

**CLOSING THE GAPS BETWEEN SKILLED IMMIGRATION AND CANADIAN LABOUR MARKETS:
EMERGING POLICY ISSUES AND PRIORITIES**

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Although Canada's immigration policy has long emphasized the selection of highly-skilled immigrants – and in recent years, preferably those with high levels of post-secondary education – certain critical gaps have emerged between this skilled immigration emphasis and what actually happens in Canadian labour markets. Emphasis on education is usually described as necessary to meet the demand for skilled workers, projected to become more severe over time because of the requirements of an emerging knowledge economy. However, there are three major 'gaps' between this skilled immigration and the actual role of immigrants in Canadian labour markets. First, skilled immigrants often do not succeed in getting those professional and other highly-skilled jobs for which they are presumed to be qualified. As a result, pervasive under-utilization of the skills of highly-educated immigrants – 'brain waste' – is a serious issue in Canadian immigration. Second, many employers have indicated significant demand for less-skilled immigration to meet labour shortfalls in various trades and other lower-level occupations, a demand not satisfied by the emphasis on professional and other post-secondary education. Third, there appears to be an increasing pattern of illegal immigration, mainly unskilled workers, who take jobs which reportedly go unfilled by native-born workers.

These three 'gaps' between skilled immigration and the Canadian labour market challenge Canada's immigration program. Their existence suggests that the program's emphasis on post-secondary education is somewhat out of touch with labour market reality. They call for consideration of new directions, with a view to bringing immigration closer to

actual labour demand. If immigrants with professional degrees end up driving taxis, delivering pizzas, or working as security guards, should Canada reduce or even abandon its emphasis on skilled immigration? To meet the demand for professionals and high-level managers, perhaps the country should rely more exclusively on domestic sources. If there are shortfalls in domestic sources, then perhaps a solution would be to increase domestic educational opportunities, in short, to put greater reliance on the Canadian educational system. For their part, should immigrants more often be recruited directly into the lower-level jobs that appear to be available for them? Could we not simply lower the bar on immigrant selection? Finally, should the way be paved for illegal workers to have a smooth transition to legal status, in recognition of the role they perform?

To answer these questions, it is useful to consider how similar questions have been addressed historically. Whereas in the past, immigration and education were seen as alternative ways of investing in human capital, with the emergence of a ‘knowledge economy,’ both have become priorities for human capital accumulation. As a result, domestic education has expanded, and the emphasis in immigration has shifted from low- to high-skilled migrants. However, history also shows that the goals of Canadian immigration and Canadian education have always gone well beyond immediate labour market needs. With respect to education, goals include providing opportunities for the domestic population to have access to the best jobs and enhancing quality of life. Regarding immigration, goals include nation-building, expansion of the economy and population, and the long-term integration of permanent migrants, many of whom are ethnic or racial minorities in Canada. The current emphasis on expansion in both education and immigration is strongly reinforced by the significance of these

on-going priorities.

Based on this understanding of the broader, often intersecting goals of immigration and education, I suggest that closing the gaps between skilled immigration and the Canadian labour market requires attention to the long-term integration of permanent migrants and their long-term self-sufficiency. Even though high-skill immigration does not fully address the demand for high-skill workers, such immigration will continue to be useful to pursue longer-term goals of nation-building and population expansion, since high-skill levels contribute to the objective of long-term integration. Hence, the policy imperative of maintaining mass immigration of the highly-skilled is to focus on the transferability of the skills of these highly-educated immigrants. At the same time, the concern with self-sufficiency and integration does not necessarily mean maintaining an almost exclusive focus on recruiting the most highly skilled. But to increase use of less-skilled immigration to address immediate labour demand at that level, a policy of simply ‘lowering the bar’ in immigrant selection could threaten long-term integration. The policy imperative then is to provide additional support for the longer-term integration of less-skilled immigrants. Such support may include special assistance in the case of job loss, including provision for labour market transition and possible re-training, and also assistance for the education of the next generation.

The following discussion explores these issues in more detail. It reviews the historical relation of immigration and education to the Canadian labour market, then identifies and describes the current gaps between skilled immigration and the Canadian labour market, and finally examines policy options for closing these gaps.

Evolution of Canadian Immigration and Education as Sources of Labour Force Growth

To provide the workforce of the future, most countries look to their youth. Although immigration provides another source of workforce growth, in most cases, immigration is understood to fill more immediate labour needs on a relatively smaller scale. For Canada, however, immigration has always loomed larger in the overall picture of future labour force growth and development, increasingly so in recent years. In fact, given the low fertility rate in Canada and the aging of the population, the Canadian government now acknowledges that immigration will be the primary source of labour force growth in the future. As a result, future labour force planning in Canada emphasizes two quite different but increasingly interconnected planning tools: domestic education and immigration.

Canada's Immigration Policy. As noted above, Canadian immigration policy has evolved in relation to three main goals: nation-building and expansion of the economy and population; the needs of the labour market broadly defined at the current stage of development; and the long-term integration of permanent migrants.

Canada's emphasis on immigration is clearly seen in the numbers (see Chart 1).

Chart 1 about here

In the past 15 years, Canada has admitted between 200,000 and 250,000 immigrants, about 0.8 percent of the total population; the number for 2005 was 262,000. Although these numbers fall short of the 1 percent of population target traditionally set by federal Liberal governments, they are still three times the American immigration numbers (even counting illegal immigration). The length of Canada's commitment to immigration relative to the United States is shown in an historical summary for the 20th century by Alan Green (1995). In particular, Canada's renewed commitment to immigration following World War II was distinctively different from American policy. Such large numbers are not just a project of the Liberal Party. In the early 1990s, a Conservative government broke with tradition by maintaining high numbers of immigrants during a severe recession, and the current Conservative government has continued the policy of high immigration.

As a result of immigration, the proportion of the Canadian population which is foreign-born is quite high (see Chart 2).

Chart 2 about here

The reason it is not even higher in relation to other countries, such as the United States and countries in Europe, despite much higher immigration, may be the rate of out-migration from Canada which is also high. Aydemir and Robinson (2006) estimate that for Canada, the "out-migration rate 20 years after arrival is around 35 percent among young working age male immigrants. About 6 out of 10 of those who leave do so within the first year of arrival" (Aydemir and Robinson 2006: 21). This is presumably in part because of Canada's status as a

secondary migration destination in North America.

The three largest cities in Canada, Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver, are focal points for economic growth and major immigration cities (see Chart 3).

Chart 3 about here

The shift in origins of immigrants since the 1970s, from predominantly Europe to predominantly Asia and the Caribbean, somewhat Africa, and to an even more limited extent, Latin America, has had an impact on population diversity, primarily in the major cities cited above (see Chart 4).

Chart 4 about here

The projections are that within the next 10 years, a majority of the populations of Toronto and Vancouver will be of non-European origins, what Canadians call ‘visible minorities.’ In fact, addressing the difficulties in the integration of immigrants of non-European origins permeates discussions of Canadian immigration. This is both a question of integration, and also of course affects the use of immigration to meet labour market demands.

Evolution of Immigration and Education in Relation to Economic Development.

Immigration policy in Canada has been framed by labour market needs specific to different stages of economic development (Reitz 2003). When Canada was primarily an agricultural

nation, immigrants were sought to populate rural lands across the country. Such immigrants became the primary settlement base in the Western Provinces. Then, as industrial development accelerated in the 20th century, immigrants were needed to meet needs in urban factory work and construction. More recently, as Canada has moved toward a post-industrial service economy, or the ‘knowledge economy,’ immigration has emphasized labour demand for skilled work, as reflected in the 1967 introduction of the ‘points system’ for selecting immigrants on the basis of education and occupational skills.

Since 1967, the points system has evolved in the direction of ever-higher levels of skill and a greater emphasis on education, especially post-secondary education, as opposed to specific occupational skills in various trades. At the same time, educational systems in Canada have responded to the changing economy, with increases in the education and training of the workforce. In both instances, policy changes have reflected the evolution of the country’s economic focus – from agricultural to industrial to post-industrial.

Sociologist John Porter (1965), in his classic book *The Vertical Mosaic*, published at the end of the low-skill era of Canadian immigration, discussed the interrelation of immigration and education policy in Canada. He noted that during the industrial phase of development, immigration policy was directed mainly at low-skill workers. The work-force demand for workers with higher levels of education, including post-secondary education, was met primarily from domestic sources. Even in this phase, Canada looked to immigration as a source for some of its skilled workforce, but according to Porter, the process by which immigrants were slotted into occupations was differentiated by immigrant source country.

Immigrants from the United Kingdom and the United States were recruited to fill the demand for professional and managerial workers, while those from elsewhere in Europe, particularly Eastern and Southern Europe, filled the unskilled positions in manufacturing and construction.

In fact, Porter argued that because of the expectation that UK and US immigration would fill skilled occupations, the development of educational institutions in Canada lagged behind the labour market demand for skilled workers. A significant education gap opened between the domestic Canadian and American populations. In 1960, the proportion of the younger US population getting a university degree was 11.1 percent compared to only 3.6 percent in Canada. But as noted above, in recent years, both education and immigration have become primary sources for skilled workers. And as Canada moved to the knowledge economy, the country's educational institutions developed very rapidly. As a result, educational levels among the native-born population have increased. This has closed the gap with the US (Wanner 1986). In 2001, the proportion of the younger population with post-secondary education in Canada exceeded that in the United States.

Reasons for Canada's Emphasis on Immigration. Canada's emphasis on immigration as a source of work force market growth does not have a formal official rationale, but is presumed to arise from the conjoint influence of the following forces.

One is the desire for population growth. As a satellite nation in North America, Canada is still in nation-building mode, and hopes to expand in response to the dictum that 'size matters.' Some politicians emphasize the multicultural character of Canada as a goal of

immigration, and this can be seen in the context of nation-building, arising as it does from the belief that multiculturalism is a way to distinguish Canada from the United States.

Next, there is a consensus in Canada that immigration contributes to economic growth. Population growth ensures that the economy grows, of course, but immigration is often considered to be a stimulus to increasing the levels of the population's well-being as it grows. In other words, immigration contributes to increases in per capita wealth. It should be noted that this belief is not generally shared by academic economists, who frequently argue that immigration has only a small – albeit positive – impact on per capita incomes (Economic Council of Canada 1991; Borjas 1999; Termote 2002).

Third are the implications of the low birth rate in Canada. Statistics Canada estimates that most population growth is now due to immigration. By 2030, virtually all population growth in Canada is expected to come from immigration (Statistics Canada 2007: 7).

Finally, immigration is seen positively in Canada, partly because of the success of the government in promoting the view that immigration is carefully managed in the national interest. The most important result of this managerial stance is the immigration selection system, consisting of an emphasis on education-based skills. Because of the high proportion admitted in the skilled categories (see Chart 5), the overall level of immigrant education in Canada remains higher than that of the domestic population, despite the latter group's rapid increase in educational level.

Chart 5 about here

The points system's emphasis on education can be seen in the large number of points given for formal education, as well as for knowledge of an official language and work experience. Within the education category, points are given for non-university education, but no points are given for experience in a skilled trade, regardless of the skill level, if formal education is not involved. Relatively little weight is given to arranged employment, and none at all to occupational demand factors, which formerly figured in the points allocation.

In the current rating system, then, a person with a BA, fluent in English and with two years of experience, under 50, and with no job, but whose spouse has a BA, passes, but by only one point. Take away the spouse with the BA, and more points are needed from another factor – such as graduate education or an arranged job.

Additional Reasons for Canada's Emphasis on Highly-skilled Immigrants.

Canada's managed immigration program includes an emphasis on the integration of immigrants into the labour market and the broader society, reflecting the long-term nation-building strategy. Skill-selectivity serves this goal, as shown by studies verifying that despite the lack of recognition of foreign credentials, skill-selected immigrants experience greater labour market success as measured by employment rates, earnings, and independence from social supports as compared to those who do not have such skills. In addition, specific policies supporting the integration of immigrants include not only the frequently-cited 'multiculturalism' – which is intended to make Canada a more welcoming environment for

those from diverse cultural backgrounds, but also settlement services such as language training, paid for partly by immigrants themselves in the form of application and landing fees.

Moreover, in recent years provinces have begun to play a greater role in immigrant selection, a move intended to facilitate integration by ensuring that immigration more effectively addresses local needs and concerns. This has by far the greatest impact in Quebec, which maintains a distinct selection system for all immigrants intending to settle within the province.

Evidence suggests that a high level of education for immigrant parents is an important reason for the success of their children in achieving high levels of education, almost regardless of the parents' employment success. To cite one example, the children of Asian and other 'visible minority' immigrants in Canada have university degree attainment rates higher than the mainstream population, propelling them to employment success (Reitz and Zhang 2004). This undoubtedly has a positive effect on their attachments and institutional involvements in Canada, at least partially offsetting whatever barriers they may encounter based on their 'visible minority' origins. In other words, immigrant education is not only human capital: it is also a significant form of social capital.

The success of these elements in Canada's immigration program is reflected in the public support of immigration. Polls show that over the past three decades of high immigration, in every year but one, a majority of the population approved of the number of immigrants admitted, or else wanted to see an increase (see Chart 6).

Chart 6 about here

The exception was 1982, a recession year. The recession of the early 1990s was more severe and was the first recession year in which immigration levels remained high; yet throughout that period, there was continued public support for immigration. What is most remarkable is the contrast with other countries with less immigration, and where there is greater public opposition to the immigration which does occur. While this success is not entirely due to the Canadian policies for skilled immigration, these policies are certainly part of the reason for success.

Current Gaps between Skilled Immigration and Canadian Labour Markets

At the same time, there are a number of nagging difficulties with Canadian immigration. One has to do with critical gaps between skilled immigration and the Canadian labour market. A second problem is found at the opposite end of the skills spectrum. As has been emphasized, both immigration and education planning focus on the development of a workforce with the highest possible level of education-based skills, and much less priority is placed on employment outside the most highly-skilled occupations. Hence there is a shortage in skilled trades and in less skilled occupations, prompting some employers to look to the immigrant pool, including temporary immigration. The third problem concerns the flow of illegal immigrants, mostly also at lower skill levels, and which now poses a challenge to policy-making decisions.

There are other problems confronting Canadian immigration, including racial tensions, border security, and the distribution of immigrants across the country. Yet the issues of tailoring immigration to the labour market and the difficulty of relying upon an entirely skill-focused immigration policy have received the lion's share of attention.

Labour Market Problems of Skilled Immigrants. Employment trends for immigrants arriving since the 1970s show that despite higher skill levels, the proportion employed in skilled occupations is less, and earnings levels relative to the rest of the population have declined (Reitz 2007). Of course, the employment experiences of recent immigrants fluctuate with labour demand, and the economic upswing in the late 1990s ameliorated the situation for the most recently-arrived, as shown by a 2001 Statistics Canada analysis (see Chart 7).

Chart 7 about here

Even so, the overall trend is down, and my own analysis shows that employment in skilled occupations is also down. What this means is that skilled immigration does not meet the Canadian need for skilled workers.

There is much public discussion in Canada of the non-recognition of immigrant qualifications by employers, a phenomenon known as 'brain waste.' News accounts portray the social stereotype of 'PhDs driving taxis,' and there are statistics to back it up. Census data examined by Galarneau and Morissette (2004, p. 13) show that among university graduates, immigrants are many times more likely to be working in several occupations requiring only a

high school education; in the case of ‘taxi and limousine drivers,’ the figure is ten times more likely. Numerous reasons for this situation and the decline in immigrant earnings and employment over time are put forward. Some point to specific time periods such as the business cycle, or the origins shift mentioned above and the fact that immigrants from outside Europe have greater difficulty translating university qualifications into good jobs. However, figuring prominently in the debate are broader labour market changes which illustrate that institutional forces obstruct the integration of foreign-trained workers into the Canadian labour market. In short, reliance on immigration to provide a skilled workforce in the future may require additional planning.

When we look at the list of policy proposals to address immigrant skill utilization, we see that they involve not only employers, regulatory agencies, and government, but also educational institutions. For example, bridge-training programs are being developed within the health care sector. An example is a program at the University of Toronto to enable foreign-trained pharmacists to acquire an equivalent Canadian qualification by means of a top-up training program rather than repeating an entire professional degree, as was the case in the past. Another example is the role of management schools in upgrading human resource training programs to include attention to the employment practices which are critical in optimizing immigrant skill transferability.

Demand for Temporary or Less-Skilled Immigrants. A second gap between skilled immigration and the Canadian labour market arises because neither immigration nor the domestic education system provides a sufficient workforce for jobs which do not require post-

secondary education. Employers report that they need workers in less-skilled jobs, and that native-born Canadians will not do these jobs. They suggest that immigrants could fill this gap, but cannot do so under the current system with its focus on post-secondary education, and so they propose a more flexible selection system. The employers belong to a variety of industries, including the booming oil industry in Alberta and the construction industry in many cities.

The specific proposal is to allow temporary immigrants, who are currently in Canada for periods up to one year, to remain longer, and if their jobs remain stable over a period of perhaps three years, to permit them to apply for permanent residence on that basis. Under this policy revision, persons trained in skilled trades would be more likely to gain permanent admission to Canada, thereby becoming part of the immigration-generated workforce of the future.

The key difference in this selection method is that filling the demand for less-skilled immigration would be based on employer-driven selection. Employers would be the gatekeepers for initial admission to Canada and the gatekeepers for permanent residency. If this is done, the following two issues should be addressed.

The first is the question of the longer-term integration potential for the less-skilled workers selected by this employer-driven scheme. Employer selection is based on immediate need, so there is at least a short-term advantage, in that such immigrants fare better than those who are better-trained but cannot find jobs. Yet even if a temporary worker survives in a job for three years, his or her longer-term success in employment might be less than for workers

with broader skills and higher levels of education.

The second issue concerns enforcement. Meeting the need for less-skilled immigration by allowing employers to make selections essentially privatizes selection, and the integrity of the selection system is no longer guaranteed by the public accountability of government. As a result, accountability must be built into the private selection system to ensure that permanent visas are granted for bona fide employment.

Illegal Immigration. The third type of gap between skilled immigration and the labour force is created by illegal immigration. No one knows the number of illegal immigrants in Canada, but journalists have published estimates from activists indicating there are up to 200,000 or more illegal immigrants in Canada, mostly working in construction and other less-skilled occupations and trades.

Arguably, since illegal immigrants are doing jobs that are necessary, or even critical to the survival of large sectors of the economy, they should be granted an amnesty and full permanent resident status. In some ways, the distinction between this third gap and the second is only in the manner in which the immigrants initially gain admission to Canada: in the first case, they qualify as temporary workers, and in the second, they simply enter the country without a visa. In fact, many illegal immigrants may be temporary immigrants who have overstayed their visa. In both instances, the solutions must address the long-term integration of less-skilled workers, as well as the enforcement of regulations to ensure the integrity of an essentially privatized system of immigrant selection.

Policy Directions to Fill Gaps between Immigration and the Labour Market

One might ask why skilled immigrants who work in less-skilled jobs do not satisfy the demand at that lower level. The answer may be related to the types of jobs available at the less-skilled level. Many skilled immigrants, as university-educated professionals, are simply not prepared for skilled trades or unskilled outdoor jobs, preferring more sedentary employment, coupled with a strategy for skill upgrading and eventual work in their original profession.

In any case, the seriousness of the issue – the fact that skilled immigrants don't get jobs at their level of skill and that unskilled jobs go unfilled or are filled by temporary or illegal immigrants – shows the limits of skilled immigration in meeting the needs of the contemporary labour market.

Some argue that Canadian educational institutions should step in to fill these gaps. Education in skilled trades and other occupations in demand in the labour force should receive increased funding, and students should be encouraged to fill these jobs. For their part, employers should be willing to offer work at rates that are attractive to graduates of these programs.

In the effort to link immigration more directly to the current labour market, the emphasis has been on employer-driven selection schemes. The difficulties mentioned above,

namely, that employers do not take responsibility for long-term integration of immigrants and may be difficult to monitor effectively, suggesting that other strategies should be pursued.

One such strategy is government-private partnerships in immigration-based workforce strategies. By this, I mean efforts in which governments and employers work together to ensure that the transition from temporary to permanent worker involves provision for inevitable disruptions of employment in a strictly private labour market. There is a need to develop specific proposals to ensure that the labour market transitions are addressed. In recruiting less-skilled immigrants, there are greater potential problems of integration, not necessarily in the short term if good and well-paying jobs have been arranged, but in the intermediate and longer term, because the employment security of these immigrants is job-specific. As well, low skilled immigrants may have fewer resources to provide for the success of their children in terms of education and social connections. Where an entire immigrant community has a low skill level, resources in the community will also be correspondingly lacking. The basic point is that efforts to address problems of integration are best made by engaging with the key stakeholder groups, in this case, the employers.

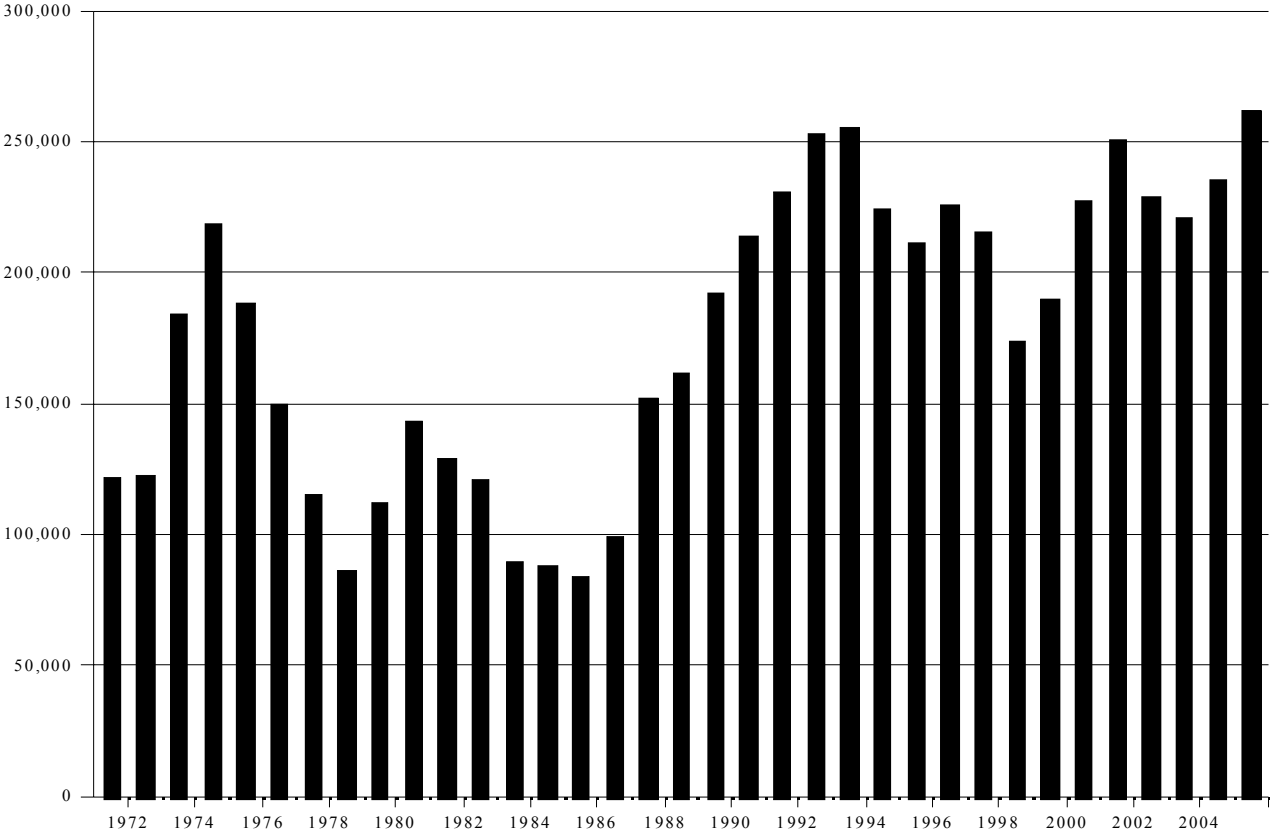
Employer-government partnerships might work in a way which is parallel in some ways to what exists for family-class migrants. Permanent residents of Canada who want to be joined by family members who do not satisfy the broader criteria, or who do not want to wait for approval through this process, are asked to engage in a 'sponsorship' arrangement whereby they undertake to contribute to the longer-term integration needs of the person they sponsor. In the same way, employers who want certain persons to come to Canada who do not satisfy the

broader criteria, or who do not want to wait for approval through the process, may be asked to enter into an agreement whereby they take some responsibility for longer-term integration, either for the persons they sponsor, or for the group of persons who enter Canada in this way.

Community groups could play a role in longer-term integration as well. The role of ethnic communities in the integration process is well known. Providing resources for groups whose members are more likely to experience employment disruptions would help ensure that problems of integration are addressed effectively.

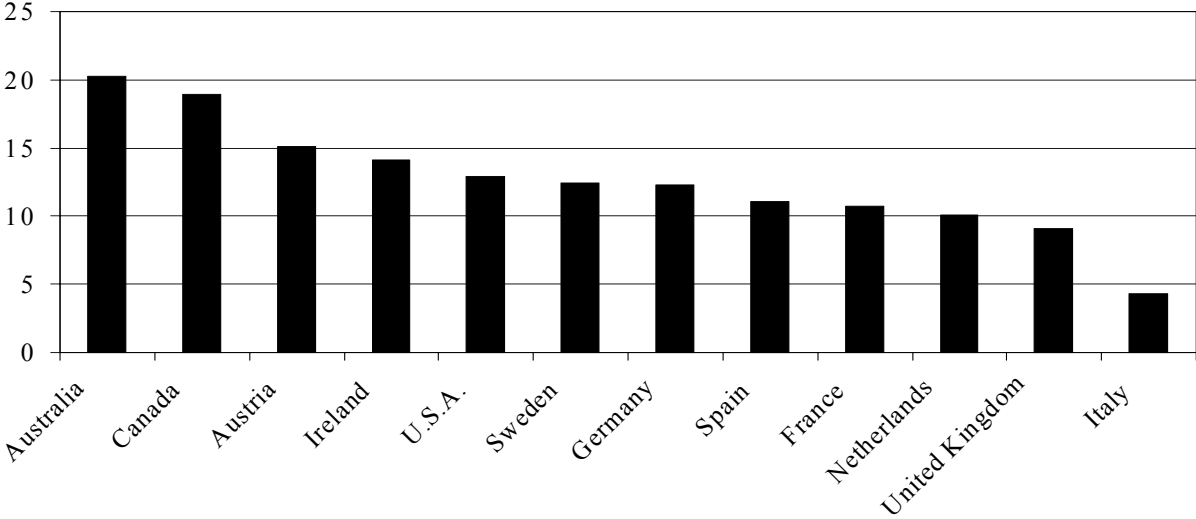
Workable initiatives should be possible, through the actions of both government and business. But neither government nor business need act alone in providing for the integration of less-skilled workers. Just as we now know that even skilled migrants do not adjust automatically, we understand that less-skilled immigrants may be needed but may require support beyond what is now available. Here, agencies in source countries might have a useful role to play, as could agencies within Canadian migrant communities. In short, community involvement in the effort to smooth the integration process for less-skilled workers would ensure the success of less-skilled migration.

Chart 1. Permanent immigrants to Canada 1971-2005.



Source: Citizenship and Immigration Canada.

Chart 2. Immigration Nations: Percent Foreign-born, 2005



Source: United Nations, International Migration 2006.

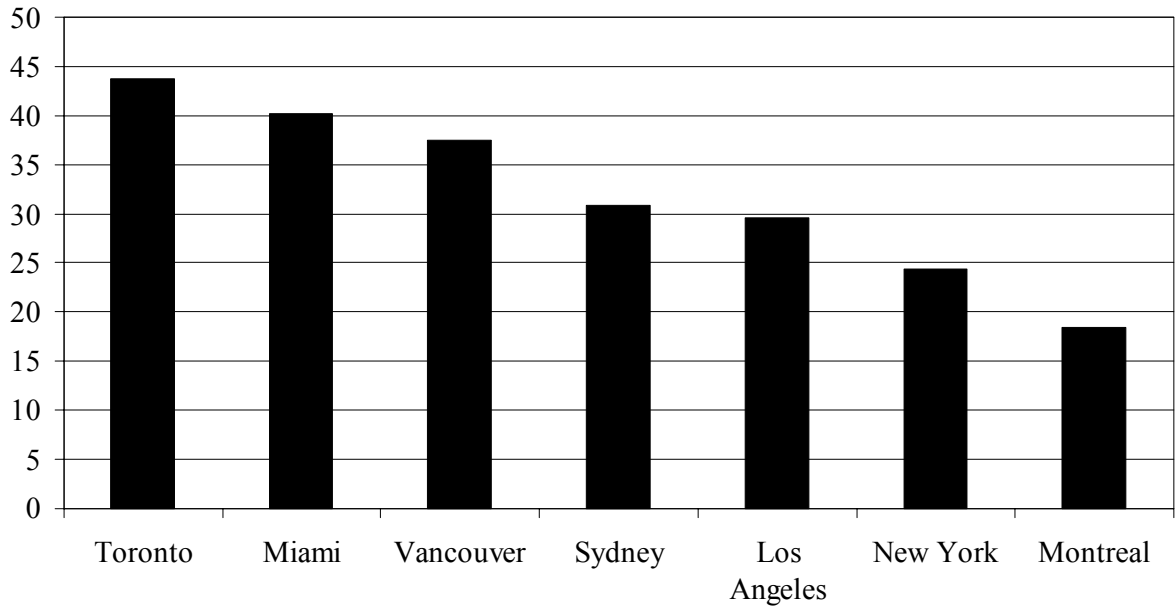
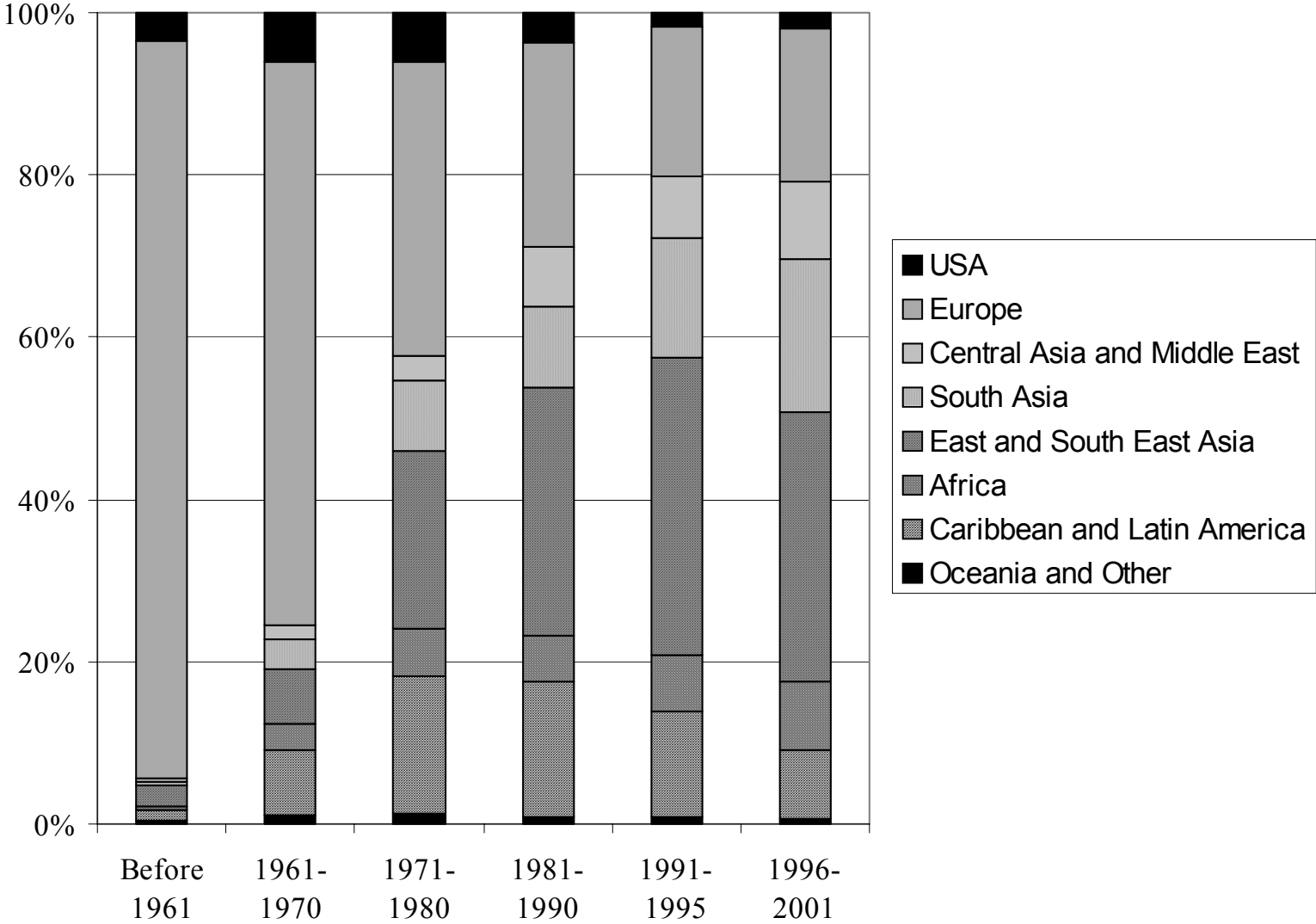


Chart 3. Immigration Cities: Migrants as a Percentage of Urban Populations, 2001

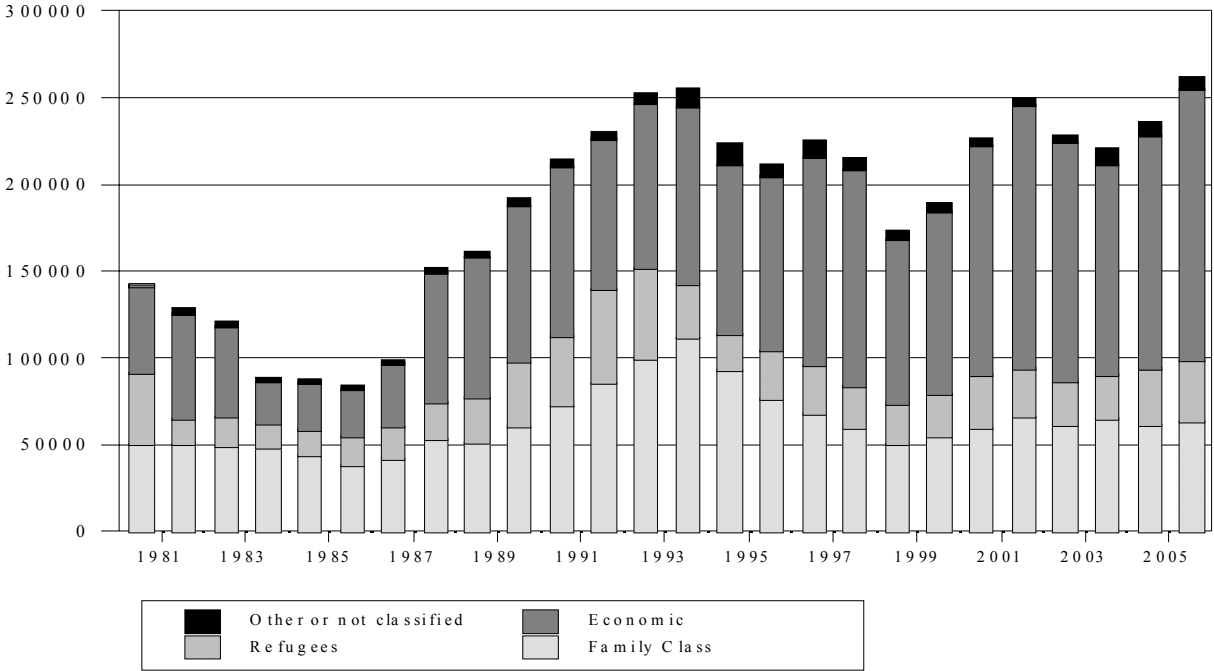
Source: Statistics Canada, 2004.

Chart 4. Immigrant Origins, by Period of Arrival, Canada 2001.



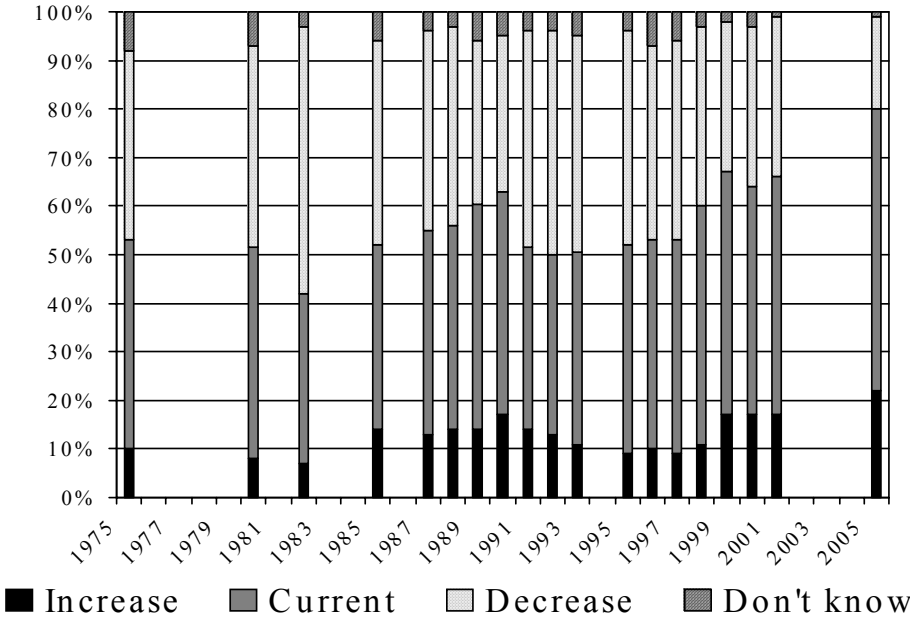
Source: 2001 Census of Canada.

Chart 5. Immigrant Admission Category, Canada, 1980-2005.



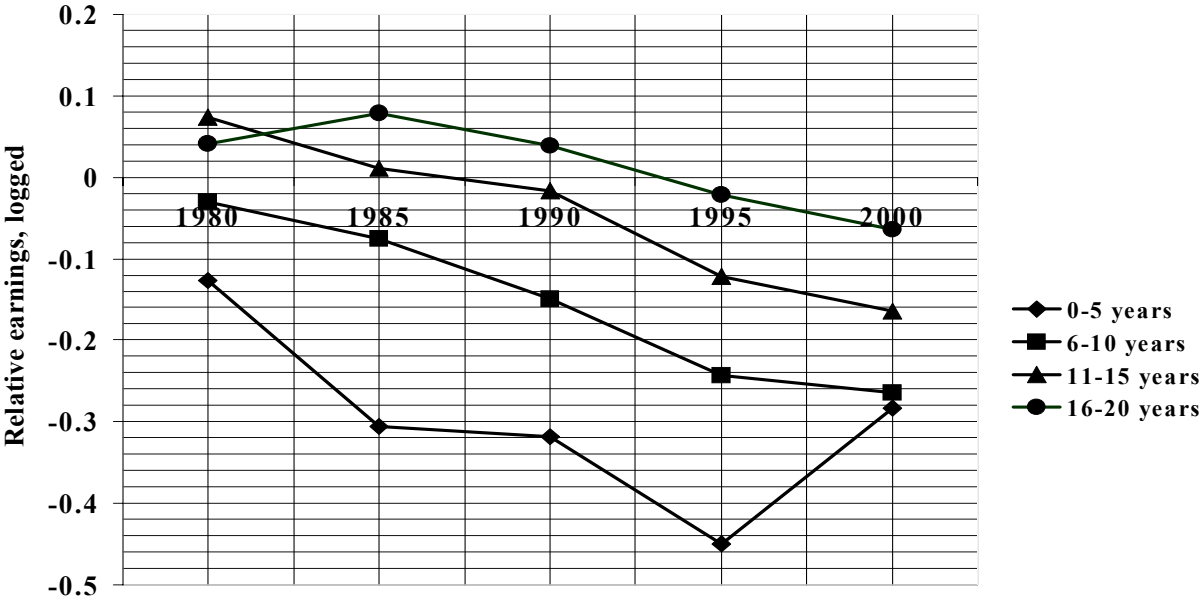
Source: Citizenship and Immigration Canada.

Chart 6. Canadian Opinion on Immigration Levels, 1975-2001: “If it were your job to plan an immigration policy for Canada at this time, would you be inclined to increase immigration, decrease immigration, or keep the number of immigrants at about the current level?”



Source: Gallup Canada, Inc.

Chart 7. Earnings trends for Immigrant Men, Canada, 1980-2000.



Source: Frenette and Morissette, Statistics Canada, 2003

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