

Immigrants to Canada are doing markedly worse economically now than in the past – New School of Public Policy report points to serious policy flaw in immigrant selection process

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Calgary – Immigrants coming to Canada over the last two decades have been doing considerably worse in terms of economic outcomes than in previous decades. Until now, we have heard suggestions that it has to do with the changing economy, systemic racism or barriers to getting foreign work credentials recognized. But one likely possibility has not yet been seriously considered: that changes in the early 1990s to the way economic immigrants are processed may have resulted in a system that is poorer at selecting those immigrants likeliest to succeed in Canada. The good news is that this problem is fixable.

Today, The School of Public Policy, with author Robert Vineberg, released a report that examines the major changes in immigrant selection since the adoption of a non-discriminatory selection system in 1962. The paper identifies problems with the immigrant selection system, with solid recommendations for the improvement in the selection of skilled workers.

According to Vineberg, “There is no question that the decline in wages and labour-force participation among immigrants, and their rise in poverty rates, is striking. While, in 1980, employed immigrant men earned 85 cents for every dollar earned by employed Canadian men, that had fallen by 2005 to 63 cents. For employed immigrant women, earnings fell from 85 cents of every dollar earned by Canadian-born women in 1980 to 65 cents in 2005. While Canadian-born people saw entry-level earnings rise by 20 per cent between 1981 and 2007, wages for immigrants classified under the Federal Skilled Worker program went the opposite direction, actually falling by more than 20 per cent over the same period. It is hard not to notice that the declines in outcomes began right after changes were made to the way immigrants were evaluated for entry into Canada. Most significant was replacing in-person interviews with so-called “perfected applications” submitted by mail, and later, online. Under the previous procedure, an interview with an immigration officer would often flesh out important information concealed by an impersonal application.”

If the government wants to improve outcomes for immigrants, it should run a pilot program with two streams of applicants in one or more intake offices: assess half of them using the current procedure and the other half using the old interview method, then measure their outcomes over the years. Other possible improvements include: lifting the caps on provincial nominees, who have a stronger record of success; providing Canadian Experience Class applicants a shorter route to immigration, so they don’t abandon their attempts; reintroducing a limited version of the Assisted Relative Class; and reducing larger immigration offices in overseas capitals in favour of smaller, more regional offices nearer newer immigrant pools.

As the government moves to increase immigration levels, these changes could make Canada’s already highly successful immigration system even more successful.

The paper can be downloaded at <https://www.policyschool.ca/publications/>

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