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# More Than Numbers: Work, Status and Canada's Changing Immigration System

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Canada's immigration system has entered a period of significant changes. After years of growth in both permanent and temporary migration, the federal government began tightening several immigration programs in 2024 and has since moved toward reducing temporary resident arrivals while placing greater emphasis on labour-market priorities. Much of the public discussion of the reduction has focused on numbers: how many temporary residents Canada can reasonably accommodate, how many permanent residents should be admitted, and which skills the economy needs. But immigration policy is also labour policy so top of mind must be how an increased emphasis on labour market flexibility and economic demand, alongside tighter migration controls, affects the work and status of temporary migrant workers in Canada, specifically caregivers, international students, and temporary foreign workers (TFWs), as well as the Canadian families, institutions and businesses that rely on them.

The shift away from temporary labour migration predates the current government of Mark Carney. In 2024, Ottawa introduced restrictions affecting international students and temporary foreign workers. That direction has continued. In February 2026, Immigration Minister Lena Metlege Diab announced new Express Entry categories prioritizing applicants with experience in areas of demand, including healthcare and social services, education, STEM and trades. The Immigration levels plan for 2026-2028 and 2027-2029 prioritize reducing the new temporary resident arrivals from 385,000 in 2026 to 370,000 in subsequent years. The plan aims to limit the temporary population to below 5% of Canada's total population by the end of 2027. Certain immigrant categories have also been adjusted. Target numbers under the Federal high-skilled economic category for 2027-2029 have decreased by 11,000 compared to 2026–2027 targets. For federal economic pilot programs, target numbers are 875 lower in 2027 and 2,600 lower in 2028 compared to earlier figures in the previous plan.

There are, of course, initiatives to bolster immigration, though these initiatives are highly restrictive. For example, the 2027–2029 plan has incorporated a rural community immigration program to address rural areas' labour needs. Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada will continue facilitating the transition of up to 115,000 project persons and 33,000 work permit holders to permanent residence in 2026 and 2027 and has promised to expedite permanent residence applications in 2027 for in-Canada workers and their families and long-waiting humanitarian migrants.

While the Carney government presents this approach as balancing immigration with labour-market needs, housing and public services, these restrictions significantly narrow migrants' opportunities to enter, work and transition to permanent status, deepening Canada's neoliberal approach to migration governance. Rather than considering migrants' contributions to Canada, rapidly changing immigration regulations, neoliberal immigration policymaking has further entrenched the idea that migrants are valuable only as disposable units of labour, with little regard for their individual needs or their lasting contributions to Canada.

## Caregiver Programs: Toward Market Efficiency

Canada has long relied on migrant caregivers to provide childcare and support for older adults and people with disabilities. Yet the pathways available to these workers have repeatedly changed. The Live-in Caregiver Program (LCP) was phased out for new applicants in 2014. In 2019, the government introduced the Home Child Care Provider and Home Support Worker pilots, providing pathways to permanent residence, while requiring some applicants to complete qualifying Canadian work experience.

In 2025, the Home Care Worker Immigration Pilots introduced a direct pathway to permanent residence for eligible workers. Demand exceeded available spaces, however, and the federal government announced in December 2025 that intake was subsequently paused. For caregivers, repeated changes create uncertainty about employment, permanent residence and family reunification. The consequences also extend to Canadian families reliant upon migrant caregivers for childcare, elder care and disability support. Care work remains essential yet the immigration pathways attached to it were redesigned, capped or closed, despite promises being made to the contrary for caregivers.

## International Students: Changing Rules, Changing Expectations

International students have also experienced substantial policy changes. For years, Canada promoted international education as offering more than a degree, creating an implicit promise that foreign students would be welcome, and that they could "**work and stay**" after graduation and potentially transition to permanent residence. Many students made significant financial and personal decisions based on these expectations.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Canada temporarily relaxed restrictions on off-campus work, a measure that ended in April 2024. In January 2024, the federal government introduced a cap on international study permits. Financial requirements increased, Provincial or Territorial Attestation Letters became mandatory for many applicants, and Post-Graduation Work Permit requirements were revised. The government describes these reforms as being necessary for program integrity and sustainability. Their effects, however, extend beyond students. Changing rules can disrupt plans for education, employment and settlement for students, while declining international enrollment affects colleges and universities that had grown increasingly reliant on international students' tuition. Businesses that rely on international student labour and revenue were also affected. The policy changes expose both students' insecurity and institutions' dependence on international enrollment.

## Temporary Foreign Workers: Labour Demand and Worker Mobility

The Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) makes the relationship between immigration and labour policy particularly visible. In 2024, the government tightened the Low-Wage Stream, placing key restrictions on Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA) applications for low-wage positions. Under these new policies, with some exceptions, LMIA applications are generally not accepted in census metropolitan areas where unemployment hovers around 6 percent or higher. The general low-wage workforce cap was reduced to 10 percent, with higher caps for specified sectors, while maximum employment duration was reduced from two years to one year.

For TFWs, these restrictions can mean shorter employment opportunities and greater uncertainty about remaining in Canada. Businesses reliant on migrant labour may also face recruitment and staffing challenges. Worker mobility raises further human rights concerns. Many TFWs hold employer-specific work permits, meaning changing employers can require undergoing different immigration procedures, including transferring to another immigration program to receive status (e.g., becoming international students instead) or seeking sponsorship from another employer. This dependence can make leaving exploitative workplaces difficult. The UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery raised concerns that employer-specific permits increase migrant workers' vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. Here we see how immigration policy shapes not only labour supply, but also workers' mobility, bargaining power and ability to exercise their rights.

**Beyond Immigration Numbers**

Caregivers, international students and TFWs enter through different programs, but their experiences reveal a common relationship between immigration status and work. Taken together, these policies reveal a system increasingly offering flexibility to employers while magnifying immigrant workers' insecurity. Occupational priorities shape selection, migration is increasingly managed through numerical targets and restrictions, and access to permanent residence remains differentiated across programs. This reflects a deepening of neoliberal governance.

A sustainable immigration system requires predictable rules, fair working conditions, worker mobility and realistic pathways to permanent status. Sudden changes to immigration programs run counter to the interests of different stakeholders, including families, institutions and businesses relying on migrants, but most importantly migrants themselves. The pivotal issue goes beyond merely how many people Canada should admit to encompass what rights and opportunities Canada provides to people once they arrive to study, work and build their lives here. Migrants should be seen as human beings and not as units of labour. *Immigration numbers matter, but so do the workers, families and communities behind them*.


## About Perspectives

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We take a broad and open-ended approach, organized around deepening pan-university and wider community linkages and building infrastructure for transformative social action.