Diverse cities in a not-so-diverse country: Patterns of Canadian immigration

Toronto, March 31 – Canada prides itself on its diversity and multiculturalism, but that diversity is not evenly spread across the country, a new study shows. In “Diversity and Concentration in Canadian Immigration: Trends in Toronto, Montréal and Vancouver, 1971–2006,” a research bulletin published by the Centre for Urban and Community Studies at the University of Toronto, researcher Robert Murdie analyzes information from the 2006 census and compares it to historical trends. The results show that while immigrants are contributing to the diversity of Canada’s largest cities, and the medium-sized centres are holding their own as reception centres for new immigrants, smaller cities do not benefit from immigration to the same extent.

Furthermore, the three biggest cities – Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver, which account for 70% of the newcomers – attract different ethnicities in varying numbers, and accommodate the newcomers in different ways across the metropolitan area. Toronto and Vancouver have some similarities (more Asians, more immigrants settling in the suburbs), while Montreal has a larger proportion of European and African immigrants, who still tend to settle in the central city.

Part of the explanation for the concentration of certain groups in certain cities is explained by the finding that immigrants are more likely to choose where to settle based on the presence of family, friends, or other people with the same background – this is more important to many recently arrived immigrants than the availability of employment or services.

The research raises a number of important policy questions. First, the increased concentration of immigrants in Canada’s large cities raises issues about the most effective way to integrate newcomers and whether some newcomers might find it easier to settle and adjust to Canada if they chose smaller communities.
Second, the shifts in immigrant origins from a mainly European population to a greater diversity of primarily non-white visible minority groups introduces challenges for service providers and municipal authorities in accommodating ethnic, racial, and religious diversity. These challenges are concentrated in the three biggest metropolitan areas.

Third, the suburbanization of immigration poses challenges for service provision and planning – the lack of transit, the potential for greater isolation, land use conflicts, and the lack of immigrant settlement services. Moreover, the research raises questions about the pros and cons of suburban ethnic enclaves in enhancing immigrant integration.

The research bulletin can be downloaded from the website of the Centre for Urban and Community studies at: www.urbancentre.utoronto.ca

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