

# Exploring How Those Working in the Canadian Employment Services Sector Perceive the Labour Market Integration of Immigrants



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## Background

- Individuals facing under/unemployment experience significant occupational disruption with considerable consequences to their overall health and wellbeing (1).
- Immigrants are at an increased risk of experiencing under/unemployment due to:
  - Others' devaluation of their skills, education and experiences
  - An unfamiliarity with the Canadian workplace culture
  - Prejudicial responses to a person being a member of a visible minority
  - Lack of fluency in the official languages
  - Having limited social networks (2)
- The negative effects of under/unemployment on immigrant mental health and wellbeing are well-documented in the literature (3, 4, 5).
- Employment service providers play a crucial role in being able to provide a local labour market perspective on immigration and unemployment characteristics (6).



Figure 1. One in five Canadian inhabitants are immigrants (7).

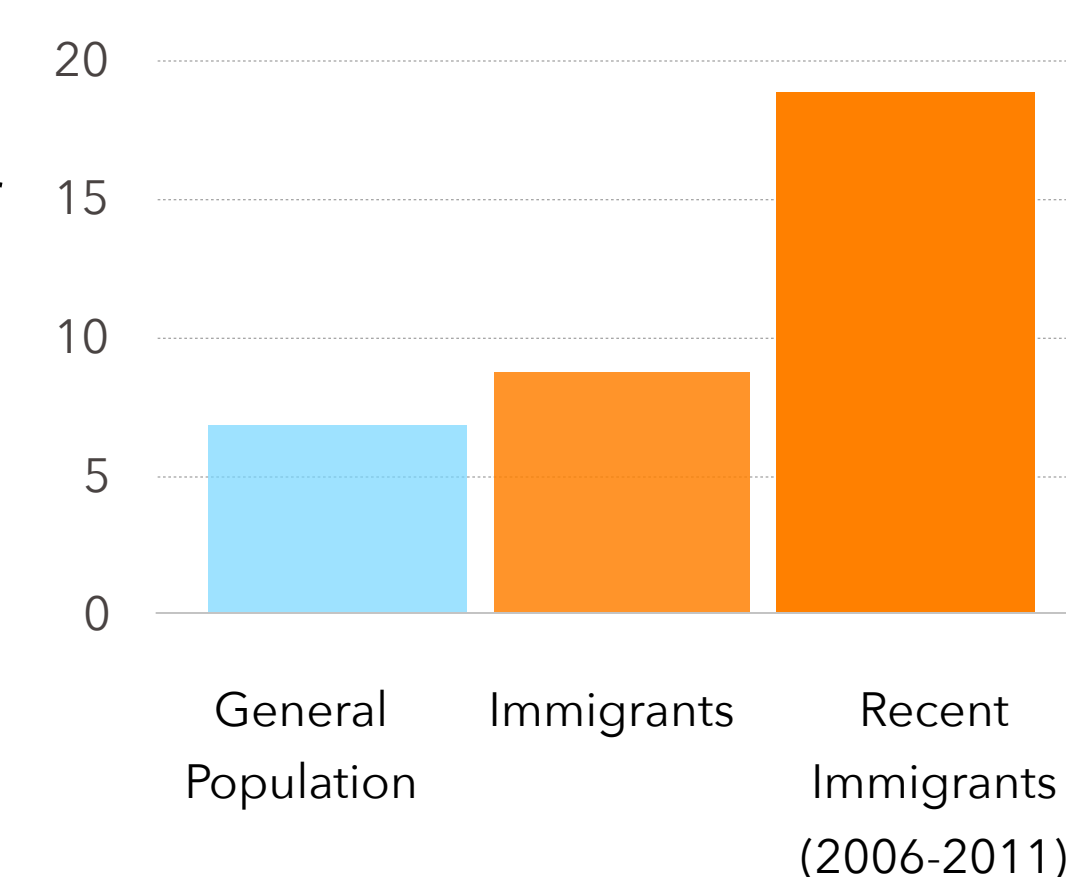


Figure 2. Unemployment rates in London, ON comparing the general population to immigrant populations (7).

## Purpose

- To explore how those working in roles to serve individuals seeking employment (hereafter referred to as 'service providers') perceive the integration of immigrants into the labour market in London, Ontario.
- As immigrants are at an increased risk of under/unemployment, it is important to expand the understanding of how occupational disruption uniquely influences this population.

## Methods

- We conducted a secondary analysis of qualitative data.
- Data Collection:** The data analyzed were drawn from a collaborative ethnographic study initiated in 2013, in partnership with Goodwill and interlinked organizations in London, ON, CAN and St. Louis, MO, USA.
- Participants:** Data were utilized from interviews completed with eighteen service providers involved in employment services and training locally.
- Data Analysis:** A whole text analysis of the transcripts was completed prior to line-by-line coding (8). A visual chart was created to help categorize the major themes and sub-themes from each of the coded transcripts. To ensure an in-depth interpretation of the data, an iterative process was used through continued dialogue and discussion (8, 9).

## Results

### 1 External Factors Affecting Labour Market Integration

#### Systemic Constraints

- Employment service providers aim to help individuals to prepare for and obtain meaningful and sustainable employment, however, they described facing many constraints, including:
  - Differing views of successful outcome measures
  - Restricted funding for services and programs
  - Government oversights and policies

#### The Local Context

- Service providers identified aspects of London's culture that impede their ability to secure meaningful employment for their clients since the recession in 2008:
  - Changes in the labour market
  - A lack of infrastructure
  - The power of employers
  - Limited willingness to embrace diversity

### 2 Consequences of These External Factors

#### Implications for Clients

- Clients using employment services, including immigrants, were described by service providers as having unrealistic expectations of how soon they would be able to obtain employment due to their lack of awareness of the current labor market trends. Many are living a precarious lifestyle with the presence of numerous stressors, mental health issues, and little hope for their employment trajectory.
- The immigrant population faces unique challenges related to recertification, cultural differences and language barriers. Stressors caused by unemployment were identified as impacting the overall dynamics of the family unit.

#### Implications for Service Providers

- Due to the impact of these external factors, service providers identified the need to cross professional boundaries, take on multiple support roles beyond their job descriptions and assume a significant burden of responsibility for their clients.

### 3 Strategies Utilized by Service Providers

#### Communication

- The data revealed multiple levels of communication strategies that were used by service providers with the various stakeholders involved in the service provision process (client-level, intra-agency level, and inter-agency level).

#### Client-Centred Approach

- Service providers' communication efforts facilitated the provision of a client-centered service, allowing them to tailor interventions to clients' specific needs.

#### Advocating/Educating

- Service providers described incorporating strategic caseload management, negotiation, advocacy, and education in their relationships with funders and employers in order to promote change within the current system structure.

## Discussion

**Lack of Awareness:** Systemic changes to the employment services model resulted in an overall lack of awareness regarding the challenges faced by immigrants. Some service providers identified a need for acknowledgement of the diversity that exists in London, in order to increase funders' commitment to immigrant-specific programs. Immigrants' misconceptions surrounding the opportunities for employment in Canada have also been found to limit their integration into the labour market (10).

**Who is Responsible?:** Employment service organizations are based on "active" labour market policies that emphasize returning clients to work quickly rather than addressing the socio-political structures that underlie unemployment (11). This perspective, which frames unemployment as an individual issue and responsibility, is reflected in expectations for immigrants. Some service providers were found to utilize tactics which instill the idea that immigrants need to change and that obtaining employment is solely their responsibility despite discrimination and prejudices evident in the labour market (12).

**Getting Caught in the System:** External factors such as government policies and funding constraints restricted service providers in their ability to adequately perform their responsibilities, especially when working with immigrants. Many service providers were unable to actively advocate for societal and political constraints to be reexamined, as they were overwhelmed by the demands of their caseloads.

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