# REGIONAL CONTEXT

# **BRIEF**

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#### PURPOSE OF THE DOCUMENT

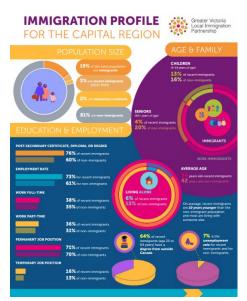
This **Regional Context Brief** provides an up-to-date snapshot of the socioeconomic landscape impacting immigrant settlement and integration in Greater Victoria. The overview is intended to inform collaborative planning and strategic decision-making among Greater Victoria Local Immigration Partnership (GVLIP) partners, with the goal of better supporting immigrant communities and fostering an inclusive and welcoming region.

This document was developed using a practical, partner-recommended approach. Rather than conducting new, time- and resource-intensive primary research, existing, credible data sources and recent community reports were compiled and analyzed to create a concise yet informative brief scan of regional context.

This document serves as a foundation for ongoing dialogue and action among partners as we move into our 2025–2028 Strategic Plan.

# **DEMOGRAPHIC LANDSCAPE**

#### **POPULATION & IMMIGRATION TRENDS**



According to the 2021 Census, the Greater Victoria Region had a population of 397,237, with immigrants accounting for 73,345 (18.9%) of this total.<sup>1</sup>

The top countries of origin for recent immigrants (2021) in Victoria are the Philippines, India, and China.<sup>2</sup>

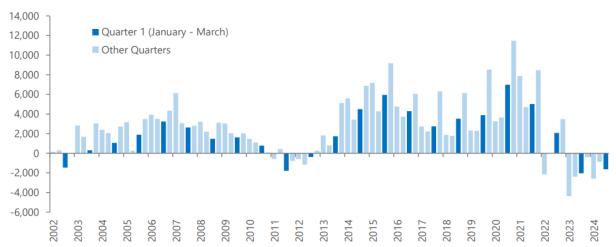
For more demographic data, read the GVLIP's resource: Immigration Profile for the Capital Region (2024)

Over the 2019-2038 period, the region's population is projected to increase by 20%. Langford alone was expected to see its population grow by over 25,000 people, the largest gain in the Capital Regional District.<sup>3</sup>

However, recent political and economic shifts have introduced uncertainty into these projections. For instance, British Columbia has seen a moderation in international migration

levels, with the first quarter of 2025 recording only a slight net inflow of international migrants (251 people), a sharp decline compared to 42,199 net international migrants a year earlier. The province also experienced its seventh consecutive quarter of net interprovincial migration loss, with 1,636 more people leaving B.C. for other provinces than arriving. <sup>4</sup>

# B.C. Net Interprovincial Migration by Quarter, 2002Q3 to 2025Q1



Source: Statistics Canada. Table <u>17-10-0020-01</u> (formerly CANSIM 051-0017) Estimates of the components of interprovincial migration, quarterly. Last updated: June 18, 2025.

Immigration flows may also increase rapidly due to humanitarian crises. During the recent decade Canada has responded to global crises with significant humanitarian intake: more than 44,600 Syrian refugees were resettled between 2015 and late 2016;<sup>5</sup> 55,195 Afghans arrived in Canada, under all streams, since August 2021 by November 2024;<sup>6</sup> and nearly 300,000 Ukrainians arrived through the Canada-Ukraine authorization for emergency travel (CUAET) program between 2022 and early 2024.<sup>7</sup>

All those patterns make long-term planning more challenging and emphasize the importance of adaptable strategies to meet changing community needs.

# TRENDS SHAPING IMMIGRATION

#### **GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE**

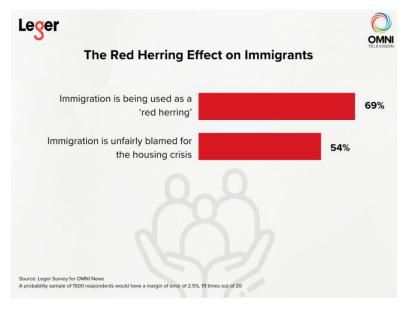
International migration continues to grow, shaped by deepening economic disparities, political instability, and environmental crises. As of 2023, there were over 280 million international migrants worldwide. The World Migration Report highlights that people are increasingly on the move due to conflict, climate change, and global inequality, while

countries struggle to balance humanitarian responsibilities with policies aimed at attracting skilled labour.<sup>8</sup>

#### CANADIAN CONTEXT

Canada's immigration system is adjusting due to perceived concerns about pressure on healthcare, housing, and public services caused by rapid population growth. Recent policy changes aim to lower immigration levels in response to community and political pressures, despite immigrants contribution to labour in sectors such as healthcare, technology, and entrepreneurship.

These public pressures and perceived challenges have influenced policy adjustments that affect immigration pathways. While digital tools have streamlined parts of the immigration process, ongoing application backlogs, <sup>11</sup> frequent immigration pathways changes, <sup>12</sup> and limited transparency about future steps create uncertainty for many with temporary status. This uncertainty often leads some individuals to change provinces or choose careers they do not prefer just to meet program requirements, which affects family stability and mental health, <sup>13</sup> alongside other challenges like credential recognition and life affordability.



Some experts emphasize that these concerns oversimplify the real causes of systemic strain. For example, Prentiss Dantzler, Director of the Housing Justice Lab at the University of Toronto says that "they [new immigrants] get used as a scapegoat for the housing crisis. People forget that this housing crisis is not new: we've been dealing with this for a long time." <sup>14</sup> This perspective is reinforced by a national Leger survey, which found that nearly

seven in 10 new Canadians believe politicians are using immigration as a "red herring" to distract from other factors.

Public concerns and misconceptions about immigration can contribute to social tensions and impact how newcomers are perceived, adding stress to their integration experience. The recent campaign, "The Canada We Believe In", launched by 180 community and business groups across the country, including ICA, responds to growing reputational

attacks on immigrants by highlighting their real contributions and promoting unity through public education.<sup>15</sup>

#### **GREATER VICTORIA SNAPSHOT**

Greater Victoria, situated in the southern part of Vancouver Island, attracts many newcomers with its mild climate and stunning natural beauty. However, the region's geography also presents unique challenges.

High housing costs and limited availability push some immigrants to settle in outlying or more remote areas. This often results in long commutes and limited access to in-person services, <sup>16</sup> including employment support, childcare, and language programs — all of which are more centralized in downtown Victoria and, to a limited extent, in Langford.

The region benefits from the presence of long-established settlement organizations. Yet recent funding cuts have reduced the availability and stability of services. <sup>17</sup> One major impact is the loss of federally funded language programs for some immigrants, <sup>18</sup> which have played a key role in helping newcomers prepare for employment, build social networks, and integrate into community life.

# SENSE OF BELONGING & COMMUNITY INTEGRATION

A strong sense of belonging is a cornerstone of successful settlement and integration, closely tied to mental and physical well-being, quality of life, and stronger community cohesion. While belonging can take many forms — from personal relationships to cultural identity and civic participation — it remains a key indicator of how well newcomers are able to integrate and thrive in their new communities.<sup>19</sup>

According to the Canadian Social Survey (2021–2022), 47% of Canadians reported a strong sense of belonging to their local community. Interestingly, recent immigrants (50%) and longer-term immigrants (48%) were more likely to report strong belonging compared to Canadian-born individuals (46%).<sup>20</sup> This data offers important insight into overall patterns and suggests that immigrants often build strong community ties, particularly when supported by cultural groups or settlement services.

Locally, participants in the 2024 Greater Victoria Vital Signs Survey rated their overall quality of life a B–, continuing a stable trend of "B" or "B–" grades reported since 2013.

The region is most valued for its natural environment (65%), climate (54%), air quality (52%), and parks (46%), all of which contribute to a sense of place and well-being. At the same time,

the cost of living (70%), housing (58%), and healthcare (57%) were identified as top community concerns — factors that can erode stability and belonging.<sup>21</sup>

WHAT ARE THE <b>BEST THINGS</b> ABOUT GREATER VICTORIA?	WHAT ARE THE <b>MOST IMPORTANT ISSUE</b> S FACING GREATER VICTORIA TODAY?
According to this year's survey, these are the region's  14 best things, ranked by the percentage of respondents who selected them.	According to this year's survey, these are the region's top  14 issues, ranked by the percentage of respondents who selected them.
65% NATURAL ENVIRONMENT	√ 70% COST OF LIVING
54% CLIMATE	58% HOUSING
⇒ 52% AIR QUALITY	€ 57% HEALTHCARE
24 46% PARKS	§ 55% HOMELESSNESS
<b>Å</b> 40% WALKABILITY	
🤲 37% FRIENDS & FAMILY	
32% ACCESS TO LOCALLY GROWN FOOD	№ 20% CLIMATE CHANGE
28% RECREATION OPPORTUNITIES	48% COMMUNITY PLANNING/DEVELOPMENT
<b>25%</b> ARTS & CULTURE	TRANSPORTATION
24% RESTAURANTS	16% POVERTY
23% CYCLING INFRASTRUCTURE	∰ 16% ELDERCARE
18% FESTIVALS & EVENTS	14% ECONOMY
	13% FOOD SECURITY
14% LOCAL BREWERIES	12% MUNICIPAL AMALGAMATION

VICTORIA'S VITAL SIGNS | 2024

To complement this broad community view, the following are the findings from the Intercultural Association of Greater Victoria (ICA) 2025 Client Evaluation survey conducted with 366 immigrants living in Greater Victoria. The results showed that newcomers most often felt a sense of belonging through:

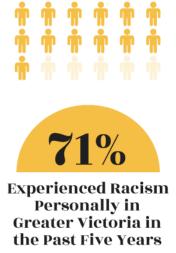
- language classes or conversation groups (50%),
- connecting with nature (43%), and
- attending cultural festivals or community events (42%).

These experiences foster trust, inclusion, and connection. The most frequently reported challenges were:

- employment (69%),
- housing (67%),
- cost of living (64%), and
- language barriers (51%)

These are systemic pressures that can hinder integration and well-being.<sup>22</sup>

One more indicator of belonging is how safe and accepted people feel and whether they are treated with respect. The 2024 Victoria Vital Signs Survey shows that most residents feel accepted in their communities, especially those who identify as White and have higher incomes. However, experiences of respect and inclusion are not universal—BIPOC individuals, young adults, and males report more frequent incidents of harassment and disrespect.



IBPoC Respondents Report

While this report reflects broader community thoughts, the GVLIP Racism in Greater Victoria: Community Report (2021) offers focused insight into the lived experiences of racialized people, exposing the frequency of racism and feelings of loneliness within this group. The survey, which engaged nearly 1,000 participants and collected detailed demographic data from almost 400 respondents, found that 71% of racialized people reported experiencing racism in Greater Victoria. Additionally, 70% of respondents indicated feeling lonely or unsafe in their communities.<sup>23</sup>

For more details, read the GVLIP's resource: Racism in Greater
Victoria: A Community Report

These local findings echo broader national patterns. According to the 2023 British Columbia Newcomer Survey, racial discrimination remains a persistent reality across Canada. The report highlights that about 7 in 10 Black Canadians have experienced unfair treatment due to their race, while nearly half of individuals from other racialized groups — including Indigenous, East Asian, and Southeast Asian communities — report experiencing discrimination either regularly or from time to time. In contrast, the majority of White respondents (66%) said they had never experienced discrimination based on their race or ethnicity.<sup>24</sup>

# **HEALTHCARE SYSTEM CHALLENGES**

The healthcare system in the Capital Regional District faces significant strain, with a shortage of family physicians and prolonged emergency room waiting times. Approximately 100,000 residents in Greater Victoria lack a family doctor, forcing many to rely on walk-in clinics or emergency departments for primary care. Median ER wait times often exceed six hours, leading to delays in receiving urgent medical attention.<sup>25</sup>

These barriers contribute to delays in diagnosis and treatment, with many residents avoiding or postponing care. As a result, minor health issues can become severe over time, and some

individuals report not seeing a doctor for years.

For newcomers, systemic challenges are compounded by language and cultural barriers. A rapid literature review on immigrant health access found that language difficulties often missed appointments, result in miscommunication, and a lack of continuity in care. Cultural differences further affect patientprovider trust, and interpreter services, while available, are often underutilized due to accessibility or awareness issues.26

Locally, immigrants report difficulties navigating healthcare due to language limitations, lack of information, inconsistent use of interpretation services, all of which contribute to reduced access and lower satisfaction with care.27

For more details, read the GVLIP's resource: Newcomer Navigating Healthcare

Source: GVLIP Newcomers Navigating Healthcare Mental health is also deeply impacted by the immigrant experience. High housing costs, underemployment, and precarious immigration status contribute to chronic stress and isolation. A national survey on newcomer mental health in 2023 found that financial strain, limited social networks, and systemic barriers significantly affect psychological well-being.<sup>28</sup>



**Newcomer Voice:** 

"[One] day I checked my kids' temperatures...oh my God...they were burning like a furnace...I got anxious I did not know what to do...I had lost my self confidence...I feel helpless [and I still feel afraid to call the walkin clinic]." 17

# HOUSING NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Housing construction in the Capital region has not kept pace with population: between 2018 and 2023, approximately two new residents arrived for every one new housing unit completed. This imbalance has intensified rental pressure across the region, particularly for newcomers seeking affordable and suitable homes.<sup>29</sup>

Regional projections estimate a need for 60,000 new dwelling units by 2038,<sup>30</sup> highlighting the critical demand for affordable housing to support population growth, including newcomers.

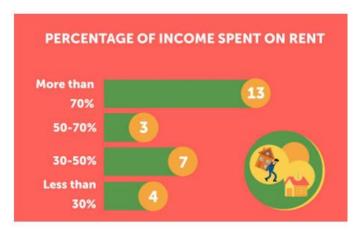
Most new developments (82% in 2023) were apartment-style or attached units. While this supports urban density, these smaller dwellings often fail to meet the needs of larger immigrant households, which may include multi-generational family members.<sup>31</sup>

The 2024 Interim Housing Needs Report for the City of Victoria highlights that housing needs go beyond quantity, emphasizing the importance of unit size and suitability. A 30% requirement for three-bedroom units was retained to support the delivery of housing options for families, particularly those in multi-generational or shared living arrangements driven by affordability challenges.

Newcomers in Greater Victoria often face housing costs that remain high despite recent declines in average rent prices. According to the June 2025 Rentals.ca Rent Report, the average asking rent in Victoria was \$2,035 for a one-bedroom (a 6.6 % drop year-over-year) and \$2,708 for a two-bedroom (a 5.3 % drop). Yet these rates still rank Victoria as one of Canada's most expensive rental markets.<sup>32</sup> Despite the drop, for newly arrived families with limited income or employment opportunities, these prices are often unaffordable.

According to the 2023 Regional Housing Report done by the Refugee Readiness Team on Vancouver Island, most surveyed displaced Ukrainians, Afghan and Syrian refugees reported spending over 70% of their income on rent.<sup>33</sup>

For more details, read the GVLIP/RRT's resource: Finding Housing for Displaced Ukrainians and Refugees on Vancouver Island: Regional Housing Report



Source: Finding Housing for Displaced Ukrainians and Refugees On Vancouver Island: Regional Housing Report According to the 2023 Regional Growth Strategy Indicator Report, average rents—especially for two-bedroom units—have outpaced inflation since 2008, while vacancy rates remain critically low across most price ranges, further intensifying housing pressures for newcomers.<sup>34</sup>

As a result, many newcomers are relocating to more distant neighbourhoods in search of lower rents—often at the cost of longer commutes and reduced access to essential services, language classes, schools, and settlement supports. <sup>35</sup> Affordability pressures also lead some immigrants to accept substandard housing—such as dark, cramped basement suites or overcrowded apartments—that fall short of basic comfort and safety standards. <sup>36</sup>

For more details, read the GVLIP's resource: <u>Hope for Home: Building an Immigrant Housing Action Plan Together</u>

# **ECONOMIC & EMPLOYMENT TRENDS**

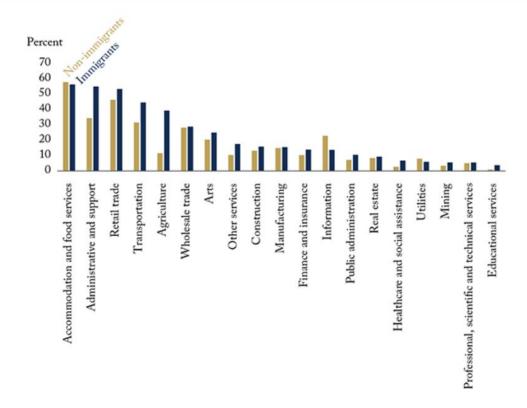
Immigrants play a vital role in British Columbia's labour market, accounting for nearly 29% of Canada's workforce in 2023 and contributing significantly to key sectors such as healthcare, technology, and entrepreneurship. There are over 800,000 self-employed immigrants across Canada, with more than 250,000 employing others.<sup>37</sup>

According to the BC Labour Market Outlook 2024, approximately 1.12 million job openings are expected in the province between 2024 and 2034. New immigrants are projected to fill nearly half (46%) of the new job seekers during this period.<sup>38</sup>

Despite strong demand, many skilled immigrants in Canada face significant underemployment due to systemic and structural barriers. A recent CD Howe Institute report (2024) highlights that 26.7% of recent immigrants with at least a bachelor's degree are working in jobs requiring only a high school education or less—three times the rate of Canadian-born workers. Key contributing factors include language proficiency, perceived education quality, and, most critically, the lack of recognition for foreign credentials and complex assessment processes. These challenges prevent many highly educated newcomers from fully contributing to Canada's economy, resulting in wasted talent and lost opportunity.<sup>39</sup>

Immigration pathways and program requirements often lead newcomers on open work permits to take jobs outside their expertise as a strategy to obtain permanent residency—a trend underscored by shifts in Provincial Nominee Programs across Canada in 2024.<sup>40</sup>

### Overqualification Rates by Industry and Immigration Status, 2021



 $Source: Howe Institute.\ (2024).\ Harnessing\ Immigrant\ Talent.\ Authors'\ calculations\ using\ 2021\ Census\ PUMFs.$ 

Temporary foreign worker programs also present challenges. Employer-specific work permits restrict workers' ability to change jobs, exposing them to potential exploitation. Many temporary workers face low wages, overcrowded housing, and unsafe workplaces, with limited access to labour protections and social benefits.<sup>41</sup>

Refugees and newcomers with limited literacy or language proficiency encounter additional obstacles to workforce participation. These challenges reduce access to training and employment opportunities, further hindering their integration.<sup>42</sup>

In addition to labour market factors, social and family dynamics influence immigrant employment patterns. Immigrant families are more likely to live in multigenerational households, where caregiving responsibilities—particularly for women—extend across children, elders, and other family members. These responsibilities often limit women's ability to participate in the labour force or access full-time and flexible employment options.<sup>43</sup>

# INDIGENOUS & CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Greater Victoria region is located on the traditional territories of the WSÁNEĆ and Ləkwəŋən peoples. Recognizing Indigenous rights and advancing reconciliation remain foundational to building inclusive and equitable communities.



Reconciliation initiatives in Greater Victoria focus on fostering mutual understanding, healing, and collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. These efforts align with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action, which include calls for revising newcomer information and citizenship materials to reflect a more inclusive history of Indigenous peoples in Canada. Specifically, Call to Action 93 urges the federal government, in collaboration with Indigenous organizations, to update newcomer kits and citizenship tests to include education on Treaties and the history of residential schools, thereby fostering awareness and respect from the earliest stages of settlement.<sup>44</sup>

At the provincial level, reconciliation is guided by B.C.'s Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act (DRIPA). The 2023–2024 Annual Report highlights steps taken to align laws and policies with UNDRIP, including legislative reviews, co-developed policies, and efforts to strengthen cross-cultural understanding. <sup>45</sup> The report also highlights the importance of integrating Indigenous perspectives into public services, planning, and community development — a principle that directly supports inclusive approaches in immigration and settlement systems.

Cultural integration efforts also highlight the need to support newcomers in understanding and respecting Indigenous histories and rights, promoting respectful coexistence and shared community belonging.

# **END NOTES**

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