

Age of oldest child key to unlocking immigration mobility within Canada

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With Canada moving to welcome more immigrants, and communities hoping to retain these new workers rather than see them move on, a Western University study reports that the age of a family's eldest child is a key factor.

Canada's plan to support [economic recovery](#) from the COVID-19 pandemic includes increased immigration to drive growth and create new jobs.

That means regions most in need of skilled labour, diversity and increased population must find better ways to recruit—and, more importantly, retain—immigrants, said Kate Choi, acting director of Western's Centre for Research on Social Inequality.

Choi and her collaborators studied migration patterns of immigrant families and their perceived motivations for moving after their arrival in Canada.

"Families with [older children](#) are more likely to stay put," said Choi. "It seems that parents time their move to not interfere with their children's high school attendance."

The quantitative study, published in the journal *Population, Space, and Place*, linked administrative immigration and income-tax files with [census data](#), but Choi said past qualitative research is also valuable for predicting socio-economic immigrant mobility.

"If we were to qualitatively ask an immigrant parent why they move, they often say they want better educational and lifelong opportunities for their children," said Choi, who conducted the study with Michael Haan, Canada Research Chair in Migration & Ethnic Relations, and University of Toronto Ph.D. student Sagi Ramaj. "If you are coming from a country with a lot of human capital, and a lot of resources, you have a lot of expectations for your children's educational success, you invest in it, and you look to achieve upward mobility."

This 'stay put' approach for families with children in high school isn't limited to immigrants. U.S. President Barack Obama's decision to stay in Washington after his time in office, in large part to allow one of his daughters to finish high school, gave Choi food for thought and fuelled this study.

"When I saw the Obamas making this particular decision, I wondered if having children of a certain age would anchor immigrant families to different regions of the country," said Choi. "That's why we decided to look at age of the oldest child, and then look at whether or not immigrant families would be more likely to move or stay put."

An exception to the finding is that immigrants living in gateway cities such as Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver are more likely to move in search of affordable housing.

"As the children are growing older, families may move to suburban areas outside of the gateway cities, still within their metropolitan areas but outside of their census tract, to find more spacious housing and a lower cost of living," said Choi.

Canada depends heavily on immigrant labour to fuel productivity, but their very presence in certain parts of the country and not others fuels economic inequality across regions.

"A lot of places, like Atlantic Canada and rural communities in the Prairies, have great difficulty in both recruiting, as well as retaining, immigrant populations," said Choi.

More than 90 percent of immigrants are found in the 20 largest census metropolitan areas, and more than 60 percent of those live in Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver.

"A bulk of the focus for different immigration agencies in regions like Atlantic Canada are to attract a lot of immigrants, but it seems to me that in order for them to have a stable labour force, comprised at least partially of immigrants, more attention should be paid to immigrant retention," said Choi. "They should consider recruiting families with children attending school."

Independent studies show that best practices for retaining [immigrant](#) families, especially those with younger [children](#), include building safer schools and multicultural community centres, developing employment-related services, and offering English as second language (ESL) classes.

More information: Kate H. Choi et al. Age of the oldest child and internal migration of immigrant families: A study using administrative data from immigrant landing and tax files, *Population, Space and Place* (2020). [DOI: 10.1002/psp.2409](https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2409)

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