

## Immigration program plagued by backlogs and uncertainty

By **Sergio R. Karas**

Law360 Canada (September 22, 2025, 3:48 PM EDT) -- Immigration has always been central to Canada's growth, with governments arguing that newcomers are vital to the economy, diversity and innovation. However, in 2025, immigration became the subject of sharp public debate. The question is no longer just how many immigrants Canada can admit, but also the type of skills needed by employers, and whether the system can handle the demand efficiently without compromising security and weeding out fraud and abuse.

The government has lowered immigration targets, presenting this as a "responsible retrenchment," but the real issue is whether these targets are being met. In practice, the immigration system struggles to stay on track, as backlogs continue to grow, processing times exceed service standards, and applicants face months of uncertainty. These delays are causing problems, such as workers losing their status and employers losing valuable employees. How did we get to this point?



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According to a study by the Fraser Institute, "Canada's Changing Immigration Patterns, 2000-2024," the scale and composition of immigration have shifted dramatically over the past two decades. From 2000 to 2015, Canada admitted an average of 617,800 newcomers per year, including permanent and temporary newcomers, but this figure more than doubled to 1.4 million annually between 2016 and 2024 (excluding 2020).

Immigration growth before 2016 was modest at four per cent per year, compared to a sharp surge of 15.1 per cent annually after 2016, largely driven by policy changes such as the 2014 International Mobility Program (IMP) and a surge in temporary foreign workers and international students. As a result, the share of permanent residents declined from 42.1 per cent (2000-2015) to 27.7 per cent (2016-2024), making temporary entrants most newcomers. The study notes that this rapid increase has added strain on housing affordability and public services, fuelling debate over Canada's capacity to sustain such elevated levels of immigration.

Canada's 2025-2027 Immigration Levels Plan sets targets for temporary residents at 673,650 new arrivals in 2025, falling to 516,600 in 2026 and 543,600 in 2027, comprised of 305,900 students, 285,750 IMP workers and 82,000 Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) workers in 2025. While the target numbers of students and TFWP workers remain the same for 2026 and 2027, they are different for IMP workers: the target numbers for this group will be reduced to 128,700 in 2026 and 155,700 in 2027. These targets are part of a broader strategy to reduce the proportion of temporary residents to five per cent of Canada's population by 2026, and to ease pressure on public services and infrastructure.

Yet by mid-2025, the number of newcomers has already diverged sharply from these projections. The IMP program alone issued 302,280 work permits in just the first half of the year, surpassing its full-year target of 285,750. Simultaneously, the TFWP has issued 105,195 permits, already exceeding its annual target of 82,000 by more than 20 per cent.

The gap between the government's stated immigration plan and its actual execution underscores a troubling inconsistency. Ottawa has imposed strict limits on international students under the banner

of “restraint.” Still, the work permit streams are being allowed to run unchecked, far overshooting their own goals. This situation highlights Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC)’s failure to enforce its own limits and reveals a deeper policy contradiction: on one hand, the government presents itself to the public as tightening immigration levels to ensure sustainability; but on the other hand, it continues to approve record numbers of temporary workers, directly undermining the very restraint it claims to exercise.

As of July 31, IRCC had 901,700 applications in the backlog. In the permanent residence category, there were 892,400 applications in total, with about half (448,900) being processed on time and the other half (443,500) delayed. For temporary residence applications, including work permits, study permits and visitor visas, there were 1,079,300 applications, of which 62 per cent (669,900) were processed within normal timelines, while 38 per cent (409,400) were delayed beyond the expected processing standards.

Work permit backlogs and processing times have worsened significantly, creating prolonged uncertainty for applicants and employers. In July 2025, 46 per cent of work permit applications were delayed, up from 40 per cent in June 2025. Processing times for inside-Canada work permit applications, including extensions, have also deteriorated. In June 2024, online applications from inside Canada were processed in approximately 101 days, but by mid-2025, this had surged to 238 days, nearly eight months. Although there has been a slight improvement, as of Sept. 11, the average processing time for work permit applications (initial and extension) still stands at around 190 days, which is more than six months and far above IRCC’s stated service standards.

These compounded delays mean workers risk losing their legal status, being stuck in “maintained status,” being unable to travel outside of Canada, or facing long gaps in employment, while employers see their hiring and project timelines disrupted by unpredictable approvals. For both new applicants and those seeking extensions, the delays cause financial strain, psychological stress and uncertainty. These disruptions go far beyond inconvenience, creating legal, financial and personal instability for applicants and eroding public trust in Canada’s immigration system.

A recent article in the *Toronto Star* highlights other policy shifts from IRCC that have caused an increase in application processing times. IRCC states that it operates on a first-come, first-served basis; however, once a program’s annual target for applications is met, new applications are usually deferred to future years, which causes further delay. Moreover, since December 2024, the Canada Border Services Agency has ended “flagpoling,” which used to allow applicants to re-enter Canada at land borders, after turning around without entering the United States, and obtain a new work permit. Most visa-required applicants now must apply through the online IRCC portal and deal with the increasing processing times.

IRCC has implemented technological enhancements to better align with application volumes and processing needs. IRCC utilizes an artificial intelligence (AI) software tool to expedite the review process of files. Although this has helped reduce processing times on the front end, it has created other issues. Refused applicants have been challenging the use of AI in the decision-making process in judicial reviews in the Federal Court.

In *Pjetracaj v. Canada*, 2025 FC 103, the applicant challenged the refusal of his temporary resident visa, arguing that IRCC’s use of AI meant the decision was not properly made by a human officer. The Federal Court dismissed this claim, ruling that using AI does not undermine fairness if an officer makes the decision. However, in *Safarian v. Canada*, 2023 FC 775, the applicant challenged a study permit refusal and complained about boilerplate reasons in the refusal letter allegedly generated by AI. The Federal Court held that such boilerplate wording alone is insufficient to refuse an application, and the officer still must address the specific facts of the case.

Considering the persistent application backlogs, significant reforms to the immigration program are necessary. Without meaningful improvements and demand reduction, the immigration program may collapse. Whether recent initiatives will yield tangible results remains to be seen. In the meantime, applicants should remain proactive by monitoring updates and ensuring the completeness of their submissions.

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