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Does Northern Ontario need more people?

By: Charles Cirtwill

The demographic shift is upon us, and has been for a while. Our overall population is falling and our total population is aging. Indigenous population is on the rise but, even there, we see early indications that as economic and social improvements occur population growth slows.

So, do we need more people? It depends on your point of view.

There are multiple schools of thought about the ongoing demographic shift.



Charles Cirtwill, President & CEO, Northern Policy Institute.

Some think it is a good thing. That a smaller population will ease human pressure on our ecosystem and will benefit future generations of Northern Ontarians; allowing a better balance between humanity and the natural environment.

Others see it as our best chance in generations to finally fully engage those who have been trapped in unhealthy social and economic situations for far too long.

Another group sees it as a doorway to "Canada 2.0," an opportunity to bring in a massive influx of new Canadians. Still others see a chance to again give families the pride of place in society that they once had, before the baby boom made making babies less of a priority.

Your view on whether we need more people also depends on where you live in the North.

In the last decade or so some areas have actually grown in population.


The districts of Manitoulin, Kenora, Parry Sound, Greater Sudbury and Nipissing have all seen measurable growth in the last ten years. Much of this growth is likely due to urbanization and Indigenous population expansion (or in some cases the urbanization of the Indigenous population). But, for those communities, it is growth nonetheless.

Population growth, however, does not necessarily translate into greater community sustainability.

That depends to a large extent on something called the dependency ratio. This is the number of people who are willing and able to work versus the number of people who need to be supported by those people.



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You can't just have population growth, you have to have population growth in the working ages and larger growth in the working ages than in the non-working ages. This is exactly the opposite of what we and most other developed and, indeed, developing countries are experiencing right now.

Most successful or sustainable economies have dependency ratios somewhere close to the .5 to .75 range. They are close to having two workers for every one dependent.

Economies that are unsustainable, or in decline, tend to be the inverse: having a ratio of 1 to 1.5 or greater, approximately two dependents (or more) for every one worker.

According to recent projections completed for Northern Policy Institute, by 2041 two of our "growth" districts, Parry Sound and Manitoulin will exceed a dependency ratio of one. So they will be growing, and aging, into unsustainability.

We have done similar projections for all of Ontario and for every Northern district. At present our dependency ratios are all in the sweet spot around two workers for one dependent. Ontario over the next 30 years will go from a dependency ratio of around .5 to around .7, still sustainable. Just to match that trajectory, most of our eleven districts will need some population growth. That means greater immigration and birth rates now, so that we have a larger, younger, population down the road. We will still have to enhance the skills and social inclusion of those already here, but that simply isn't enough to address the problem, even if we had a 100 per cent success rate.

Notice I said just to match the provincial decline we will need more people. In Thunder Bay, to slow our decline to the provincial trend, we need approximately 1,000 new working age people a year for the next 15 years. Algoma needs nearly 700 a year. Cochrane and Greater Sudbury need close to 500 a year, Timiskaming around 250 or so, every year for 15 years. If we wanted to keep our current worker to dependent ratios we would need, in some cases, upwards of three to four times the level of immigration and new births than we need just to slow our descent.

Those births have to start next year, and continue for the next 30. So really immigration is our primary short-term response. Here is an idea. The province of Prince Edward Island, with a population of 125,000 or so, is allowed to nominate for expedited entry 400 immigrants a year. In a simple per-capita formula, that means Northern Ontario, with roughly 800,000 people, should be able to nominate 2,500. Right now, we can nominate exactly 0. The province of Ontario and the federal government should partner to immediately assign at least 2500 immigrants annually for expedited entry to our region. It is a simple, achievable and necessary change. Let's get it done.

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