

Shifting Canadian attitudes toward immigration

By **Sergio R. Karas**

Law360 Canada (July 29, 2025, 1:14 PM EDT) -- For much of its modern history, Canada has stood out as a beacon of openness and multiculturalism, with immigration widely embraced as a key pillar of economic prosperity. However, in recent years, this long-standing support has begun to show signs of erosion.

Immigration levels rose rapidly over the past decade, although this trend was briefly interrupted in 2020 due to international travel restrictions during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. As immigration resumed and continued to climb after the pandemic, concerns grew between 2021 and 2024, eventually prompting the federal government to revise its immigration targets for both permanent and non-permanent residents.



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Worrying trends about housing affordability, pressure on public services, cultural integration, decreasing per capita income, and job competition have led to a noticeable shift in public attitudes. While immigration remains important to Canada's demographic and economic future, a growing number of Canadians now question whether current levels are sustainable.

A national survey by Abacus Data, conducted in October 2024, reports that an increasing number of Canadians now believe that high immigration is placing a significant strain on public resources and community well-being. According to that poll, 73 per cent of Canadians feel that immigration is worsening housing availability and affordability. Similarly, 62 per cent report diminished access to health care due to rising population pressures, and 59 per cent cite negative impacts on social services. Canadians perceive that there are insufficient critical resources to accommodate rapid population growth.

Concerns are also mounting at the community level: 60 per cent of respondents believe newcomers contribute to increased traffic congestion (up from 51 per cent), 53 per cent worry about crime and public safety (up from 39 per cent), and 42 per cent feel that immigration harms community cohesion (up from 34 per cent). These sharp increases across multiple indicators suggest deepening public unease about the tangible, everyday effects of high immigration levels on Canadian society.

Now, 53 per cent of Canadians believe immigration is harming the nation, and this trend strongly correlates with political affiliation and age. Among supporters of the Conservative Party, 70 per cent view immigration negatively, compared with just 27 per cent of Liberals and 37 per cent of NDP supporters. Age-wise, 57 per cent of Canadians aged 45-59 hold negative views, while 47 per cent of younger Canadians (18-39) share these concerns.

This shift in public attitude is closely tied to the significant rise in immigration levels. According to the recently published report by the Fraser Institute titled "Canada's Changing Immigration Patterns, 2000-2024," immigration has surged significantly since 2015, both in terms of volume and composition. Between 2000 and 2015, Canada admitted an average of 617,800 immigrants annually in all temporary and permanent categories, but from 2016 to 2024 (excluding 2020), that number grew to about 1.4 million per year — more than twice as many as in the previous 15 years.

This dramatic rise reflects not only increased targets for permanent residents but also an unprecedented influx of temporary foreign workers, international students and asylum seekers. The composition of immigration changed sharply: from 2000 to 2015, about 42 per cent were permanent residents, but between 2016 and 2024, that dropped to around 28 per cent. During the same period, the share of non-permanent residents increased to over 72 per cent.

As immigration levels and demographics have changed, public opinion is becoming increasingly cautious and skeptical about its benefits. A recent national study by Pollara Strategic Insights reveals a sharp decline in Canadian support for immigration over the past two decades. In 2002, net approval stood at +31, but by 2025, it had dropped to just +2, with Albertans showing the most negative sentiment at -8. The percentage of Canadians who believe immigration levels are too high has surged from 34 per cent to 60 per cent, with Alberta (65 per cent), Quebec (63 per cent) and Ontario (62 per cent) leading in concern.

Cultural optimism has also eroded — only 33 per cent now believe immigration enriches culture, down from 58 per cent in 2002. Quebecers (26 per cent) and Albertans (29 per cent) express the lowest confidence in multicultural benefits. Economic anxiety is rising too, with 52 per cent now fearing immigration increases unemployment, especially among those with a college or high school education (55 per cent) and Albertans (56 per cent). These findings reflect a growing public unease that could significantly shape future immigration policy.

One of the most prominent concerns fuelling this public unease is the housing crisis. According to a report by the Fraser Institute titled "The Crisis in Housing Affordability: Population Growth and Housing Starts 1972-2024," Canada is facing a deepening housing affordability crisis, largely driven by a mismatch between record-breaking population growth and immigration. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, Canada's population surged by 1.23 million new residents in 2023, primarily due to immigration, which is more than double the pre-pandemic high set in 2019. While growth slowed to 951,517 in 2024, it remained significantly above historical averages.

However, housing construction has not kept pace. In 2024, only 245,367 new housing units were started, a decline from 271,198 in 2021 and far below the needs of a rapidly expanding population. In 2023, the country added 5.1 new residents for every housing unit started, the highest ratio in over 50 years — far surpassing the long-term average of 1.9 residents per unit. Although the ratio improved slightly to 3.9 in 2024, it remains alarmingly high.

In response to public concerns, the government has revised its immigration targets. Permanent resident admissions are now capped at 395,000, down from the previously planned 500,000, with further reductions projected for 2026 (380,000) and 2027 (365,000). For the first time, the government has introduced temporary resident caps, aiming to reduce the share of temporary residents in the population from seven per cent to five per cent by 2026.

Canada's evolving approach to immigration reflects a delicate balancing act between economic necessity and societal capacity. For decades, immigration has been a cornerstone of Canada's demographic strategy, addressing aging populations and labour shortages. By scaling back immigration targets and introducing new controls on temporary intakes, the federal government must acknowledge the need for moderation and systemic reform. This recalibration aims to restore public confidence while maintaining Canada's global reputation as a welcoming nation.

Moving forward, the challenge will be to align immigration policy with the country's capacity to integrate newcomers effectively — socially, economically and culturally — without losing sight of the long-term benefits of immigration. A more transparent, regionally responsive and integration-focused immigration system may well define Canada's path to inclusive and sustainable growth.

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