

# Canadian provinces in open competition for economic immigrants

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At a time of widespread labor shortages, the competition to attract and retain skilled immigrants isn't just between countries; Canada's provinces are also competing against each other. Catherine Xhardez, a professor in the Department of Political Science at Université de Montréal who studies immigration policy, discussed the trend in a talk on June 6 at the Forum sur l'intégration 2024 in Montreal.

Based on her recent study titled "'Stand by me': competitive subnational regimes and the politics of retaining immigrants," Xhardez examined the strategies used by the provinces to attract, select and above all retain economic immigrants.

The work is [published](#) in the *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*.

## More immigration powers

While Quebec was the first province to gain increased powers over immigration, the other provinces quickly followed suit. Under bilateral agreements with the federal government, they now have significant powers, particularly over economic immigration.

"Of all the federated entities in the world, Canada's provinces have the greatest say in immigration matters," Xhardez said. "They have used their autonomy to develop policies for attracting, recruiting, selecting and receiving immigrants, as well as distribution strategies to spread newcomers across their territory."

The instrument most frequently used by provinces to attract economic immigrants is the Provincial Nominee Program (PNP), which lets them directly select a significant portion of their skilled immigrants. In some cases, up to 90% of a province's economic immigrants have been selected through the PNP.

After these targeted selection efforts, however, provinces face a major challenge in retaining the immigrants they have selected.

"Under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, immigrants enjoy the same freedom of movement as Canadian citizens, with some qualifications, and can therefore change province at will," Xhardez noted.

## Varying retention rates

The data Xhardez gathered by reviewing provincial documents published between 2005 and 2022 and 63 economic immigration programs show significant interprovincial differences in [immigrant](#) retention five years after arrival.

British Columbia, Quebec and Alberta lead the way with retention rates of 86%, 85% and 83% respectively (5-year rates, all immigrant categories). At the other end of the scale, some Atlantic provinces struggle to hold onto immigrants: New Brunswick retains 50%, Newfoundland and Labrador 46%, and Prince Edward Island 31%.

## Taking local ties into account

To maximize their chances of retaining economic immigrants, the provinces apply specific selection criteria, using PNPs not only as tools for attraction and selection but also as levers for retention.

Xhardez divides the provinces' actions on this front into four categories:

- **Adaptability factors:** Applicants are favored if they already have family, professional or educational ties to the province.
- **Demonstrated intent and ability to settle permanently:** Some provinces, such as Manitoba, require proof of ties to the local community.
- **Detailed settlement plan:** Applicants may be required to provide a concrete integration plan, including points such as place of residence and education for their children.
- **Exclusion criteria:** Candidates may be rejected if, for example, they reside in another province or own property in another province.

These practices give rise to a new selection criterion: According to Xhardez, the "ideal migrant" is no longer just someone who has the required professional skills but also someone who shows a strong commitment to the host province.

"It remains to be seen whether these policies work in the long term and we need a better understanding of immigrants' trajectories," she said. There are, she noted, other factors that can influence the decision to stay in a province or leave.

## Major financial and societal challenges

The importance that Canadian provinces attach to retaining economic immigrants "is due to the provinces' investments and efforts in both attracting and integrating newcomers," Xhardez observed. "The departure of an immigrant to another province is therefore a net loss for the original host province."

Beyond the financial considerations, these retention strategies raise questions about the balance between the provinces' economic needs and immigrants' right to mobility. They also highlight the challenges of long-term integration of newcomers and building a sense of belonging.

"As the competition for talent intensifies, Canadian provinces continue to refine their approaches," said Xhardez. "The effectiveness of these policies and their impact on the country's demographic and economic distribution will remain subjects of study and debate in the years to come."

**More information:** Catherine Xhardez, 'Stand by me': competitive subnational regimes and the politics of retaining immigrants, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* (2024). [DOI: 10.1080/1369183X.2024.2319179](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2024.2319179)

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