foreign workers, and non-status migrants. The absence of permanent legal residence often produces significant social and economic insecurity. For many migrants, precarious status is associated with unstable employment, limited access to income supports, housing insecurity, barriers to health care (Goldring et al. 2009) and heightened risk of exploitation and rights violations. It can also create ongoing uncertainty, as individuals may face the possibility of losing their immigration status, being excluded from services, or being unable to assert their rights without fear of consequences.

The accessibility and effectiveness of social services for precarious status migrants in the GTA remain under-explored (Ali et al. 2025). To help address this gap, we conducted a survey between December 2024 and January 2025 that gathered insights from nearly 1,000 respondents.³ This report documents the main challenges precarious status migrants face in accessing and using social services and support in the GTA and collects their own suggestions for improvement, with the goal of centring migrants' voices and lived experiences in service design and policymaking. It has a twofold aim: 1) to shed light on the barriers that precarious status migrants encounter; and 2) to underscore the vital role social services and support play in alleviating hardship and promoting migrants' social, economic, and emotional well-being. By providing timely evidence on service gaps and needs, the report aims to inform more accessible and effective social services and support systems for precarious status migrants. These findings are particularly important given the across-the-board funding cuts introduced in the 2025 federal budget. These cuts target a wide range of services and support available to migrants across Canada (MacDonald 2026; Toronto Star 2026). In particular, the budget for the IRCC Settlement Program is expected to decline substantially, further constraining already overstretched services and undermining migrants' access to critical support.

We acknowledge that many of the challenges identified by respondents, particularly difficulties accessing health care providers and securing adequate housing, are not unique to migrants. These issues are also widely experienced by non-immigrant populations and reflect broader structural shortages and inequities in Canada's social service and support systems. Addressing them will make Canada more inclusive. It will require system-wide public investment and policy reform that extend beyond targeted measures for migrants alone, even as tailored support remain essential for those facing compounded barriers due to immigration status, gender, race, and socioeconomic position.

The report is organized as follows. It begins by outlining the research methodology and limitations, followed by key findings and a demographic profile of survey participants. It then examines the socioeconomic precarity of participants, with a focus on income, employment, housing, and mental health. The report next provides an overview of social services and support available to precarious status migrants in the GTA and analyzes their availability and accessibility. It goes on to discuss the participants' experiences using key services and their perceptions of the usefulness

² The GTA includes the City of Toronto and four regional municipalities: Halton, Peel, Durham, and York. As Canada's most populous metropolitan region, it comprises roughly 18% of the country's population. The GTA had 7.1 million residents in 2024, fueled by strong immigration (Ministry of Finance 2024).

³ The research was approved by Toronto Metropolitan University Research Ethics Board (File #2020-258).

of these services and support. Participants' sense of belonging, including experiences of isolation and discrimination in Canada are also discussed. Finally, the report concludes with key recommendations for policy and systemic change.

Methodology and Limitations

Survey participants were required to be at least 18 years old and reside in the GTA. They should have migrated to Canada as migrants or refugees and belong to a group that experiences vulnerability or has specific needs. This may include women, parents, individuals with disabilities or mental and physical health challenges, and members of the LGBTQI community. Furthermore, participants were required to possess a strong command of the English language.

To incentivize participation, the first 200 respondents received a \$20 stipend. The online survey was distributed primarily through service-providing organizations to their clients. An invitation script was sent to more than 40 immigrant-serving organizations in the GTA, with a request that they share it with their clients. In addition, members of the research team, many of whom were newcomer women in Canada at the time of data collection, circulated the survey within their own social circles and community networks to further broaden the reach. The online survey garnered a total of 2,574 responses. However, not all were valid for analysis. A notable portion appeared to be generated by bots or completed with minimal engagement, particularly during the compensation window from December 10 to 16, 2024. To ensure data quality, a comprehensive multi-step cleaning and vetting process was implemented using both automated filters and manual review.

The survey was administered using the Qualtrics platform and comprised 68 questions. Internal testing indicated it took over 20 minutes to complete the survey thoughtfully. Many responses submitted during the compensation period were completed in under 9 minutes, approximately 4.5 questions per minute, raising concerns about engagement quality and the potential for automated or inattentive responses. A threshold of 9 minutes was therefore established to flag responses for further review.

To identify and eliminate likely inauthentic or low-quality entries, three key criteria were applied:

1. **Completion Time:** Responses completed in under 9 minutes (totaling 724) were flagged as suspicious; only those confirmed as inauthentic through additional markers were excluded.
2. **Country of Origin:** The survey targeted non-Canadian participants, so responses listing "Canada" as the country of origin (57 total) were reviewed and removed if inconsistent with eligibility.
3. **Completion Status:** Responses marked as "Unfinished" in Qualtrics, especially those with numerous blank sections, were excluded. Similarly, responses that completed fewer than two full sections were removed.

Manual review supplemented automated filters to ensure genuine responses were not unnecessarily discarded. The final cleaned dataset comprised 994 valid responses.

Although the initial volume was substantial, data cleaning significantly reduced the sample size. This reflects the limitations and typical challenges, such as bot activity, duplicate entries, and superficial engagement, associated with online surveys, particularly those offering compensation. The survey was available in English only, which limited its reach. Additionally, misunderstandings may have arisen with some questions. For instance, a considerable number of respondents

indicated the United States as their country of origin, possibly interpreting the question as the country they resided in before arriving in Canada (see also below).

Despite these limitations, the final dataset retained significant qualitative depth, with many open-ended responses and written contributions which provide valuable insights for analysis.

Key Findings

Survey participants are a diverse group of predominantly racialized migrants, many of whom arrived in Canada as refugee claimants and continue to navigate complex, non-linear legal status trajectories. These precarious status migrants face significant socioeconomic precarity, characterized by widespread income insufficiency (70% report inadequate income)⁴ especially in the first years of settlement in Canada. 27% of respondents were on government assistance such as Ontario Works. Others faced precarious employment conditions, with many in part-time or underemployed roles post-migration. Housing insecurity is prevalent, with one-third of respondents in shared living or otherwise inadequate housing, and 6% experiencing homelessness.

Women experience higher unemployment rates than men post-migration. They are more likely than men to be employed part-time. Women are also disproportionately affected by inadequate housing. The survey data highlight a cycle of precarity for migrants whereby poor mental health and disability/chronic illness correlate with insufficient income, precarious work, and unstable housing.

Most respondents (82%) indicated they accessed information about social services and support within the first 6 months following their arrival in Canada. Information was provided from different sources and notably from settlement organizations, social media and government websites. Respondents reported using the services of settlement organizations and other agencies and generally positive experiences with services received and their interactions with service workers who were helpful and well-trained.

However, access to some services is deemed difficult. Housing support, legal aid, and healthcare support were rated as the top three less accessible services. Access issues were also common with education and assistance with reporting abuse, violence, or discrimination. Service accessibility is impeded by systemic factors and notably by eligibility requirements tied to one's legal status. Other factors include long waiting times and limited service delivery hours.

Experiences with key services were generally positive. Food banks are rated as the most accessible and useful service as well as the service offering the best user experience. Employment and health care services are considered to be the most useful services after foodbanks. English language and settlement services were rated low in terms of usefulness. Poor user experience ratings were high for housing and employment services.

Close to 70% of respondents reported a strong sense of belonging to Canada and consider Canada as a welcoming country. They rated as positive the overall experience of moving to Canada. Social services and support seem to play a key role in this respect. Access to community programs and services are among the top factors that helped migrants in their settlement journey, the other factors being family support and making friends.

⁴ All percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

91% of respondents reported experiencing at least some degree of isolation in Canada. A significant portion (60%) faced discrimination or unfair treatment, mostly in the workplace, but also when accessing services and during their interaction with police. Feelings of isolation are correlated with high levels of discrimination and unfair treatment.

Finding work and affordable housing, and discrimination and racism are the biggest challenges encountered by respondents in Canada. When asked what would help them reach their full potential in Canada, respondents emphasized the need for a centralized hub where migrants can access settlement and other essential services in one location, as well as stronger efforts by settlement and community organizations to better meet migrants' needs.

Survey Respondents: Demographic Data and Legal Status in Canada

This section presents an overview of the survey respondents' key sociodemographic and migration characteristics, including country of origin, race, gender, age, family and caregiving responsibilities, education, language proficiency, legal status on arrival and at the time of the survey, reasons for migrating, and length of time in Canada. The aim is to contextualize respondents' experiences by showing who participated in the survey and how their legal, social, and economic situations shape their settlement journeys and needs.

Demographic Data

Survey participants represented 98 different countries, with 26 countries contributing 20 or more respondents. A significant proportion identified the United States as their country of origin (20%), followed by India (8%). Other notable countries included Nigeria (6%), Mexico (6%), Kenya (3%), Brazil (3%), Afghanistan (3%), and the United Kingdom (3%). All remaining countries accounted for 2% or less of the total responses. 108 participants did not specify their country of origin or provided an invalid response by listing Canada, which was inapplicable in this context.

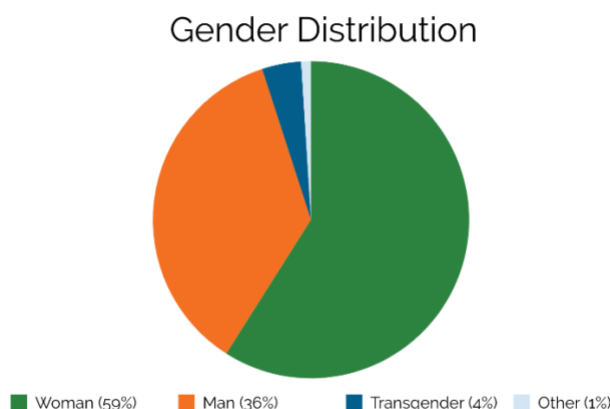
We hypothesize that the high percentage of respondents citing the United States as their country of origin may result from a misunderstanding, with participants interpreting the question as asking for the country they lived in prior to arriving in Canada. This interpretation is supported by legal status data, which shows that the vast majority of respondents (629 out of 994) were refugee claimants when they arrived in Canada.

Most survey participants identify as racialized: Black (28%), Latin American (14%), or Arab, Middle Eastern, or West Asian (12%). Other sub-groups include South Asian or Indo-Caribbean (7%), East Asian (6%), and South Asian (5%). 23% of participants identify as White.

59% of survey participants identify as women.⁵

⁵ Gender identity is defined as the gender that people identify with or how they perceive themselves, which may be different from their sex assigned at birth.

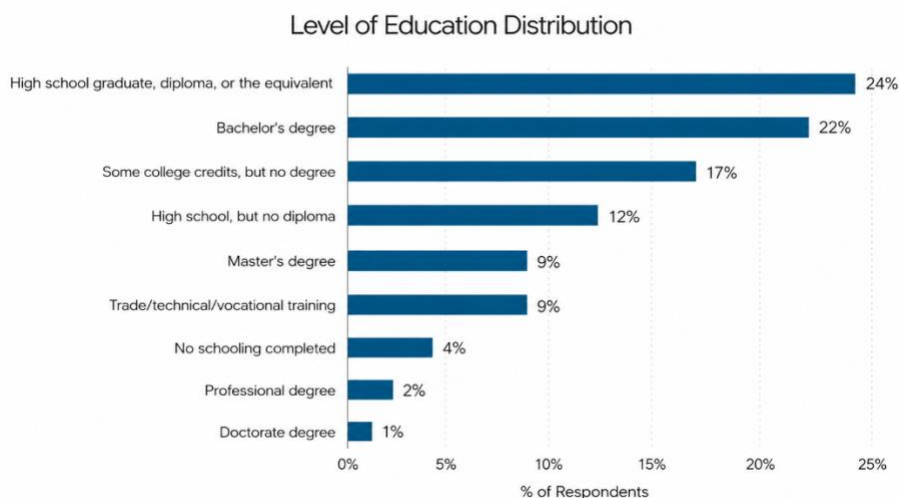
Figure 1. Gender distribution amongst survey respondents.



Among survey participants, 45% are aged 25–34 and 33% are aged 35–44. 13% are between 20–24 years old, while the remaining 9% are either 15–19 years old or 45 years and older. The majority of respondents are married (662), followed by single individuals (267). There are fewer respondents who are divorced (26), separated (19), or in a common law relationship (13). There are three widowed respondents.

71% of respondents reported having children or other dependents in their care. Of those with caregiving responsibilities, the majority (92%) indicated that they care for 1 to 3 children or dependents, while a smaller proportion (6%) reported caring for 4 to 6 dependents.

Figure 2. Level of education distribution among survey respondents.

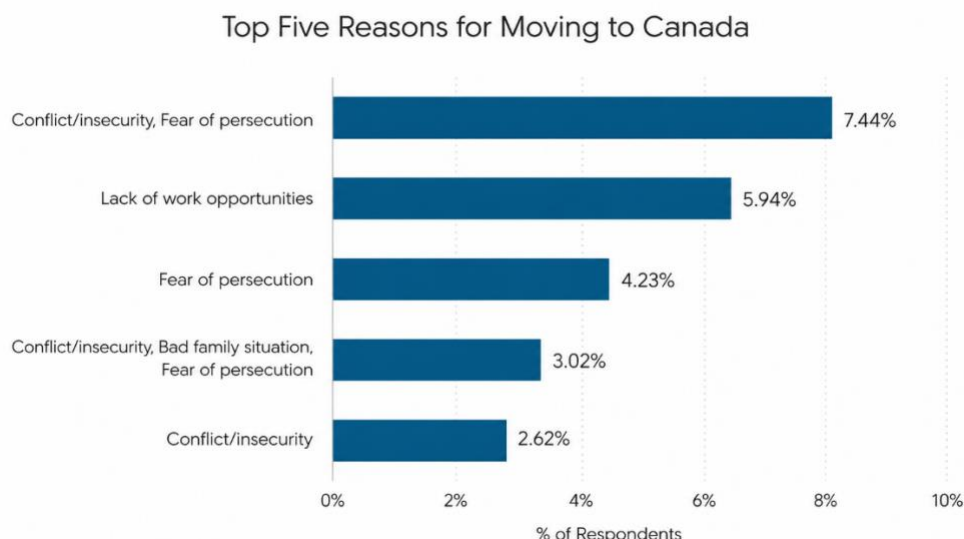


The educational backgrounds of respondents are diverse. The largest group, comprising 24%, holds a high school diploma or equivalent, closely followed by those with bachelor's degrees (22%). Twelve percent of participants reported having no diploma or formal schooling, and 17% indicated they have some college credits but no degree.

Regarding language proficiency, 78% of survey participants reported a high level of English proficiency. Specifically, 48% stated they speak English very well, and 30% said they speak it well. These results are consistent with the survey's English language inclusion criteria.

Reasons for Moving to Canada

Figure 3. Top five reasons for moving to Canada.



Most respondents indicated that they moved to Canada due to fear of persecution and conflict or insecurity in their countries of origin. This is not surprising since the majority of respondents were refugee claimants at the time of the survey or before gaining another status such as permanent resident or citizen (see below). However, the decision to move to Canada is complex. While 26 individuals (2.6%) cited conflict/insecurity and 42 (4.2%) cited persecution as their sole reasons, these factors were often mentioned alongside others. Only 59 (5.9%) respondents mentioned lack of work opportunities as their sole reason, and 21 (2.1%) cited education. Other reasons included family reunification (25 respondents) and job promises (23 respondents). These findings are consistent with previous research that points to the increasingly interrelated nature of economic and political motivations to leave one's country. Forced migration linked to conflicts, political unrest, and violence is often exacerbated by factors such as climate change and struggles for scarce resources, poverty, state fragility, and corruption (Betts, 2010).

Length of Time in Canada

Most respondents have lived in Canada for a relatively short period and are still in the early stages of settlement. Specifically, 6% have been in Canada for less than a year. One-third of respondents (33%) reported residing in Canada for 1 to 3 years, followed closely by 28% who have been in the country for 3 to 5 years.

Table 1. Total Overview of Length of Time in Canada (Number and Percentage)

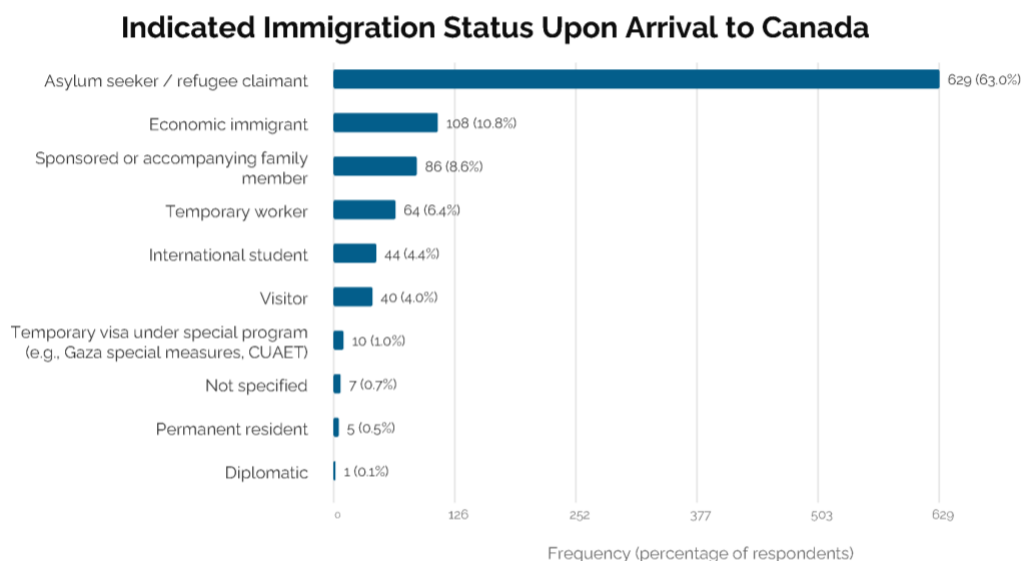
Length of Time in Canada	# of Respondents	% of Respondents
1-3 years	325	33
3-5 years	277	28

5-7 years	170	17
7-10 years	99	10
Less than a year	63	6
More than 10 years	60	6
Grand Total	994	100

Legal Status in Canada Upon Arrival in Canada

A substantial majority, 629 respondents (63.3%) out of 994, identified as refugee claimants upon their arrival in Canada. Economic migrants constitute the second largest group, with 108 individuals (11%). Smaller categories include sponsored or accompanying family members (86 respondents, 8.7%) and temporary workers (64 respondents, 6.4%). Other groups such as international students and visitors account for 44 individuals (4.4%) each. Permanent residents and diplomatic staff account for 5 individuals (0.5%) each.

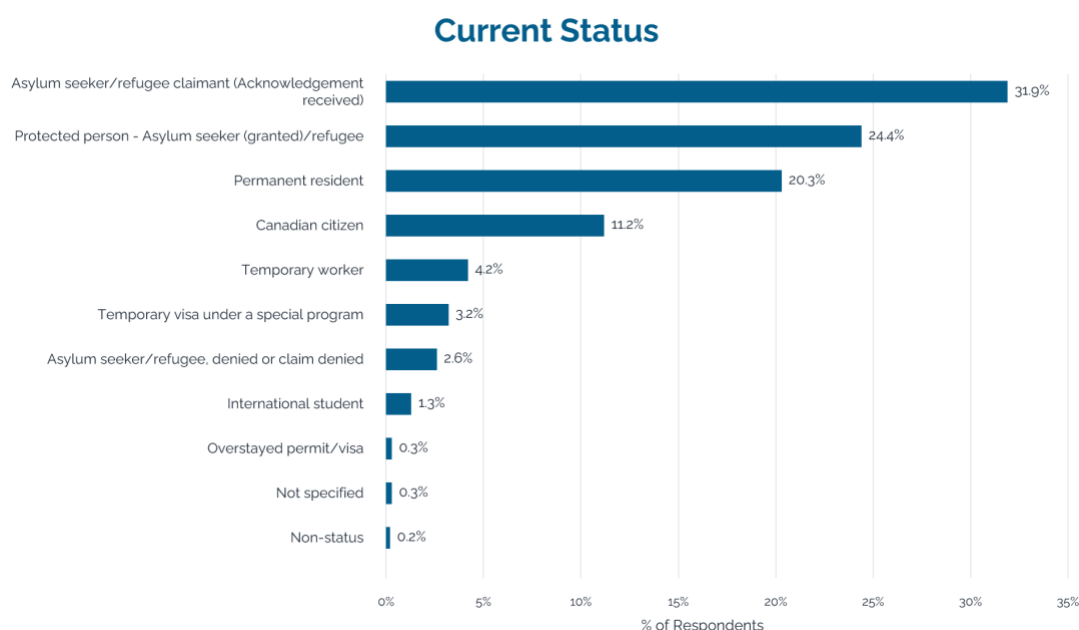
Figure 4. Immigration status of survey participants upon arrival to Canada.



Legal Status at the Time of the Survey

31.9% of the survey respondents are refugee claimants, who form the largest group followed by 24.4% who had their refugee claims granted or were protected persons otherwise. Permanent residents account for 20.3%, while Canadian citizens make up 11.2%. Smaller percentages of respondents include temporary workers (4.2%), those on temporary visas under special programs (3.2%), and denied refugee claimants (2.6%). A small number of respondents said that their current status falls into the non-status category (0.2%).

Figure 5. Percentage of Participants by Current Status



Current Legal Status versus Initial Legal Status

The survey compared respondents' legal status upon arrival in Canada with their current legal status. The aim was to gain insights into migrants' transition between legal statuses and to gauge pathways to permanent residency and citizenship.

Among the 111 Canadian citizens who answered the relevant questions, 44 respondents (40%) were former refugee claimants and 41 (37%) were economic migrants, 10 (9%) were sponsored or accompanying family members.

The survey data confirms previous research findings that most precarious status migrants experience multiple temporary-to-temporary transitions (for instance from temporary migrant worker to refugee claimant), rather than linear moves from temporary to permanent status (Goldring and Landolt 2013). To illustrate, a small number of refugee claimants who took the survey held another legal status in Canada before applying for refugee status.

Table 2. Breakdown of Previous Legal Status Held by 65 Refugee Claimant Respondents

Previous Legal Status	Count	Percentage
Visitors	15	23.1%
Economic Migrants	16	24.6%
Sponsored Migrants	12	18.5%

Previous Legal Status	Count	Percentage
International Students	11	16.9%
Temporary Workers	8	12.3%
Unknown/Other	3	4.6%
Total	65	100.0%

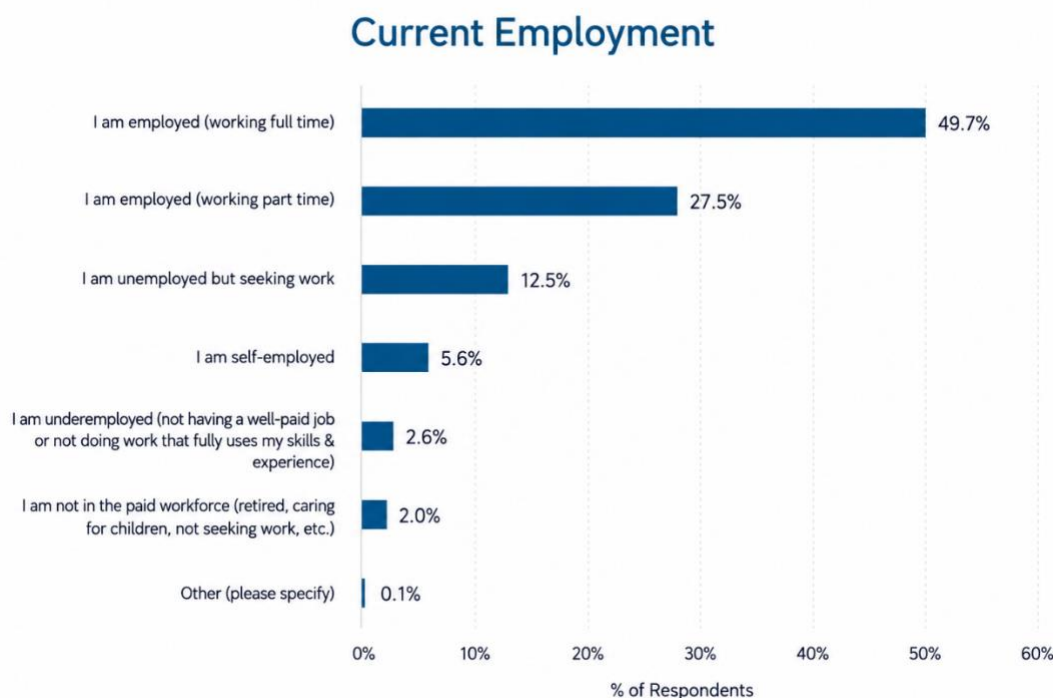
Temporary-to-temporary immigration status transitions are often shaped by a combination of personal circumstances and systemic factors, including employment conditions, availability of legal assistance, shifting and increasingly stringent migration program requirements (Coderre and Nakache 2022). These dynamics can place migrants at risk of losing their status and becoming undocumented. Although only a small percentage of survey participants self-identified as non-status at the time of the survey, it is notable that 160 respondents (16%) reported having lived and worked in Canada without authorization and 34 (3%) reported having received a deportation order. In this context, robust and accessible social services and support are crucial to helping migrants navigate complex immigration programs (Vosko 2023) while simultaneously managing the socioeconomic precarity discussed below.

Socioeconomic Precarity of Migrants

Employment, Income Sources & Financial Stability

Nearly half of respondents (49.7%) are employed full time, followed by 27.5% who are employed part time. A notable share, 12.5%, are unemployed but seeking work, while 5.6% are self-employed.

Figure 6. Current employment status of survey respondents.



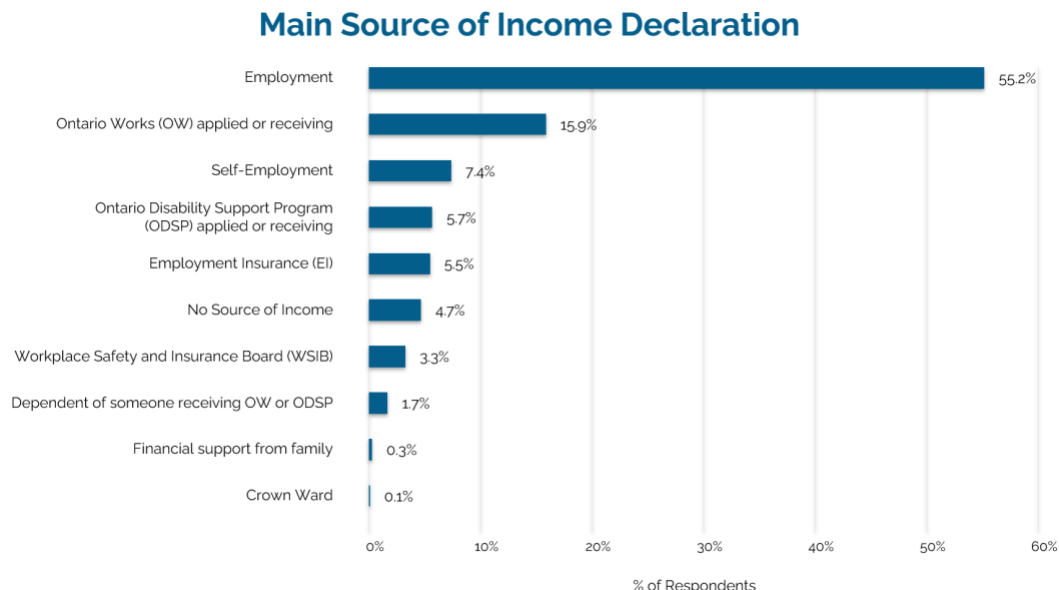
The unemployment rate decreased after migration. The percentage of individuals working full-time increased from 43.1% to 49.7%. However, the data also show a rise in part-time work. It is noteworthy that the unemployment rate of participants (12.5%) remains well above the national average of 6.8% at the time of survey (Bartlett 2025). The rise in part-time work, coupled with increased unemployment, indicates a shift toward more precarious forms of employment that often fail to provide adequate financial stability. This pattern aligns with the survey's findings on income insufficiency (see below).

Table 3. Employment Status Before and After Migration.

Employment Status	Before Migration	After Migration
Full-time	43.1%	49.7%
Part-time	23.4%	27.5%
Unemployed	18.6%	12.5%

Findings show varying levels of financial stability among respondents. Over half (55.2%) of respondents report employment as their primary income. But significant portions rely on government assistance like Ontario Works (15.9%), Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) (5.7%), Employment Insurance (5.5%), or self-employment (7.4%). 4.7% of respondents reported having no income. Others relied on disability-related support, such as benefits from the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) (3.3%) or received assistance from family members (less than 1%).

Figure 7. Main source of income amongst survey participants.



The reliance on government assistance among some respondents underscores the challenges they face in achieving financial independence and highlights socioeconomic hardships such as insufficient income, especially for those with disabilities or engaged in self-employment. This is particularly concerning given that 69% reported being the primary source of financial or material support in their households, and that 52% of full-time workers and 79% of part-time workers indicated that their income is inadequate.

Survey results show that wages do not align with the cost of living and employment does not guarantee financial stability. 70% of respondents experienced financial insufficiency.

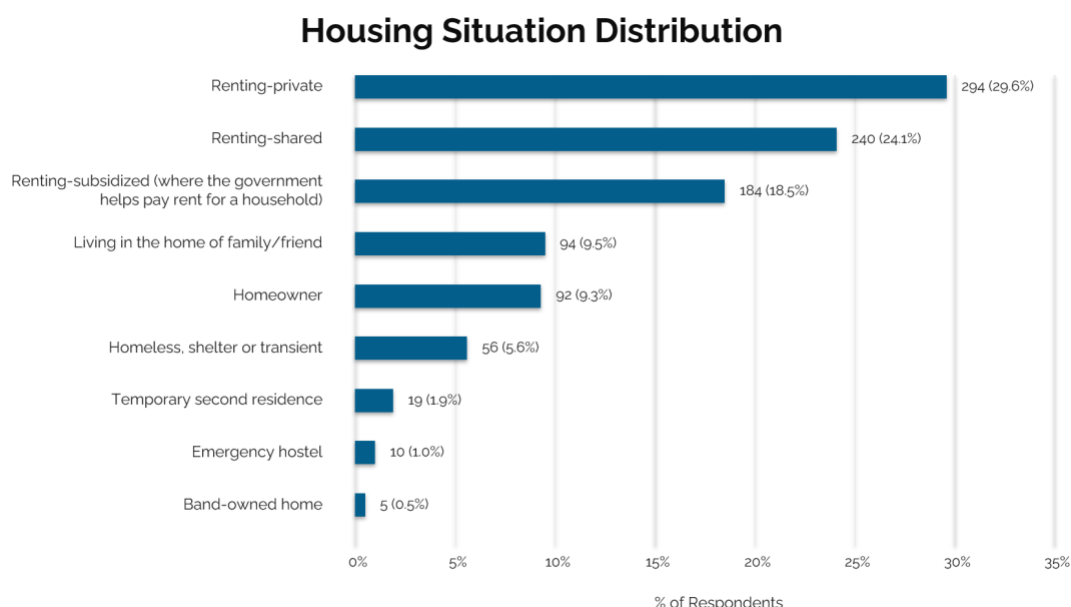
Income sufficiency improved with time in Canada but remained a challenge. Among newcomers with less than one year in Canada, 43% reported that their income was 'definitely not enough,' and only 16% said it was 'enough'. Although the data indicates that systemic barriers persist, the first years of settlement appear to be the most difficult ones.

Income insufficiency is also correlated with disability and chronic illness. 34% of respondents reported a disability or chronic illness limiting activity and form barriers to employment. 82% of those with disabilities had insufficient income, significantly higher than the 63% without disabilities.

Housing Instability

Respondents experience a critical level of housing insecurity, with only 9% are homeowners and many facing challenges in securing stable and independent housing. Almost half of respondents live in rental housing (30% private, 19% subsidized). Additionally, 9% indicated they were temporarily housed by friends or family and 24% of participants lived in shared rental arrangements. 6% reported homelessness.

Figure 8. Housing situation of survey participants.



These findings support previous research which shows that refugee claimants and non-status migrants face a high risk of hidden and episodic homelessness and destitution (Hynie 2018). These issues are pressing especially in urban centres like Toronto which is among Canada's most expensive rental housing markets.

Migrant Women's Socio-Economic Precarity

Migration, rather than being a straightforward path to economic improvement, can lead to precarious work conditions, particularly for women who experienced a sharper rise in unemployment (from 3% to 15%) compared to men (from 2% to 9%). The uptick in part-time employment was more pronounced for women, moving from 9% to 28%. These trends indicate gender disparities in employment. Women seem to be disproportionately impacted by underemployment and job precarity following migration to Canada. The disparity points to the challenges women face in the labour market, particularly in the context of migration, where they may encounter barriers such as discrimination and limited access to networks and support.

Table 4. Employment Status by Gender (Before vs. Current)

Gender	Employment Status	Before Migration	After Migration
Men	Full-time	110 (30.7%)	182 (50.8%)
	Part-time	38 (10.6%)	95 (26.5%)
	Unemployed	8 (2.2%)	33 (9.2%)

Gender	Employment Status	Before Migration	After Migration
Women	Full-time	154 (26.5%)	284 (48.9%)
	Part-time	53 (9.1%)	163 (28.1%)
	Unemployed	16 (2.8%)	87 (15.0%)

Women are disproportionately affected by housing instability as shown below. A higher proportion of women are homeless, in shelters, or transient (5.85% vs 4.47%). Women are also more likely to live in subsidized rentals (20.6% vs 13.4%) and in the homes of family or friends (10.6% vs 7.8%), which reflect greater reliance on formal and informal support for housing.

Table 5. Housing Situation by Gender

Housing Situation	Men (n)	Men (%)	Women (n)	Women (%)
Homeless, shelter, or transient	16	4.47%	34	5.85%
Shared renting	99	27.6%	131	22.5%
Living in the home of family/friend	28	7.8%	62	10.6%
Renting (subsidized)	48	13.4%	120	20.6%
Homeowner	50	14%	39	6.7%

Unsurprisingly, the survey data point to a correlation between housing and income insufficiency. Respondents living in “not suitable” housing exhibited the highest levels of financial stress, with 65% stating their income is “definitely not enough” and 93% reporting overall financial insufficiency.

Mental Health Conditions

A significant portion of respondents indicated experiencing emotional, psychological, or mental health conditions.

Table 6. Emotional, Psychological, or Mental Health Conditions Among Survey Respondents

Current Emotional, Psychological or Mental Health Conditions	# of Respondents	% of Respondents
Always	78	8%

No	328	33%
Often	164	16%
Prefer not to answer	5	1%
Sometimes	419	42%
Grand Total	994	100%

Our findings do not show a decline in mental health outcomes post-migration. However, the percentage of respondents reporting “sometimes” experiencing mental health challenges rose from 35% before migration to around 42% afterward.

Respondents who experienced frequent mental health challenges are disproportionately affected by housing precarity. Among those who reported mental health issues “always,” 12% were either homeless or living in shelters, and 40% resided in shared rental accommodations. In contrast, only 3% and 21% of individuals with no mental health issues reported similar situations, respectively.

Mental health issues may be linked to individual stressors associated with migration and settlement, as well as to social determinants of health, such as access to safe environments, adequate food and housing, quality health care, and decent employment (Ahnquist et al. 2012) and interpersonal factors like social exclusion and discrimination. These determinants highlight how conditions tied to the migration process, including prolonged insecure status and restrictions on work or housing, can affect health. Social services and support are therefore critical to fostering integration and reducing marginalization. However, as discussed in the next sections, service accessibility and efficiency are impeded by eligibility criteria and other structural factors such as limited resources and system inefficiency.

Overview of Social Services and Support Available for Precarious Status Migrants in the GTA

Social services including the settlement sector are key to promoting migrants’ rights and assist them in their integration. They provide various forms of support and assistance to this population and meet their core needs for their integration into Canada (Shields et al. 2016, 5). These services are primarily funded by the federal government through Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada’s (IRCC) Settlement Program. Each province has specific arrangements with the federal government whereby IRCC funds service provider organizations across Canada (outside Quebec). Migrant-serving agencies and social service organizations offer a diverse array of settlement services, such as needs assessments and referrals, information and orientation, and language classes (IRCC 2024).

The Province of Ontario can supplement federally funded settlement services by provincial initiatives and programs. For instance, Ontario provides funding to the City of Toronto to ensure delivery of settlement and integration services for migrants mostly through third parties. Alongside numerous non-profit and civil society organizations, an array of settlement organizations across the GTA offer support and services. Local governments play a key role. A prominent example is the City of Toronto’s Newcomer Office (TNO) which coordinates policy implementation with the

city's operational divisions that provide direct services to migrants. The TNO funds community partners to implement specific projects for this population (Praznik and Shields 2018, 5).

Eligibility for settlement services and other resources differs significantly depending on the individual's immigration status. Federally funded settlement and orientation programs, such as language courses and referrals, have stringent eligibility criteria that exclude non-status migrants and most temporary residents (Van Katwyk et al. 2024). Refugee claimants are entitled to receive limited settlement services and social support whereas other temporary residents (e.g., temporary migrant workers in the Temporary Foreign Workers Program and international students) become eligible for federal government-funded settlement services only when they are approved to become permanent residents (Government of Canada 2023).

The overview of select services below illustrate this complex landscape.

Language Support

Precarious status migrants face significant barriers to accessing formal language training in Ontario. In general, they are not eligible for the federally funded Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program, which is primarily designed for permanent residents and certain protected persons. As a result, many refugee claimants, temporary residents, and non-status migrants must rely on provincial or community-based programs such as English as Second Language (ESL). While refugee claimants may be eligible for some provincially or locally funded ESL classes, access is often uneven, inconsistent, and dependent on local availability. Access to language training should be informed by community need, not by their immigration status. Language acquisition is a foundational component of successful migrant integration. It enables them to access employment, housing, health care, education, legal information, public services, and community networks. Settlement organizations receive a limited allotment of federal funding, which determines the total number of training seats available. This funding constraint can lead to overcrowded classes and limited enrollment opportunities. Even when resources are available, they are often inadequately advertised in languages other than one of Canada's official languages. Temporary residents and non-status migrants' access to language support frequently depend on community organizations, whose ability to provide support is often limited by restricted resources.

Housing Support

Temporary residents (other than refugee claimants) and non-status migrants face exclusion from long-term government-subsidized community housing programs due to restrictive eligibility criteria. This contrasts with the stated commitment of Canada's National Housing Strategy to equitable housing for all (Bell 2019). Access to emergency and transitional housing through both federal and provincial programs varies by immigration status and the specific policies of provincial governments. For instance, specialized organizations offer emergency and transitional housing specifically for refugee claimants across most provinces whereas non-status migrants can only access homeless shelters. In urban centers like Toronto, available beds and resources are limited. Most shelters are chronically at capacity, especially those serving families and those with special needs such as survivors of domestic violence or human trafficking (Baglay et al. 2024). Shelter users report facing issues such as overcrowding, discrimination, and difficulties in transitioning to independent living (Bachour 2024; Atak et al. 2024). Precarious status migrants are often unfairly scapegoated for straining social services. Intergovernmental tensions ultimately harm migrants, who are left without essential support. A recent example is the City of Toronto's decision to bar refugee claimants from its base shelter system and redirect them to federal

services, although these services did not provide temporary shelter, in 2022–2023. As a result, hundreds of claimants, most of them from African countries, were forced to sleep on the streets (Ombudsman Toronto 2024).

The Interim Housing Assistance Program (IHAP) is an IRCC initiative that reimburses municipalities for emergency housing costs incurred for refugee claimants experiencing homelessness. In 2025–2026, the federal government covered 95% of those costs while municipalities covered the remaining 5% (MacDonald 2026). The federal government now plans to eliminate IHAP funding.

Healthcare Services

Refugee claimants in Canada are eligible for the Interim Federal Health Program (IFHP), which provides access to temporary coverage of health-care benefits through healthcare providers who are registered with the insurance company, Medavie Blue Cross (IRCC 2023). The benefits covered by the IFHP have certain limits including maximum dollar amounts. Recent changes to refugee health coverage further illustrate how policy decisions can deepen the vulnerability of precarious status migrants. On May 1, 2026, refugee healthcare funding was cut by 15% and a co-payment model was introduced: \$4 per eligible prescription and 30% of costs for other supplemental services such as dental, vision, counselling, and assistive devices (IRCC 2026). While basic medical services such as doctor and hospital care remain covered, the introduction of out-of-pocket costs for supplemental services represents a significant reduction in accessible health support for refugees, refugee claimants, and other eligible migrants. The Canadian Refugee Health Network (2026) warned these measures will increase emergency and hospital use, and worsen newcomer health outcomes.

In Ontario, seasonal agricultural workers in Ontario gain access to provincial health coverage upon arrival. Other migrant workers become eligible after three months of residence (CCR 2018). International students are required to have health insurance, typically through mandatory private plans that are often administered by their educational institutions (Global Affairs 2024). Migrants who are not eligible for provincially funded health care services, can obtain private health insurance, which can be costly and often comes with strict eligibility criteria or exclusions for certain health conditions (City of Toronto 2013). Non-status migrants do not have any coverage and often depend on the few existing community health clinics for restricted services. In the GTA, some community health care centres, non-profit organizations, and physicians offer mostly free primary care services to non-status migrants. However, community health centres are few and serve only a small portion of Ontario's population. Moreover, the care provided by community/non-profit organizations is limited, with gaps in long-term, homecare, chronic care and most specialist and hospital care.

Most precarious status migrants have limited access to mental health care, which largely depends on their eligibility for provincial health insurance or the IFHP. The IFHP generally requires a doctor's referral and pre-authorization, and covers services provided by affiliated health professionals. Migrants who are ineligible can still obtain mental health services through community-based organizations, specialized programs such as the International Agricultural Worker Wellness Program in Ontario. In practice, most precarious status migrants face many barriers in accessing mental health care (Rousseau et al. 2022). Even migrants who qualify for government-funded mental health care are typically placed on lengthy waiting lists. As a result, many are compelled to buy private insurance plans or pay out of pocket for regular therapy sessions, which can be prohibitively expensive and unsustainable in the long term.

Access-Without-Fear Policies

Non-status migrants are not entitled to any settlement services or social support, since they do not meet the eligibility criteria based on legal residence. To alleviate the hardships faced by non-status migrants, the City of Toronto has implemented an “access-without-fear” policy since 2013. The policy seeks to enhance access to programs and services provided by the city or city-funded agencies. In Toronto, they encompass emergency shelter support, employment help, library services, and basic public health services (City of Toronto n.d.). Similarly, in Ajax, a municipality in GTA’s Durham Region, residents have access to town services (recreation programs, libraries, parks) regardless of immigration status since 2017 (Jung et al. 2024). The implementation of access-without-fear policies has been limited and has yielded only mitigated results. Due to the restricted nature of the municipal jurisdiction, many vital services such as health care, education, work-related protections, and housing support remain unavailable to non-status migrants (Atak and Hudson 2022). Moreover, the effectiveness of these policies is often impeded by limited resources and insufficient support from the provincial and federal governments. The lack of cooperation from municipal police remains a major obstacle.

This non-exhaustive overview shows that social services and support, particularly the settlement sector, in the GTA can be difficult to navigate for precarious status migrants. Rules about eligibility and limited funding affect service access. In this context, knowing what services and support exist, whether someone qualifies, and how to apply often makes a difference between getting help and going without it. The survey data analyzed below confirms existing systemic issues.

Sources of Information and Access to Social Services and Support

This section examines participants’ reported sources of information about social services and support and their actual experiences accessing those services. Patterns of accessibility are highlighted and existing gaps identified.

Access to Information About Available Services and Support

Access to information about services empowers migrants to navigate their new environment more effectively. By being informed about available resources, such as language classes, legal assistance, and healthcare, migrants can make informed decisions, access essential services, and ultimately, better integrate into society, and overcome challenges.

Most respondents reported receiving information about social services and support for migrants early in their settlement process. The largest group (45%) stated that they received this information between 4 to 6 months after arrival. This is followed by 37% who received information within the first 3 months. However, there is room for improvement since 5% of respondents indicated that they did not receive any information about available migrant services during their time in Canada.

Table 7. Total Overview of Migrant Services Info Received (Number and Percentage)

Migrant Services Info Received	# of Respondents	% of Respondents
No	48	5%
Yes, between 4 to 6 months of the arrival	448	45%

Yes, between 7 to 12 months after arrival	128	13%
Yes, within the first 3 months of arrival	370	37%
Grand Total	994	100%

We asked the respondents where they obtained information about available services and support with the aim to identify gaps in communication and access.

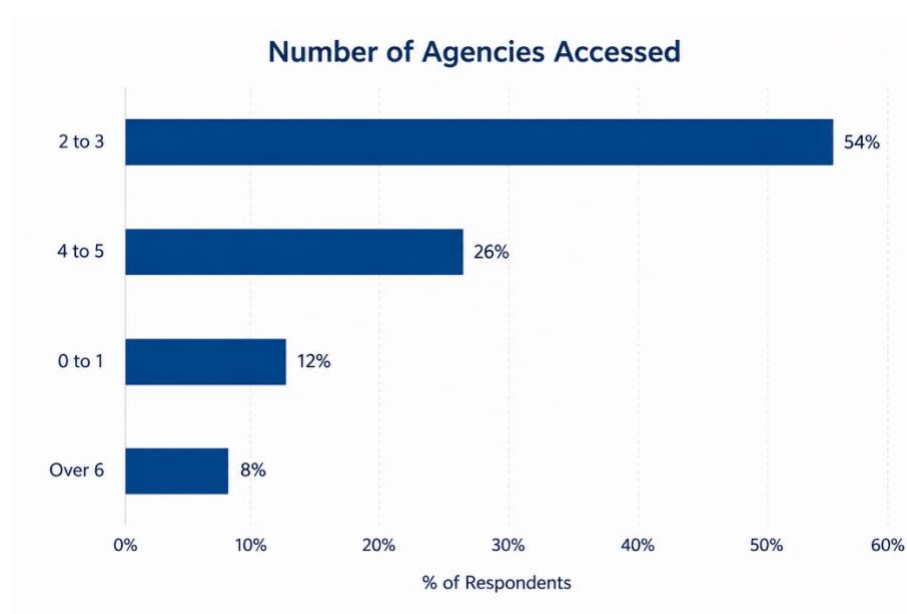
For those who received information within the first 3 months of arrival in Canada (370 respondents, 37%), the most commonly cited sources of information for migrants were social media platforms and mobile applications (73 respondents (19.7%)), settlement organizations (67 respondents (18.1%)), government websites (54 respondents (14.6%)), and family and friends (21 respondents (5.7%)). Most respondents used a mix of channels like government sites, social media, newcomer hubs, religious or ethnic community groups, social services organizations, online newcomer groups and hubs, and family and friends to find information.

The findings point to a fragmented information landscape and suggest that newcomers would benefit from a centralized, authoritative hub for key information. Such a hub could then be disseminated across multiple platforms, government and settlement organization websites, social media, and community partners, to ensure consistent and accessible information.

Use of Social Services and Support

Most survey participants reported engaging with multiple agencies to address their settlement needs since arriving in Canada. Over half (54%) indicated that they accessed services from 2 to 3 agencies. While a small number of respondents had limited contact, the majority engaged with several service providers and had more than one point of contact and continued engagement.

Figure 9. Number of agencies accessed by survey respondents.



Follow-up services are generally provided and accessible beyond the first appointment. 57% of participants reported having 2–3 follow-up visits with a service provider after their initial needs assessment. Another 24% had 4–5 visits.

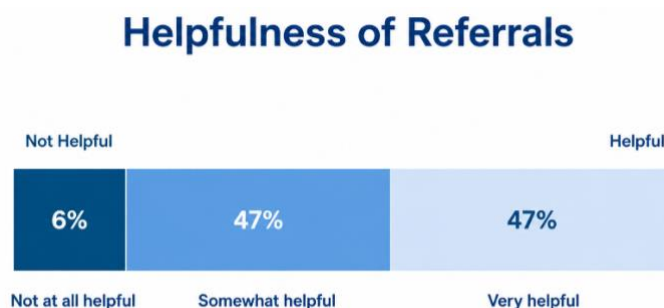
Referrals seem to be a common part of the support process for migrants. Most participants (69%) indicated that they were referred to additional social services and other organizations providing support after initially seeking help.

Table 8. Total Overview of Referrals to Additional Services (Number and Percentage)

Referrals to Additional Services	# of Respondents	% of Respondents
No	309	31
Yes	673	69
Grand Total	982	100

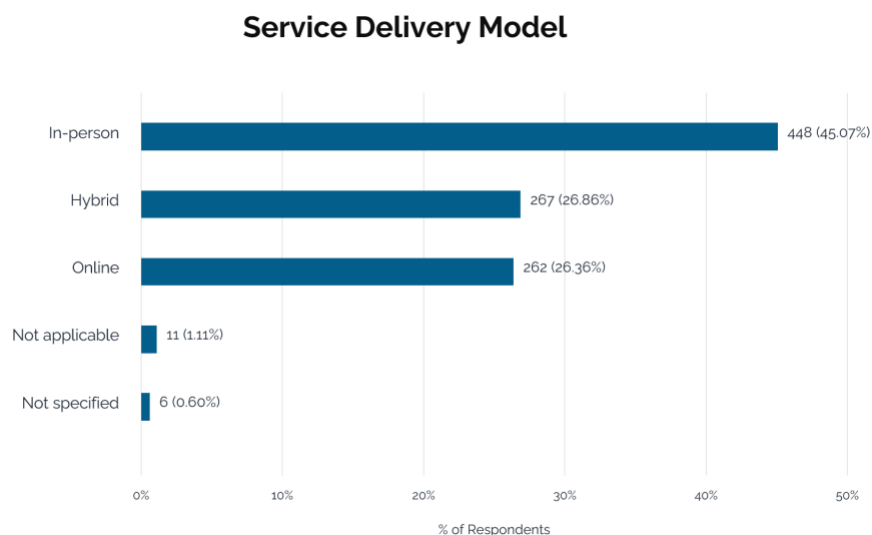
Referrals not only happen frequently but are generally helpful in meeting participants' needs. The majority of participants felt the referrals had a positive impact on addressing their concerns.

Figure 10. Helpfulness of referrals to additional services.



While in-person service remains the primary method of delivery, online and hybrid models are nearly just as common. The results point to the growing role of flexible service formats. However, as discussed below, some respondents view online services as a barrier to access.

Figure 11. Service delivery model accessed



Most participants had at least a moderately positive perception of the services and support they received. They had confidence in the knowledge and skills of the workers or counselors they engaged with. Nearly half of the respondents felt that workers were well-trained to meet their needs. Concerns about training were not widespread.

Table 9. Overview of Perceived Training of Workers (Number and Percentage)

Perceived Training of Workers	# of Respondents	% of Respondents
No, they were not adequately trained	63	6
Yes, they were somewhat well trained	448	45
Yes, they were well-trained	481	48
Grand Total	992	100

Accessibility of Social Services and Support

Although most survey participants were able to access social services and support, a significant majority (710 out of 994 or 71%) also reported experiencing challenges in the process.

Table 10. Total Counts of Services Most Difficult to Receive

Count of Services Most Difficult to Receive	Total Counts	Percentage of Respondents
Housing Support	421	42.35%
Employment Information and Support	348	35%
Legal Aid and Other Legal Support to Regularize Immigration Status	318	32%
ID Cards, Driver's Licence	302	30.38%
Mental Health Support	277	27.86%
Physical Health Care	256	25.75%

Assistance with Reporting Abuse, Violence and/or Discrimination	196	19.71%
Education	189	19.01%
Childcare Services	169	17%
Shelters	157	15.79%
Language Courses	130	13%
Food Banks	113	11.36%
Municipal Services	98	9.85%

Not all social services and support are perceived as equally accessible. On the contrary, the findings highlight challenges respondents faced in obtaining certain essential services, notably housing support, employment information, legal aid, and health care. The concentration of reported difficulties around these services suggests that the most structurally regulated and documentation-dependent services are also the least accessible. These services typically require formal eligibility screening and proof of legal status, which may deter or exclude precarious status migrants.

In contrast, food banks and municipal services such as public libraries, public health clinics, emergency shelters and food banks typically do not rely on legal documentation or immigration status for service delivery. They appear more accessible by design. Municipal services are often mandated to operate with fewer administrative requirements, such as complex application processes, compared to housing support, legal aid and health care services. “Access-without-fear” policies in Toronto and Ajax, where, in principle, no ID is required for food banks and selected municipal services may have contributed to the high accessibility ratings for these services.

Table 11. Types of Barriers in Accessing and Receiving Social Services and Support

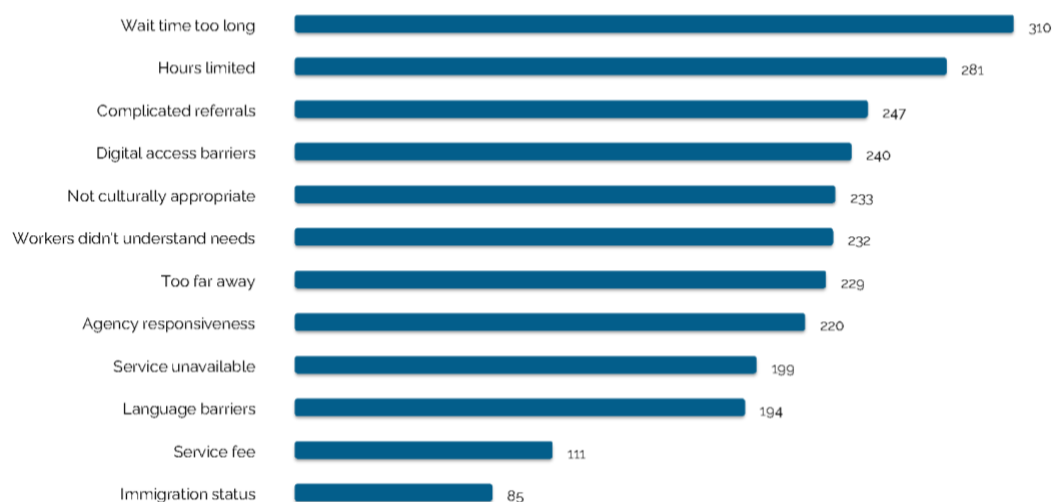
Challenge	Count	% of respondents (n = 709)
Wait time to access services was too long	310	43.8%
Service delivery hours were limited	281	39.6%
Process was too complicated with multiple referrals	247	34.8%
Services were not accessible (couldn't access online/hybrid due to lack of devices/internet)	240	33.9%
Services were not culturally appropriate	233	32.9%
Workers didn't understand my needs	232	32.7%
Services were not accessible (far from where I live)	229	32.3%

Challenge	Count	% of respondents (n = 709)
Lack of responsiveness from agencies	220	31%
Services I was looking for were not offered at the agencies I reached out to	199	28.1%
Language barriers	194	27.4%
There was a fee associated with this service	111	15.7%
My immigration status prevented me from accessing these services / I was not eligible to access the services	85	12%

Respondents were asked which specific obstacles they encounter when seeking services. The most frequently reported challenge was long waiting times for service access (44% of the 709 respondents who answered), followed by limited service delivery hours (40%). Most respondents reported multiple challenges rather than a single issue.

Figure 12. Frequency in which challenges were identified when accessing and receiving support services.

Frequency of Mentions Per Challenge Identified in Accessing and Receiving Support Services



Systemic inefficiencies (for example, long waits, complex service models, capacity constraints, insufficiently trained staff, and lack of culturally appropriate care) and service providers' limited delivery capacity and resources (for example, restricted hours and lack of in-person options) were mentioned as the top barriers. Structural problems within service systems create overlapping access barriers that disproportionately affect the most vulnerable migrants who face language

barriers, lack digital literacy or devices for online access, live far from providers, or cannot afford fees, factors which were mentioned among key access barriers.

Twelve percent of respondents reported that they were not eligible for the services they needed. As previously mentioned, eligibility linked to immigration status is a major obstacle to service access. This finding has been confirmed when respondents rated their experiences with social services and settlement support (see next section). A notable share indicated that they did not access certain services due to ineligibility.

Survey data shows that awareness (e.g., understanding rights and available services, information to navigate systems) remains a key access barrier. Among those who did not use the available services, the most common reason given was lack of awareness. Specifically, 28.2% of respondents stated that they were not aware of the services but would have used them if they had known. An additional 6.6% said they were not aware of the services but even if they were, they would not have used them.

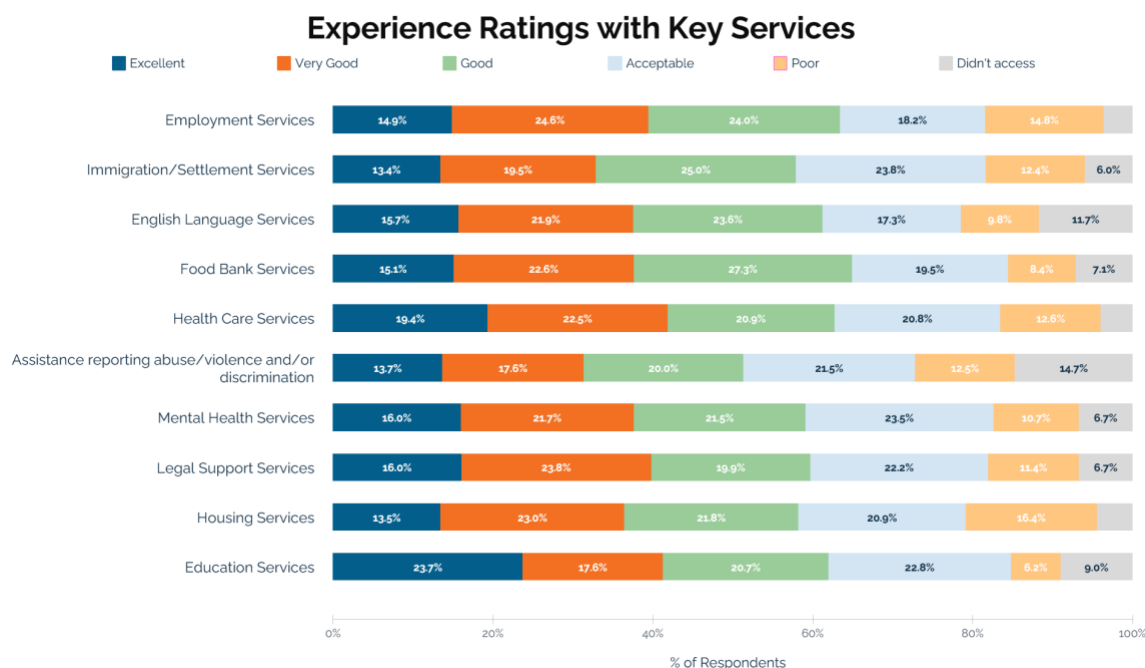
Accessibility barriers disproportionately affect vulnerable migrants and further exacerbate their situation. Notably, 15% of respondents reported not accessing assistance for reporting abuse, violence, or discrimination, the highest “did not access” rate among all services. This may reflect limited availability, poor accessibility, or low awareness of such support. In addition, fears of legal repercussions, especially among those with precarious or no legal status in Canada, can deter migrants from seeking help. For these individuals, reporting abuse, violence, or discrimination may carry serious risks, including detention or deportation. As a result, concerns about these potential consequences can reduce their willingness to access support services or to formally report incidents of abuse, violence, or discrimination. This inaccessibility represents a broader public safety issue, as unreported violence and exploitation can become entrenched and result in impunity. These dynamics are frequently highlighted in debates about access-without-fear policies and related advocacy efforts, which emphasize the need for protections that allow migrants regardless of immigration status to seek help and report harm without fear of immigration enforcement or other legal repercussions.

In sum, the findings point to a gap between the availability of support services and the ability of individuals to effectively access them. Obstacles to service usage, such as eligibility, need to be addressed. Improving outreach and visibility could help ensure more people can benefit from available support.

Experiences with Social Services and Support

Respondents were invited to evaluate their experiences with 10 key services. Experience ratings are aimed at gauging satisfaction, quality of service, and accessibility. They encompass aspects such as the helpfulness of staff, the overall impact on users’ needs, and the environment in which the service was provided. Respondents were given the opportunity to share written feedback on their experiences or concerns about using the services they rated. Some of this feedback is shared in the analysis below.

Figure 13. Percentage comparison of respondent experience ratings with key services.



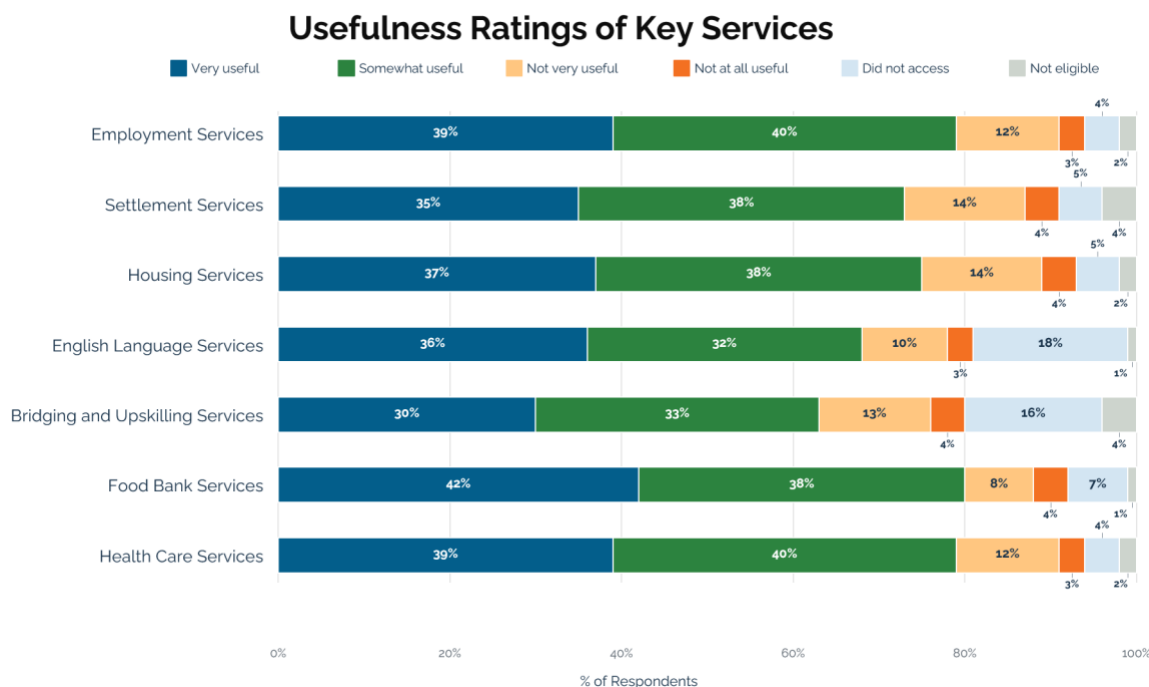
Across all ten services, users' experiences were generally positive. Several services received high ratings in the "Excellent" and "Very Good" categories. Food banks have the highest percentage of positive ("Excellent," "Very Good," and "Good") ratings (65%). Education stood out with 24% of respondents rating their experience as "Excellent," the highest in this category, followed by Healthcare at 19%.

Employment services, legal support, and language training were commonly rated as Very Good (25%, 24%, and 22% respectively). Although most respondents showed relatively strong satisfaction in those areas, employment services also had one of the highest "poor" ratings (15%) after housing (16%).

Perceived Usefulness of Specific Social Services and Support

Respondents were asked to rate how useful they found the services they accessed. They were also asked to provide written feedback. The questions aimed to capture the perceived usefulness of specific services. The notion of "usefulness" refers to how effectively a service meets the needs and expectations of the user. It encompasses several factors, including the service's quality and impact on the user's experience. A useful service provides tangible benefits, such as solving a problem, enhancing skills, or improving the overall well-being of the user.

Figure 14. Percentage Comparison of Respondent Ratings on Usefulness of Key Services



Respondents generally reported positive experiences regarding the usefulness of key services they accessed. Food banks stood out with the highest “Very useful” rating at 42%, which highlights its strong impact in providing essential support. The written feedback confirmed these positive views, although it also emphasized shortcomings.

“The food bank provided assistance, but sometimes I feel the variety of food is limited, and I wish there were more options, especially foods that align with my culture.”

“The food bank was a lifesaver when I first arrived, but I didn’t know if I could use it long-term. It would be nice if they had clearer guidelines.”

Foodbanks were closely followed by employment and health care services, with 39% of respondents finding them “Very useful” and an equal or higher percentage finding them “Somewhat useful” (40% and 39%, respectively).

Many participants who provided written feedback pointed out the difficulty of finding jobs that match qualifications due to lack of Canadian experience and unrecognized credentials. They found employment services were generally helpful, as they offered resume and job-search support, interview preparation and workshops, arranged interview and internship opportunities, and boosted their confidence. Skills training and career counseling improved some respondents’ competitiveness and job-search strategy. Financial counseling helped them create a crucial budget for adjusting to their new financial situation. However, employment services were criticized for being too generic or not industry-specific or disconnected from the local market and wanted more support with resumes, interviews, and understanding workplace culture.

“I wish the employment service could provide more advice on how to deal with workplace challenges and on salary negotiation.”

“I wish the employment service could provide more personalized advice on resumes and cover letters.”

Respondents' comments show that healthcare was generally valued but respondents also reported facing long waits for doctors or specialists and difficulties navigating the system. Language barriers complicated care. Individuals faced challenges in communicating their symptoms to doctors, understanding diagnoses and treatment plans, and finding qualified interpreters. There were worries about lack of cultural sensitivity or understanding of traditional health practices.

“I tried to explain my symptoms in English, but I couldn't express myself clearly. I wish the clinic had provided a translator.”

“The healthcare services are generally good, but I feel overwhelmed when I have to fill out forms in English. It would be great if there were more support with paperwork.”

“The healthcare services are good, but I have to wait a long time to book appointments with doctors, which sometimes makes me feel anxious.”

In relation to housing services, many found it hard to secure affordable, stable housing and described a cycle of housing insecurity driven by high market rents, limited availability of subsidized housing, and long waitlists that force newcomers into poor-quality, or overpriced accommodations. The application processes for public and subsidized housing are experienced as bureaucratic and emotionally taxing. This is compounded by a lack of adequately trained housing workers and insufficient follow-up support.

“The process of applying for public rental housing was cumbersome and complex, requiring a lot of proof materials, and the waiting time was long, which made me feel anxious and helpless.”

“There is a scarcity of housing workers who are well trained and who can help follow-up with their clients continuously until they get housing.”

Bridging and upskilling services had the lowest “Very useful” rating (30%) and one of the highest “Did not access” rates (16%), which may indicate lower need or awareness among participants or eligibility barriers.

“I wish settlement experience especially employment services and bridging programs were more aligned to challenges of newcomers. It lacks transparency and approach needed for an individual to thrive in a new country.”

“I participated in a skills training program, but the skills learned didn't seem to match the job market here in Canada. I wish the program could be more targeted.”

English language services had the highest percentage of respondents who did not access the service (18%), despite being rated positively by those who did. The low access level may be due to the English proficiency of most participants which was a survey eligibility criterion. However, barriers to access language services have been highlighted by several respondents. In their written comments, many respondents stated that language barriers hinder access to essential services, particularly in healthcare and employment contexts. Additionally, language barriers complicated interactions in housing, made it challenging to understand lease agreements and

communicate effectively with landlords. Many respondents expressed appreciation for translation and interpretation offered by social services. However, they noted issues such as delays, insufficient in-person options, and concerns about interpreter qualifications, confidentiality, and cultural sensitivity. While some language classes were deemed helpful, many felt they lacked a focus on job-specific language skills or advanced proficiency.

“While there are many free or affordable language courses, the schedules are sometimes not flexible enough for immigrants who are busy with work. For some immigrants, progress in language learning can be slow, which may affect their career development and daily life.”

Among those who accessed services, very few found them entirely unhelpful. Negative ratings remained relatively low across all services, with “Not at all useful” consistently under 5%.

Categories such as English language services and settlement services have higher percentages of respondents finding them “Not useful” or “Somewhat useful.” Although some respondents said settlement programs helped them adjust to life in Canada by providing the tools and support needed to start a new life, there is a need to enhance these services through adequate funding and adapt them to the specific needs of precarious status migrants.

Extensive paperwork, long application waits, confusing forms (often not in native languages), lack of clear information, and complex requirements were cited in the written feedback, especially around housing and government support. Some highlighted strict “one-time only” settlement program rules for courses.

“I appreciate having these support and services, but I have faced some challenges: Hard to Access: Some services take a long time to get or have complicated steps to apply. Not a Good Fit: Sometimes the help doesn’t fully meet my needs or solve my problems. Confusing: It’s not always clear how to use this support or where to start. Worry About Changes: I’m concerned that services might stop or change, making it harder to rely on them. I’m thankful for the help but hope this support can be easier to use and more helpful.”

Survey findings show that service availability does not guarantee equitable access or consistent quality. They point to a need for more accessible services and targeted programming for precarious status migrants.

Sense of Belonging

Respondents were asked questions focusing on their sense of belonging in Canada. They were provided with the following definition: “Sense of belonging is when you feel accepted and valued by others around you. It is when you feel like Canada is truly your home.”

Most respondents reported a “somewhat strong” sense of belonging (43%), with an additional 26% indicating a “very strong” sense of belonging. Nevertheless, close to one third of the respondents indicated that they have a “somewhat weak” and “very weak” sense of belonging.

Table 12. Belonging in Canada: Feeling Accepted, Valued, and at Home

Rate	Total Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Somewhat strong	437	43.96%

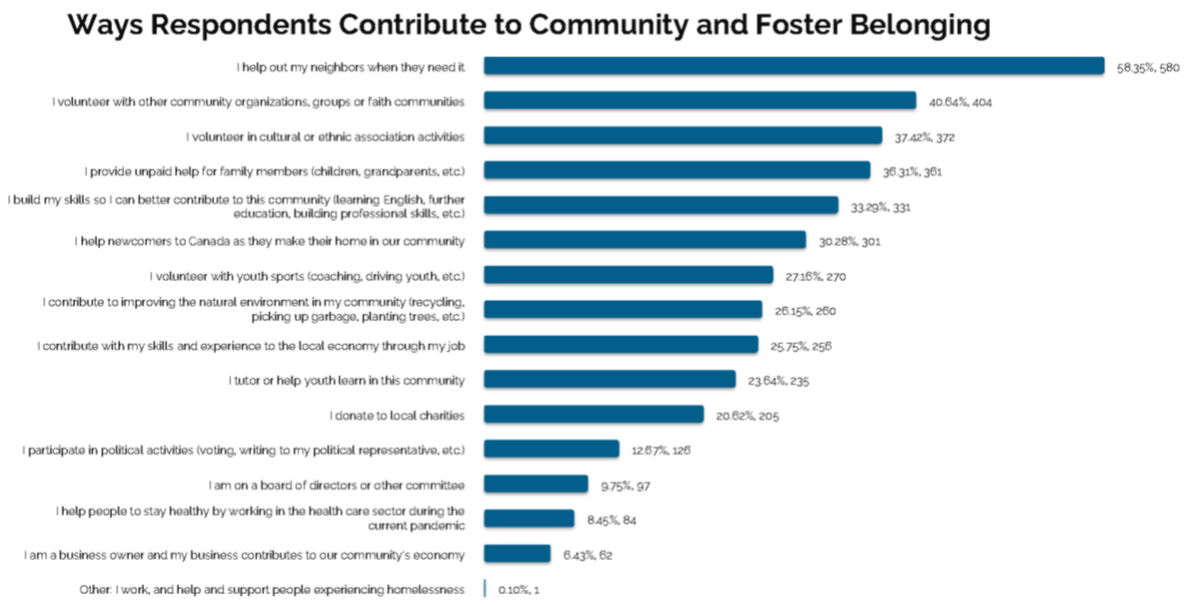
Very strong	265	26.66%
Somewhat weak	221	22.23%
Very weak	53	5.33%
Don't know / no opinion	15	1.51%
Not specified	3	0.30%
Grand Total	994	100.00%

Migrants' sense of belonging shapes their capacity to adapt and contribute meaningfully to society. It is closely tied to self-esteem, trust, and the decision to remain in the country of destination (Chow 2007). Belonging can be understood in both subjective and objective terms. Subjectively, it refers to feeling at home, being accepted and able to participate, and sharing common values and emotions with others. Objectively, it includes formal membership, most clearly expressed through secure legal status (i.e. citizenship or permanent residency) and social belonging rooted in lived relationships and everyday practices of inclusion (Anthias 2016; Chow 2007).

Grasping the complexity of belonging therefore requires attention to both subjective experiences, such as discrimination and life satisfaction as well as structural factors, including pathways to secure legal status and resource availability (Anthias 2016). This dual perspective highlights not only how migrants construct their own sense of belonging, but also how policies and services can either foster or erode it.

Respondents were asked to identify the factors that have been most helpful in their settlement journey. The top three most frequently reported factors are family support (446 respondents, 45%), access to community programs and services (416 respondents, 42%), and making friends (404 respondents, 41%). Other factors (e.g., participation in cultural associations and connecting with peer groups, belonging to a religious group and volunteering) were often mentioned. Findings point to how belonging often emerges through community involvement, group participation, and meaningful social connections (Mendoza 2013; Blachnika Ciacek 2021). Moreover, 31% of respondents mentioned finding work as being helpful in their settlement.

Figure 15. Reported primary factors supporting newcomer settlement



Migrants have diverse ways to connect with and contribute to their communities which help them to cultivate a sense of belonging. When prompted about their contributions to fostering a thriving and inclusive community in Canada as a way of promoting belonging, respondents most frequently cited helping neighbours in need and volunteering with community organizations, groups, or faith communities. Many individuals reported employing multiple methods of contribution, such as volunteering and providing unpaid support to family members.

These findings confirm how everyday practices of support and participation contribute to migrants' sense of belonging. The prominence of family support, access to community programs and services, and friendship indicates that belonging is closely tied to feeling cared for and socially connected. The repeated mention of cultural associations, peer groups, religious communities, and volunteering further shows that participation in collective spaces provides both practical resources and emotional connections. Moreover, migrants are not only recipients of support but also active agents in creating inclusive communities as illustrated by the high frequency of helping neighbours and volunteering.

A significant portion of respondents reported a positive overall experience moving to and integrating into Canada. Nearly half (45%) described their experience as "good," while 26% rated it as "excellent." Only 5% reported a "not very good" experience.

This aligns with perceptions of Canadian welcomeness. Respondents were asked to assess how welcoming the Canadian community is to migrants, using a scale of 0 to 10. 0 means "very dissatisfied" and 10 means "very satisfied." 72% of respondents rated Canada between 6–10 on the welcomeness scale. Conversely, 27% rated Canadian welcomeness lower, which corresponds closely with the 29% who reported a weak or very weak sense of belonging.

Table 13. Perceptions of Canadian Welcomeness Toward Immigrants (0= Not at all, 10=Very)

Rate	Total Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
0	1	0.10%
1	5	0.50%
2	12	1.21%
3	38	3.82%
4	71	7.14%
5	142	14.29%
6	181	18.21%
7	179	18.01%
8	166	16.70%
9	110	11.07%
10	80	8.05%
Not specified	9	0.91%
Grand Total	994	100%

Respondents were asked how they feel about their life in Canada. Life satisfaction is defined as “an overall assessment of an individual’s quality of life according to his/her personal judgment and criteria.” A predictor of sense of belonging, life satisfaction is linked to both objective indicators such as income and employment as well as subjective ones such as expectations, values, and past experiences (Amit and Bar Lev 2015). This survey did not focus on one particular migrant group, but rather included respondents holding different immigration statuses, and originating from diverse regions, cultures, ages, and experiences. Therefore, life satisfaction alone may not fully capture the subjective social and cultural dimensions that frame their sense of belonging.

Most respondents (70.3%) rated their overall well-being between 5 and 8 on a 10-point scale. This moderate level of satisfaction may be explained by the daily realities faced by precarious status migrants, such as uncertain legal status and barriers to effective social services and support. Discrimination and unfair treatment may also contribute to low life satisfaction.

Table 14. Overall Life Satisfaction: Self-Rated on a Scale from 0 (Very Dissatisfied) to 10 (Very Satisfied)

Rate	Total Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
0	2	0.20%
1	4	0.40%

2	10	1.01%
3	36	3.62%
4	57	5.73%
5	135	13.58%
6	190	19.11%
7	206	20.72%
8	168	16.90%
9	91	9.15%
10	78	7.85%
Not specified	17	1.71%
Grand Total	994	100%

Challenges: Isolation, Discrimination, and Unfair Treatment

Although most respondents reported a strong or somewhat strong sense of belonging, the moderate levels of perceived life satisfaction may reflect the persistence of isolation and discrimination or unfair treatment. Isolation is a common reality for many newcomers. 91% of respondents (904 out of 988) reported experiencing at least some degree of isolation.

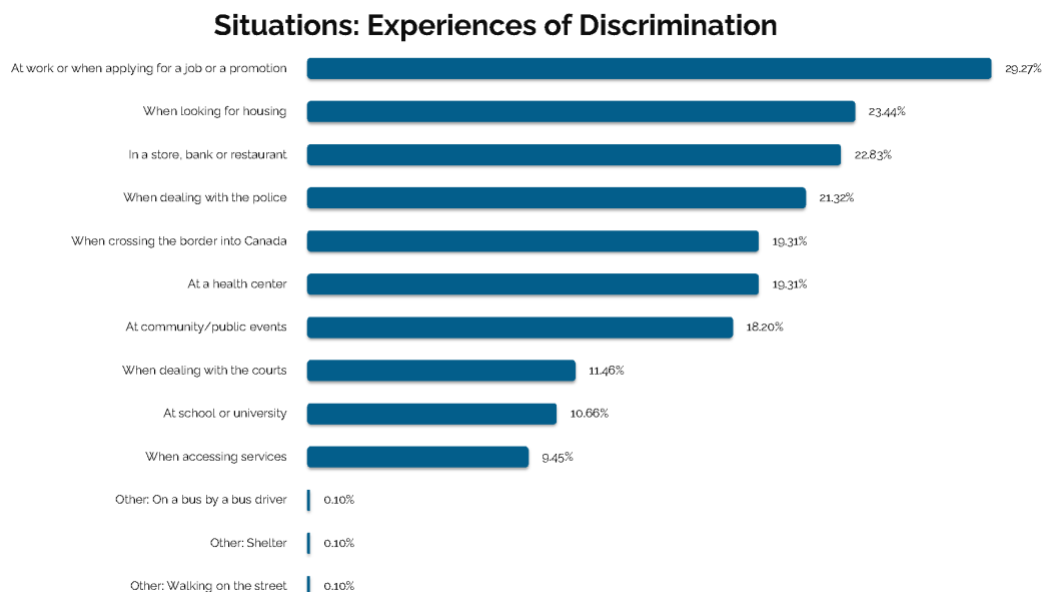
Additionally, an alarming 55% reported experiencing discrimination or being treated unfairly.

Table 15. Reported Unfair Treatment or Discrimination since Arriving to Canada

Row Labels	Total Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Yes	543	54.63
No	359	36.12
Not specified	4	0.40
Prefer not to answer	88	8.85
Grand Total	994	100.00%

Among those who experienced unfair treatment or discrimination, the most reported settings were the workplace or during the process of applying for a job or promotion, followed by difficulties when looking for housing, accessing services in stores, banks, or restaurants, and interactions with police. Experiences of discrimination are often not limited to a single context. Many respondents selected more than one area.

Figure 16. Experiences of discrimination among survey respondents.



Experiences with cultural dislocation and discrimination were also reported through the written feedback provided. Some respondents described fear of being misunderstood and experiences of racism and microaggressions that undermine their sense of belonging.

“Someone at the grocery store made fun of my accent. I felt so embarrassed I left without buying anything.”

“I worry about the stigma associated with using certain services, which can make me hesitant to seek the help need.”

“In settlement services, the staff did not understand my cultural background well enough to provide life guidance and help that met my cultural customs, making me feel unadapted and lonely.”

Although most migrants with precarious status expressed a strong sense of belonging in Canada, that sense often coexists with experiences of isolation and discrimination. This apparent paradox reflects the multidimensional nature of belonging. In alignment with participants’ reported community contributions in Canada, it is possible that migrants experience a sense of belonging through increased participation in their communities (Djogbenou et al. 2025). However, participation does not necessarily translate into social connection. Fear, trauma, and past and current lived experiences may shape how individuals engage socially. This dynamic is reflected in studies of older migrants, where life course factors contribute to social isolation and experiences of discrimination despite ongoing community involvement and an enduring attachment to place (Koehn et al. 2022). In this context, migrants’ sense of belonging may be shaped less by social inclusion/participation and more by perceptions of safety and protection in Canada compared to past contexts. This illustrates the limits of socialization-based conceptions

of belonging.⁶ Nevertheless, systemic factors seem to play an important role in promoting migrants' sense of belonging and life satisfaction through the way they provide equitable access to services and extend resources. Findings point to the need for effective pathways to secure legal status, well-funded accessible settlement services, stronger community support systems and ways to dismantle systemic discrimination within social services and support in order to ensure migrants can truly build a sense of belonging. While migrants are asked to integrate into society, governments and organizations must also create spaces that allow belonging to flourish.

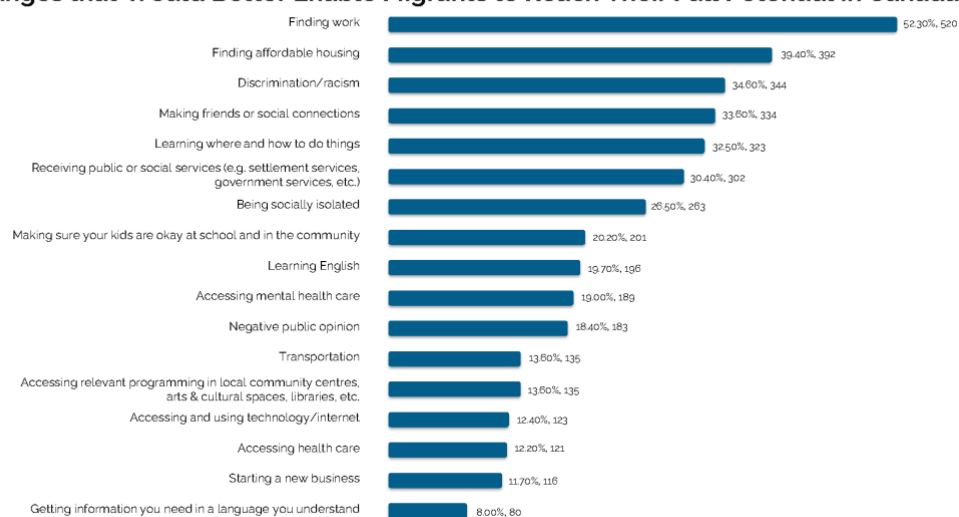
Solutions: Respondent Recommendations

Respondents were asked to select their top three suggested changes that would better enable migrants to reach their full potential in Canada. The most reported change is help finding work, cited by 52.3% (520) of respondents, followed by finding affordable housing at 39.4% (392). Respondents also mentioned the importance of addressing discrimination/racism (34.6%, 344), making friends or social connections (33.6%, 334), and learning where and how to do things (32.5%, 323). Receiving public or social services was identified by 30.4% (302) of the respondents.

The changes suggested by respondents show that their needs are first and foremost about basic economic security and stability: they need help finding work and affordable housing before anything else. Findings also show that many respondents are struggling with social inclusion as they mention discrimination and racism, and difficulty making friends, which signals a strong need for belonging and fair treatment, not just services. They also need practical support to navigate life in Canada. Language learning, mental health care, transportation, technology, and access to community programs are additional needs that would help the respondents participate more fully.

⁶ The questions asked in this section of the survey only captured socialization-based belonging for migrants and those in precarious situations in Toronto. Intersecting factors such as migration status, age, gender, housing, food security, cultural identity, may also influence belonging which are not captured in this section. Instead, they appear in other sections of the report as broader factors affecting settlement and participation.

Figure 17. Changes that would better enable migrants to reach their full potential in Canada

Changes that Would Better Enable Migrants to Reach Their Full Potential in Canada

We asked respondents to share additional comments or ideas for improving the welcome, integration, and wellbeing of migrants. Participants offered a range of suggestions; the top five recommendations for migrant support and integration are summarized below. For each recommendation we include selected participant quotes.

i. Increase access to safe, affordable housing

"The government can cooperate with social organizations to develop more affordable housing projects and give priority to the housing needs of migrants. Meanwhile, a housing dispute mediation mechanism should be established to handle the problems that migrants encounter during the process of renting or purchasing houses quickly and fairly."

ii. Expand access to free or low-cost language classes, translation services, and language exchange programs

"Encourage community-led language programs where residents can volunteer to help newcomers learn. This kind of grassroots support can create bonds and enhance language acquisition."

"For language learning, more free or low-cost language learning resources should be provided, such as online learning platforms and community language corners. Moreover, personalized learning plans should be formulated according to migrants' different language foundations and learning progress, and volunteers can be arranged to conduct one-on-one tutoring to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of language learning."

“Schools could offer more language support programs, cultural adaptation projects, and provide specialized educational resources for migrant families to help them overcome academic challenges.”

- iii. Enhance employment opportunities and support by strengthening job training and skills development, improving recognition of foreign credentials, providing incentives for employers, and increasing access to mentorship programs and career counseling.

“Speed up the process of recognizing international qualifications and certifications. This would help skilled immigrants find employment in their field more quickly, rather than being forced into unrelated jobs.”

“Develop vocational training centers that offer skills training and career development opportunities.”

“In terms of employment support, in addition to the existing employment services, a professional mentor system specifically for immigrants can be established. Experienced and public-spirited industry professionals can serve as mentors, who will give one-on-one career planning advice, ways to expand personal networks, and skills training on dealing with workplace cultural differences according to immigrants' professional skills and career goals.”

“Offer financial support and legal advice for immigrants who want to start their own businesses.”

“Canada could encourage businesses to hire immigrants through tax incentives or reward programs.”

“The government and businesses should offer more professional certification, internship opportunities, and career counseling to help immigrants enhance their skills and better enter the local labour market.”

- iv. Strengthen community and social support networks by promoting community centers, mentorship programs, cultural exchange events, and peer support groups to foster belonging and reduce isolation

“Establish dedicated helplines for migrants to seek information and assistance regarding various services, including legal aid, housing, and employment. This would provide a direct line to support when needed.”

“The community can establish a dedicated migrant service center to provide one-stop services for us, including employment consultation, legal aid, housing information, etc., making it convenient for us to solve various problems.”

“Create more community-based support programs that foster connections between migrants and locals. These programs can help newcomers feel welcomed and reduce feelings of isolation.”

“Community-based initiatives and partnerships are important in promoting the integration and wellbeing of migrants. This could include collaborations between local organizations, community groups, and settlement agencies to provide comprehensive support services and cultural orientation programs. ...it's essential to involve migrants themselves in the decision-making process and program development, ensuring that their voices, concerns, and experiences are heard and valued.”

“It's essential to recognize that every migrant's experience is unique, and there's no one-size-fits-all solution. By listening to our stories, acknowledging our strengths and challenges, and providing tailored support, I believe that we can create a more welcoming and inclusive environment for migrants like me.”

v. Provide Culturally Sensitive and Accessible Services

“Settlement agencies should have mobile units that visit different neighborhoods regularly.”

“Ensure migrants have access to essential services like healthcare, education, and housing regardless of immigration status. Anti-discrimination measures: Support legislation and enforcement mechanisms to combat discrimination against migrants.”

“If the government can simplify the administrative procedures and processes related to immigration, reducing unnecessary paperwork and waiting time, it will reduce our burden and allow us to focus more on life and work.”

“Implement regular surveys and feedback mechanisms that allow migrants to share their experiences and suggestions for improving services. This could help organizations tailor their offerings to better meet newcomers' needs.”

“Government services, including healthcare, education, and social services, could benefit from increased cultural sensitivity training for staff. Understanding cultural differences and diverse needs would help migrants feel more comfortable accessing essential services and reduce potential misunderstandings.”

Conclusion

Precarity is a systemic issue that shapes the everyday lives of migrants with precarious status in the GTA. Refugee claimants, temporary migrant workers, international students, and non-status migrants often face employment and housing insecurity and limited service access. These structural vulnerabilities are compounded by precarious migration status and intersect with factors such as gender and race. The survey findings show that economic integration, especially employment and housing, is the dominant concern for migrants. These needs are closely linked to social inclusion and systemic barriers such as discrimination and difficulties navigating services.

Addressing the challenges faced by precarious status migrants requires coordinated interventions across federal, provincial, and municipal levels. Policy and program attention should prioritize key services such as employment supports, affordable housing, and healthcare. Economic measures alone are unlikely to be sufficient without efforts to reduce systemic discrimination and ensure that social services and support are accessible and responsive to migrants' needs. Policies must move beyond status-contingent frameworks to ensure equitable access to social services and support for migrants regardless of legal status. Access often depends on individuals knowing where to look or which organization to contact. Drawing on models such as community information lines like 211 Ontario, a single, centralized phone number dedicated specifically to immigration and precarious status situations could significantly improve service visibility and navigation. Similar to large-scale public awareness campaigns such as Bell Let's Talk, increased public promotion of such a service could normalize help-seeking and improve awareness among migrants in precarious situations. This model would build on existing services rather than replace them, strengthening access by simplifying entry points and reducing the burden on individuals to navigate complex service landscapes on their own.

Settlement organizations and support networks play a critical role in mitigating the challenges faced by precarious status migrants. However, these organizations often operate with limited financial and human resources which can compromise their ability to deliver consistent and quality services (Shields, Drolet, and Valenzuela 2016). Moreover, a persistent gap exists between service availability and meaningful accessibility. The findings reveal that administrative barriers, documentation requirements, long wait times, language limitations, and insufficient cultural responsiveness significantly constrain service effectiveness. Notably, institutional design shapes inclusion: services that are least conditional on legal status, such as food banks and certain municipal services, are perceived as more accessible.

Improving cultural responsiveness, simplifying administrative processes, expanding language and mental health support, and embedding migrant voices in service design are critical steps toward fostering genuine inclusion. Findings also underscore the need for greater investment in the settlement sector and related social support to ensure timely, accessible assistance for migrants. Beyond program improvements, structural reforms are needed to address discrimination and guarantee equitable access to services. Integration is not achieved through isolated initiatives, but through sustained funding and systemic change that recognize all migrants as full members of Canadian society.

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