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Vulnerable, Inequitable, and Precarious: Impacts of COVID-19 on Newcomers, Immigrants, And Migrant Workers in Rural Canada

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed crucial flaws in Canada's immigration systems. While the majority of newcomers to Canada reside in urban centres, a substantial minority work and live in rural areas and small towns where crucial immigrant services are far less developed and greater geographical distances hinder efforts to support immigrants. Rural immigrants face distinct challenges, including increased social isolation and economic marginalization, which have only been amplified by the pandemic. Furthermore, the inaccurate perception of immigration as an exclusively urban issue hinders efforts to combat these problems. Building on rural immigration literature, this paper examines the ways in which the pandemic has impacted rural immigrants, including newcomers, refugees, and temporary foreign workers. Findings highlighted include the difficulty of providing immigrant support services in rural areas, the vulnerability of migrant farm workers to illness and isolation, and the lack of awareness and funding for immigration issues in rural areas relative to their urban counterparts. The paper draws on journalism and academic literature from the past year into these issues. In doing so, it demonstrates the need for renewed academic, policy, and rural development practice interests in rural immigration.

Keywords: immigration, newcomers, COVID-19, employment, temporary foreign worker program

Vulnérable, inéquitable et précaire : Impacts de la COVID-19 sur les nouveaux arrivants, les immigrants et les travailleurs migrants dans les régions rurales du Canada

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Résumé

La pandémie de COVID-19 a révélé des failles cruciales dans les systèmes d'immigration du Canada. Alors que la majorité des nouveaux arrivants au Canada résident dans des centres urbains, une minorité importante travaille et vit dans des régions rurales et de petites villes où les services essentiels aux immigrants sont beaucoup moins développés et où de plus grandes distances géographiques entravent les efforts de soutien aux immigrants. Les immigrants ruraux sont confrontés à des défis distincts, notamment un isolement social accru et une marginalisation économique, qui n'ont été qu'amplifiés par la pandémie. De plus, la perception inexacte de l'immigration comme étant un problème exclusivement urbain entrave les efforts pour lutter contre ces problèmes. S'appuyant sur la documentation sur l'immigration rurale, cet article examine les façons dont la pandémie a touché les immigrants ruraux, y compris les nouveaux arrivants, les réfugiés et les travailleurs étrangers temporaires. Les résultats mis en évidence incluent la difficulté de fournir des services de soutien aux immigrants dans les zones rurales, la vulnérabilité des travailleurs agricoles migrants à la maladie et à l'isolement, ainsi que le manque de sensibilisation et de financement des problèmes d'immigration des zones rurales par rapport à leurs homologues urbains. Le document s'appuie sur le journalisme et la littérature universitaire de l'année écoulée sur ces enjeux. Ce faisant, il démontre la nécessité de renouveler les intérêts universitaires, politiques et pratiques du développement rural en matière d'immigration rurale.

Mots clés : immigration, nouveaux arrivants, COVID-19, emploi, programme des travailleurs étrangers temporaires

1.0 Introduction

In this article, we examine how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted newcomer, immigrant, and migrant workers¹—many of whom do not hold the right to permanently reside in the country—in Canada’s rural-situated agriculture and agri-food industries. However, we argue that the pandemic has not entirely created the challenges facing these workers; rather, it has deepened those that have been long-standing. We consider how the pandemic has exacerbated the vulnerability, inequality, and precarity long faced by these workers. Furthermore, with an eye to a possible post-pandemic horizon, we posit ways to address both the amplification of these problems, which occurred during the pandemic, and the longer-standing problems from which they originated.

In a recent publication, we argued there is an intrinsic link between rural immigration and agriculture and agri-food labour (Helps et al., 2020). Migrant and immigrant agriculture and agri-food workers routinely encounter vulnerabilities in the workplace, which in turn impacts Canadian food systems, rural economies, and rural communities. This article represents an updating and deepening of this argument. We situate the circumstances of such workers amidst broader pandemic-era trends pertaining to newcomers to/in rural Canada, and the general effects of the pandemic on Canada’s immigration system(s).

However, we do so with an eye to long-standing structural inequities facing newcomer, immigrant, and migrant agriculture and agri-food workers, inequities that long precede COVID-19 but which have been exacerbated by the pandemic. These structural inequities have persisted despite the government and society in Canada re-imagining such workers as essential during the pandemic due to their indispensability within Canadian food chains. Moreover, this classification of ‘essential,’ while bringing some positive attention to the significance of these workers, has negative implications, as we demonstrate.

The primary objective of this research is to investigate the impacts of COVID-19 on newcomer, immigrant, and migrant workers in rural agricultural and agri-food industries. Key impacts of the pandemic are identified through a review of academic, government, and community-based literature and available secondary data. We analyze the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on rural employment in Canada. Here we consider the presence of newcomer, immigrant, and migrant workers within rural Canadian agriculture and agri-food industries, longer-run trends of their presence in such industries, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic within these industries. While these industries experienced considerable challenges during the pandemic, we demonstrate that they have ‘bounced back’ substantially in the subsequent months, and that this is in no small way attributable to the presence of foreign labour.

Next, we will consider the longer context of rural immigration to Canada. We suggest that there are long-standing issues pertaining to immigration to rural Canada, which can be understood broadly as challenges to newcomer attraction and retention. The latter include structural inequities and absences that prevent newcomer, immigrant, and migrant workers from achieving permanent, secure, and satisfying lives in rural Canada.

¹ This article follows the classification developed in Helps et al. (2020) where a newcomer is ‘a person arrived to Canada from another country within the past five years with the intention of residing and/or working.’ An immigrant is ‘a person born in another country who now resides permanently in Canada.’ A migrant worker is ‘a person from another country temporarily living and working in Canada through government programs such as the Temporary Foreign Worker Program or with a temporary work permit.’

Specifically, we consider the overlapping matters of satisfaction in employment, racial discrimination, temporary or non-permanent status, access to services, and the presence of supportive ethnocultural communities and corresponding social and cultural ‘resources.’

Finally, we demonstrate the specific effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on newcomer, immigrant, and migrant workers in Canada’s agriculture and agri-food industries. Coupled with the previous section, we demonstrate that their ‘essential’ designation during the pandemic is the culmination of generational trends of their significance to their related industries and that being designated as essential has not resulted in sufficient measures to overcome the structural inequities they face. The COVID-19 pandemic has offered a particularly stark example of the effects of these inequities in relevant workplaces and communities.

This analysis is followed by a discussion on paths for moving forward. The analysis points to a clear need for place-based approaches to ensure rural appropriate supports for newcomers, immigrants, and migrant workers. As it pertains to migrant agriculture workers, such place-based and rural-appropriate supports must be coupled with national standards in health and safety, housing, and employment for migrant agriculture workers.

2.0 Methods

We employ a pan-Canadian focus to examine the impacts of COVID-19 on rural newcomers, immigrants, migrant workers, communities, and immigration systems. Our analysis focuses on rural communities as defined by the non-metro definition—representing communities outside of a census metropolitan area (Bollman, 2017). Two primary methods were employed to examine these impacts: literature review and analysis of secondary data.

A comprehensive review of Canadian and international academic literature was conducted on the primary themes of rural immigration, migrant workers, the COVID-19 pandemic, and vulnerability within the immigration system. To supplement the nascent academic literature on COVID-19, the literature review also captures newspaper articles, government publications, community-based and organizational reports highlighting the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The literature review, guided by the approach outlined by Creswell (2014) and Hart (2018), frames our current understanding, identifies gaps, and provides the foundation to understand the impacts of COVID-19. The literature review is supplemented with secondary data from national, provincial, and regional agencies to both illustrate the key themes emerging from the literature review and illuminate implications for practice, policy, and research. Secondary data has been included from the Association for Canadian Studies, Canadian Agricultural Human Resources Council, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, and Statistics Canada.

The continually changing dynamics of the pandemic and multiple responses by government and businesses complicate the ability to examine the impacts on rural immigration. Examining the impacts of COVID-19 on rural immigration is hindered by limited publicly available data. Rural data analysis is complicated by limited national data availability (Reimer & Bollman, 2019), particularly with regard to rural immigration given the smaller number of immigrants and migrant workers. This paper presents a snapshot using publicly available information; however, continued empirical data is necessary.

3.0 The Impact of COVID-19 on Rural Employment and the Significance of (temporary) Foreign Labour to Canadian Agricultural and Agri-food Industries

COVID-19 has impacted employment differently throughout the country. As noted by Agyepong et al. (2020), rural areas fared differently than urban areas largely due to the composition of rural economies. In general, rural businesses were more likely to remain open throughout the pandemic. Over 77% of ‘agriculture, forestry, fishing, and hunting’ rural businesses remained operational (Smailes et al., 2021). The number of people employed in rural communities varied during the pandemic, ranging from a -2.6% decrease in employment in February 2021 to -14.2% in April 2020 (Bollman, 2021).

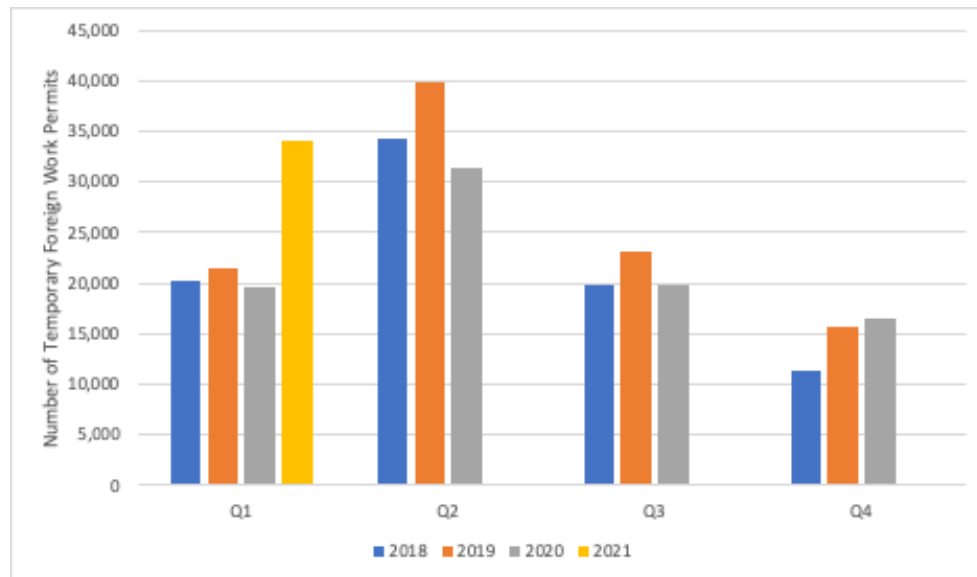
Foreign labour, specifically temporary foreign labour, is central to the Canadian agriculture and agri-food industries, particularly in an environment often described as a ‘cheap food policy’ (MacRae, 2011; *The Flaw in the Food System*, 2000; Weiler et al., 2017). Canada’s Temporary Foreign Workers Program (TFWP) has come to focus primarily as a means to source agricultural labour since 2013, and agricultural workers became the program’s largest group between 2015 and 2018 (see Chartrand & Vosko, 2021). Hence, changes in the number of arrivals within the TFWP significantly impact Canadian agriculture, while the development of the program itself reflects trends within the labour practices of Canadian agriculture. From 2015–2019, the number of foreign workers in the TFWP increased from 72,965 to 98,060 (Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2021). Before the global pandemic, 15.5% of the labour force in the North American Industry Classification System category of ‘agriculture, forestry, fishing, and hunting’ was composed by foreign labour in the TFWP. The presence of foreign workers varies across specific sectors: 27.4% in crop production, 5.6% in animal production and aquaculture, and 3.4% in food manufacturing (Lu, 2020). Approximately one in ten crop production employers hired at least 30% of employees through the TFWP.

The flow of temporary foreign workers (TFWs) was dramatically influenced by the onset of the global pandemic (see Figure 1). As the Canadian government closed international travel and imposed other restrictions, the number of TFWs decreased substantially. In March 2020, 47% fewer TFWs arrived than in March 2019 (Canadian Agricultural Human Resources Council [CAHRC], 2020). The number of foreign workers in Canada rebounded in the fourth quarter of 2020. Data for the first quarter of 2021 demonstrate a substantial increase in TFWs compared to previous years.

The reduction in TFWs during the onset of the pandemic disrupted Canadian food production in multiple ways, demonstrating that Canada’s food system was operating on the unstated assumption of a substantial workforce leaving and entering the country on a seasonal basis. These disruptions occurred in multiple ways related to labour vacancies due to the unavailability of workers. Over 40 percent of agricultural employers reported being unable to find the necessary domestic and foreign workers for their operations. In particular, agricultural employers noted approximately 20% of positions that otherwise would have been filled by TFWs remaining vacant (CAHRC, 2020; United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2020). The access to foreign labour and impacts of COVID-19 at agricultural operations created significant economic impacts for the agricultural industry—estimated at \$2.9 billion in lost sales (CAHRC, 2020). The

lack of foreign labour particularly hindered early harvest crops. Molnar (2020) reports financial losses for asparagus producers who plowed under their crops due to the lack of foreign labour to harvest, resulting in significant financial losses for agricultural operators.

Figure 1. Workers in the temporary foreign worker program, by quarter, 2018–2021.



Source: IRCC (2021).

Canada’s food systems were further disrupted by work stoppages and declines in productivity owing to COVID-19 outbreaks amongst workers, both domestic and foreign. These included outbreaks among workers in several Canadian meat processing facilities (Bueckert, 2020; Kost, 2021). Categorically, TFWs have played an increasingly prominent role in Canadian meat processing facilities in the 21st century (see Bucklaschuk, 2016). In Ontario, it is estimated that 12% of all foreign farm workers tested positive for COVID-19 in 2020 (Ontario to Ramp Up, 2021). The resulting closures at meat processing facilities created a backlog of 130,000 feed cattle and 150,000 swine in Canada (USDA, 2020). Beef slaughter output decreased by 7% in 2020 compared to 2019 in Canada (USDA, 2020).

Canadian, if not North American, food systems rebounded substantially after initial disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Weersink et al. (2021), “the agri-food sector has since moved back to near normal conditions with prices and production levels similar to those typically observed in previous years prior to the pandemic within a few months” (p. 15). Indeed, the initial absence of temporary foreign labour proved temporary: after assessing the less than anticipated decline in agricultural TFWs during the pandemic, Larue (2021) concludes that “the availability of agricultural TFWs has not been as large of a problem as initially feared. The biggest problem might have been the mistreatment of TFWs” (p. 10). This mistreatment, we contend, is tied to long-running trends that have hampered the ability of immigrants, newcomers, and migrant workers to establish secure and satisfying lives in Canada’s rural areas, as we will explain in the subsequent section.

4.0 Issues in Rural Immigration

While this article presents our understanding of the most important ways that COVID-19 has affected newcomer, immigrant, and migrant worker communities and immigration systems in rural Canada, many of the greatest challenges stem from conditions that existed long before the pandemic. It is also important to note that rural and urban immigration are different in ways that mean the problems facing urban newcomers, immigrants, and migrant workers (as well as the solutions to those problems) will not always be applicable in rural areas. This section presents our understanding of critical issues in rural immigration prior to the emergence of COVID-19.

In this section, we contend that longstanding inequities experienced by newcomers, immigrants, and migrant workers arriving and living in rural Canada have been exacerbated during the pandemic. In particular, COVID-19 has deepened long-standing systemic problems faced by migrant workers in Canada (Esses et al., 2021; Haley et al., 2020). While a systematic demonstration of the phenomenon exceeds the scope of this paper, scholars have demonstrated the extent to which precarious status—the conditionalities upon which a migrant worker is capable of residing in Canada, along with an inability to gain permanent residency—undermines migrant workers' abilities to fully participate in social and economic life. Canada's immigration system has been reconfigured via the proliferation and institutionalization of precarious migration status, each of which allows differential access to social, political, and economic resources and different degrees of valorization of the work performed by workers in that classification (see Rajkumar et al., 2012; Goldring et al., 2009; Goldring & Landolt, 2013; Vosko et al., 2014).

While such precarity and vulnerability are not new within Canada's immigration system, they were exacerbated during the pandemic and passed on to Canadian food systems and supply chains. Key Canadian rural industries that utilize migrant worker labour will embody the status precarity and economic and social vulnerability experienced by migrant workers. Therefore, issues pertaining to residency status and the nature of work performed by migrant workers in agri-food and related industries render the Canadian economy and society vulnerable and precarious.

Similarly, community-led attempts to foster development are undermined by this same vulnerability and precariousness. Though immigration to Canada has long been strongly associated with large urban centres, some rural communities have been actively working in recent years to change that narrative. Some now see newcomer attraction and retention as a key part of their community development strategies, as they attempt to counter the trends of depopulation and aging that are prevalent in many rural areas (Esses & Carter, 2019; Gibson & Annis, 2019). Provincial governments have also recognized the importance of immigration to the future of rural areas. Manitoba has used the Provincial Nominee Program (PNP) to settle temporary foreign workers permanently in rural areas and small urban centres, a strategy which has been notably successful in newcomer attraction and retention (Gibson et al., 2017). Immigration is therefore not only present in rural Canada, but a central component of many rural communities' strategies for development and long-term resilience.

Rural communities looking to attract and retain newcomers have encountered a variety of challenges. Existing literature points to the difficulties created by rural areas' relative lack of settlement services, language supports, cultural and religious groups, and other factors that help newcomers to integrate within a community

(Ashton et al., 2016; Bucklaschuk & Sormova, 2011). Many rural areas rely on settlement service providers in the nearest urban centre (Ashton et al., 2015). As a result of the challenges described above, newcomers to rural areas frequently experience difficulty in accessing services, language barriers, poor housing, underemployment, isolation, and even overt discrimination and racism (Aora & Lauzon, 2019; Ashton et al., 2015; Beattie, 2009). All of these factors contribute to the economic and social marginalization of rural newcomers and migrants.

An important aspect of the difficulty of integrating into rural communities for many newcomers is the type of employment available to them. Immigrant and migrant workers in rural Canada often fill positions that are precarious, dangerous, or otherwise undesirable, particularly in agriculture and agri-food production industries. This association between rural newcomers and the agri-food sector is true of both permanently settled immigrants and temporary migrants arriving through programs such as the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) and the broader TFWP of which it is a part (Preibisch & Otero, 2014). Agriculture and agri-food jobs, particularly those considered low-skilled, are associated with precariousness, seasonality, low wages, and health and safety hazards due to the use of pesticides and equipment.

Migrant workers, in particular, have been found to suffer from poor working and living conditions provided by their employer (Otero & Preibisch, 2015), difficulty accessing health care (Caxaj & Cohen, 2019), and vulnerability to loss of employment and repatriation (Hennebry & Preibisch, 2012). Furthermore, as Hennebry et al. (2016) argue, despite the appearance of eligibility, migrant workers have long been unable to access health care in Canada due to an implicit permanency bias in the system. In rural areas, these workers are primarily associated with agriculture and agri-food production. Over 54,000 migrants entered Canada in 2018 through one of the TFWP's agricultural streams (Statistics Canada, 2020). The annual influx of migrant workers forms an important part of the social fabric of many rural communities and small towns, with the same workers often returning year after year to the same workplaces (Bauder et al., 2002).

Given the importance of newcomers and migrants to rural communities as well as food systems in Canada, and the particular vulnerabilities of these groups highlighted in this section, it is therefore crucial to understand the ways in which they have been affected by COVID-19. Rural immigrants, newcomers, and migrant workers have faced challenges that differentiate them from their urban counterparts since long before the COVID-19 pandemic, including reduced access to public services, distance from cultural and religious communities, and precarious employment, particularly as it pertains to the agri-food sector. However, as with many other injustices in Canadian society, the pandemic has ways of making these issues more apparent than ever before.

5.0 Impacts of COVID-19 on Newcomers, Immigrants, and Migrant Workers

As mentioned earlier, comprehensive statistics on the impact of immigration to rural Canada, as well as the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on immigrants to/in rural Canada, remain elusive. Nonetheless, we begin this section by developing a composite snapshot of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Canada's immigration system and immigrants, newcomers, and migrant workers themselves.

The pandemic has had profound impacts on these groups, some of which overlap with those seen in urban centres and others that reflect the place-based phenomena described in earlier sections. Rural immigrants have had to contend with the widely-felt struggles arising from closed borders, economic hardship, and a public health crisis, but also the additional challenges created by social distancing in places with reduced access to public services and often a lack of high-speed internet. This section describes a variety of ways in which newcomers, immigrants, and migrant workers have been affected by COVID-19, and how these experiences have been shaped by realities of rural immigration that have existed since long before the pandemic.

One of the primary ways in which newcomers and immigrants to rural areas have been affected during the pandemic is due to the restrictions on international travel imposed by the Canadian government starting in March 2020. From March 2020 until September 2021, many international travelers who did not hold Canadian citizenship or permanent residency were barred from entering the country, with exceptions being made for essential workers and immediate family members (Harris, 2020; Tunney & Simpson, 2020; Tunney, 2021). While travel abroad for Canadian citizens and permanent residents was not prohibited and their ability to re-enter the country is guaranteed by the constitution, the federal government also took steps to make non-essential international travel very difficult, including the requirement for COVID-19 testing before re-entering the country and a mandatory three-day quarantine in one of a selection of designated hotels, the cost of which is paid by the traveler (Gilmore, 2021).

The result for many Canadian newcomers, immigrants, and migrants has been an extended separation from loved ones outside of the country. The emotional and mental health burden of this separation is intensified for those of them in rural areas on multiple fronts. Limited high speed internet access can reduce their options for long-distance connection with friends and family such as video-calling services. Simultaneously, place-based realities of many rural communities, such as lower cultural and ethnic diversity, geographic remoteness, and often an absence of public transportation options to reach urban centres, separate these newcomers and immigrants from support networks in their cultural and religious communities. Such networks are often crucial to their well-being and to facilitate their integration into their wider communities (Bucklaschuk, 2009; Bucklaschuk & Sormova, 2011). Their absence from many rural communities was an obstacle to rural immigration prior to the pandemic and creates additional concerns about these newcomers' isolation during this time.

COVID-19 has been a catalyst for acts of violence and discrimination against racial and cultural minority groups. The past year has seen a troubling increase in racially motivated violence in Canada, particularly against people of East Asian descent (Center for Research-Action on Race Relations [CRARR], 2020; Heidinger & Cotter, 2020). Indeed, scholars have sought to connect the effects of structural racism on the disproportionate effects of the pandemic, particularly on migrants (Tuyisenge & Goldenberg, 2021). Reports of discrimination and exclusion of racialized groups show the pandemic's contribution to their further social marginalization in Canadian society.

While the full scale and scope of specific and targeted racist acts occurring in rural Canada during the pandemic are not clear, rural newcomers, immigrants, and migrant workers are not insulated from this and may even be more vulnerable than

those in urban centres. The relatively low prevalence of visible minorities in rural areas can make it more difficult for rural immigrants to feel a sense of belonging in their communities (Caxaj & Gill, 2017). Simultaneously, without the extensive cultural and religious communities and social services found in many cities, rural newcomers, immigrants, and migrant workers may find themselves with less support in cases where they are discriminated against.

Rural newcomers, immigrants, and migrant workers have also had to contend with the changes that the pandemic has instigated in workplaces. The risks associated with COVID-19 transmission in work settings have had varying impacts on different sectors and industries in the Canadian economy. Closures in the restaurant and hospitality industries, for example, have resulted in waves of unemployment, while many office workers have shifted to working from home. Rural newcomers and immigrants occupy a wide range of jobs in various industries. Nonetheless, there is a noted connection between rural immigrant and migrant labour and the agri-food sector, particularly in low-paid positions (Bauder, 2006).

The pandemic had a disproportionate effect on the employment of recent immigrants to/in Canada. Early in March and April 2020, recent immigrants—those who landed in Canada within 10 years or less—were more likely to transition from employment to non-employment than both the Canadian-born and long-term immigrants, with female recent immigrants experiencing the greatest rate of this transition. Moreover, recent immigrants had a lower rate of transition from unemployment to employment during the partial recovery experienced in the Canadian economy in May, June, and July 2020, with recent immigrant women having a larger gap than Canadian-born women (Hou et al., 2020). While observations and analysis hold that the COVID-19 pandemic will have had an uneven effect on populations in accordance with race, gender, class, and citizenship status (see, for example, Wenham et al., 2020), a comprehensive picture for newcomers to rural Canada remains elusive.

Canada's immigration system itself witnessed disproportionate effects from the pandemic. Refugee resettlement to Canada was drastically reduced, echoing the dramatic global decrease in refugee resettlement that occurred. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) resettled only 22,770 refugees in 2020, its lowest number in almost two decades. The number of refugees resettled to Canada dropped significantly, although those resettled to Canada comprised a substantial number of the global total. A spokesperson for Immigration Minister Marco Mendicino said that 9,000 refugees were admitted to Canada in 2020. UNHCR figures suggest that more than 30,000 were admitted to Canada in 2019 (Dickson, 2021).

There was, however, less of a reduction in the number of temporary foreign workers compared to other classes of Canadian 'newcomers.' Compared to 2019, the number of TFWs who came to Canada in 2020 decreased less than the number found in other immigration categories: TFW numbers saw a 10% decrease compared to a 45.7% decrease in the number of permanent residents and a 33% decrease in the number of study permit holders (Keung, 2021). Interestingly, amongst permanent residents, economic admissions have been slower to recover towards pre-pandemic levels than have family sponsorship or resettled refugee and protected persons (House of Commons, 2021).

The comparatively lower admissions viewed across Canada's immigration system did not occur to the same extent to migrant workers in Canada's rural-situated

agriculture and agri-food industries, a signal of their perceived significance to Canada's pandemic economy and arguably food security. In other words, despite disruptions to Canada's immigration system *as such*, temporary foreign workers were able to enter Canada at a greater rate than were people of other categories in Canada's immigration system.

The pandemic provides a particularly glaring example of how the safety and well-being of food and agriculture TFWs have been predicated on interventions beyond the level of the employer. In July 2020, the Government of Canada announced \$58.6 million for the TFWP to enhance the health and safety of 'Canadian and temporary foreign workers': supporting TFWs; strengthening the employer inspections regime, with a focus on farms; improving health and safety measures on farms, targeting employee living quarters and increased personal protective equipment; and other health and safety measures. The Government of Canada, along with the Canadian Red Cross and the Government of Ontario, set up temporary housing in response to the rapid spread of COVID-19 amongst TFWs in Windsor-Essex County. Also, the Government of Canada amended the Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations to require that employers pay workers during their initial quarantine and provided an initial \$50 million Mandatory Isolation Support for TFWP to help employers pay costs associated with safely quarantining workers (Government of Canada, 2020a).

The recasting of many of these workers as essential during the pandemic insulated them from some of the stoppages in Canada's immigration system. This recasting, while allowing temporary foreign workers to cross into Canada at a rate higher than that of other classes of immigrants, also brought to bear new hardships to their COVID-19 work lives.

At the heart of government interventions into the living situations of migrant workers was a marked change in perception towards these very workers. Macklin (2020) encapsulates the change in perception towards seasonal agricultural workers during the pandemic, as those undeserving of permanent residency due to the 'unskilled' nature of their labour to those who were *essential*, and, hence, allowed to re-enter Canada despite new border restrictions (see also Shields & Abu Alrob, 2020). Macklin (2020) states, "in order to sustain the food supply in Canada, the entry of seasonal agricultural workers was facilitated as an exception because their admission was *economically essential* to Canada" (p. 3). Moreover, Vosko and Spring (2021) contend that interventions by the federal government, far from adequately protecting migrant farmworkers deemed 'essential' to Canadian food production, exacerbated the already disproportionate economic, social, and health risks they face on account of their deportability.

Many newcomers, immigrants, and migrants working in the agriculture and agri-food sector experience precarious employment, making them vulnerable to exploitation by their employers, particularly in the case of migrant workers in the TFWP and, specifically, the SAWP. This vulnerability has become all too apparent during the pandemic, as outbreaks at food processing facilities and on farms employing mainly newcomers and migrant workers have been the sites of several major outbreaks of COVID-19 (Dryden & Rieger, 2020). Researchers have attributed this pattern to longstanding issues with conditions at such workplaces, including overcrowded worker housing, poor access to medical care, and unsafe and unhealthy working conditions (Haley et al., 2020). Simultaneously, measures taken by some employers to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 exposure such as restricting

migrant workers from leaving farm property (in direct violation of these workers' rights) have exacerbated the isolation they already experienced in Canada (Kelley et al, 2020). The pandemic has therefore had negative health and social impacts on precarious migrant workers in rural areas.

A March 9, 2021 letter (updated March 15) from the Migrant Rights Network to the Director-General of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program and relevant Federal Ministers illustrates the challenges faced by food and farm migrant workers during the pandemic, reflecting the needs as articulated by the workers themselves, as well as the organizations that support them (Migrant Rights Network, 2021).²

Migrant food and farm workers experienced specific hardships during the pandemic despite their indispensability to Canadian food production. The letter reports that “at the height of the pandemic, migrant farm workers were falling ill at a rate *11 times* that of frontline healthcare workers (emphasis added)” (Migrant Rights Network, 2021). Furthermore, it contends that basic safety measures—including physical distancing and the provision of personal protective equipment—were not undertaken by ‘most employers’; that quarantined infected workers had inadequate access to food, health care, and social support; and that to compensate for workdays lost due to travel disruptions, ‘many migrant workers faced labour intensification without increased compensation.’

That the letter asked for similar measures to be taken during the mandated hotel quarantine and the worksite and home-based quarantine demonstrates that ongoing working and living conditions—which include congregate living arrangements—are similarly inadequate to those found in quarantine for migrant food and farm workers. The recommended measures are fundamental to decent, safe, and healthy living: connecting to migrant support organizations; safe transportation; fresh air; first-language speaking and accessible personnel for workers to consult with during emergencies and for other needs; rights information and services; take-home COVID-19 tests; support for COVID-19 positive workers; and vaccination.

The organization also calls for enforcement of employer compliance with pandemic related health and safety protocols; the vaccination of migrant food and farm workers; a stop to ‘blacklisting’ food and farm workers, a process wherein employers fire or do not invite back workers who spoke out against work conditions during the pandemic in 2020; and accessible vaccination for the workers.

While many of the above observations and recommendations were pandemic-specific, arguably, they are connected to an inequity that is constitutive of the TFWP itself: that of temporariness. Any discussion on how to move forward must begin here.

6.0 Discussion and Conclusion: How to Move Forward

The lack of permanent status is the condition that necessitates more specific recommendations for treatment of migrant workers during the pandemic; the letter notes that ‘most of our recommendations ... would not be necessary if migrants had the ability to protect themselves that permanent resident status would provide.’ Indeed, the central recommendation of the letter is to ensure “full and permanent immigration status for all migrant and undocumented people in Canada.”

² All subsequent references to the Migrant Rights Network, including direct quotes, are attributable to this source.

Therefore, while the safety and well-being of agriculture and agri-food workers, many of them migrants and newcomers to rural Canada, must be at the forefront of policy efforts so long as the pandemic persists, policymakers may set their sights on a longer horizon and envision a post-COVID19 reality in which migrant workers and newcomers experience long-term residency security and employment satisfaction in Canada's rural areas.

This means that multifaceted efforts to overcome newcomer and migrant vulnerability, inequity, and precarity are required over time. As we have demonstrated in this article, the financial, personal, and health struggles rural newcomers and migrant workers have faced during the pandemic stem not exclusively from the direct impacts of COVID-19, but also from a lack of recognition that these groups exist and are an essential part of rural communities and small towns.

There is an opportunity to translate the recognition of the 'essential' nature of newcomer and migrant workers in Canada's agriculture and agri-food industries into long-term support. As was the intention in citing the experiences of the Migrants Rights Network above, our analysis is designed to complement existing calls being made by newcomer and professional communities. To this end, we echo and extend beyond the pandemic the witness testimony contained within the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, which emphasized the need to provide permanent residency for those unable to access high-skilled immigration programs (House of Commons, 2021, pp. 78–79). Public calls by health workers and human rights advocates to ensure access to health care for all people in Canada regardless of immigration status were considerable amidst growing numbers of migrant workers, including migrant farmworkers, contracting COVID-19 (see Doyle, 2020). Newcomer and migrant worker health warrants attention beyond the pandemic.

Worker safety and satisfaction will be at the heart of future discussions about the viability of Canada's rural-based agriculture and agri-food industries. Alboim and Cohl (2020) suggest that recruitment and retention of agricultural farm workers will remain the most significant challenge facing Canada's agricultural sector moving forward. They have documented calls to increase the number of migrant agricultural workers—including those from both the SAWP and Temporary Foreign Worker Agricultural Stream (which allows for two years of work in Canada). However, while pathways to permanent residency for some agricultural workers exist through PNPs and Canada's new Agri-Food Pilot, the language and educational criteria for these programs are too high for many migrant workers. We echo Alboim and Cohl's emphasis that the pandemic has amplified the need for national standards in health and safety, housing, and employment for migrant agriculture workers, as well as inspection of worker treatment.

Given the long-standing challenges with newcomer attraction and retention faced in rural Canada, including employment satisfaction, differential access to permanent residency and settlement support for newcomers, immigrants, and migrants in rural areas, we also contend that there is a need for specifically rural perspectives on immigration to be present in policymaking and public discussion. This includes *place-based approaches to ensure rural-appropriate supports for newcomers, immigrants, and migrant workers (and need for financial resources). Furthermore, additional research and data are required to make evidence-based decisions to support newcomers, immigrants, and migrant workers in rural Canada.*

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