



Voting with Their Feet: Migration in Atlantic Canada

by Alex Whalen, Nathaniel Li, and Ben Eisen

SUMMARY

- Migration is a perennial topic of interest in Atlantic Canada. Out-migration specifically has been widely recognized as both a symptom of the region's economic weakness and a potential threat to its future well-being.
- Atlantic Canada experienced a net out-migration of 66,396 people between 2000/01 and 2019/20. The out-migration is largest in New Brunswick, which lost 21,974 people.
- In four of the past five years, Atlantic Canada has experienced in-migration, as more people moved to the region than left. However, the quantity of in-migration has not been enough to offset the out-migration experienced in the years leading up to 2016/17.
- Over the past 20 years, most (74.3 percent) of Atlantic Canada's interprovincial out-migrants have moved to Alberta and Ontario. Economic developments in these provinces affect migration patterns in Atlantic Canada.
- The Atlantic Provinces have significantly increased the number of international immigrants coming to the region over the past several years. While this represents an important potential source of population growth, the region still struggles with low retention rates, which reduces the benefit of bringing newcomers to the region.
- The phenomenon of out-migration in Atlantic Canada over 14 of the past 20 years is a significant concern for the region. Migration patterns are important to overall economic success; international evidence shows that people tend to move where they are likely to find economic growth, higher paying jobs, and prosperity.

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Introduction

Patterns of movement among people, either between cities, provinces, regions, or countries, are often an indicator of the economic prosperity and quality of life available in various jurisdictions. International evidence shows that the search for productive employment helps shape migration patterns as people are willing to accept the high costs of moving from one place to another in search of economic opportunity (Ozden, 2018).

In addition to being an important indicator of a jurisdiction's attractiveness as a place to live and work, migration patterns also play a role in shaping economic outcomes. Specifically, migration patterns influence the size and composition of a jurisdiction's labour force, population growth (or decline), size of the market, employment, and overall economic growth.

Out-migration is a perennial topic of policy discussion in Atlantic Canada. More specifically, out-migration has been widely recognized as both a symptom of the region's economic weakness relative to the rest of Canada and also a potential threat to the region's future well-being. (Savoie, 2006).

This study analyzes interprovincial flows of people in to and out of Atlantic Canada since the turn of the century as well as the extent to which immigrants to Canada are choosing to locate in Atlantic Canada.

The plan of the bulletin is as follows. The first section examines overall interprovincial migration statistics to show the extent to which the various provinces and the Atlantic region as a whole experienced net interprovincial out-migration over the past two decades. The next section provides more detail on the demographic characteristics of interprovincial

migrants as well as the destinations of out-migrants from Atlantic Canada. Next, briefly analyze international migration, specifically, the extent to which new Canadians are choosing to live and work in the Atlantic region. The concluding section includes a brief discussion.

Data sources and methodology

The data in the following discussion come from Statistics Canada, which produces estimates of interprovincial migration. Estimates for all years except for 2019/20¹ are considered final, which means that the underlying source of the data are personal income tax returns (Statistics Canada, 2015). This means that the migrants described in the following sections legally moved their residence for tax purposes.

What the data do not capture, however, are people who live in Atlantic Canada but commute to another part of the country for work. These are known as rotational workers, and are a significant proportion of the people who move between provinces. It is often observed that many people who reside in Atlantic Canada work part of the year in Alberta. However, data on this type of worker is difficult to find and estimates of the number of such workers range widely.

One Statistics Canada analysis estimated that 32,166 Atlantic Canadians were rotational workers in Alberta in 2008² (Statistics Canada, 2015).

¹ We have used Statistics Canada's preliminary estimates for 2019/20, which the agency produces by using the change of address data from the Canada Revenue Agency, recorded from the Canada Child Benefit program.

² The estimates here rely on data from 2008 and much has changed in Alberta since that time. Given the downturn in Alberta's economy, it is likely that the number of rotational workers is lower today

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A second analysis looking at the same year estimated that there were 35,245 Atlantic Canadian rotational workers in Alberta (Enform, 2015). However, all these estimates must be used with caution given the lack of data availability and variability based on the time and data source used. In general, analyses estimate that there are between 100,000 and 130,000 rotational workers in Alberta in a typical year, with between 13 and 27 percent estimated to be coming from Atlantic Canada. These broad estimates indicate that the number of Atlantic Canadian rotational workers in Alberta was regularly in excess of 10,000 workers per year during that period.

This number is meaningful in the discussion of Atlantic Canada's migration patterns. The estimates discussed here suggest that in some years the rotational workforce is as large or larger than the flow of out-migration from Atlantic Canada. Another way of viewing the size of the rotational workforce is to compare it to Atlantic Canada's total employment numbers. Using the 2008 data (the year discussed above), Atlantic Canada's rotational workforce in Alberta alone was equal to 3.2 percent of all employed persons in Atlantic Canada (Statistics Canada, 2021a).

This study focuses largely on Atlantic Canada as a whole (although data for individual provinces is presented throughout). Our goal is to provide a regional comparison, not to delve into the specifics of individual provinces.³ While dif-

than in 2008. However, the data discussed here are the most recent that the authors were able to find and are meant simply to illustrate the substantial number of rotational workers that live in Atlantic Canada but are working in other provinces.

³ For a more detailed breakdown of migration data and analysis for specific Atlantic Provinces, inter-

ferences between them exist, the four Atlantic provinces face many common migration and population issues.

We needn't delve further into the details except to emphasize that the migration numbers presented in the following sections do not capture Atlantic Canada's large rotational workforce. The following discussion of migration therefore focuses on changes of residency (except where otherwise noted), which is the best data available at the time of writing.

1. Net interprovincial migration flows to and from Atlantic Canada

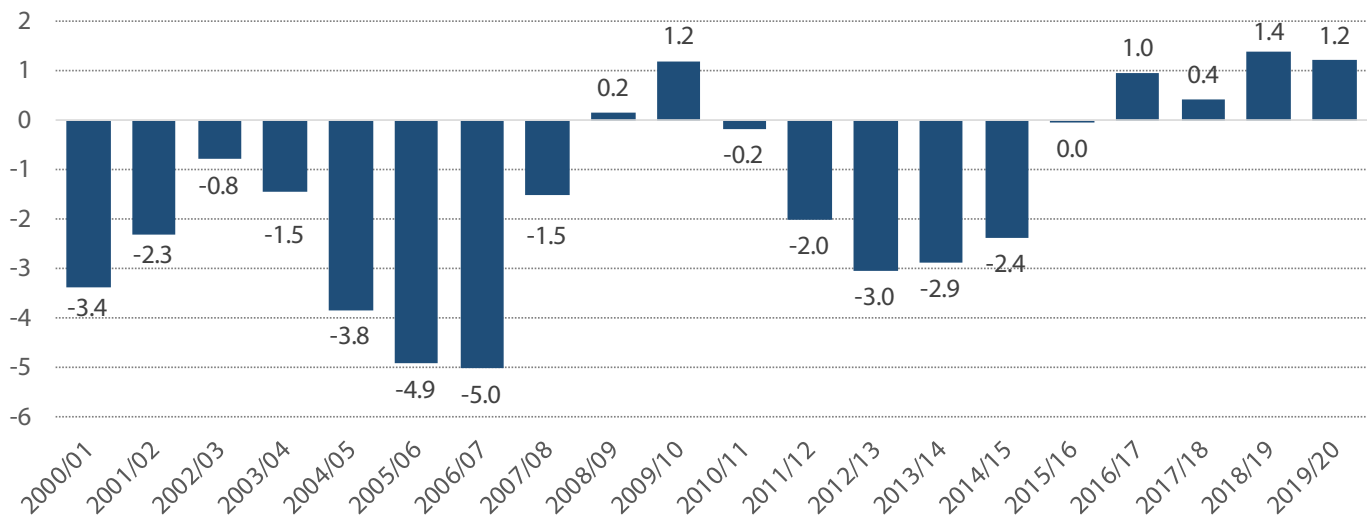
This section analyses the overall patterns of interprovincial migration to and from Atlantic Canada and other specific provinces. Unless otherwise stated, all figures in this study are for the period between 2000/01 and 2019/20. We have chosen this period in an effort to provide an overall picture of recent migratory patterns that are recent enough to be relevant to today's challenges, yet long enough to capture normal economic fluctuations. The choice of the base year is not sensitive to the overall findings presented below.

Figure 1 shows Atlantic Canada's net migration from 2000/01 to 2019/20 per thousand population. It tells us the years in which there were net inflows to and outflows of people from Atlantic Canada as a whole. That is, the figure shows for any given year whether more people came to the region from elsewhere in

ested readers can consult the ONE Nova Scotia Dashboard (<https://www.onens.ca/goals/goal-1-inter-provincial-migration/deep-dive>) or the Boost NB 2020 Analysis for New Brunswick (https://www.boostnb.com/uploads/1/2/6/8/126864015/goal_1.pdf).

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Figure 1: Atlantic Canada's Net Inter-regional Migration Per Thousand Population, 2000/01 to 2019/20



Note: The interprovincial migration among the Atlantic Provinces is not counted.
Sources: Statistics Canada, 2020a; 2020b.

Canada or left Atlantic Canada to live in other provinces.⁴

Figure 1 shows there is a long-term net out-migration from Atlantic Canada. The region has lost 1.4 people per thousand residents per year, on average, for the 20-year period between 2000/01 and 2019/20 (the most recent year of available data). In fact, the region experienced net in-migration for only six of the past 20 years.

Figure 1 also shows that the trend has reversed since 2016/17. Specifically, the figure shows that in the most recent four years (2016/17 to

2019/20), there was an average in-migration of 1.0 person per 1,000 residents. For perspective, there was a net in-migration during this period of 9,559 people compared to a net out-migration between 2000/01 and 2015/16 of 75,955 people. We will look at this recent development in more detail in the next section.

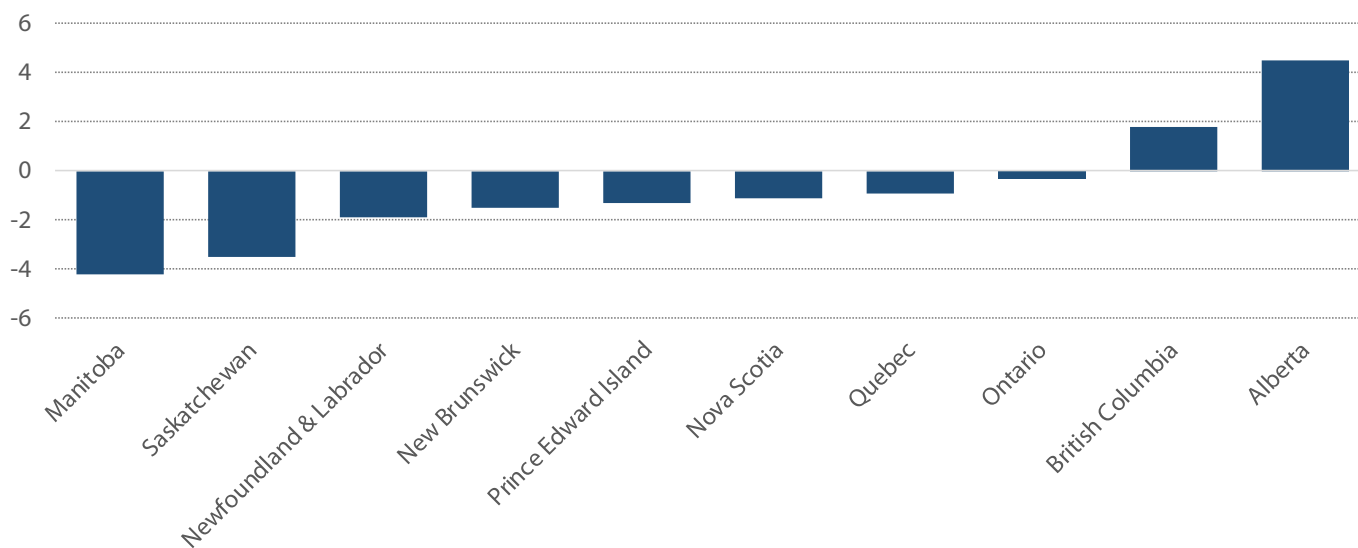
The aggregate effect of the recent years of positive net migration have not reversed this study's key finding of substantial negative net migration from the Atlantic region in the period examined. Figure 2 illustrates this fact.

Figure 2 shows the average net migration for each of the Canadian provinces over the same period covered in figure 1. It shows that over the course of the 20-year period, all four Atlantic provinces experienced net out-migration. Only Saskatchewan and Manitoba experienced higher rates of out-migration (though this has recently been reversed).

⁴ Expressing these data as per-thousand population allows for a clearer comparison across provinces and regions and enables us to accurately compare provinces with different population levels. Note that migration within Atlantic Canadian provinces has been removed from all calculations in this study (unless otherwise noted) to give a clearer regional picture.

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Figure 2: Average Net Migration by Province, Per Thousand People, 2000/01 to 2019/20



Sources: Statistics Canada, 2020a; 2020b.

Newfoundland & Labrador has the highest net out-migration rate in the region, and the third highest in the country. Its long term average out-migration rate is 1.9 people per thousand population per year. At 1.5 per thousand, New Brunswick follows Newfoundland & Labrador. Then comes Prince Edward Island at 1.3, and Nova Scotia at 1.1. Quebec and Ontario also both experienced net inter-provincial out-migration during this period, though at a lower rate than any Atlantic province. By contrast, the out-migration rate per thousand was higher in Saskatchewan and Manitoba than in the Atlantic provinces. Only British Columbia and Alberta experienced positive net migration.

The cumulative effect of these annual average numbers over the last 20 years has been substantial. Specifically, the cumulative net out-migration from the region has been 66,396 people over the 20 year period. Table 1 shows

the total net nominal out-migration from each Atlantic province during this period.

In absolute terms, New Brunswick lost 21,974 people, Nova Scotia 20,805, Newfoundland & Labrador 19,927, and Prince Edward Island 3,690 people between 2000/01 and 2019/20.

Taken together, the data quantify how the Atlantic Provinces have all lost more people than they gained in 14 of the past 20 years. While migration statistics fluctuate from year to year, the data demonstrate that the recent in-migration flow has not been enough to offset the out-migration experienced up to 2015.

2. Who is migrating from Atlantic Canada?

This section analyzes the total out-migration patterns of specific provinces and discusses the demography of intra-Canadian migrants.

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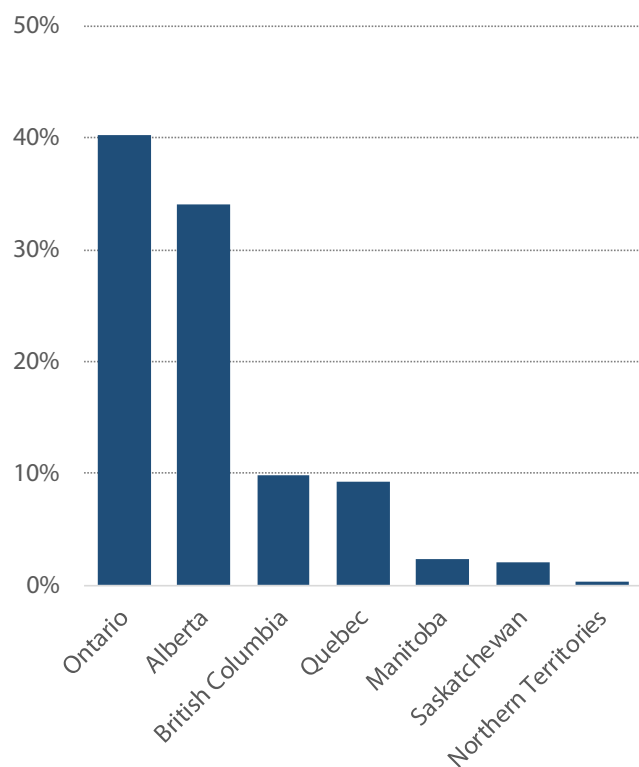
Table 1: Total Cumulative Net Out-migration, 2000/2001–2019/20

Area	Total Out-migration, 2000/01 to 2019/20
Newfoundland & Labrador	19,927
Prince Edward Island	3,690
Nova Scotia	20,805
New Brunswick	21,974
Atlantic Canada	66,396

Note: The migration among Atlantic Provinces is not counted.

Sources: Statistics Canada, 2020a.

Figure 3: Destination of Atlantic Canadian Out-migrants, Average Share, 2000/01 to 2019/20



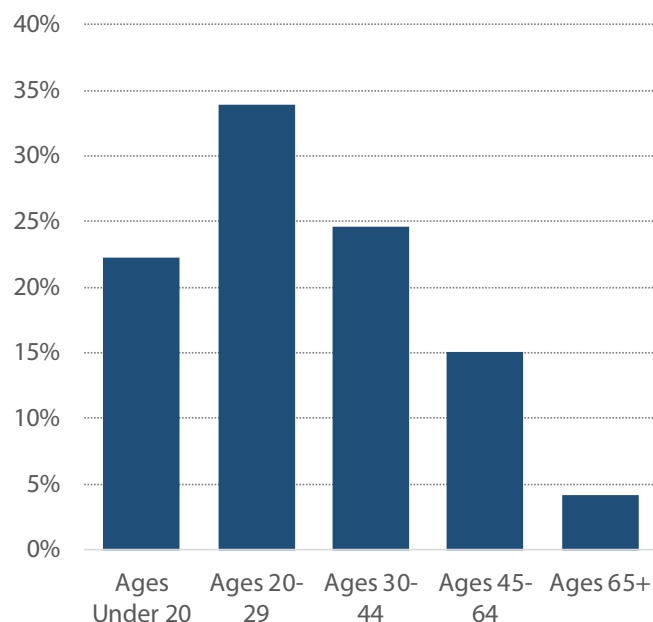
Sources: Statistics Canada, 2020a.

Figure 3 shows the share of all (total) Atlantic Canadian out-migrants who moved to each of the other provinces in the 20-year period. During those years, Ontario and Alberta were the top two destinations for residents leaving Atlantic Canada for another province. In fact, relocations to Ontario and Alberta represent the majority of people leaving the region for elsewhere in Canada in the last 20 years, accounting for an average of 74.3 percent (combined) of the region's total out-migration. Ontario received 40.3 percent of the migrants, the highest proportion among all destination provinces. However, Alberta disproportionately attracts people from Atlantic Canada. Despite having less than a third of Ontario's population, Alberta attracts 34.0 percent of Atlantic Canada's outmigrants.

British Columbia (9.9 percent) and Quebec (9.2 percent) represent the two next most common destinations for Atlantic Canada's migrants. A relatively low share goes to Manitoba (2.4 percent) and Saskatchewan (2.1 percent). While these proportions fluctuate over time, the common theme remains consistent: the vast majority of people who leave Atlantic Canada choose to go to either Ontario or Alberta.

Age is another important characteristic in the region's migratory patterns. Specifically, analysts have paid particular attention to out-migration from Atlantic Canada by young, working-age individuals (Savoie, 2006). To the extent it is true, such a finding would have important implications for provincial governments in Atlantic Canada, who would be losing young, working-age people who provide revenue to the government (in personal income and other taxes) and cost less (in health care and other costs) than their older counterparts. With this in mind, we turn now to the age structure of Atlantic Canada's out-migration.

Figure 4: Average Share of Out-migration by Age Group in Atlantic Canada, 2001/02 to 2019/20



Note: The migration among Atlantic Provinces is not counted.

Sources: Statistics Canada, 2021c (custom tabulation received March 22, 2021); 2021d.

As figure 4 shows, the people leaving Atlantic Canada are largely younger, working-aged residents. Specifically, over the past two decades, in an average year 58.5 percent of the total residents who migrated out of Atlantic Canada were between the age of 20 and 44. When this group is expanded to include those aged 20 to 64, almost three quarters (73.6 percent) of Atlantic Canada’s out-migration involved working-aged people.

Figure 5 compares the share of total outmigrants in each age group in each province to that age group’s share of the provincial population. The share of out-migration of people aged 20 to 44 ranges from 57.1 percent to 59.7 percent, while the share of population of those in

the same age ranges from 31.7 percent to 32.6 percent.

The out-migration of people aged 20 to 44 being higher than their share of the population is a trend observable across all jurisdictions in Canada as younger, working-aged people tend to be most mobile. However, the degree to which young people leave in comparison to their share of the population is largest in Atlantic Canada (Statistics Canada, 2021c).

Observations and recent developments

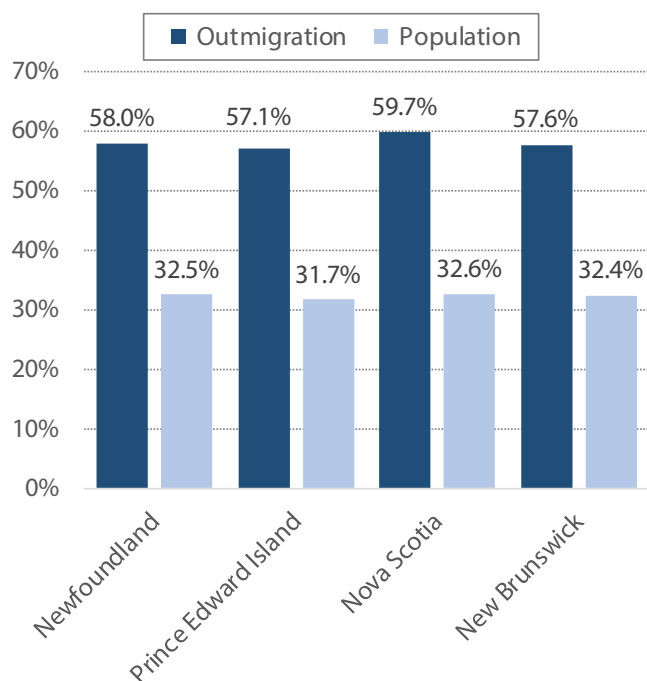
As noted above and in figure 1, Atlantic Canada’s long-term pattern of out-migration has shifted over the past four years toward in-migration. This development coincides with ongoing economic changes in some of the provinces, notably Alberta and Ontario, which have hitherto been most successful in attracting Atlantic Canada’s migrants. Given that 74.3 percent of Atlantic Canadians who leave the region for another province end up in one of these two destinations, a closer examination of developments in those provinces can help us better understand recent developments in Atlantic Canada.

Specifically, Alberta has experienced three recessions since 2009, and saw negative real per-person economic growth between 2006 and 2019. This economic weakness slowed the creation of high paying jobs and reduced economic migration to the province. Meanwhile, Ontario has also stagnated economically over the past 15 years. Ontario’s economic performance has been so weak that one analysis has argued that in comparison to its past and the economic performance of other provinces, Ontario has recently experienced a “lost decade” of economic growth (Eisen and Palacios, 2018).

The decline in net migration from Atlantic Canada to these historically significant destinations

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Figure 5a: Share of Outmigration versus Share of Population Aged 20-44, Atlantic Provinces, 2001/02 to 2019/20



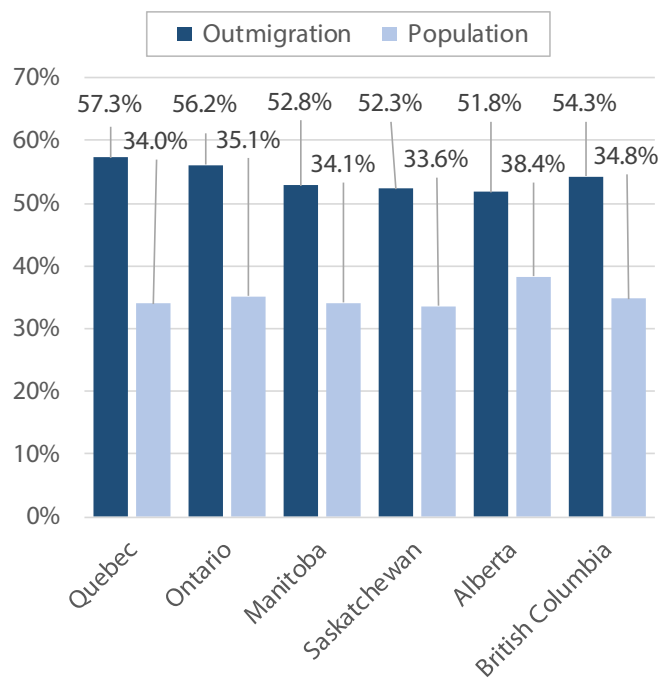
Note: The migration among Atlantic Provinces is not counted.

Sources: Statistics Canada, 2021c (custom tabulation received March 22, 2021); 2021d.

during this protracted period of economic stagnation is consistent with theory, which holds that economic opportunity is a major driver of migration patterns. Atlantic Canada's growth during these years has generally not been robust, but, at least temporarily, Ontario and Alberta have ceased to be such popular destinations as they no longer have the much more rapid economic growth that creates the type of jobs that theory and evidence show attracts new in-migrants.

One final note: the developments of recent years and the reversal of migration patterns is

Figure 5b: Share of Outmigration versus Share of Population Aged 20-44, Other Provinces, 2001/02 to 2019/20



Note: The migration among Atlantic Provinces is not counted.

Sources: Statistics Canada, 2021c (custom tabulation received March 22, 2021); 2021d.

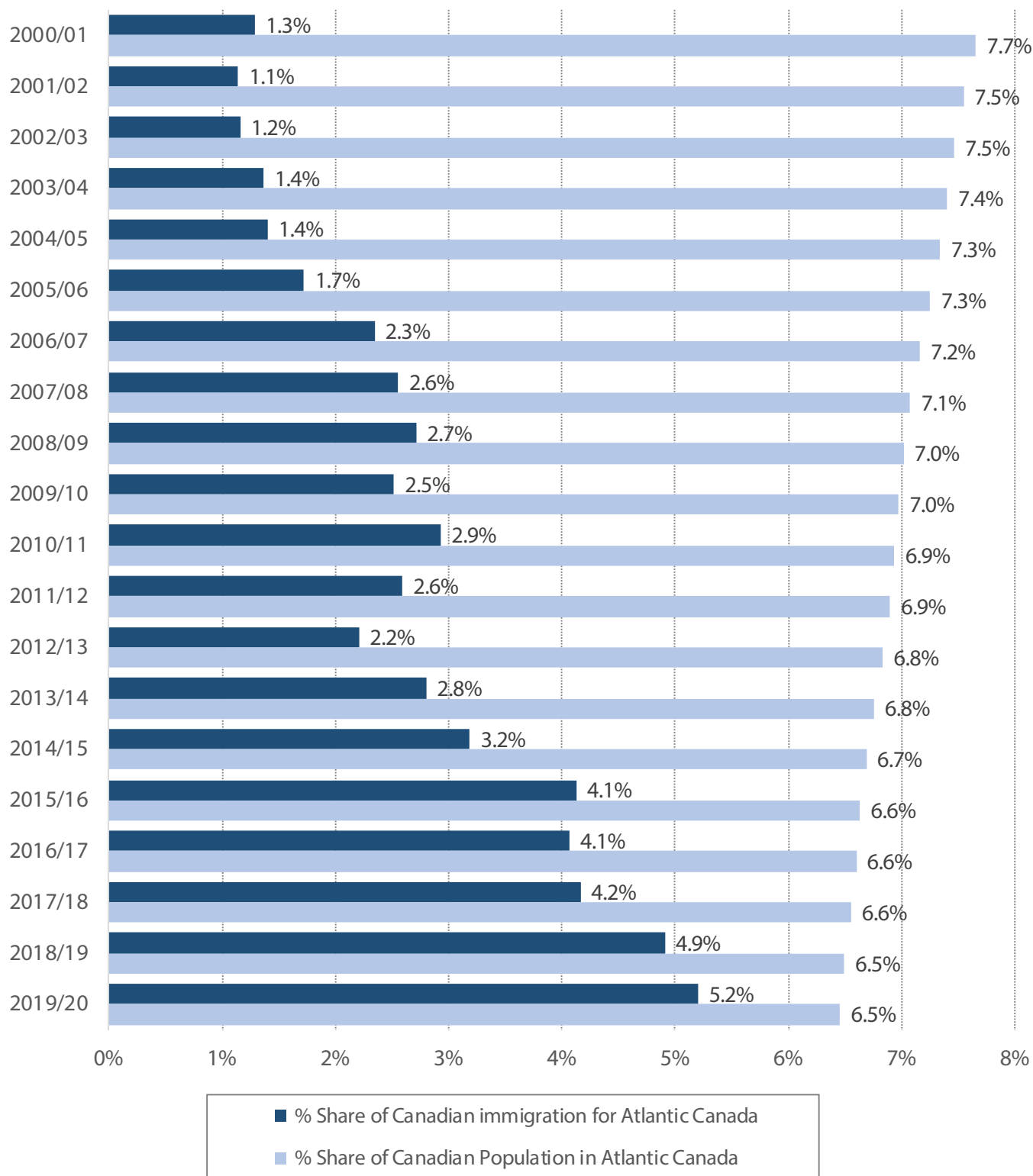
a relatively recent phenomenon and cumulatively does not reverse the key finding of this paper: that Atlantic Canada has had substantial net out-migration over the past 20 years. Future economic developments will largely shape the extent to which the current phenomenon proves to be short-lived or a durable change in Atlantic Canadian migration patterns.

Immigration and population

While this study is principally concerned with interprovincial migration, immigration from other countries is another important variable in

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Figure 6: Share of Canadian Immigration and Total Population in Atlantic Canada



Sources: Statistics Canada, 2020c.

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population change. This section examines Atlantic Canada's recent immigration record.

For a number of reasons, migration included, Atlantic Canada's share of the Canadian population has been steadily declining over the past 20 years. As figure 6 shows, the region's population as a share of the Canadian population was 7.7 percent in 2000/01 and declined to 6.5 percent in 2019/20. This drop is due to a combination of both slower population growth in Atlantic Canada compared to the rest of the country and more rapid growth in provinces like Alberta.

Atlantic Canada's recent record on immigration is a promising area of population dynamics, however. Again measured as a share of the Canadian total, Atlantic Canada was responsible for just 1.3 percent of Canadian immigration in 2000/01. By 2009/10, a decade or so later, this had increased, but to only 2.5 percent. However, immigration has since increased significantly, reaching 5.2 percent of the Canadian total in 2019/20. Figure 6 shows that the share of immigrants to Canada who settled in Atlantic Canada is now approaching the region's share of the country's overall population.

Attracting more immigrants to Atlantic Canada has been an explicit objective of the region's governments. In partnership with the federal government, provincial governments have emphasized immigration growth through such initiatives as the Atlantic Immigration Pilot Project (Canada, 2021). Figure 6 suggests that these initiatives may have been at least somewhat effective at bringing newcomers to the region. This is important because immigrants represent a potential source of population growth, which is badly needed to reverse Atlantic Canada's long-term migration patterns and broader population challenges.

However, while a larger share of immigrants is coming to the region, Atlantic Canada still struggles with a low retention rate for the immigrants it does attract. Retention rates fluctuate based on the immigration year and the time frame measured, but the Atlantic provinces tend to have the four lowest immigrant retention rates in the country. For example, data from 2018 sheds light on the 2008 immigration admission year a decade before. Only 11.2 percent of immigrants from this cohort remained in Prince Edward Island, 38.9 percent in New Brunswick, 41.8 percent in Newfoundland & Labrador, and 55.4 percent in Nova Scotia after a decade (Statistics Canada, 2021c). These are the lowest retention rates in the country and contrast starkly with rates in Alberta (86.8 percent) and Ontario (90.3 percent).

3. Discussion and conclusion

The first two sections of this bulletin described Atlantic Canada's long-term net migration record. They established that Atlantic Canada is not only losing people to out-migration, but that those who leave tend to be younger, working-aged people.

Migration patterns are an important indicator of overall economic success. International evidence shows that people tend to move to where they are likely to find economic growth, higher paying jobs, and prosperity. Immigration can also drive economic success as new arrivals can bring skills, knowledge, and productive capacity that can contribute to a region's growth. As such, the phenomenon of substantial out-migration from Atlantic Canada over the past 20 years is indicative of a concerning lack of perceived economic opportunity in the region over this period.

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