

Belonging:

Stories of the Dignity and Resilience of Immigrants

The State of Immigration and Settlement in Edmonton - Annual Report 2021

Executive Summary

Edmonton is a city that is rich in history and diversity, encompassing Indigenous Peoples, settlers and more recent migrants. Every year, more than 12,000 people move here from other countries. Indeed, immigrants make up a quarter of our city's population, and speak more than 125 languages.

The first of five annual reports, *Belonging: Stories of the Dignity and Resilience of Immigrants* explores the many strengths migrants bring, and the challenges they experience in our city. It connects the wisdom, lived experience, commitment and collaboration of many diverse individuals from settlement and immigrant-serving agencies, thought leaders from multiple sectors, people with lived migration experience, and City of Edmonton employees. Community-based researchers conducted a focused literature review, and examined more than 40 policies that affect migrants and newcomers, in order to provide context for how to build a city that works well for everyone, and in which everyone has a strong sense of belonging.

In this report, you will meet five composite characters: Yusef, Neo, Merla, Marina and Anton. While their stories are semi-fictionalized, their experiences and perspectives are drawn from the journeys, strengths, struggles and aspirations of 22 Edmontonians with lived migration experience. The characters' immigration pathways reflect the variety of circumstances by which people leave their homelands. Yusef and his family are Government-Assisted Refugees, who are exploring their Edmonton home for the first time. Neo, sponsored to come here by his father, is a 17-year-old youth with a bright future ahead of him, so long as racism and financial pressures don't close doors on him. Merla and her husband are economic migrants, skilled workers with much to offer, and yet they both struggle to find employment here. Marina is a Temporary Foreign Worker who has the courage to stand up to abuse in the workplace, and Anton is a Refugee Claimant who is fighting to save his life and to build a new life in Canada.



All of these characters show resilience, courage and determination in the face of significant hardship. Their stories demonstrate how policies, systemic barriers and structures of power affect people in their day-to-day lives. The corresponding research that accompanies their stories presents some big ideas and promising practices that could help remove the barriers they face.

The report is grounded in two models to highlight a fresh perspective in the narrative of immigration and settlement. While immigration is formally the domain of provincial and federal governments, municipalities are able to create opportunities for immigrants to fully participate in all aspects of civic life. The Multidimensional Immigrant Model views immigrants beyond the economic benefits they bring and more in terms of the multiple assets and strengths that migrants harness to overcome systemic barriers in adapting to their new homeland. The Cultural Wealth Model builds on this holistic approach, and reveals the rich mosaic of cultural assets that migrants bring to their new communities.

We also draw on social inclusion research to look at ways to foster cultural bonds, intercultural bridges and links to systems of power in order for newcomers to build their social capital. And finally, we explore how to move beyond a multicultural society to an intercultural one, which focuses on the mutual benefit of our interconnectedness, and the value of building reciprocal relationships across many cultures, rather than simply celebrating our diversity.

The intent of this first report is to begin shifting our ways of thinking and feeling, as a city and a community, when it comes to immigration, settlement and integration of newcomers. Through the stories of lived experience, we can, as a collective, gain a deeper understanding of some of the systemic and structural barriers migrants face, and the need to shift the paradigm from 'serving vulnerable communities' to co-creating solutions together. Migrants of the present (and the past) are city-makers with tremendous resilience, assets and potential; they are agents of local development, bringing value to our economy and the cultural fabric of our community. We have so much to gain by honoring our collective strengths as Edmontonians, and so much we can do to ensure that migrants can fully contribute to building our city. ■