



Saint Mary's
University

ARGEIAD News

**Atlantic Research Group on
Economics of Immigration, Aging
and Diversity**

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Immigration in Atlantic Canada: some recent trends

Over the past ten years, Atlantic Canada has experienced negative natural growth in its population (number of births falling below number of deaths). While population gains through net interprovincial migration remain volatile, the region risks losing its population mass. Population growth is necessary for the region’s economic growth as human capital is the main driver of innovation, investments and labour force growth. Population growth is also necessary to maintain each province’s representation in the Canadian House of Commons, relative to other provinces. It is not surprising, therefore, that in the 21st century, the provincial governments in the region, as well as the federal government, began to recognize the need to boost immigration which has now become the main driver of population growth. Immigration remains under federal jurisdiction, but the provinces now actively participate in federal immigration levels and programs. Data in Table 1 show how the share of immigrants in resident population has changed in Atlantic Canada since the turn of present century. Although immigrants’ share more than doubled between the 2001 and 2021 population censuses, from 3.4 percent to 6 percent, it remains well below the national share of about 24 percent.

Table 1: Immigrant Status of Population in Atlantic Canada, 2001-2021.

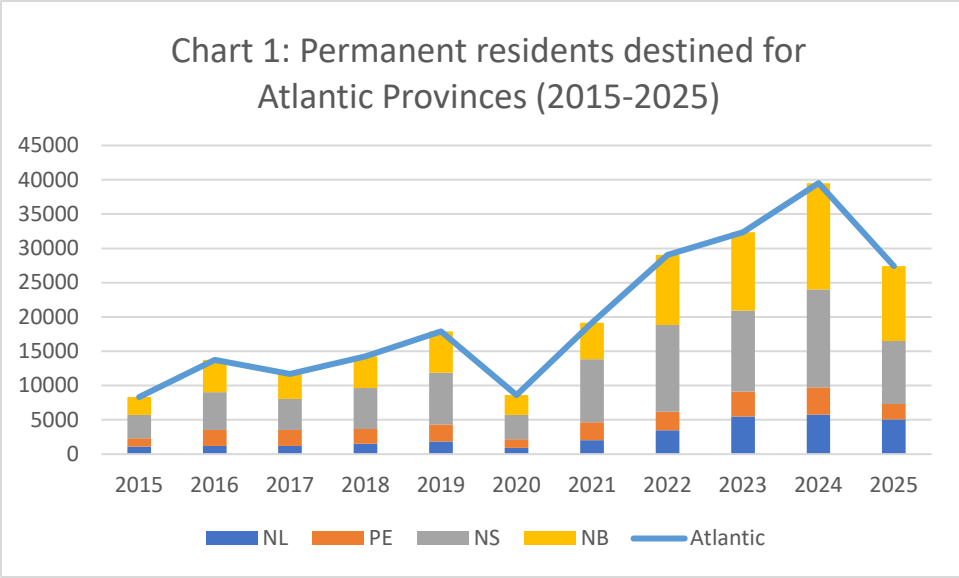
Year	Total Population	Non-Immigrants	Immigrants	Immigrants in total population
2001	2,258,740	2,177,240	75,955	3.36%
2006	2,257,555	2,165,190	84,755	3.75%
2011	2,286,650	2,181,060	92,990	4.07%
2016	2,290,980	2,161,110	110,505	4.82%
2021	2,367,635	2,182,065	141,710	5.99%

Source: Statistics Canada, Census 2001, 2006, 2011, 2016, and 2021.

The current federal limits on immigration are expected to disproportionately affect the Atlantic provinces.

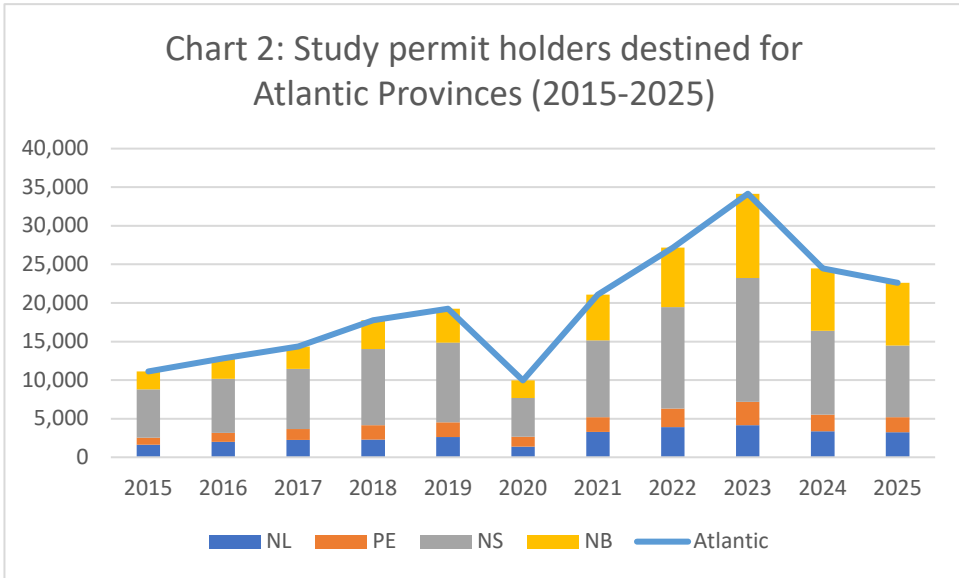
The next three charts show trends in annual inflows of permanent residents, study permit holders and work permit holders since 2015.

Chart 1 shows a rising trend in inflows of permanent residents destined for all four provinces. In 2019, about 115 percent more permanent residents were destined to Atlantic provinces than in 2015. Between 2015 and 2019, their inflows rose by about 115 percent. After falling to less than half at the outbreak of Covid-19 virus, there was a steep rise since 2020 to about 360 percent by 2024. Caps on immigration introduced by the federal government in 2024 resulted in a 30 percent decline by the end of 2025.



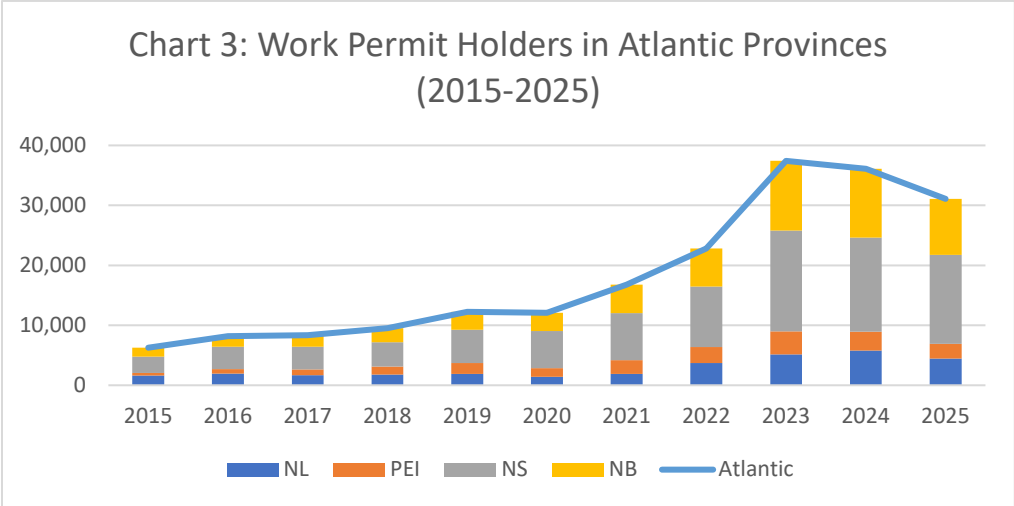
Source: IRCC. Canada - Admissions of Permanent Residents by Province/Territory of Intended Destination and Immigration Category, January 2015 - January 2026

Study permit holders displayed almost the similar trends, although slower, as did permanent residents. Their numbers rose by about 73 percent between 2015 and 2019, fell about 52 percent in 2020 and then rose 243 percent by 2023. The 2024 caps resulted in 72 percent decline in that year which levelled off in 2025 when the decline was 8 percent 2025. (Chart 2).



Source: IRCC. Canada - Study permit holders by province/territory of intended destination, study level and year in which permit(s) became effective, January 2015 - January 2026

In contrast to permanent residents and study permit holders, work permit holders continued to rise until 2023 when they peaked at 497 percent of their 2015 level. The federal caps of 2024 resulted in a 17 percent decrease by 2025 compared to 2023 and 14 percent compared to 2024 (Chart 3).



Source: IRCC. Canada - International Mobility Program (IMP) work permit holders by province/ territory of intended destination, program and year in which permit(s) became effective, January 2015 - January 2026

In summary:

In Atlantic Canada, the federal limits on immigration as introduced in 2024:

- affected the permanent residents the most
- resulted in a sharp decrease in study permit holders in the first year of the caps, the decrease levelled off in 2025.
- work permit holders were affected the least.

Research Group Activities

ARGEIAD participated in the recently held National Metropolis Conference that was held March 11- 13, 2026 at the Halifax Convention Centre. The thematic title of the conference was: *Changing Course? Establishing Consensus on Canada's Immigration Future*. Dr. Akbari (ARGEIAD Chair) was on the conference organizing committee. This pan-Canadian conference attracted 1,200 delegates representing academicians, policymakers, employers, think tanks, settlement sector and members of general public.

Dr. Akbari was one of the featured speakers at the conference and spoke on immigration retention and their economic integration leading to a panel discussion on employers' roles and the new challenges posed by the federal caps on immigration. He also presented in three workshop sessions, a summary of their description follows.

[Find full presentations here.](#)



Meet our plenary speakers



Dr. Ather Akbari
Professor
Chair Atlantic Research Group
on Economics of Immigration,
Aging and Diversity, Saint Mary's
University

Dr. Shannon Dea (Provost and Vice President, Academic & Research) was another featured speaker from Saint Mary's University. She gave welcoming remarks to the delegates on Day 2 of the conference.



Meet our guest speakers



Dr. Shannon Dea
Provost and Vice-President
Academic and Research
Saint Mary's University

Twenty-five years of immigration in Atlantic Provinces

Chair/Moderator
Ather H. Akbari

Immigration has become important for smaller provinces, such as the Atlantic provinces, where population is aging at a faster rate. Any population growth in the region since the mid-1990s has been due to positive international migration, and this was often slight as new arrivals left for other parts of Canada. This changed since about 2016, as population increased markedly. Natural increase is still negative, but there was a much better record of net migration, both international and interprovincial. Recent caps on immigration make it important to analyze how immigrants have performed in labour markets and what has been their impact on economic growth. Inflows of international students — potential skilled labour pool – are also analyzed.



Presenters and Discussant

- Tony Fang, Memorial University of Newfoundland & Labrador, Immigration in Newfoundland & Labrador
- Wimal Rankaduwa, University of Prince Edward Island, Immigration to Prince Edward Island
- Nicholas Manuel, Saint Mary's University, Immigration in Nova Scotia
- Martha MacDonald, Saint Mary's University, Immigration to New Brunswick
- Ather Akbari, Saint Mary's University, Immigration in Atlantic Canada
- Mr. John Biles, Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship Canada.

[Download the Atlantic Canada presentation here](#)

Workshop G9

From Newcomers to Gamechangers: Examining Immigrant Skill Utilization and Retention in Key Sectors

Chair/Moderator
Alice Craft, Signal49
Research (Former
Conference Board of
Canada)



Canada needs skilled immigrants to close labour gaps in key growth sectors, yet many newcomers are working below their education level. Research indicates higher-skilled immigrants are more likely to leave Canada than lower-skilled immigrants. This workshop shares new data on skill mismatch and wastage in healthcare, construction, and hospitality, and explores trends in onward migration. Participants will strategize on retaining skilled professionals and improving immigrant skill utilization.

Presenters

- Federica Guccini, Signal 49 Research
- Ather Akbari, Saint Mary's University
- Hans de Wit, Shannex Inc.

[Download the Signal49 presentation here](#)

Plenary session 2

Making the Case for Immigration: What do Employers Want?

Chair/Moderator:

Patrick MacKenzie, CEO, Immigrant
Employment Council of BC

“Sustainable immigration levels” is the term used by the Government of Canada in presenting its Immigration Levels Plan for 2026–2028. This objective calls for decreases to temporary resident arrivals and stabilizing permanent residents at annual levels that remain twenty percent below admissions in 2024. Employers are seen as key voices in informing federal decisions and are sensitive to public opinion. This session explored where the business community currently stands on immigration.

Panelists:

- **Dr. Ather Akbari**, Professor, Chair Atlantic Research Group on Economics of Immigration, Aging and Diversity, Saint Mary's University
- **Dan Gignac**, Chief People Officer, Murphy Hospitality Group
- **Stephen Harrington**, Partner, Global Workforce Strategies & Intelligence leader, Deloitte Canada
- **Vanessa Chouinard**, Associate Deputy Minister for the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration, Government of Nova Scotia

[Download Dr. Akbari's plenary presentation](#)



Workshop B3

Building a Resilient Atlantic Canada: Integrated Strategies for Newcomer and International Student Retention

Chair/ Moderator:
Megan Morris, Association of
New Canadians

This workshop focused on integrated, multi-stakeholder strategies for long-term retention, covering pre-arrival supports, post-graduation pathways, meaningful employment, and community belonging. It presents data on retention trends, showcases effective service delivery models, and aligns immigration policy with regional workforce needs.



Presenters:

- Tony Fang, Memorial University, *Immigration and skilled labour force in Atlantic Canada: The role of employers and international students*
- Ather Akbari, Saint Mary's University, *Network effect on job-education matching of international students in Atlantic Canada*
- Jim Murphy, Association of New Canadians
- Paula Knight, Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia
- Dale Crawford, Atlantic Workforce Partnership

[Download International Students in Atlantic Canada presentation here](#)

Media mentions and interviews

Ather Akbari appeared on CTV News Live on January 9, 2026 to discuss interprovincial migration.