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When immigration goes awry

Unless Canada cuts immigrant numbers, our major cities will not be able to maintain their social and physical infrastructures, writes *Daniel Stoffman*

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It's 2020 and, in Toronto, the days when everyone used the public health-care system are gone. So is the time when a majority of affluent, middle-class parents sent their kids to public schools. In 2020, vast tracts of suburban slums occupy what used to be good farmland on the city's outskirts.

Traffic congestion and air pollution are unbearable. Toronto's reputation as one of North America's most livable cities is a distant memory. It's now known as the "Sao Paulo of the north."

This dystopian vision of the future of Canada's largest city is hardly far-fetched. Toronto is already suffering severe growing pains, the result of the federal government's insistence on maintaining the world's largest per capita annual immigration intake — around 250,000 people a year of whom about 43 per cent come to Toronto. That's more than 100,000 newcomers year after year after year.

It is impossible for any city to maintain its social and physical infrastructure in the face of such relentless population growth.

By 2020, Greater Toronto's population will have ballooned from 5 million to 7 million, or even more if immigration levels are raised higher still.

Every year Mercer Human Resource Consulting ranks world cities according to their liveability. Vancouver always places at or near the top of the list while the other big Canadian cities are among the top 30. Most of the top-ranked cities are relatively small — places like Copenhagen (500,000) and Zurich (340,000).



Daniel Stoffman

The project



Canada in 2020 is a joint project by the *Star*, *LaPresse*, the CBC and the Dominion Institute aimed at highlighting what Canadians think will be the single most important issue facing Canada in the year 2020.

From July until November, the *Star* and *LaPresse* will publish a series of essays by 20 leading Canadian commentators on the issue or event they believe could transform Canada by 2020.

The CBC will broadcast interviews with the authors and documentaries about their ideas.

Canadians can add their voices to the debate through thestar.com/2020 or the project's website, twenty-twenty.ca. There, they can also enter an essay contest conducted by the Dominion Institute on

None of the world's vast urban agglomerations of 10 million or more, such as Sao Paulo and Seoul, is rated by Mercer as desirable places to live. Smaller big cities are more livable because their residents can enjoy the amenities of urban life without the congestion, crime, and pollution associated with sprawling megalopolises.

what issue or event could have the greatest impact on Canada by the year 2020.

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Canada's livable cities are an unsung national asset.

One of the things that makes them special is the presence of immigrants from all over the world who have contributed new energy and cultural diversity. But, in immigration as in everything else, too much of a good thing isn't better. Ottawa's policy of mass immigration, for which no reasonable explanation has ever been offered, risks doing irreparable damage to our cities. This policy of rapid urban growth is being implemented by Ottawa even though it has no jurisdiction over urban affairs and even though the policy has never been stated explicitly.

Yet the impact is already evident.

Highway 401 across Toronto has become the busiest road in North America, the city can't find a place to put its garbage, and its public schools can't afford to provide the English instruction newly arrived children need. In Vancouver, meanwhile, controversy rages over the British Columbia government's plan to expand the Port Mann bridge that links the rapidly growing Fraser Valley suburbs to the city.

Amazingly, the local politicians who have to cope with the results never suggest that perhaps the immigration intake might be lowered from time to time as was standard practice until the late 1980s. To listen to their silence, one would think the relentless influx of huge numbers of new residents was a natural phenomenon like the weather rather than a deliberate federal policy that easily could be changed.

Ottawa might claim it is not to blame for unmanageable urban growth because it just lets the immigrants in, it doesn't tell them where to go. But this would be disingenuous, because Ottawa knows Toronto gets almost half of all immigrants while Vancouver gets 18 per cent and Montreal 12 per cent. Many of those who settle elsewhere at first also eventually wind up in one of the three biggest cities.

Attempts at dispersion are doomed because immigrants want to live where previous cohorts of the same ethnicity are already established. They also want to live in cities for the same reason Canadian-born people do — they are more likely to find jobs there.

The country most comparable to Canada is Australia. Like Canada, it is an English-speaking Commonwealth nation settled in relatively recent history. Like Canada, it has an organized immigration program and has used immigration effectively to enhance population growth and increase the vigour and diversity of its major cities.

Australia's current net migration rate (immigration minus emigration per 1,000 of population) is 3.85. Canada's is 5.85. Before the Progressive Conservative government of Brian Mulroney increased immigration levels and made them permanent during the latter part of the 1980s, a policy continued by the Liberals under Jean Chrétien, Canada had an intake similar, on a per-capita basis, to Australia's.

There is no reason why Canada should have far more immigration than any other country. Canada's existing population is younger than those of most other developed countries and its ratio of working age people to retired ones is higher. If Canada reverted to its traditional, more moderate, immigration program, it could continue to enjoy the benefits of immigration while sparing its cities the problems of unmanageable growth. Immigrants would benefit too. Their economic performance has been in free

fall over the past 15 years.

Previously the number of new immigrants varied according to labour market needs. Sometimes it would be cut to give the newly arrived a chance to be absorbed successfully into the economy without intense competition from more new arrivals. Not any more.

An endless stream of newcomers arrives in the big cities with few options but to work in poorly paid jobs such as cleaning houses and driving taxis. Wages of these jobs are thus kept low and the occupants of them have little chance to get ahead.

Previously, poverty levels among immigrants were about the same as those of the Canadian-born. Now they are much worse. According to a report by the Canadian Council on Social Development, whereas the poverty level of those who arrived before 1986 was 19.7 per cent, or slightly lower than that of the Canadian-born, the poverty level of those who came after 1991 was an alarming 52.1 per cent, while that of people born in Canada remained unchanged at around 20 per cent.

If this trend is not reversed, Toronto and Vancouver will by 2020 be home to an entrenched underclass living in slums. Because of gentrification and rising property values in the central cities, these slums will be located in the suburbs, requiring long commutes for those fortunate enough to have employment.

Fan Yang, a reader of the *Toronto Star*, shrewdly analyzed the impact of federal immigration policy in a letter to the newspaper in 2003. He accused the federal government of "dumping more cheaply acquired labour into the domestic labour pool, regardless of whether there is a healthy demand. Businesses welcome that enthusiastically as they bear no direct cost of unemployed immigrants and only garner the rewards of lower labour costs."

Even skilled workers are doing poorly. According to the 2001 census, male immigrants with a university degree who came to Ontario in the late 1990s were earning after six to 10 years in Canada only 54 per cent of what native-born Canadians with similar qualifications in that province earned.

Remarkably, immigrant labour market performance has declined during a time of increasing shortages of skilled workers. But, as the above data suggest, just bringing in huge numbers of people doesn't solve skills shortages. Mexico has a worse skills shortage than Canada yet it has no shortage of people. The trick is to match immigrants to jobs and our current immigration program doesn't do that well.

Luckily, Canada doesn't need to reinvent the wheel. It merely needs to emulate the solutions that Australia's more successful immigration program has already found, such as requiring the credentials of skilled immigrants to be approved before they come and imposing strict requirements for language skills.

In addition to creating poverty, mismanaged immigration is weakening our public health-care and education systems. By 2020, the huge baby boomer cohort of Canadians will be entering its stage of heaviest reliance on the health-care system. The boomers will not tolerate interminable waits for hip replacements and cancer treatment.

As if the challenge of caring for impatient boomers weren't enough, the presence of millions of new immigrants will intensify the demands on the system. Many of the newcomers will be old because Canada is the most generous country in allowing immigrants to sponsor elderly parents and grandparents.

There is no chance that our health-care system can survive in its current form given the demands on it from these demographic changes. As a result, by 2020 a full-fledged, parallel, private health-care system will be in operation in the major immigrant-receiving cities which are also where most of the

boomers live. Private health care will be relied upon not just by the wealthy but by much of the middle class as well.

A similar transformation will occur in education. A report last January conducted for the Elementary Teachers of Toronto said teachers were spending the equivalent of one day a week trying to make up for the lack of English as a second language support for their immigrant students.

"The more time the regular classroom teacher is having to devote to ESL students ... it detracts from the level of service we want for all of our students," union president Martin Long told *The Globe and Mail*.

In other words, the lack of support for ESL students is hurting all students. This is certainly not the fault of the immigrant children. It is the fault of rash and ill-conceived federal policy. As a result, by 2020 most middle-class families will have abandoned the public system. This will be an unfortunate development because the public schools are where immigrants and Canadian-born get to know each other. They are an important force for social cohesion.

A seemingly plausible argument for boosting the population of at least one Canadian city to 10 million or more would be that the truly great cities of the world are very big. But London and Paris grew to their current size gradually over hundreds of years and their greatness is the result of the wealth of the empires of which they were the capitals.

You don't build London and Paris by adding millions of bodies over a short period of time. That's how you build Mumbai and Mexico City.

Ontario's environment commissioner, Gord Miller, issued a warning last year about what the future holds for Toronto given current trends:

"The environmental impacts of this magnitude of growth ... will compromise the quality of our lifestyle to a stage where it will be unrecognizable," he said. "We already have trouble dealing with our waste right now ... What about another 4 million tonnes a year? What about another 4 million cars?"

The new Conservative government's immigration minister, Monte Solberg, told a House of Commons committee in May that he was concerned about the "huge burden" high immigration levels place on our major cities. He thus became the first immigration minister in at least two decades to show any sensitivity to the impact of immigration policy on the urban environment.

Now it's the turn of local officials to abandon their ostrichlike refusal even to mention immigration when discussing urban growth. Perhaps they fear being branded "anti-immigrant" if they do.

But Pierre Trudeau, in his last year as prime minister, cut immigration by 25 per cent and no one called him anti-immigrant. In that case, good management trumped politics. It's an example the Conservative government would do well to follow.

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