

## **Finding friends in the new country: social interaction of older immigrants to Canada**

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### **Extended abstract**

This paper examines social integration of recent immigrants to Canada, those who arrived in the country at the pre-retirement stage of their life. Using data from Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada (LSIC), we study transitions between older immigrants' social networks at the country of origin (country of last residence) and networks in the country of destination (Canada). We analyze factors related to maintenance of their connections with a country of residence prior to emigration and determinants of a social network development in the new country.

LSIC was launched in 2000 to meet a growing need for information on recent immigrants in Canada. While integration may take many years, LSIC is designed to examine the first four years of settlement, a time when newcomers establish economic, social and cultural ties with the new country. The survey objectives are two-fold: to study how new immigrants adjust to life in Canada over time; and, to provide information on the factors that can facilitate or hinder this adjustment. This is a unique source as it provides very rich information on all aspects of integration, including immigrants' social integration. Longitudinal character of this survey enables a more robust foundation for the analysis of the determinants of various outcomes than other surveys available so far.

The survey has been used extensively for studies of economic integration of immigrants, with special emphasis on the prime working age group. These studies show that the educational level of newcomers upon landing have little or no impact on whether they work in the same field after coming to Canada as they had before immigration. After being in Canada for two years, 80 per cent of immigrants between the ages of 25 and 44 found a job, but only less than half of them found work in their intended occupation. As LSIC follows the same group over time, we are able to determine that the majority of immigrants working in intended occupations by the end of their second year in Canada were able to find these jobs very quickly, within the first year. Also, 20% of those who did not work in their intended occupation right away were eventually succeeding in doing so in their second year. Although we know from the survey that family and friends have a far greater influence on where immigrants to Canada settle than do job

prospects, the impact of a family composition on the immigrants' settlement patterns and outcomes has not been explored to the same degree as economic integration. Also, there is not much research focussing on the older immigrants' integration into the Canadian society.

According to the 2001 Census of Canada, 3% of immigrants admitted between 1996 and 2001 were 65 years and older. Among the LSIC cohort (2001 immigrants), this proportion was the same and immigrants over 50 years of age represented over 10% of the total. Women dominated men, at 55% in the 50 years and over age group. They were arriving mostly from Asia (67%) and Europe (15%) as other continents were insignificant sources of immigrants to Canada in this age group. The majority of them were admitted under the family category (almost 80%).

Studies conducted so far demonstrated that only a small proportion of the recent immigrants to Canada live alone. They live with at least one more person, and are related to those in the same household by blood or some type of union. Living arrangements of recent immigrants aged 65 years and over differ from those for Canadian born of the same age: nine out of 10 live with relatives comparing to six out of 10 for Canadian-born (CIC, 2005). These living arrangements might not be conducive to a development of social networks outside family by older immigrants.

The other factor closely associated with social integration is ability to communicate outside household. We know from LSIC that the language proficiency of older recent immigrants is not high. At the time of arrival in Canada, four out of 10 immigrants of the 2001 cohort aged 45 to 64 years didn't speak neither English nor French. The knowledge of the Canadian official languages tends to decrease with age –six out of 10 recent immigrants older than 65 years wouldn't be able to conduct conversation in English or French.

LSIC shows that, although selected based on their health condition, problems with physical health are more common among older than younger immigrants. While 15% of immigrants aged 15 to 54 declared these problems, among those older than 55 years the proportion was almost 30%. To what degree this situation is related to specific problems of older recent immigrants social integration? Over the past two decades, evidence has accumulated indicating that people with weak community ties are at greater risk of death, even when age, physical limitations and illness, and socio-economic status are taken into consideration (Wilkins, 2003).

It seems that age at immigration matters also for economic integration. For the variety of reasons, recent older immigrants are less economically integrated than their peers who established residence in Canada at younger age (Ravanera and Fernando, 2001). Their chances to live in poverty are also higher as they might have difficulty accessing sources of income available in Canada to those who

reside in the country for longer periods – there is a requirement of 10 years of residence in Canada for eligibility to the federally funded old age benefits (National Advisory Council on Aging, 2005).

Are recent older immigrants in Canada live in isolation from the society around them? How well connected they stay to their “old” country? What kind of consequences it has for their quality of live and their contribution to the Canadian society? What are their prospects for a successful integration into the new country?

This paper provides background information for formulation of answers to the above questions. First, we analyse a human capital of older recent immigrants to Canada at the time of their arrival in the country. We take into account their demographic characteristics (age, sex, marital status), consider their socio-cultural background (mother tongue, English and French proficiency, country of birth, level of education and occupation prior to immigration) and health status. Next, in order to study the process of developing social networks outside household, we use four general indicators: a participation in social activities (volunteering, religious, professional and educational activities, sport), social contacts in Canada (family and friends in Canada on arrival, new friends after 6 months and 2 years in the country), social contacts outside Canada (family and friends in the origin country, frequency of contacts), and use of assistance in overcoming problems (health, housing, education, employment).