

# Disconnected

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A population decline that began across Northwestern Ontario in the early 1990s will likely continue unless rural residents have ways to better connect with urban centres, particularly for educational and training services, warns a Lakehead University economist.

In a report for the Northern Policy Institute, Prof. Bakhtiar Moazzami said better transportation services and less isolation has helped residents in Northeastern Ontario access urban services with relative ease.

In the Northeast, he said, 60 per cent of residents live close to a city and commute there for work or to attend school.

The result has been a more stable population that is better educated, said Moazzami.

Northwestern Ontario's population, including Thunder Bay and Kenora, fell to just over 224,000 in 2011 from nearly 241,000 in 1991.

Not surprisingly, most of the decline has occurred in rural areas.

Moazzami said NWO residents, particularly those in the 20-34 age bracket, have been leaving the area the most for employment and education pursuits.

In 2006, a high of 1,400 people in that age group left the region, although the number dropped to about 300 just four years later.

Much of the population decline can be attributed to the forestry crash, but in general, said Moazzami, economic conditions have been poor.

In recent years, he said, more

## *Rural population decline linked to lack of access to urban centres*

than 15,000 immigrants have come to the Northwest, only to leave a short time later because they haven't been able to find permanent jobs.

Exceptions have occurred in the health and retail sectors, where employment prospects have been a bit better, he said.

If the present population decline continues, employers in rebounding industries like forestry will increasingly rely on having to bring in skilled and educated workers from other parts of the country, said Moazzami. Those workers may not establish a long-term connection to the Northwest.

"So the economic benefit from those workers doesn't remain in the region," Moazzami said.

He added: "The major complaint we hear from employers is they can't find enough qualified people."

By 2030, 80 per cent of jobs will require some form of education that is higher than a high-school diploma, Moazzami noted.

**TEN GOOD FRIDAY  
EASTER SUNDAY  
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