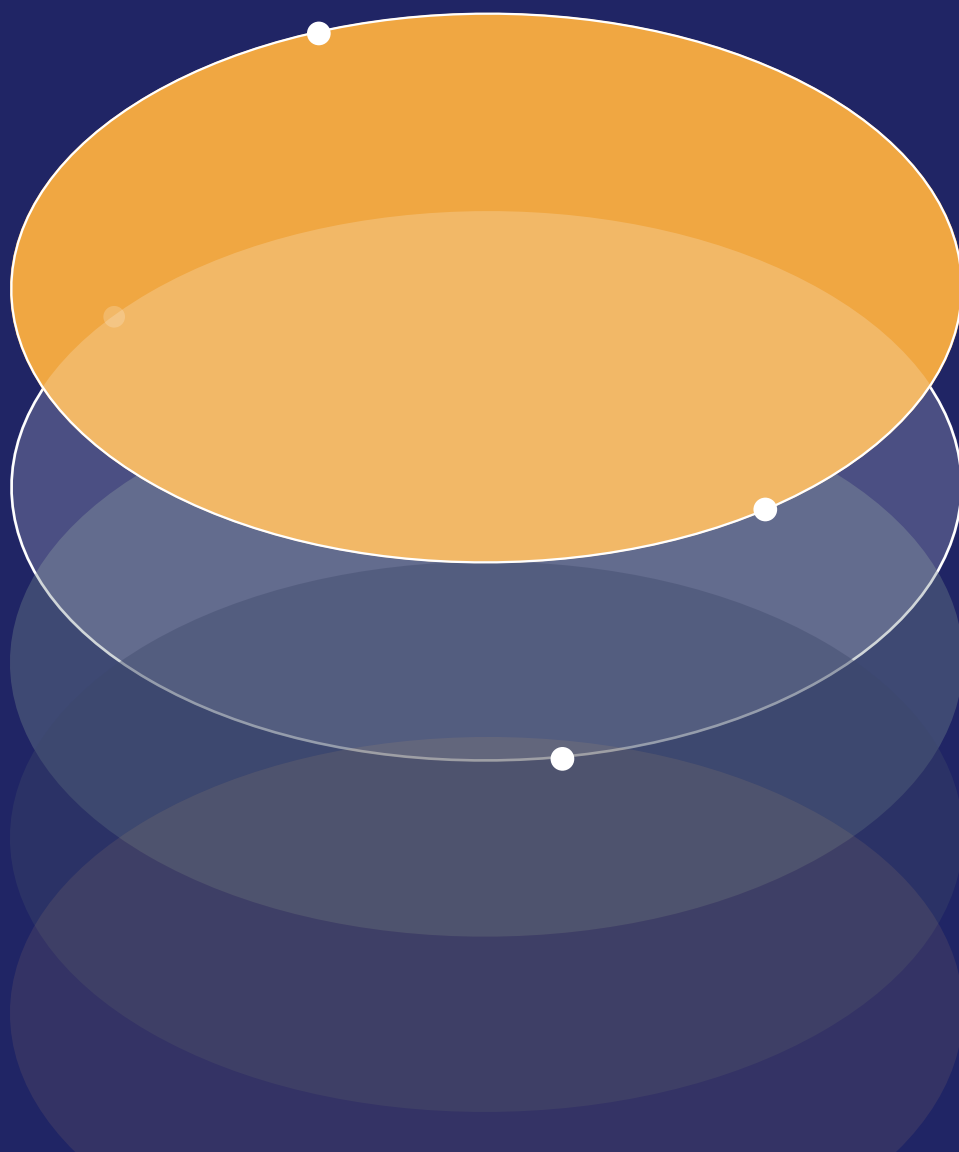


# Public opinion & immigration: maintaining Canada's advantage

Key Insight Report #4

February 2023



## Acknowledgements

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## About Century Initiative

Century Initiative is a national, non-partisan charity with a mission to enhance Canada's long-term prosperity, resiliency and global influence by responsibly growing the population of Canada to 100 million by 2100. Century Initiative delivers its mission by leading, enabling and partnering on initiatives that support long-term thinking and planning in immigration, urban development, employment and entrepreneurship, early childhood supports, and education.



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## Canada's immigration strategy depends on public support

The Government of Canada has committed to increasing immigrant admissions to 500,000 per year by 2025 – more than doubling the number of admissions to Canada in 2015.<sup>1</sup> Meeting this commitment while building a more prosperous country will depend on effective policy design and implementation, but also on public attitudes toward immigration, at home and abroad.

Canada's ability to increase immigration is grounded in strong levels of public support. Century Initiative supports high levels of immigration to support prosperity, well-being and national security. Successful outcomes depend on understanding and responding to Canadians' concerns and goals to maintain a broad consensus in support of immigration in Canada.

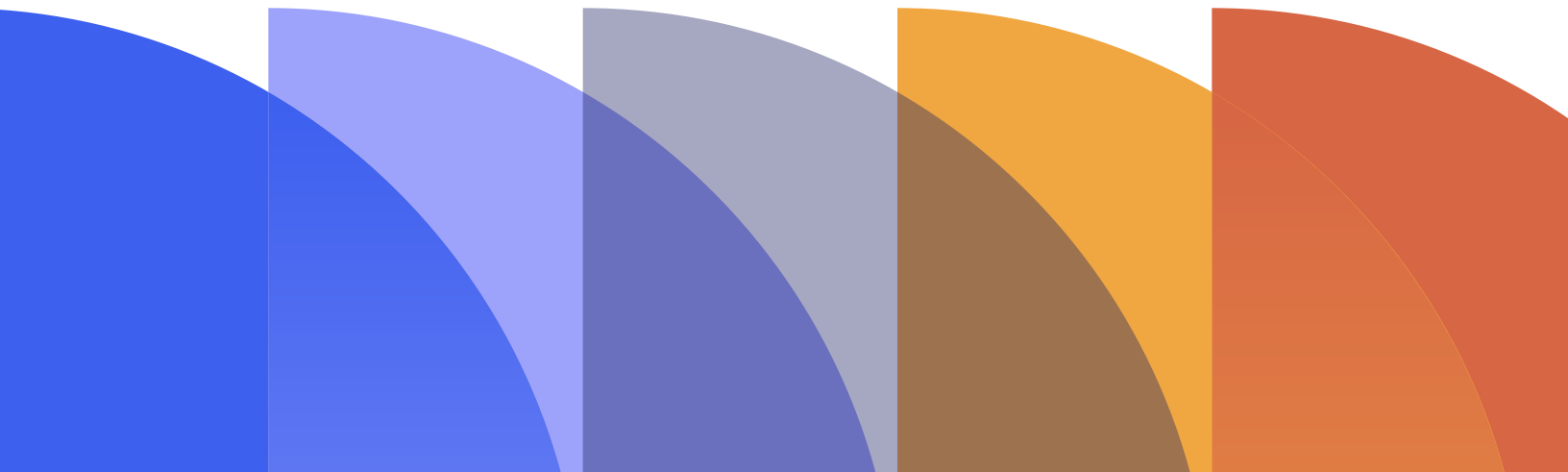
**Canadians are highly and increasingly supportive of immigration.** This is evident over the course of recent decades and across a range of studies. In fact, Canada has seen growing support for immigration even while other countries grapple with anti-immigrant sentiment and xenophobic political rhetoric. This is not to discount the continued presence of anti-immigrant sentiment, incidents of discrimination, and racism in Canada. However, Canada continues to have strong support for immigration and should capitalize on this distinct Canadian advantage.

**We can't take this advantage for granted.** A variety of factors, if left unaddressed, could undermine the broad political consensus in favour of immigration. These include ongoing pressures on housing and public services, where more Canadians feel that they cannot access what they need. Strong public support for immigration is predicated on Canadians' perception that newcomers are contributing to prosperity and well-being rather than competing for scarce resources or services.

**And we can't take Canada's attractiveness to newcomers for granted either.** While Canada is one of the world's most attractive countries for immigrants, there are growing concerns that some immigrants believe Canada has promised more than it has delivered. These concerns come at a time of growing global competition for talent. Immigration processing times, high costs of living and housing, and the inability to have one's professional experiences recognized all must be addressed to maintain Canada's brand and attractiveness – and to ensure prosperity and fairness for newcomers and current Canadians alike.

This Key Insights report synthesizes what we know about public opinion toward immigration in Canada and international perspectives on Canada's "brand" for immigrants. It also explores potential risks to Canada's immigration advantage and responses to those risks. For successful immigration policy that supports growing prosperity, **policymakers need to be proactive in monitoring and nurturing support for immigration to Canada at home and abroad.**

Century Initiative's **National Scorecard on Canada's Growth and Prosperity** measures how well Canada is doing on the key metrics that will allow us to grow well – that is, to sustainably increase our population to 100 million in a manner that improves our prosperity, well-being, and environment. Strong public support for immigration and continued attractiveness of Canada as a destination are crucial to growing well. Key scorecard indicators are highlighted throughout this report.

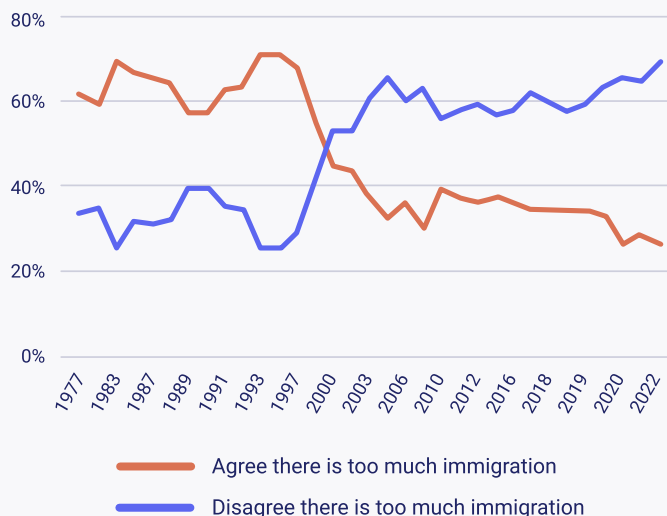


## What we know about Canadian attitudes toward immigration

Canadians, generally, have very positive attitudes toward immigration. Support for immigration is so strong among Canadians that it is often considered a core part of national identity.<sup>2</sup>

The Focus Canada survey is notable among opinion polls on immigration because the study has been tracking Canadian public opinion using standard questions on immigration consistently since 1977. In the 2022 Focus Canada survey, **7 in 10 Canadians support current or increased immigration levels – this is the highest that support has been** since the survey began more than 40 years ago.<sup>3,4</sup> Canadians' support for immigration grew sharply around the turn of the century,<sup>5</sup> a change that has proven resilient in the face of shocks such as the 2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>6</sup> Support has continued to increase in recent years, as immigrant admissions have increased.

Support for immigration



**Figure 1 - Support for immigration levels in Canada, 1977-2022.** Adapted from "Focus Canada - Fall 2022: Canadian Public Opinion about Immigration and Refugees," The Environics Institute for Survey Research, 2022.

Canadians' support for immigration is based on both economic interests and values. Canadians agree that Canada needs more immigration to increase its population (58%),<sup>7</sup> that immigration positively impacts the economy (85%),<sup>8</sup> and that "the hard work and talent of immigrants makes Canada better"<sup>9</sup> (75%). Canadians also increasingly support welcoming refugees: 76% think that Canada should accept more immigrants from places experiencing major conflicts – up from just 34% in 1993.<sup>10</sup>

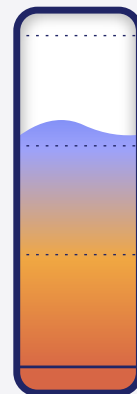
### Indicator

## Support for immigration

### Direction Canada is Trending

### On track

Public support for immigration is an essential condition for Canada to effectively attract and retain immigrants and strategically grow its immigration levels over time. While support is currently strong, some risks have emerged that could impact the level of support.



Growth in support for accepting immigrants and refugees has occurred alongside growth in Canadians' "multicultural identity": 64% of Canadians agree that multiculturalism is a very important symbol of Canadian identity, compared to just 37% a quarter century ago.<sup>11</sup>

Strong support for immigration in Canada can also be partially attributed to a few specific structural drivers. The recent history of immigration means that today, nearly one-quarter of Canadians are immigrants,<sup>12</sup> leading to positive feedback that further drives both immigration and support for it. Similarly, Canada has, for many years, oriented its immigration policy towards economic immigrants who are most likely to succeed in Canada – with control over selection made possible by Canada's geography and single land border.<sup>13,14</sup> Another factor is the combination of Canada's electoral system and large immigrant population in many ridings (immigrants or children of immigrants make up 40% of the Canadian population, and more than 50% in many large cities<sup>15</sup>), which makes it difficult for political candidates with anti-immigration platforms to get elected.

As a result, even among countries that have traditionally welcomed immigration, Canada stands out. In a 2019 Pew Research survey of people in 18 countries, Canadians were on average the most supportive of immigrants – ahead of Australia, the UK, Germany, and the US.<sup>16</sup>

## Public attitudes of Canadian immigrants

**Immigrants living in Canada** can offer a dual perspective, having lived in Canada and considered immigrating to it. While many immigrants are happy in Canada, others face challenges such as discrimination and high costs of living. In a recent survey, only about one-third of immigrants agreed that they get "fair job opportunities in Canada's job market,"<sup>17</sup> and nearly two-thirds agreed that "immigrants are less likely to stay in Canada" due to the rising cost of living.<sup>18</sup> Overall, however, the majority of immigrants are doing well: 72% agreed that "Canada provides immigrants with a good quality of life."<sup>19</sup>

## Emerging risks to Canadian public support for immigration

While there is broad acceptance of immigration in Canada now, there is no guarantee that will remain the case. To ensure the support necessary for successful immigration attraction, retention and integration, policymakers need to be proactive – identifying the factors that could reduce support for immigration and determining how policy choices might influence them. Century Initiative analysis, informed by a December 2022 expert roundtable discussion, identified four main emerging risks<sup>20</sup>:

- | Access to affordable housing
- | Public infrastructure and services
- | Economic challenges
- | Political rhetoric

**Access to affordable and suitable housing** has reached crisis levels in a growing number of Canadian communities. Some are already expressing worries that Canada's ambitious immigration targets will worsen the problem.<sup>21</sup> A 2022 poll by Leger found that 75% of Canadians are "concerned the immigration plan will result in excessive demand for housing."<sup>22</sup> At the same time, more than half of Canadians younger than 29 are already "very concerned about their ability to afford housing."<sup>23</sup>

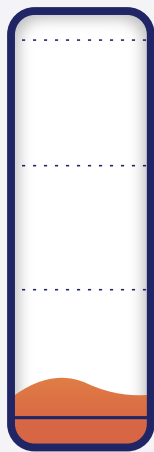
Indicator

### Affordable housing

Direction Canada is Trending

#### Falling behind

Suitable, adequate, and affordable housing is needed to support the health and well-being of a growing Canadian population, including immigrants. Between 2005 and 2020, Canada recorded one of the largest increases in housing prices in the OECD. The pandemic has continued to exacerbate housing challenges.



**Public infrastructure and services** in Canada are strained, with shortages mounting for Canada's existing population. Canada's physical infrastructure faces an estimated investment deficit on the order of \$100 billion,<sup>24</sup> healthcare shortages have reached the point of crisis,<sup>25</sup> and both citizens and media have expressed concern over delays for basic public services such as passport provision.<sup>26</sup> Some experts suggest that immigrants could pose further strains on existing public services, and that this poses risks to both economic security and social cohesion.<sup>27</sup>

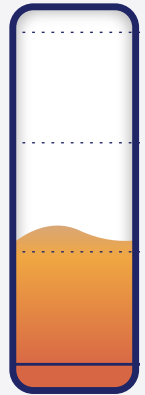
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### Investments in infrastructure

Direction Canada is Trending

#### Needs Attention

Much of Canada's public infrastructure is aging and in need of repair. A bigger, bolder Canada requires investments in infrastructure such as affordable housing, climate adaptation infrastructure, broadband, roads, bridges and public transit.



Public support for immigration may be harmed if Canadians perceive it to be exacerbating these challenges. But rather than being reason to decrease immigration levels, this should be a call to invest in much-needed infrastructure and services.

**Economic challenges** and uncertainty including continued inflation, a recession, or an extended period of stagflation are all possibilities for Canada in the coming years. Although a severe recession in the near future is becoming less likely in the eyes of economic forecasters, the public is still very concerned about the economy and a possible economic downturn.<sup>28</sup> These concerns could decrease support for immigration, which people may associate with increased government expenditure, and could represent a recurring threat in times of economic downturn. Canadians may become less supportive of immigration when they are unemployed, when they are concerned about the economy, or when they are worried about unemployment and immigrant dependence on the welfare state.<sup>29</sup>

Nonetheless, immigration support in Canada has shown clear resilience to shocks (such as the 2008 financial crisis) and in the years following them (see Figure 1 on page 2). Beyond surveys, consistent advocacy for increased immigration from private sector employers large and small as well as provincial and territorial governments reflect the strong view that immigration is an economic benefit rather than threat.

**Political rhetoric** can influence attitudes toward immigration.<sup>30, 31</sup> In countries where there has been a significant rise in anti-immigrant sentiment, there have also been rises in political messaging that targets and mobilizes latent public concerns about immigration.<sup>32</sup> This could include, for example, impacts on wages and employment, although research suggests that such impacts are negligible, or even positive.<sup>33</sup> In Canada, People's Party leader Maxime Bernier and Quebec Premier Francois Legault have shared anti-immigrant political rhetoric,<sup>34, 35</sup> but such discourse remains rare in Canadian politics.

## Canada's strong international immigration "brand"

Just as Canadians' opinions about immigration matter, so too do international perspectives on Canada as a destination. Canada has developed a strong international brand for welcoming immigrants, and received over 660,000 applications for permanent residency in 2021.<sup>36</sup>

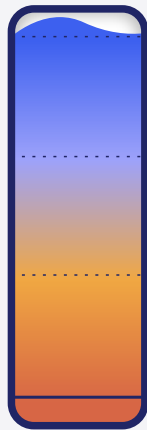
Indicator

### Global reputation

Direction Canada is Trending

#### Leading

A strong global reputation can help attract talented immigrants to Canada, support investment and bolster global influence. Canada's brand is among the world's strongest, with trust in its government being particularly positive internationally. Despite this reputation, Canada cannot afford complacency.



**People outside of Canada generally have a positive impression of Canada**, seeing it as a country that has a positive impact globally.<sup>37</sup> As a destination to migrate to, Canada receives consistently good marks for quality of life, healthcare, education, civic engagement, jobs, and income in international rankings.<sup>38</sup> Overall, Canada remains well-positioned to attract and retain immigrants from global labour markets.

The positive perception of Canada depends upon Canadians' openness to newcomers, which is historically strong. According to Gallup's Migrant Acceptance Index, **Canada is the most accepting country in the world for migrants**.<sup>39</sup> Canada's citizens take pride in multiculturalism and have a very favourable view of immigration,<sup>40</sup> in part because so many Canadians are immigrants, or know them: immigrants now make up almost one-quarter of the population<sup>41</sup> – the most since Canada's confederation.<sup>42</sup>

## Emerging risks to Canada's global immigration "brand"

**Without careful management, Canada's good reputation among prospective immigrants could be under threat.** As other countries increase competition for immigrant talent,<sup>43</sup> a number of factors may cause newcomers to think twice about their decision to move to Canada.

In a recent Leger study commissioned by the Institute for Canadian Citizenship, 30% of 18–34-year-old newcomers said that they were likely to leave Canada within 2 years,<sup>44</sup> demonstrating that as much as immigrant attraction is crucial to Canada's long-term prosperity, so too is immigrant retention. Canada has fallen behind on key issues that impact our reputation, and if not managed carefully, threaten Canada's ability to welcome and keep newcomers.<sup>45</sup> Top issues highlighted by literature and recent immigrants include<sup>46</sup>:

- | The cost of living
- | Poor recognition of foreign credentials and experience
- | Housing affordability
- | Administrative backlogs
- | Poor treatment of some immigrants
- | Increasing global competition for talent

**Cost of living:** Rising costs threaten to harm Canada's reputation by making Canada seem financially inhospitable. In mid-2022, Canada had the world's 18<sup>th</sup> highest cost of living.<sup>47</sup> The cost of living is among the most frequently cited disincentives for choosing Canada as a future home.<sup>48</sup> Should prospective salaries for newcomers not keep pace with the cost of living, many may determine that Canada is too expensive.

#### Poor credential and experience recognition:

Many newcomers are admitted to Canada based on their educational and professional merits. However, those same international qualifications, credentials, and experiences aren't always recognized, forcing newcomers to work jobs that they are persistently overqualified for.<sup>49</sup> This can be a detriment to Canada's ability to entice immigrants, and to immigrants' ability to thrive. At the same time, increasingly global labour markets could drive increased competition for economic immigrants.<sup>50</sup> Despite relatively longstanding efforts to improve in this area, limited progress has been made, and "many internationally trained individuals continue to face multiple barriers as they attempt to work in positions that are commensurate with their qualifications."<sup>51</sup>

**Housing affordability:** One factor that has an outsized contribution on the cost of living in Canada is the cost of housing. Immigrants in particular tend to suffer the worst outcomes in an unaffordable housing market: more than one-quarter of immigrants reside in housing that is considered unsuitable, and nearly 40% of homes owned by recent immigrants are considered unaffordable.<sup>52</sup> A study by the Canadian Centre for Housing Rights found systemic discrimination against newcomers seeking rental housing, especially when they are part of a racialized group.<sup>53</sup> The majority of immigrants reside in Canada's largest urban centres, where housing is already least affordable.<sup>54</sup>



**Administrative backlogs:** Since the COVID-19 pandemic, Canada's immigration system has struggled to process applications across all streams and categories.<sup>55</sup> Although Canada's backlog reached an all-time high of nearly 2.7 million as a result of COVID-19,<sup>56</sup> lengthy backlogs had become an enduring feature of the Canadian immigration system even before the pandemic.<sup>57</sup> Long wait-times discourage and impede newcomers from being able to settle in Canada, even when they meet or exceed the criteria for doing so. Backlogs also reduce Canada's labour market competitiveness, as in-demand talent from around the globe may choose to pursue other destinations. Still, the federal government has taken several steps to attempt to reduce the significant backlog, including changes to the Express Entry system to respond more quickly to labour needs,<sup>58</sup> and welcomed record numbers of immigrants in 2022.<sup>59</sup>

**Poor treatment of some immigrants:** The reality for many immigrants when they arrive in Canada is very challenging. Hardships are real, and these are often exacerbated by mistreatment at the hands of some employers, landlords, agencies and training and educational institutions. Cases of unfairness are increasingly being documented publicly, and many immigrants are speaking out about the exploitation and discrimination that they face. In a few recent instances, foreign students have been exploited by a select few predatory private education institutions and employers,<sup>60,61</sup>

while in the last year, migrant workers from Jamaica and from Mexico have filed open letters of complaint, citing mistreatment by Canadian employers.<sup>62,63</sup> Still, progress is being made: the Government of Canada recently provided more protections for these workers,<sup>64</sup> is looking at ways to expand pathways to permanent residency for students and migrant workers,<sup>65</sup> and recently increased the number of hours that students are permitted to work legally (reducing pressure for "under the table" arrangements).<sup>66</sup>

**Increasing global competition for talent:** Increasing labour mobility and widely shared demographic challenges have led to intense competition for highly skilled workers and entrepreneurs across the globe. In 2021, the UK announced a visa for "High Potential Individuals,"<sup>67</sup> while there are active proposals in the US to allow for immigrant start-up visas.<sup>68</sup> China and India both have policies and programs to incentivise the return of high-skilled emigrants.<sup>69</sup> In China this has included providing a range of preferential policies for entrepreneurs.<sup>70</sup> In the 2022 Global Talent Competitiveness Index, Canada has fallen to 15<sup>th</sup> place<sup>71</sup> – down from 9<sup>th</sup> place in 2015,<sup>72</sup> with its lowest scores for immigrant retention. Beyond their direct effects on talent attraction, these incentives (or their absence) also shape the broader perception of a country as a welcoming place for people to make a new home.

## Growing Canada while growing support

Canadians' strong level of support for immigration is globally unique. It is a fundamental Canadian advantage and source of differentiation from other nations competing for global talent. These attitudes must be carefully stewarded, and potential threats to our competitive advantage must be monitored. The risks to Canadians' support for immigration and to Canada's immigration brand overlap in many ways. Similarly, policy responses to them impact multiple risks at once. These responses also have benefits beyond just influencing how immigration (or Canada) is perceived. Below, three major categories of public policy responses – and which risks they protect against – are outlined:

Risks to:	Policy responses to address risks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Canadian support for immigration</li> <li>• Canada's brand</li> </ul>	<p>Policies and administration of the immigration system</p> <p>Policies for a more welcoming environment for immigrants</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Administrative backlogs</li> <li>• Economic challenges and uncertainty</li> <li>• Harmful political rhetoric</li> <li>• Immigrant's access to housing</li> <li>• Poor credential recognition</li> <li>• Poor treatment of some immigrants</li> <li>• Global competition for talent</li> </ul>	<p>Investments to accommodate population growth</p>

## Policies and administration of the immigration system

- Improving administrative capacity** through improvements to business processes to simplify admissions and the implementation of new technologies to accelerate decision-making and application processing. Notably, a new global case management system will help to improve administrative capacity. This is scheduled to begin in 2023,<sup>73</sup> based on funding announced in Budget 2021, but the sooner that an improved system is available, the easier it will be to move beyond recent immigration backlogs. Application backlogs could be reduced by simplifying application forms, considering whether all steps are in fact necessary for low-risk applicants, providing more digital application options, and continuing to improve transparency and communication for applicants. Improving the administrative process – typically an immigrants' first true interaction with Canada – is crucial for ensuring Canada remains competitive in the global competition for talent.
- Create more pathways for permanent residency** by committing to the Strategy to Expand Transitions to Permanent Residency.<sup>74</sup> There are many reasons for a modern immigration system to admit individuals on temporary status, such as short-term labour market needs or for study. But long-term challenges require long-term solutions. Canada should ensure that its immigration system is based on permanent immigration.

## Policies for a more welcoming environment for immigrants

- Support and strengthen business attraction of immigrants** – through programs such as the Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot and the Global Skills Strategy – to help drive immigrant employment and strengthen the economy. Canada's brand is a core issue for many Canadian businesses wanting to remain competitive and attract top talent, and leading businesses demonstrate this by helping to drive immigration to Canada.<sup>75</sup>
- Develop proactive incentives to attract skilled immigrants and entrepreneurs** in the global competition for talent. As other countries roll out the red carpet, Canada can't afford to rest solely on its good reputation. Government-led incentives are particularly important for entrepreneurs – where there is no employer to lead the attraction. Canada's current start-up visa program is very modest – representing 0.1% of new arrivals and with a processing time approaching 3 years, even with commitments from approved Canadian investors. To attract dynamic entrepreneurs to grow businesses here, Canada needs bolder proactive talent attraction.

- Provincial governments and regulatory bodies should monitor and regulate the role of predatory private career colleges** (and unscrupulous recruiters) that seek to profit off newcomers. Tight regulation of post-secondary recruitment (for example restricting incentive-based competition for international recruiters, or mandating that post-secondary institutions provide students with information on the PR process) will help to disincentivize business models that rely on exploiting immigrants.
- Fighting the mistreatment of migrant workers and immigrants** by regulating and monitoring predatory business practices. In particular, treatment of TFW's can be improved by enhancing inspections of workplaces, creating a special designation for employers with good records, or strengthening migrants' options for recourse. Ensuring newcomers are treated with dignity is critical for Canada's global reputation.
- Sharing immigrants' stories**, through informational campaigns such as the IRCC's Immigration Matters initiative<sup>76</sup> and Century Initiative's own *Champions for Immigration* campaign, to demonstrate the benefits of immigration and to make immigrants' experiences more relatable. The effects of such campaigns on public opinion should also be evaluated.
- Amplifying advocacy for immigration by business leaders** in the public sphere. Canada's corporate leaders speak frequently about welcoming newcomers and should continue to practice strong leadership publicly and in their own internal organizational practices.

- Providing quality work for immigrants** is possible if employers and regulatory bodies can improve recognition of international experience and credentials and build improved hiring practices to eliminate criteria and rules that are implicitly biased. Programs to mentor and support successful transitions and pathways, such as those developed by the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC), are important and deliver positive outcomes. And while the private sector has made significant efforts to welcome and support many immigrants, more can be done.

## Investments to accommodate population growth that benefits all Canadians

- Proactively investing in the infrastructure and services that underpin economic growth** such as healthcare and transportation, to lower prices and expand availability. This is why Century Initiative advocates for long-term infrastructure planning.<sup>77</sup> The upcoming National Infrastructure Assessment, for which consultations were



held in 2021,<sup>78</sup> should support governments at all levels to make infrastructure planning and investment decisions that support population growth and long-term prosperity. Dealing with resource stressors supports all Canadians and limits blaming immigrants for using these resources.

**Growing the housing supply for all Canadians.** Housing shortages should be reason for more housing, rather than less immigration. Pulling back on immigration due to housing shortages could have dire consequences for Canada's long-term prosperity. Canada's National Housing Strategy, which aims to build housing supply and support community housing initiatives, is an important start.<sup>79</sup>

Newcomers can be supported by policies to tackle discrimination in rental markets and with strong connections to community organizations to help them navigate housing.

**Leveraging underrepresented talent** by prioritizing immigrants with strong in-demand skills and increasing the supply of workers to fill labour shortages. At the same time, immigration streams must also continue to navigate long-term human capital needs. This helps to ensure that immigrants complement Canada's existing labour force rather than compete with it.

## A singular opportunity for growth

**Canada's support for immigration is a major global advantage: it builds diversity and harmony, and allows us to grow stronger and more prosperous.** At the same time, while Canadians are generally (and increasingly) supportive of immigration, strong public support for immigration and Canada's good international brand cannot be taken for granted. If Canada is to reach its immigration targets and compete with global competition for talent, these will need careful attention.

**We must nurture and steward all of our advantages with continued good policies and program administration.** We must continue to make the case that immigrants are in Canada's economic interest – and that Canada is a good place for immigrants. There is a role for government, business, labour and the not-for-profit sector on both of these goals. Canadians' support for immigration is a choice that requires continued attention to what is working and what needs to be improved in our selection, settlement and integration programs.

In many places in the world, attitudes toward immigration have hardened in recent years. These attitudes have gone hand-in-hand with the rise of authoritarian populism in some countries. While this is not currently the case in Canada, there is no room for complacency. Identifying, monitoring, and remedying the risks to public opinion of immigration in Canada is necessary for Canada to grow well. **Canada's strong immigration support and brand are a singular opportunity to attract more immigrants and grow toward 100 million Canadians.**

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