



## No Safe Haven: Markets, Welfare, and Migrants

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### Issue

## Immigrants, Social Policy, and the New Labour Market

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### Introduction

Public policy in Canada, as elsewhere, has increasingly come to be influenced by neoliberal thinking. Neoliberal theory places jobs and employment as a central public policy goal. It views “excessive” social supports and spending as leading to dependency. The welfare state has shrunk as a result of these political priorities.

Yet, the Canadian labour market is marked with high unemployment and a “flexibility” that promotes greater polarization, job insecurity, and exclusion for workers. At most risk, however, are immigrants.

Historically, immigrants to Canada have successfully integrated into

the labour market.<sup>1</sup> Since the 1980s though, immigrant earnings have dropped behind those of native born Canadians.

Unemployment, underemployment, and poverty have reached high levels among recent immigrants. This is in spite of their having better English and/or French language skills than in the past, as well as higher education levels than native born Canadians. Since the majority of newcomers are visible minorities, race and ethnic discrimination are also important factors.

In the past, public social programs and labour markets have helped immigrants integrate into the host society. With neoliberal restructuring of these key institutions, immigrants are now at risk of social exclusion. In this new labour market, immigrants appear to be part of a “flexible” and disposable labour market suited for the demands of a globalized “just-in-time” economy.

This paper analyzes the forces that help marginalize immigrants by examining the:

- Effects of neoliberal change on the welfare state and the growth of social exclusion, particularly immigrant marginalization;
- Relationship between welfare and labour markets and the role of neoliberal social policy

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<sup>1</sup> Economic integration is considered to have occurred when immigrants catch up to or surpass the labour market earnings profile of the native-born population.

### SUMMARY

Recent immigrants have faced greater difficulties integrating into Canadian society. In the past two key institutions, social support programs and labour markets, have helped to integrate immigrants. But neoliberal restructuring of these institutions has jeopardized the integration process.

This paper examines the impact of social policy and labour market change on immigrants to Canada. It argues that growing immigrant inequality is due to the lack of good jobs. This is in part the result of social policy that has cut social support and promoted new labour market structures. Immigrants are now becoming part of the “flexible” workforce. Their social exclusion is marked by high unemployment and underemployment, increased poverty, income polarization, and ghettoisation.

This paper concludes that weakened safety nets and social programs have deepened the tensions and feelings of alienation within the immigrant population.

To link to the original report CERIS Working Paper Series #22

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in developing flexible workforces;

- Shift in immigration policy towards skill-based, economic-focused recruitment and demographic changes in the Canadian labour market; and
- Key institutions – social welfare programs and labour markets – under neoliberal restructuring.

**Analysis**

***Issue 1: Neoliberal Change, the Welfare State, and Social Exclusion***

Neoliberals contend that government has become too large and interventionist in the economy and society. Government failure has created problems such as public sector debt and the difficulties faced in adjusting to globalization. According to neoliberals, the solution is to downsize government and give markets and individuals greater “freedom.” As the state shrinks, “welfare” becomes increasingly the responsibility of individuals, families, and voluntary organizations.

In the past, under Keynesian principles, public policies were developed to provide a safety net in times of economic and social hardship. Unemployment insurance, social income assistance, and universal healthcare were created. Community-based non-profit agencies, funded by government, provided social and economic supports within communities (Rekart, 1993). This non-profit

network was particularly important in helping newcomers adjust to Canadian society.

Social programs helped to build a society based on social security. This safety net prevented individuals and families from falling below a basic level of support. Public policy balanced a market society and economic inequity with public supports. The objective was to let everyone share in the benefits of the economy. Social security produced a capitalism of limited inclusion.

In contrast, neoliberalism has shredded the Keynesian social contract. The goal has been to reduce the cost of government social spending and to restrict government’s social and economic obligations to its citizens (Burke, Mooers & Shields, 2000: 12-13).

*... ‘excessive’ social supports and social spending, neoliberals contend, are the path to dependency. The welfare state has been shrunk to reflect these political priorities. Author*

With the growth of homelessness, unemployment, youth exclusion from the labour market, ghettoisation, child poverty, and the problems of integrating immigrants and refugees into Western society, social exclusion has become a major focus of public policy. Social exclusion goes beyond poverty issues. It has us look at “the social mechanisms that produce or sustain deprivation” (Giddens, 2000: 104).

Neoliberals have criticized the

*Neoliberalism is about transferring decision-making power away from collective/public hands to the market place (McBride & Shields, 1997: 14).*

welfare state for creating a culture of welfare dependency (Richards, 1997) and impeding economic growth in the new competitive global economy (Evans, 1998). Instead of equipping the “socially excluded” with the tools to find work, social programs focused on income supports for those on social assistance and unemployment insurance (Ebersold, 1998). Neoliberals argue that success in the global economy requires strong human capital or a highly skilled work force (Reich, 1991<sup>2</sup>).

Therefore, those who can work but do not take advantage of programs to upgrade skills should be cut off social supports. The motto of public policy is “no rights without responsibilities”. This approach, which radically restructures the welfare state, views social exclusion from an individualistic perspective. It is up to individuals to use opportunities to prepare themselves to find and keep a job. They must then take responsibility for their and their families’ well-being.

What neoliberals ignore is that there are not enough good jobs in the new economy. This results from a flexible labour market, which increases the use of temporary, contract, and part-time

<sup>2</sup> For a critical position on this issue see McBride, 2000.

employment as well as self-employment. The demand is for 'just-in-time workers' to match the 'just-in-time economy.' Exclusion, polarization, and marginalization are more obvious in the labour force. Moving from passive income support to an active labour market strategy does not address these problems.

***Issue 2: Welfare and the New Labour Market***

Immigrants' success or failure does not only depend on the skills they bring with them. Institutions also play important roles in how successfully immigrants integrate into society. Two central institutions are the labour market and social welfare support systems.

*... neoliberal restructuring has served to both under cut important social welfare supports and foster highly bifurcated labour markets.*  
Author

Through labour markets immigrants bind themselves to and build standing in the new society. Social welfare support systems help individuals and families establish themselves and assist with unforeseen social and economic problems. In the past, these two institutions were viewed separately. While this was never a true depiction of their relationship, it was the case that Keynesian public policy social support systems were built to provide safe havens for individuals and families in time of need.

For those who could not meet the demands of a market society, on-

going support would be necessary. But for most people, social support was temporary until they could return to work.

Neoliberal policy changes have reduced the support for at-risk groups like the unemployed. In this process some distinctions between welfare and labour market policy have been erased. The basis of social welfare reform centres on employment, with "welfare-to-work" the foundation of the current welfare system (Standing, 2002: 173).

The point of the new workfare/welfare system is to increase individual and family reliance on the labour market, regardless of the market's ability to provide adequate support. In this way the costs of welfare have been increasingly privatized.

The new labour market, marked by insecure work and the risks of joblessness, and neoliberal resolve that public policy adjusts to the demands of the competitive global economy are linked. Welfare systems are being reworked to the needs of the employers. Labour is increasingly commodified while social safety nets are greatly reduced.

Exclusion and disadvantage result for those underemployed and unemployed. Immigrant groups face particular risks because of the difficulties they have faced in finding employment in recent years.

***Issue 3: Immigration Policy and Demographics***

The immigration system has moved from one centred mainly on

restrictive recruitment from northwest Europe, to an open immigration policy. This has opened the door to immigration from the developing world (Green, 1995: 39-41). Today, visible minorities make-up about 75% of immigrants arriving to Canada (Smith & Jackson, 2002: 1).

*In the new labour market, immigrants ... are coming to be used increasingly as a part of a "flexible" and disposable labour force suited to the demands of the globalized just-in-time economy.*  
Author

Based on relative population size, Canada takes in more immigrants than does the US. Family-class immigrants were the basis for recruitment in the 1980s, but by the 1990s economic-based immigration dominated (OECD, 2001:142). Immigration policy highlighted "the need for economic self-sufficiency among newly arriving immigrants" (Bauder, 2001:316). At this time, immigrants also started to pay user fees to have their applications processed. This has led to the movement toward economic and skills-based immigration.

In the late 1990s, two federal policy papers<sup>3</sup> emphasized the economic benefits that immigrants would contribute to Canada's economy and labour market. This

<sup>3</sup> *Not Just Numbers: A Canadian Framework for Future Immigration* (CIC: 1997) and *Building a Strong Foundation for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: New Directions for Immigration and Refugee Policy Legislation* (CIC: 1999).

was indicated by the importance placed on education, skills, job experience, and language ability as necessary to be accepted into the country. National security issues related to immigrants and refugees (particularly since September 11, 2001) were also a concern.

In response to these issues, *The Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* was introduced in February 2001. Its purpose is:

- To enhance immigration enforcements practices;
- To attract more highly skilled workers and entrepreneurs; and
- To tighten the refugee determination system (OECD, 2001: 142).

The 2001 Census data indicate that immigration is now Canada's main source of population growth (Statistics Canada, 2002: 2). Given the ethno-racial profile of immigrants to Canada, by 2016 20% of the population will be visible minorities, up from 9.4% in 1991 (Chard & Renaud, 2000: 22-27). With over 70% of immigrants settling in Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal (OECD, 2001:144), immigration is an urban affair.

For Toronto, the 2001 Census reveals that 43.7% of residents were foreign-born, the highest proportion of any North American city (Carey, 2003: A6). Only 6.1% of the population reported not speaking English (Ornstein, 2000: iii). In 1961, visible minorities were 3% of the Toronto population. By 2001 they composed 43%. The racial profile of this population is 25% Chinese,

25% South Asian, and 20% black (Carey, 2003: A6; Carey, 2002: B4-5). Toronto has become one of the world's most ethnically diverse cities.

### *Issue 4: Key Institutions*

#### *1. Social Welfare Programs*

Welfare policy in Canada has been shaped by federalism.

Responsibility for unemployment insurance lies with the Federal Government, while the provinces control social welfare, health, and education. The Federal Government influences provincial policies through federal financing. However, Provincial and Federal Governments share immigration responsibilities, although the Federal Government holds ultimate constitutional authority. Provincial laws cannot run counter to federal policies.

*The logic is to "churn" the welfare/workfare population, to hold them close to or push them into the job market, and to systematically remove alternative means of support in order to enforce (low) wage dependency (Peck, 2001: 12).*

Caught in between are the municipalities, which are under provincial jurisdiction and where many settlement services for immigrants are delivered. Cities are often left to deal with the consequences of policies for which they have neither a say, nor a financial base from which to adequately respond.

Over the last decade, welfare and labour market policies have been restructured in Canada. One example of restructuring is the

"reform" of unemployment insurance that began in 1995. The length of time to receive benefits has been reduced, premiums have been raised, and eligibility rules tightened. The percentage of unemployed eligible for Employment Insurance (EI) has dropped from 76% in 1989 to 36% in 1997 (McCarthy, 1999: A1, A4).

So far there are no studies documenting the effect of EI changes on new immigrant groups. But because immigrants have more difficulty getting jobs, and are often employed in low paying work (Kunz, 2001), it is likely that they have high rates of disqualification from EI. EI programs that served mainly immigrants have been eliminated, and daycare has been cut. Since only those who qualify for EI benefits have access to EI-funded training, many immigrants and refugees are excluded (Whittleton, 1999: 3-4).

Under the new Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST) grant, a cap was placed on federal contributions to the shared costs of social welfare and health. Existing financing was also cut. To soften

*Workfare conditions 'participants' to view the temporary employment relationship as a realistic alternative to social assistance in light of shifting employment norms (Vosko, 1998: 71).*

this reduction, Ottawa allowed provinces to cut support payments and introduce workfare social policies (Shields & Evans, 1998: 47-50). With this we see the active

dismantling of much of the post-war social welfare system (Russell, 2000: 37).

In Ontario, the most important destination for immigrants, social welfare has been restructured along work-first lines. Under a Progressive Conservative government, Ontario followed the lead of welfare “reform” in the US and introduced the first workfare program in Canada – *Ontario Works* (Vosko, 1998:59). *Ontario Works* established two forms of assistance:

- Financial assistance, covering welfare recipients’ basic needs but at a reduced level; and
- Employment assistance, requiring mandatory job preparation/search, “volunteering” in the non-profit sector or working in temporary paid jobs found through a private sector employment agency.

Those who did not participate would be cut off from welfare support (Caledon Institute, 1997: 3-4). The idea behind these changes was that jobs existed for welfare recipients. Workfare would break this group’s dependency on public assistance (Moscovitch, 1997: 89).

Using employment agencies to place “employable” social welfare recipients into temporary, low-paid work signalled a shift away from the idea of full-time stable employment and to the “flexible” employment model. Workfare approaches are undermining full-time stable work as a norm and

promoting risky contingent work (Vosko, 2000: 230-231).

Recent immigrants now encounter a labour market where quality jobs have shrunk, making economic integration more challenging than in the past.

*Work-first systems forcibly attach welfare recipients to the lower end of the labour market both by eroding welfare entitlements and by actively managing the transition into an initial job (Peck, 2001: 256).*

Offloading many aspects of welfare assistance onto municipalities means cities absorb more of the costs of social welfare programs, but without enough funds to do so. Municipalities are also solely responsible for emergency welfare assistance (Caledon Institute, 1997: 9-10).

This short-term assistance is something that new immigrants and refugees often need as part of the settlement process. The lack of an adequate transfer of public money to reflect these changes has raised the call for a new deal between Canada’s major cities and the Provincial and Federal Governments (Carey, 2002: B1).

Since the introduction of neoliberal welfare reforms in Ontario in 1995, welfare rolls have declined by about half or to 500,000 people (Ontario MCSS, 2002: 1). The Ontario government and workfare supporters have attributed this to the success of workfare. Critics, however, maintain the decline is due to factors such as:

- Economic growth that has created more jobs and thus decreased the need for social assistance; and
- Exclusion of needy individuals and families who do not qualify for benefits (Shragge, 1997).

Significantly, at the same time that welfare use has decreased, poverty, homelessness, and use of food banks have increased (United Way of Greater Toronto & Canadian Council on Social Development, 2002; Husbands, 1999). For those who left Ontario Works for jobs, the majority exist at poverty level incomes (Community and Neighbourhood Services, 2002: 3-4). Neoliberal welfare reform appears to have deepened levels of social exclusion.

Immigrants to Canada continue to make positive economic contributions, paying more in taxes than they take out. Only refugees have higher rates of welfare, compared to the general population (Lo, et al, 2000: 51, 54). This is no surprise given their admittance on humanitarian grounds and the fact that many are not allowed to work. Social welfare is often their only option.

*Work-first workfare makes a virtue of the job market as it finds it, molding potential workers accordingly (Peck, 2001: 256).*

With welfare restructured on the idea that there are enough jobs in the labour market to absorb welfare recipients, neoliberals saw the removal of incentive barriers,

which prevented people from moving into the labour market, as necessary. This assessment ignores the fact that supplies of labour routinely outrun the demand for jobs.

The problem of quality jobs also remains. Unemployment levels may have decreased, but at over 7% they are still high, and underemployment is widespread. There are too few good jobs in Canada that offer adequate employment opportunities (Burke & Shields, 2000).

*... gaps in services result from agencies being funded to provide services to immigrants from one country, but not another, residing in the same catchment area (Simich, 2000: 11-12).*

Settlement services should be seen as part of the social service and welfare supports offered by government. The purpose of settlement services<sup>4</sup> is to help immigrants integrate quickly into Canadian society (Simich, 2000: 10-12). The Federal Government's and Ontario's failure to agree on the sharing of financial responsibilities for settlement services has resulted in funding instability and service gaps.

The Federal Government cannot deal directly with municipal governments, where most services are delivered, without provincial approval. This further

<sup>4</sup> Settlement services range from reception services (food, clothing, shelter, orientation) to long-term services – i.e., language instruction, finding housing, job search assistance, skills upgrading.

compromises settlement service support (Mwarigha, 2002: 12).

Many settlement services are offered through non-profit agencies. In 1995, Ontario revamped its settlement program, cutting it by almost 50%. The Provincial and Federal Governments shifted from core funding for non-profit service providers to a competitive service contract (Simich, 2000: 7).

With neoliberal restructuring, the non-profit sector has had to do more with less. Programs have been eliminated, service quality has declined, and many smaller agencies have been forced to close (Evans & Shields, 2002; Owen, 1999: 7). This has seriously compromised front line support for immigrants.

With greater employment barriers for recent immigrants and the difficulties with employer recognition of foreign credentials, employment services have become even more important for immigrants. These services, like others, have been cutback, creating significant shortages, just as the demand for them has climbed (Simich, 2000: 12).

## **2. Labour Markets**

Recently, immigration has come to be viewed as the solution to Canada's low birth rate. Already immigration counts for over half of the country's population growth (Statistics Canada, 2002: 2). It is projected that by 2026 immigrants will be responsible for all of Canada's demographic growth. It is also estimated that by 2011 immigration will be the sole source

of labour force growth (Canadian Press, 2002: 39).

Although integration patterns of immigrants into the labour market have varied over time, overall integration has been successful. However, since the early 1980s, new labour market entrants, including immigrants, have experienced a growing gap between their labour market performances compared to more established groups in the workforce.

Evidence does not suggest that the situation of immigrants improves significantly the longer they remain in the job market (Grant & Thompson, 2000: 17-19). This is in spite of the fact that the educational qualifications and language abilities of recent immigrants have been increasing (Badets & Howatson-Leo, 2000: 16). Since the 1980s, immigrants in Canada have experienced more difficulty in finding employment.

*There are not enough good jobs in the new economy, a situation which flows out of an economic environment dedicated to promoting increased labour market flexibility. Author*

In comparing youth and immigrant unemployment, in the 1980s immigrant unemployment was on average greater, but not as high as that of youth. In 1986 immigrant unemployment was 12%, youth unemployment was 17%. But by 1996 immigrant unemployment had reached 17%, while youth unemployment was 18% (Badets & Howatson-Leo, 2000: 20).

By the late 1990s, the length of time out of work was over twice as long for immigrants than for non-immigrants (Smith & Jackson, 2002:8).

Human Resources Development Canada statistics and other studies (Grant & Thompson, 2000: 5; Hum & Simpson, 2002: 49) indicate the growing gap in earnings between immigrant and non-immigrant men and women. It appears that, unlike the past, the ability of recent immigrants to successfully assimilate economically has almost disappeared (Bloom, Grenier, & Gunderson, 1995).

*... if the work world undervalues or overvalues the human capital of its holders on the basis of their racial, gender, and nativity characteristics, then the penalties and rewards associated with such evaluation should be interpreted as features of the labour market, and not results of individual efforts (Li, 2000: 305-306).*

Although the trend is towards a worsening labour market situation for immigrants, the immigrant workforce has become bipolar (Castles & Davidson, 2000: 75). A small proportion of immigrant professionals and other skilled workers end up at the top of the job hierarchy.

Although there are few Canadian studies on this situation, data from the mid-1990s suggest that about 25% of immigrant university graduates found jobs in the natural and applied sciences (Badets & Howatson-Leo, 2000: 20-21). But the recent layoffs in the high tech

sector did displace many such immigrant professionals.

Studies have started to look at the differences between visible minority newcomers and other immigrant groups in the successful integration in the labour market. With minor exceptions, visible minorities systematically earn less and have higher rates of unemployment/underemployment. Poverty and minority ethno-racial status have grown significantly in Canada's largest cities.

The 1996 Census shows that, in Toronto, non-European groups had family poverty rates of 34.3% - twice that of families of European and Canadian origin (Ornstein, 2000: i). A strong correlation exists between immigrant status and high levels of family poverty.

At the same time, the racialization of poverty and the ghettoization of minorities mark the appearance of American patterns of poverty and employment disadvantage in Canada's major cities (United Way of Greater Toronto & Canadian Council on Social Development, 2002).

*... how well they [immigrants] perform relative to the native born population is not only a function of immigrants' human capital, but also a function of how prepared Canadian society is to reward them in the same manner as native-born Canadians ... (Li, 2000: 305-306).*

The weak economy of the last couple of decades has resulted in high unemployment and job growth based on contingent

employment. This has created a poor employment base for immigrant integration into the Canadian labour market.

Where immigrants obtain their education affects the jobs they get in the labour market. Immigrants educated in Britain, the US, and Canada tend to occupy jobs similar to those of their Canadian born counterparts.

In contrast, immigrants, and particularly visible minority immigrants, educated elsewhere are at a disadvantage in the job market. The loss to the Canadian economy from this "brain waste" is significant.

Viewed globally, the "brain drain", or the movement of skilled labour, travels from the South to the North. Not only do Canada and other advanced democracies poach the best and brightest from the developing world, but we under-employ these migrants.

A number of recent studies point to the problem of non-recognition of the education credentials and skills training of immigrants, especially from the developing world (Reitz, 2001; CIC 1999).

A Citizenship and Immigration Canada report (CIC, 1999: 4) indicates that by the 1990s, any earnings bonus that immigrants may have enjoyed in the labour market because of their high education level had ended. The problem is not with individual employer decisions but with labour market discrimination (Li, 2000: 305-306).

In the current period, the high-wage and stable jobs in manufacturing and construction have declined, while occupations in the lower-skilled, low-waged sales and service sector have increased.

Although immigrants are still over-represented in the unstable, low-waged areas of manufacturing (Lo, et. al., 2000: 7), now the sales and service sector absorbs almost a third of immigrant workers (Badets & Howatson-Leo, 2000: 20).

With immigrant performance in the Canadian labour market since the 1980s seriously declining, the possibilities of economic integration are dampened and the extent of immigrant social exclusion is increasing.

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### Policy Implications

Recent immigrants to Canada have been facing significant difficulties to successful economic and social integration. Traditionally, social welfare and labour markets have helped the integration path. Neoliberal restructuring of these institutions has compromised the process.

*The old norm of stable, full-time, standard work, promoted during the Keynesian era, has been displaced in favour of support for contingent work associated with 'flexible' labour markets. Author*

Growing immigrant inequality is mainly due to the lack of good jobs. This is the result of the expansion of "flexible" labour markets, growing ethnic/racial

employment barriers, and reshaping of welfare/social policy that weakens social supports, while promoting new labour market structures.

Neoliberal policies have encouraged aggressive market competitiveness and a regulatory environment advantageous to employers. The stable, full-time work of the Keynesian era has been displaced by the contingent work connected with "flexible" markets.

Reshaping welfare policy has encouraged market dependency and de-emphasized the supportive role of the government. Under this situation, immigrants increasingly play the role of a "flexible" workforce, suited to the demands of the new economy.

Growing social exclusion is evident, especially with recent immigrant groups. The signs of this include:

- Increasing levels of unemployment /underemployment;
- Polarizing of incomes;
- Expanding poverty rates; and
- Growing geographic isolation of ethnic and racial minorities.

Weakened safety nets and publicly-supported settlement services have deepened tensions within the immigrant population.

The expanding inequalities put societal well-being at risk by putting a few at the top, while growing numbers of immigrants remain at the bottom. This

dynamic creates a social divide as well as an environment of alienation that is deeply ingrained (Dahrendorf, 1998: 82).

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Launched in 1996, the **Metropolis Project** aims to improve policies for managing migration and diversity by focusing scholarly attention on critical issues. It involves policymakers, researchers, and NGOs in all project initiatives.

**Metropolis'** goals are to:

- Enhance academic research capacity;
- Focus academic research on critical policy issues and policy options;
- Develop ways to facilitate the use of research in decision-making.

Structured as a partnership, the project has both Canadian and international components. **Metropolis** encourages communication between interested stakeholders at the annual national and international conferences and at workshops, seminars, and roundtables organized by project members.

Find out more at: [www.metropolis.net](http://www.metropolis.net)

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