

Coming to, and Settling on, Prince Edward Island: Stories and Voices

A Report on a Study of Recent Immigrants to PEI

Executive Summary

1. This report is a qualitative, person-centered study of contemporary immigrants to Prince Edward Island, noting their stories and listening to their voices as they seek to settle in, and settle down, on the island: a useful supplement to the considerable, up-to-date, numerical data about immigration flows and characteristics which is already available.
2. With its small population, absence of significant urban agglomerations and a ‘white-anglophone-christian-straight’ (WACS) demographic profile, Prince Edward Island starts off at a disadvantage in attracting immigrants who tend to be ethnically diverse, allophone, multi-cultural and mainly urban dwellers.
3. The research *objectives* of this study are mainly six:
(a) to identify why people have *recently* (meaning between 1998 and 2003) come to settle *and* decided (so far) to stay on PEI; (b) flesh out the concept of ‘well being’ and ‘quality of life’ in relation to PEI; (c) serve as a follow-up to the 1999 Provincial Population Strategy; (d) provide a more informed understanding of why people come and stay, thus confronting widely held beliefs as to why people ‘from away’ come to ‘the island’, while providing knowledge with which to devise suitable schemes and strategies for immigrant attraction and retention; (e) suggest insights as to why so many newcomers to PEI don’t settle here and move elsewhere; and (f) serve as a prototype to similar studies.
4. The research *design* of the study aims to elicit information about the ‘pull factors’ for recent inward migration to the province. These include economic, educational, socio-cultural, environmental and health related issues. Immigrants targeted for the study include non-Canadians, Canadians moving in from other provinces and territories as well as returning islanders.
5. Immigrants constitute a *fluid, mobile category*. In fact, just over 11% of respondents claim to be “actively planning to leave PEI”; others reveal a willingness to consider moving to other destinations if strategically warranted.
6. There is *no database* of immigrants to PEI; and so no population from which a representative sample can be drawn. This ‘settler study’ is therefore indicative, rather than representative.
7. From an approximate 4,500 immigrants to PEI between 1998 and 2003, 320 (just over 7.1%) completed a 25-question survey questionnaire (via hard copy, internet or face-to-face interview) between October 11 and December 24, 2005. 310 (96.8%) responded in English; 10 in French.

8. The survey respondents consist of 179 females (55.9%) and 141 males (44.1%). 64.7% of these are university graduates. 99.4% claim to be able to speak and understand English; 25.6% claim to be able to speak and understand French. Almost half the respondents (48.1%) live in Charlottetown or its immediate suburbs. 65.3% live in the island's 2 cities and 7 towns.
9. The survey respondents were born in 46 different countries; and have spent the bulk of their lives in 41 different countries. Only 18 (5.6%) were born in countries with largely coloured ('non-white') populations; and even less – 12 (3.1%) - spent most of their lives in such countries.
10. Eighty-eight respondents are non-Canadians by birth; 167 are Canadians born in other provinces and territories; 65 are islanders. For non-Canadians, the USA is the most cited country of birth (22 respondents); followed by the United Kingdom (18 respondents). For other Canadians, Ontario is the province where the largest number of respondents had been born (41 respondents) and spent most of their lives (75 respondents).
11. Only 95 of the respondents (30%) moved to PEI alone. In all, the 320 survey respondents claimed to have been accompanied or followed by 557 other migrants to the province (a ratio of 1: 1.74).
12. Forty-six respondents (14.4%) consider themselves to be members of *visible minorities* – these include blacks, but also Francophones and Latin Americans.
13. Sixty-three respondents (19.7%) did *not* decide to come specifically to settle on PEI.
14. Respondents appreciate best the attractive quality of life that living on PEI provides as the main reason for moving to the island. Being close to family, or to one's roots, is another key consideration. Availability, promise or prospects for employment or business follows, along with affordable housing or farm land, sedate tempo, rural-urban balance, lure of ocean and beaches, and relatively mild winters. Only 5 responses (1.6%) can be classified as being primarily negative.
15. Business-class immigrants are most optimistic in their assessment for coming to settle on PEI; while skilled worker class immigrants are the least optimistic. The most glowing assessment is that by returned islanders in relation to the presence of relatives and friends on the island. Canadian non-islanders are least keen about the island's health care system. Males are more appreciative of employment availability; females happier with the rural charm of the island. The youngest age-cohort (20-29 year olds) is most critical of what PEI has to offer.
16. When *sharing their stories about moving to PEI*, respondents cite hassle-free security, lower crime, slower tempo, shorter distances and commuting times,

- ‘small town’ atmosphere, lovely summers and affordable housing as the main ‘pull factors’; while big city life, with its dirt, noise, crime and stress, is the key ‘push factor’ enticing people to move to PEI.
17. Those *actively planning to leave* the island are mainly non-Canadians; the alleged close-mindedness of islanders and their guarded attitude to ‘CFAs’ are the main reasons cited by those planning to leave. Low wages, high taxes, bridge tolls, job seasonality and inability to specialize at work are other factors cited as inducers to pack up and leave. Those keenest to stay on PEI are – not surprisingly – the returned islanders.
 18. *Opinions about staying on PEI are more positive than opinions about coming to PEI.* While the attractive quality of life remains top of the list, the availability of decent and attractive jobs now becomes a more crucial consideration for actually *staying* on the island. These are followed in importance by the charm of the place, the safe and welcoming neighbourhoods, affordable housing and existence of close family and/or friends. The overall assessment of family class immigrants is much improved since arrival to PEI: they are especially pleased with living on PEI, and are least happy with lack of access. In contrast, the overall assessment of business class immigrants has waned since arrival. Returned islanders, realistically, report the smallest difference between their assessments for coming to and for staying on the island. Males remain more appreciative of employment availability; females remain happier with the rural charm of the island. The youngest age-cohort (20-29 year olds) remains most critical of what PEI has to offer, but all age cohorts improve their assessments of PEI since arrival.
 19. When *sharing their stories about staying on PEI*, respondents cite the quality of the natural environment and the importance of getting involved in local activities – be it work, church, culture or business related; but highlight the difficulty of ‘fitting in’ and (conversely) the relative ease of making friends with other immigrants rather than with islanders. Housing and real estate is generally more affordable, but taxes are claimed to be higher and wages lower than elsewhere in Canada.
 20. Respondents identify various *obstacles towards attracting newcomers to PEI.* The most frequently cited is economic: the absence of good, challenging, careerist, specialized, well-paying and preferably non-seasonal employment opportunities. Next is the perceived social conservatism, exclusivity and clannishness of the host society, which also impacts on employment options for CFAs. These are followed by concerns about health (nature and quality of general and specialized health care, plus a shortage of medical personnel); the choice, cost, frequency and reliability of transportation, particularly public transit and air travel to/from PEI; and the limited range of cultural, sport, shopping and other activities and services.
 21. The solid homogeneity and non-multiculturalism, informal communication channels and robust kin and friendship network provide a strong sense of identity

and resilience to the island society, which is very welcoming to visitors and tourists. At the same time, this same society is very difficult to penetrate by those who ‘come from away’ and stay longer than the visitors and tourists do. Can these CFAs – actually “islanders by choice” - ever *belong*? Those not used to this cultural fabric are exasperated (to say the least) by the ‘Who’s your Daddy?’ approach. *Can a close and cohesive society avoid being a closed society?* Being ‘from here’ versus being ‘from away’ emerges as an important criterion of social division on PEI. This is especially difficult for non-Canadian, non-‘WACS’, immigrants; and especially so in rural PEI.

22. Breaking into PEI society, however, is not impossible: various respondents narrate personal episodes of some success. These usually include the involvement of one of four kinds of brokers: (a) *community broker* (like a neighbour, Welcome Wagon, Newcomers Club, PEI-ANC’s Host Program, or the island relatives of one’s spouse); (b) a local *church*, (c) an ‘*alternative*’ *forum* (like the arts community or the Farmers’ Market) and (d) an *employer* in the private or public sector (such as UPEI, Holland College, Diagnostic Chemicals, Biovectra, Department of Veterans Affairs, RCMP). These tend to be contexts where newcomers play a more significant role, are active or involved in greater numbers, and meet locals in non-threatening environments.
23. The ‘*last words*’ of *respondents* to the survey questionnaire include various positive feelings about the place (great quality of life, safety, affordable housing, tranquillity) – 49 respondents; specific recommendations for improvement – 26 respondents; the challenges of PEI as a closed society and being branded and treated as a ‘CFA’ in that context – 26 respondents; and various negative feelings that include high taxes, high energy bills, insufficient cultural diversity and conservative politics – 9 respondents.
24. *Recommendations* for action to improve the settlement experience on PEI include: strengthening the Welcome Wagon program; developing a customized PEI ‘Survival’ Handbook; facilitating ‘buddy’, ‘good neighbour’, ‘host’ or ‘business angel’ initiatives to broker entry into the host society; extending the PEI Association of Newcomers to Canada’s support programs to incoming settlers who may *not* be refugees. Settlers themselves should be involved in initiatives meant to facilitate their integration into PEI society.

Should PEI develop appropriate employment strategies for would-be immigrants, and effectively address the more subtle issue of social exclusion, it could become an unbeatable choice settlement destination.
