



# Learning From One Another

Labour Markets in Northern Ontario







**Future Skills Centre** Centre des **Compétences futures**

The Future Skills Centre – Centre des Compétences futures (FSC-CCF) is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to preparing Canadians for employment success. We believe Canadians should feel confident about the skills they have to succeed in a changing workforce. As a pan-Canadian community, we are collaborating to rigorously identify, test, measure, and share innovative approaches to assessing and developing the skills Canadians need to thrive in the days and years ahead.

The Future Skills Centre was founded by a consortium whose members are Toronto Metropolitan University, Blueprint, and The Conference Board of Canada.

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# Highlights

- The economy in Northern Ontario has recovered from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and is expected to grow by 20 per cent over the next 20 years. As a result, employment is expected to increase in Northern Ontario by 5 per cent, with greatest gains in the manufacturing, non-commercial services, and commercial services sectors.
- The main challenge for the labour market in Northern Ontario is a shortage of labour. In 2023, Northeastern and Northwestern Ontario had some of the highest vacancy rates in the country.
- Declining participation rates in the labour market, the aging population, and out-migration from the region all contribute to a shortage of labour. Young adults are the largest demographic leaving the region.
- To maintain an adequate ratio of dependents to workers and meet the demand for labour, it is projected that Northern Ontario would need to retain its current population and attract 8,100 new people every year for the next 20 years.
- Over the last five years, Northern Ontario has seen an influx in immigration due to efforts to attract skilled workers. Between 2016 and 2021, Northern Ontario saw a 49 per cent increase in immigrants obtaining permanent residency.
- Continuing to attract skilled immigrants and supporting retention will be key to meeting the demands of the labour market. Challenges to retention include the availability of affordable housing, inadequate public transportation, limited settlement services and cultural and religious infrastructure, and discrimination and intolerance.
- At the same time, post-secondary institutes in Northern Ontario need support to offer programming in occupations that are in demand in the labour market. This may reduce the number of young adults leaving the region to pursue a post-secondary education.
- Closing disparities in education and labour force participation among Indigenous people remains a priority in the region.
- While the existing mental health and addictions crisis in Northern Ontario has an important social impact in the region, it also impacts the labour market. More resources are needed to support individuals coping with mental health challenges and addictions and their re-entry into the workforce.



# Challenges to maintaining growth

The economy in Northern Ontario has remained strong despite the COVID-19 pandemic. New projects in housing, mining, and Ontario's Critical Mineral strategy will support the growth of the region's economy.

However, a shrinking labour market due to an aging population, out-migration, and disparities in labour market outcomes among Indigenous people in the region will continue to limit the capacity of the labour force to meet the demand for labour in the region. And the existing housing crisis in Northern Ontario makes attracting skilled labour to the region more difficult.

This primer provides an overview of Northern Ontario's labour market conditions, including labour recruitment and retention challenges. It is part of a multi-year collaborative research project which explores labour markets in Nunavut, Northern Ontario, and Yukon. (See "Learning from one another project.")

Our labour market analysis highlights which economic sectors are growing or changing and provides insight into the availability and readiness of the resident workforce to take on employment opportunities in the region. It also helps inform which supports and education are needed to maximize employment for the population living in the region.

For an in-depth look at the data, including additional charts and tables, download the associated [data file](#).



## Learning from one another project

Learning From One Another: A Comparative Analysis of Labour Market Needs and Corresponding Skills in Northern Ontario, Yukon, and Nunavut is a multi-year collaborative research project led by The Conference Board of Canada. This project, undertaken for Canada's Future Skills Centre, drew in various Indigenous, government, and post-secondary partners from Northern Ontario, Yukon, and Nunavut. It features a labour market analysis and economic forecast for each region from 2024 to 2045, as well as descriptions of the in-demand skills and key challenges to workforce and skills development in these Northern regions. This is complemented by an analysis and showcase of training and skills development initiatives across the regions.

See our other [Learning From One Another](#) publications for our in-depth analysis.

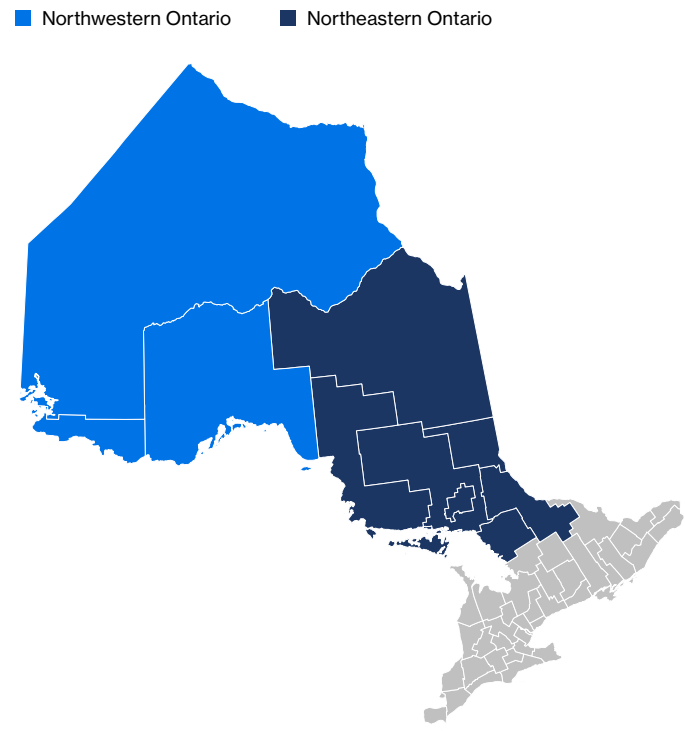
# Northern Ontario's population and labour force

Northern Ontario is a sparsely populated region with a population density of less than one person per square kilometre.<sup>1</sup> In 2021, almost 800,000 people lived in Northern Ontario.<sup>2</sup> The region is broken up into two economic regions, Northeastern Ontario and Northwestern Ontario. (See Exhibit 1.) Northeastern Ontario includes the census divisions of Algoma, Cochrane, Manitoulin, Nipissing, Parry Sound, Greater Sudbury, Sudbury, and Timiskaming. Northwestern Ontario includes the census divisions of Kenora, Rainy River, and Thunder Bay.<sup>3</sup>

Northeastern Ontario has a much larger population than Northwestern Ontario. In 2021, 71 per cent of the population in Northern Ontario lived in Northeastern Ontario compared with 29 per cent in Northwestern Ontario. In 2021, about 557,000 people lived in Northeastern Ontario while 230,000 people lived in Northwestern Ontario.<sup>4</sup>

The communities in Northern Ontario range between remote fly-in communities and larger population centres. However, across Northern Ontario, the majority of the population is concentrated in an urban setting. (See Appendix A for the definition of urban and rural areas in Northern Ontario.) In 2021, 65 per cent of the population in Northern Ontario lived in an urban area while 35 per cent lived in a rural area.<sup>5</sup> Major urban centres in Northern Ontario include Elliot Lake, Greater Sudbury, North Bay, Timmins, Sault Ste. Marie, Kenora, and Thunder Bay. These cities serve as economic hubs. At the same time, 35 per cent of the population in Northern Ontario live in rural areas. This rural population includes just over 100 Indian reserves and settlements.<sup>6</sup>

**Exhibit 1**  
Northeastern and Northwestern Ontario



Note: Map retrieved from mapchart.net.  
Sources: Statistics Canada; Government of Ontario; The Conference Board of Canada.

1 Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, *North at Home*.  
 2 Statistics Canada, *Census Profile, 2021 Census of Population*.  
 3 Northern Ontario was defined using the geographical boundaries defined by Statistics Canada and the Government of Ontario. However, this definition of Northern Ontario differs from that of the Federal Economic Development Agency for Northern Ontario, which also includes Muskoka in its definition of Northern Ontario.  
 4 Statistics Canada, *Census Profile, 2021 Census of Population*.  
 5 See Chart 14 in the [data download](#).  
 6 Statistics Canada, *GeoSuite*.

## An aging population

Northern Ontario's population is aging faster than Ontario's population as a whole. According to projections from the Northern Policy Institute, by 2036 almost 30 per cent of the population in Northern Ontario will be age 65 and older compared with about 24 per cent in Ontario.<sup>7</sup> In 2021, 22.4 per cent of the population in Northern Ontario was 65 years of age and older compared with 18.5 per cent in Ontario. Looking across the region, Northeastern Ontario has a higher proportion of seniors than Northwestern Ontario.<sup>8</sup> Rural regions in Northern Ontario also have a larger aging demographic compared with urban areas in Northern Ontario.<sup>9</sup>

The aging population in Northern Ontario is driven by low fertility rates and increasing life expectancy.<sup>10</sup> Over the last 10 years, there have been more deaths than births each year in Northeastern Ontario—a trend that has been observed in Northwestern Ontario over the last five years.<sup>11</sup> In the past, the fertility rate in Northern Ontario has been slightly higher than the provincial average. However, research suggests that it is primarily the rural and Indigenous populations in Northern Ontario that are having more children.<sup>12</sup>

Out-migration among young adults is also contributing to the aging population in Northern Ontario. Historical data have shown that the largest demographic leaving the region is young adults ages 15 to 34.<sup>13</sup> In fact, there have been more young adults leaving the region than all other age groups combined. Based on a survey of people who left Northeastern Ontario, better economic and educational opportunities were the top reasons why people left the region.<sup>14</sup>

## Growth in the region is falling behind the province of Ontario

Northern Ontario is the slowest-growing region in Ontario.<sup>15</sup> Between 2016 and 2021, the population in Northern Ontario increased by 1.2 per cent compared with 5.8 per cent in Ontario.<sup>16</sup> Looking across the region, Northeastern Ontario had a larger increase in population—a 1.6 per cent increase over the five-year period compared with only a 0.3 per cent increase in the population in Northwestern Ontario. And projections by the Government of Ontario show that growth in the region is expected to fall behind the rest of the province. Between 2022 and 2046, Northern Ontario is projected to grow by 14.6 per cent. In comparison, Central Ontario is projected to grow by 48.1 per cent, Eastern Ontario by 41.7 per cent, and Southwestern Ontario by 40.9 per cent. Growth will be larger in Northeastern Ontario at 16.7 per cent compared with 9.7 per cent in Northwestern Ontario.<sup>17</sup>

Interprovincial out-migration and the natural increase are contributing to losses in the population in Northern Ontario. (See Chart 1.) Each year between 2014 and 2023, more people left Northern Ontario for another province or territory in Canada than people moved to the region. And each year there were also more deaths than births in the region. At the same time, intraprovincial migration and international immigration to Northern Ontario are playing a key role in sustaining and growing the population, with the most significant growth in the region occurring after 2021.

7 Northern Policy Institute, "Is Northern Ontario's Population Aging, or Is It Just Getting Less Young?"

8 See Table 5 in the [data download](#).

9 See Table 6 in the [data download](#).

10 Moazzami, *It's What You Know (and Where You Can Go)*.

11 Statistics Canada, Annual Demographic Estimates, Economic Regions."

12 Moazzami, *It's What You Know (and Where You Can Go)*.

13 Northern Policy Institute, "Is Northern Ontario's Population Aging, or Is It Just Getting Less Young?"

14 Karabeyoğlu, *Exit Signs, Northeastern Ontario, and Out-Migration*.

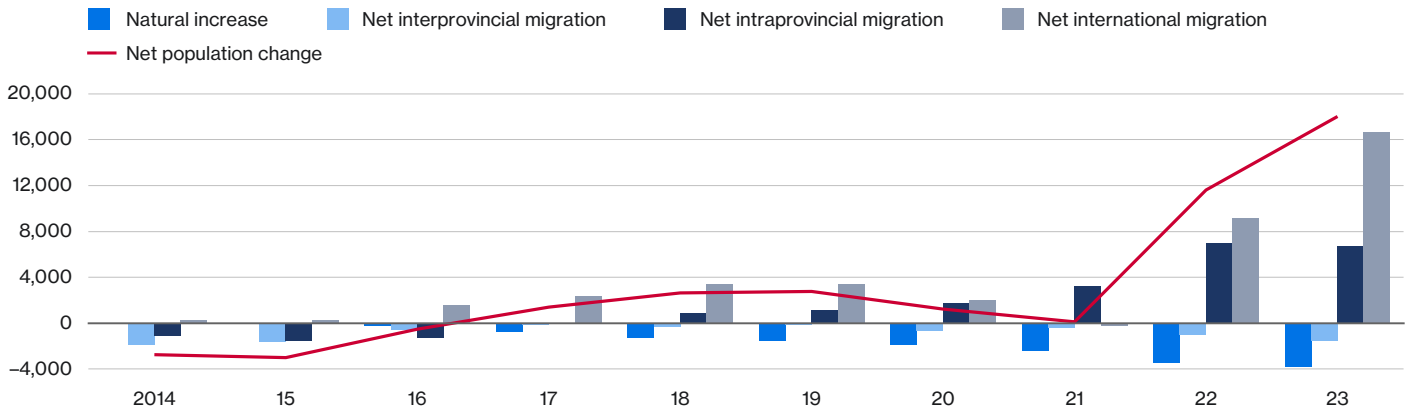
15 Statistics Canada, Census Profile, 2021 Census of Population.

16 See Chart 15 in the [data download](#).

17 Government of Ontario, "Ontario Population Projections Update."

**Chart 1**

Intraprovincial migration and international immigration to Northern Ontario are playing a key role in sustaining and growing the population (net number of people)



Sources: Statistics Canada, Annual Demographic Estimates; The Conference Board of Canada.

Northern Ontario has seen an influx of residents of Ontario moving to the region. Statistics Canada reports that between 2016 and 2021 more people have moved from Southern Ontario to Northern Ontario than the reverse.<sup>18</sup> However, Northeastern Ontario has seen a greater influx of people moving to the region from elsewhere in the province compared with Northwestern Ontario. (See Chart 2.) Some of this intraprovincial migration may be tied to the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition toward remote work. For residents of Northern Ontario who previously left for employment opportunities in Southern Ontario, remote work arrangements may have provided the opportunity to return to the region. Improving high-speed Internet access in the region may increase inter and intraprovincial migration to Northern Ontario tied to remote work. Currently, many households in communities in Northern Ontario have limited access to high-speed Internet—especially in smaller and more remote communities.<sup>19</sup>

The majority of growth in the population in Northern Ontario is tied to international immigration. Both Northeastern and Northwestern have seen an influx of international immigrants, with the greatest gains being in Northeastern Ontario. (See Chart 2.)

Programs such as the Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot and the Ontario Immigrant Nominee Program offer opportunities for foreign workers and students to expedite the process of obtaining permanent residency while creating a pool of skilled workers for businesses to recruit from. Almost every year between 2014 and 2023, the populations in Northeastern and Northwestern have had a net increase in immigration. But the greatest gains have occurred in more recent years. Between 2016 and 2021, Northern Ontario saw a 49 per cent increase in immigrants obtaining permanent residency compared with the 2011–15 period. The growth in immigration in Northern Ontario was almost double that of the province of Ontario, which saw a 27 per cent increase in immigrants over the same period.<sup>20</sup> However, there still remains a smaller proportion of immigrants in Northern Ontario compared with the province as a whole. In 2021, 5.7 per cent of the population in Northern Ontario identified as an immigrant compared with 30.0 per cent in Ontario. Rates were comparable in Northeastern Ontario at 5.4 per cent and Northwestern Ontario at 6.5 per cent.<sup>21</sup>

18 Kelly, "Resilient Northern Business Owners Are Bouncing Back Better Than Rest of Ontario."

19 Taschner, "Northern Ont. Communities Still Lack High-Speed Internet Access, Report Finds."

20 Statistics Canada, Census Profile, 2021 Census of Population.

21 Ibid.



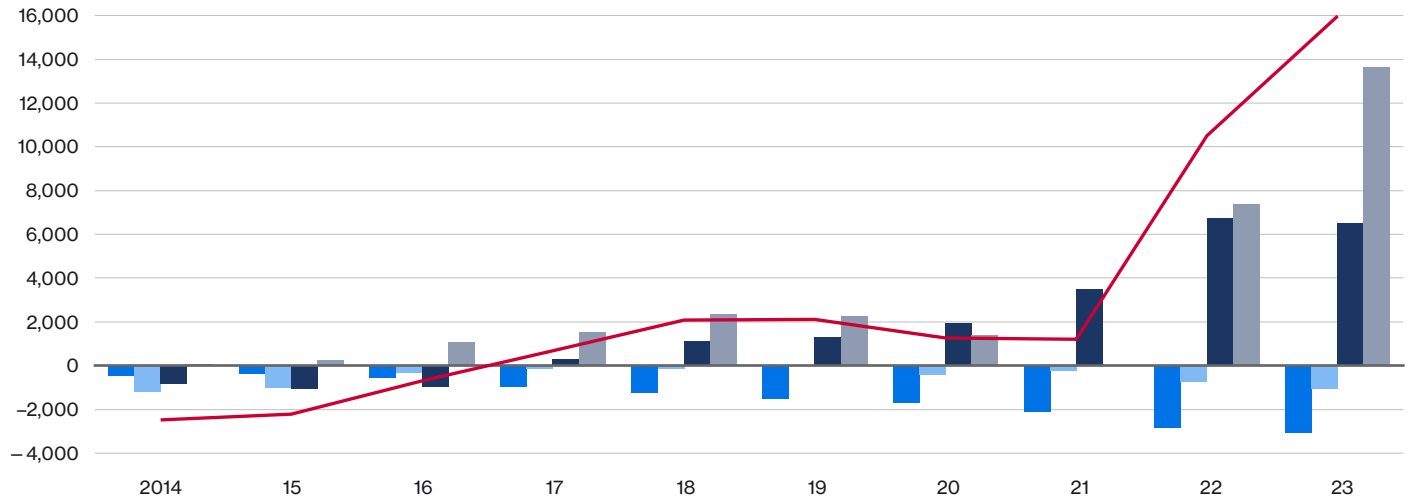
**Chart 2**

Northeastern Ontario has seen larger increases in intraprovincial migration and interational immigration than Northwestern Ontario

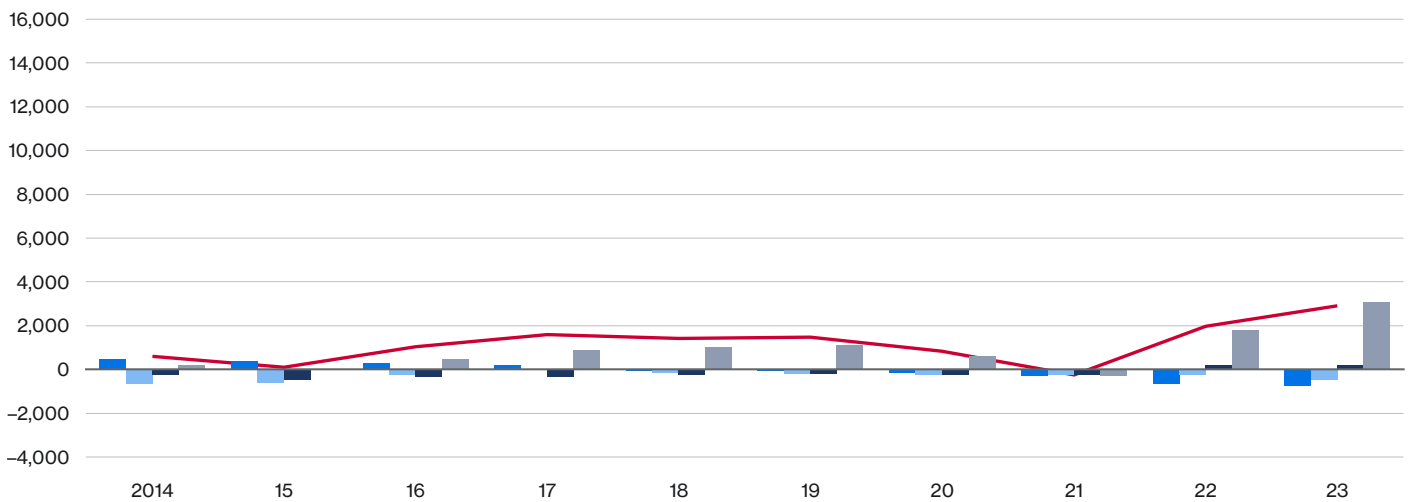
(net number of people)

- Natural increase
- Net intraprovincial migration
- Net population change
- Net interprovincial migration
- Net international migration

**Northeastern Ontario**



**Northwestern Ontario**



Sources: Statistics Canada, Annual Demographic Estimates; The Conference Board of Canada.

## There are a large number of First Nation communities in the region

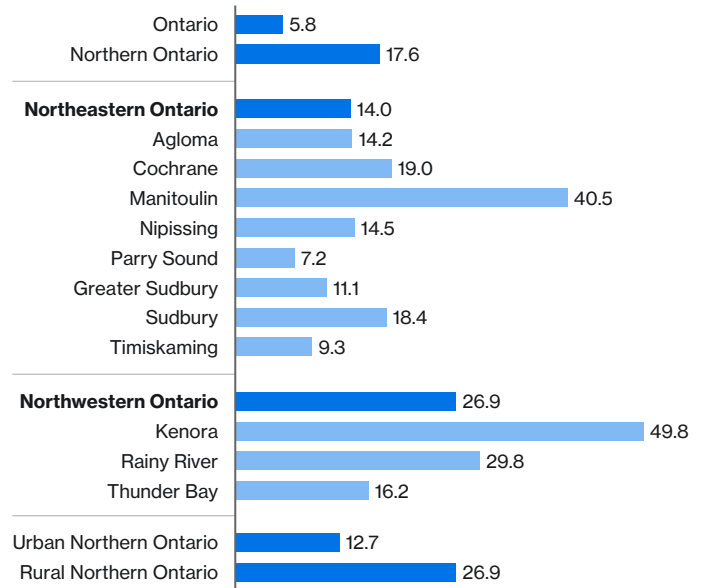
There is a large Indigenous population in Northern Ontario, which includes First Nation, Inuit, and Métis peoples. In 2021, 5.8 per cent of Ontario’s population identified as Indigenous compared with 17.6 per cent in Northern Ontario. Looking across the region, there is a larger representation of Indigenous people living in Northwestern Ontario at 26.9 per cent compared with Northeastern Ontario at 14.0 per cent; however, representation varies across the census divisions. (See Chart 3.) According to the Government of Ontario, within Northern Ontario, there are 106 First Nation communities, and Registered or status First Nations are the largest Indigenous identity group in the region.<sup>22</sup> In 2021, 77.1 per cent of all Indigenous people in Northwestern Ontario and 48.3 per cent of all Indigenous people in Northeastern Ontario identified as a Registered or status First Nation.<sup>23</sup>

Indigenous people in Northern Ontario are also more likely to be living in a rural area than the non-Indigenous population. In 2021, 53.8 per cent of the Indigenous population in Northern Ontario were living in rural areas compared with 31.5 per cent of the non-Indigenous population.<sup>24</sup> And many of the Indigenous people from rural areas are living in remote communities. More than three-quarters of First Nation communities in Ontario are located in Northern Ontario, with about one in four of these communities being remote and accessible year-round only by air or by ice road in the winter.<sup>25</sup>

Data also suggest that the Indigenous population in Northern Ontario is growing. Between 2016 and 2021, approximately 8,000 more people in Northern Ontario identified as Indigenous. Higher fertility rates and declining mortality rates in the Indigenous population in the region can explain some of this growth.<sup>26</sup>

**Chart 3**

There is a large Indigenous population in Northern Ontario which differs across the census divisions in the region, 2021 (per cent Indigenous)



Note: Urban and rural areas were defined using Statistics Canada’s statistical area classification types. See the Methodology for more information. Sources: Statistics Canada, Census Profile, 2021 Census; The Conference Board of Canada.

The lack of affordable housing in urban centres may also contribute to a return to community for First Nation people. Like the rest of Canada, the Indigenous population in Northern Ontario is younger than the non-Indigenous population.<sup>27</sup> However, changes in reporting on Indigenous identity from one iteration of the census to the next may also be a contributing factor.<sup>28</sup>

22 Government of Ontario, “Communities”; and the number of First Nation communities in Northern Ontario is dependent on the definition of the geographic boundaries of the region—this estimate is consistent with Ontario’s geographic definition of Northern Ontario.

23 Statistics Canada, Census Profile, 2021 Census of Population.

24 Calculations based on statistical area classification type of 2021 Census. See “Defining urban and rural areas in Northern Ontario.”

25 Government of Ontario, *In the Spirit of Reconciliation*.

26 Moazzami, *It’s What You Know (and Where You Can Go)*.

27 Ibid.

28 White, “Some 8,000 More People in Northern Ontario Say They Are Indigenous.”



## There is a large Francophone population in Northeastern Ontario

There is also a large Francophone population living in Northern Ontario, centred in Northeastern Ontario. In 2021, 18.5 per cent of the population in Northeastern Ontario reported French as their first official language compared with 2.1 per cent of the population in Northwestern Ontario.<sup>29</sup> However, the Francophone population in Northeastern Ontario has declined since 2016 when 20.8 per cent of the population reported French as their first official language.<sup>30</sup> To counter these declines and ensure that there will be an adequate supply of workers who can offer services in French in the labour market, the region will need to attract working-age Francophones to Northern Ontario.<sup>31</sup>

## The region’s economic outlook falls behind that for the province of Ontario

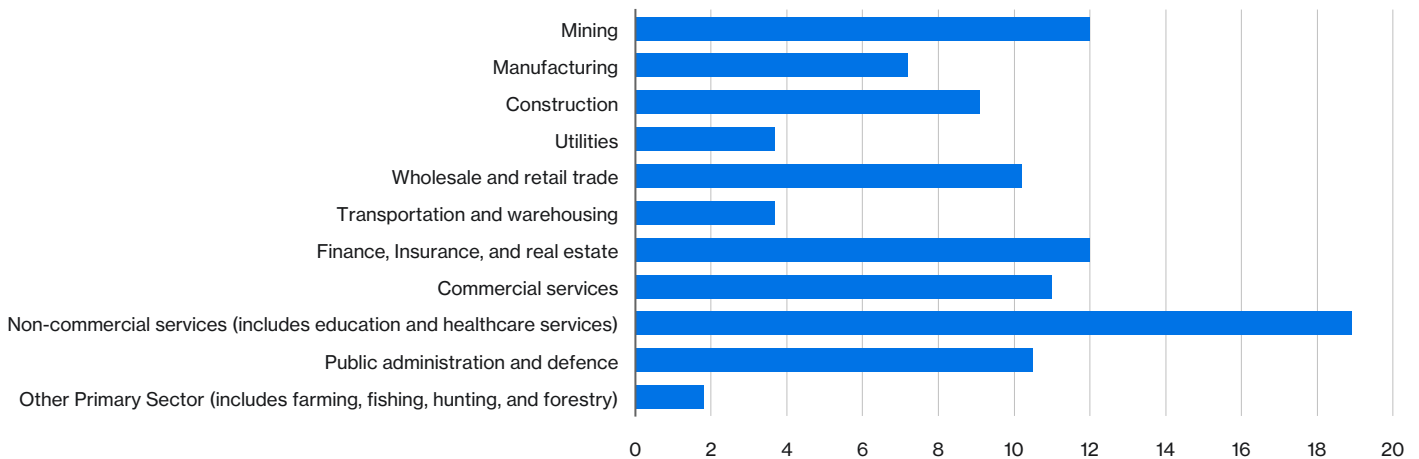
The economy in Northern Ontario has recovered from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Conference Board of Canada economic models, the Northern Ontario economy saw a 7.1 per cent decrease in real gross domestic product (GDP) during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 but saw an immediate bounce-back in real GDP growth the following year, and eventual recovery to pre-pandemic levels in 2023.

Important sectors in the economy in Northern Ontario in 2022 were non-commercial services, mining, and the finance, insurance, and real estate sector. In 2022, these three sectors accounted for 43 per cent of real GDP in the region, with non-commercial services accounting for almost 20 per cent of real GDP. (See Chart 4.)

### Chart 4

Non-commercial services and mining were the largest contributors to real gross domestic product in Northern Ontario in 2022

(per cent contribution of sector to real GDP in 2022, 2012 \$)



Note: Commercial services includes professional, scientific, and technical services; business, building, and other support services; information and cultural services; arts, entertainment, and recreation; accomodation and food services; other services. Non-commercial services includes healthcare, social assistance, and hospitals and educational services. Other primary sector includes agriculture; forestry; fishing and hunting.

Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

29 Statistics Canada, Census Profile, 2021 Census of Population.

30 Statistics Canada, Census Profile, 2016 Census.

31 Northern Policy Institute, "Taking Aim."

According to Conference Board of Canada projections, between 2024 and 2045, real GDP in Northern Ontario is expected to increase by 20 per cent. In year-over-year terms, the economy is expected to see an average growth rate of 1 per cent, which is lower than the 2 per cent projected growth rate for the province as a whole.<sup>32</sup> Over this period, the growth in real GDP in Northern Ontario will be driven by expansion in non-commercial services, the manufacturing sector, and the finance, insurance, and real estate sector. However, smaller sectors, including the utilities sector and other primary sectors, are expected to have substantial growth, too. At the same time, according to these projections, employment in Northern Ontario is expected to increase by 5 per cent, with employment growth greatest in the manufacturing, non-commercial services, and commercial services sectors.

Northern Ontario will play a key role in Ontario's Critical Mineral Strategy with the expansion of exploration, mining, and processing of critical minerals in the region.<sup>33</sup> Several mines are expected to come online in the region in the next five years. And if the proposed Ring of Fire project is approved, the growth in GDP tied to mining will be much greater. The project involves the mining of a large deposit of critical minerals approximately 500 kilometres northeast of Thunder Bay.<sup>34</sup> Consultations with Indigenous groups impacted by the project are ongoing.<sup>35</sup>

## Healthcare, retail, and public administration are the largest employers in the region

The largest industries of employment in Northern Ontario are healthcare and social assistance, retail trade, and public administration. (See Chart 5.) Compared with the province, a larger proportion of the workforce in Northern Ontario was employed in the mining and quarrying and oil and gas sectors, healthcare and social assistance, and public

administration in 2021. Mining is also a top employer in the census subdivisions of Cochrane, Greater Sudbury, and Timiskaming in Northern Ontario.<sup>36</sup>

There are a few differences in the sectors of employment between Northeastern and Northwestern Ontario. In 2021, there was a higher proportion of people employed in manufacturing in Northeastern Ontario compared with Northwestern Ontario. And a higher proportion of the population was employed in public administration in Northwestern Ontario. (See Chart 5.) There are also small differences in industries of employment for people living in rural versus urban areas of Northern Ontario.<sup>37</sup> For example, people living in rural areas were more likely to be employed in agriculture, forestry and fishing, construction, and manufacturing and were less likely to be employed in professional, scientific, and technical services compared with workers living in urban areas.

### Employment in healthcare and public administration is growing in the region

Between 2016 and 2021, the industries that had the highest number of new jobs were healthcare and social assistance, public administration, mining and quarrying, and oil and gas extraction.<sup>38</sup> Looking at industry broken into more detail, the largest increases in employment were seen in ambulatory healthcare services, hospitals, federal government and public administration, and Aboriginal public administration.<sup>39</sup> However, there were also several smaller industries that had significant growth, including textile product mills, beverage and tobacco product manufacturing, motion picture and sound-recording industries, and couriers and messengers.

Over the same period, employment declined in several industries in Northern Ontario. Most notably there were significant declines in employment in the arts, entertainment, and recreation sector, and the accommodation and food services sector—a finding that is tied to the restrictions in place during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>40</sup>

32 The Conference Board of Canada, *Driving Growth by Following Opportunities: Provincial Outlook to 2045*.

33 Government of Ontario, *Ontario's Critical Minerals Strategy*.

34 Government of Ontario, "Ontario's Ring of Fire."

35 Karim, "Ring of Fire Development Stalled Due to Lack of Dialogue With First Nations."

36 See Table 7 in the [data download](#).

37 See Chart 16 in the [data download](#).

38 See Table 8 in the [data download](#).

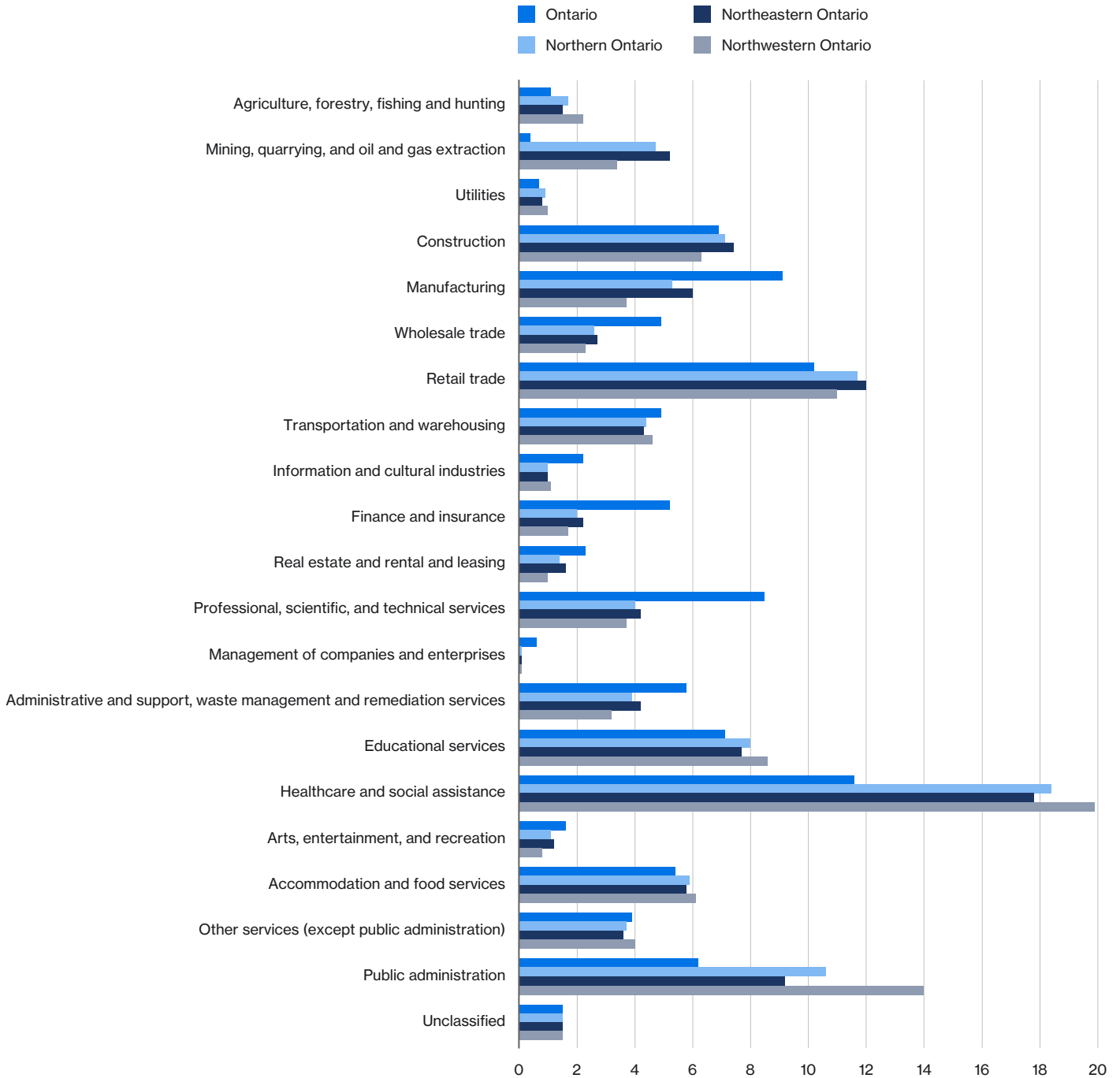
39 See Table 9 in the [data download](#).

40 See Table 8 in the [data download](#).



**Chart 5**

The largest industries of employment in Northern Ontario were healthcare and social assistance, retail trade, and public administration, 2021  
 (per cent employed in the industry)



Note: Industry is presented at the 2-digit level of the North American Industry Classification System.  
 Sources: Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs; The Conference Board of Canada.

# Challenges in the labour market

Several challenges will need to be addressed to meet the demand for labour in the region. These include attracting and retaining skilled workers in the region, reducing disparities in labour market outcomes for immigrants, Indigenous people, and women, and improving access to education for residents in the region.

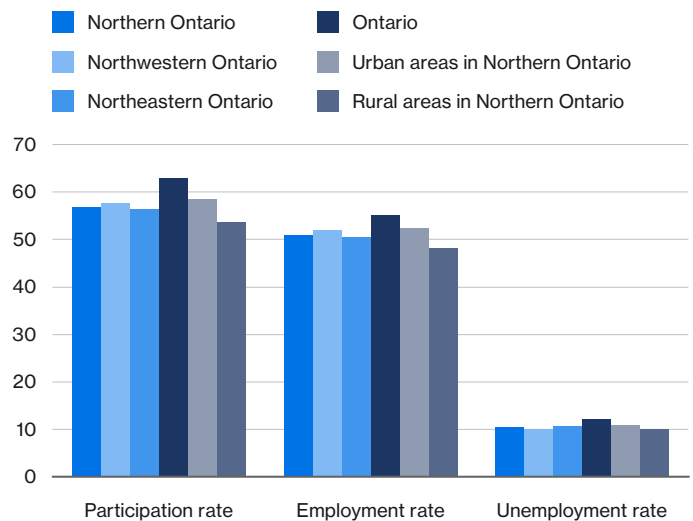
## There is a shortage of labour in the region

One of the main challenges for the labour market in Northern Ontario is a shortage of labour. In 2023, Northeastern and Northwestern Ontario had some of the highest job vacancy rates in the country.<sup>41</sup> The annual average vacancy rate was 4.7 per cent in Northeastern Ontario and 5.3 per cent in Northwestern Ontario compared with 3.8 per cent in Ontario as a whole. During that period occupations in sales and services had the highest number of vacant positions in Northeastern and Northwestern Ontario.<sup>42</sup> Other occupations with large numbers of vacancies include health occupations, trades occupations, and occupations in education; law; and social, community, and government services.

While the unemployment rate in Northern Ontario is lower than in the province of Ontario, a smaller proportion of the population in the region is participating in the labour force. (See Chart 6.) In 2021, the participation rate in Northern Ontario was 56.8 per cent compared with 62.8 per cent in the province. While the participation rates are comparable between Northeastern and Northwestern Ontario, rural areas in Northern Ontario have a lower proportion of the population participating in the labour market compared with more urban areas in the region.

**Chart 6**

Northern Ontario has lower rates of participation in the labour force than the whole of Ontario, 2021 (per cent)



Note: Urban and rural areas were defined using Statistics Canada’s statistical area classification types. See the Methodology for more information. Includes population age 15 and older.

Source: Statistics Canada, Census Profile, 2021 Census; The Conference Board of Canada.

Similar to Canada and Ontario as a whole, there were declines in the proportion of the population participating in the labour market in Northern Ontario between 2016 and 2021. The aging population is a major contributor to the declining participation rate in the labour market in the region. However, the decline in participation rate is larger in Northeastern and Northwestern Ontario compared with the province—with the decline being largest in Northwestern Ontario. While declines in labour force participation rates occurred in every census division in Northern Ontario over this five-year period, Kenora, Sudbury, and Parry Sound had the largest declines.<sup>43</sup>

41 See Table 10 in the [data download](#).

42 See Table 11 in the [data download](#).

43 See Table 12 in the [data download](#).



The aging population and declining participation rates in the labour market, out-migration, and the slow growth of the population all contribute to a shortage of labour in the region. And the pandemic accelerated this shortage.<sup>44</sup> An aging population contributes to higher pension and healthcare costs and a smaller tax base to support these costs.<sup>45</sup> A report from the Northern Policy Institute projects that, to maintain an adequate ratio of dependents to workers, Northern Ontario would need to retain its current population and attract 8,100 new people every year for the next 20 years.<sup>46</sup> Attracting skilled workers to the region from elsewhere either through inter and intraprovincial migration or international immigration will remain important to sustain the labour market in the region.

### Housing limitations impact the ability to attract skilled workers

Housing is a major impediment to attracting skilled labour to Northern Ontario. While the cost of housing in the region is often more affordable than in large metropolitan cities in Southern Ontario, there is a limited supply of housing.<sup>47</sup> The construction of new housing in the region is limited mainly due to high construction costs. At the same time, the existing housing stock is older than other regions in the province. Many houses need repairs—especially in smaller communities where the cost of maintenance and repairs are highest.<sup>48</sup> There is also a limited supply of affordable rental housing due to the influx of people moving to the region to attend post-secondary institutes or take employment opportunities in major mining projects. As immigration continues to accelerate in the region and several mining projects come online, it will be necessary to improve access to affordable and suitable housing to attract skilled labour to the region.

Recently, the provincial government has set targets for building new housing in many communities across the province. However, the cost of building and shortage of workers in the construction industry are important obstacles in meeting those targets in Northern Ontario.<sup>49</sup> The government, communities, and mining companies will also need to work together to ensure there is adequate housing for the contract and fly-in fly-out workers employed at developing mining projects in the region. The start of these projects will place increased pressure on already taxed housing markets in many communities.

## Closing disparities in labour market participation

Improving participation rates among all working-age adults in the region will be necessary to support a healthy worker-to-dependent ratio and meet labour demands. This will require reducing disparities in labour market outcomes for immigrants, Indigenous people, and women in the region.

### Recognition of international education is a challenge for employment for newcomers

As discussed, over the last five years, the majority of growth in the population in Northern Ontario has been driven by international immigration. Supporting the attraction and settlement of new Canadians to the region can play a key role in filling labour shortages. Between 1980 and 2021, just under half of all immigrants admitted to Northern Ontario were economic immigrants.<sup>50</sup>

44 Northern Ontario Business Staff, “Labour Shortages and Supply Chain Issues Hinder Ontario’s Rebound”; Romaniuk, “Sudbury Businesses Battling Labour Shortages During Pandemic”; and Taschner, “North Bay Business Survey Finds Labour Shortage, Community Safety Issues.”

45 Northern Policy Institute, “Is Northern Ontario’s Population Aging, or Is It Just Getting Less Young?”

46 Cirtwill, Hagar, and Rizzuto, *Come North*.

47 Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, “North at Home”; and Taschner, “North Bay Business Survey Finds Labour Shortage, Community Safety Issues.”

48 Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, “North at Home.”

49 Kaufman, “Thunder Bay Beats 2023 Housing Target.”

50 Statistics Canada, Census Profile, 2021 Census of Population.

The Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot, which started in 2019, is a program designed to attract skilled foreign workers to smaller communities in Canada by providing a clear path to achieving permanent residency.<sup>51</sup> There are five communities in Northern Ontario that participate in the program: North Bay, Sudbury, Timmins, Sault Ste. Marie, and Thunder Bay. The success of this program in these communities has led community leaders to call for the program to be extended as it has helped in addressing skilled labour shortages.<sup>52</sup> However, some communities are finding that those occupations with the highest vacancy rates are not always the ones being filled through the program.<sup>53</sup> For many immigrants, a common barrier is having their international education, training, and work experience recognized.<sup>54</sup> This can result in immigrants working in positions in which they are over-qualified. Ontario has recently introduced legislation that bans certain regulated professions from requiring Canadian work experience—the first association to do so was Professional Engineers Ontario.<sup>55</sup> This move will expedite the process of finding employment for internationally trained applicants who wish to work in their field of study.

**Retention of immigrants in the region is declining**

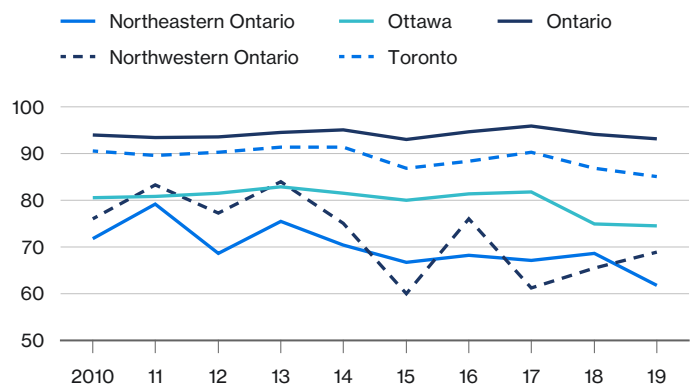
Data also suggest that the retention of immigrants coming to Northern Ontario is low compared with other economic regions in the province. Chart 7 displays the one-year retention rates of immigrants coming into select economic regions in Ontario.<sup>56</sup> Retention after one year is higher in Ottawa and Toronto compared with Northeastern and Northwestern Ontario. Looking at the one-year retention rates for immigrants coming into Northeastern and Northwestern Ontario between 2010 and 2019, the data show that the one-year

retention rates have been dropping in Northeastern and Northwestern Ontario over the last 10 years; however, Northwestern Ontario generally has a higher retention of immigrants.

There are several barriers to retention of immigrants in Canada. Research from the Northern Policy Institute and Public Policy Forum suggests that factors that contribute to immigrants leaving Northern Ontario include the availability of affordable housing, inadequate public transportation, limited settlement services and cultural and religious infrastructure, discrimination and intolerance, and limited access to meaningful employment for the individual and their spouse.<sup>57</sup>

**Chart 7**

One-year retention rates of immigrant taxfilers are lower in Northeastern and Northwestern Ontario than other economic regions in the province (per cent)



Note: The one-year retention rate represents the percentage of immigrant taxfilers continuing their residence in the geographical area (province or economic region as designated) of intended destination one year after admission. This does not take into account immigrants migrating in from another destination. Sources: Statistics Canada, Table 43-10-0024-01; The Conference Board of Canada.

51 Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, “Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot.”

52 Northern Ontario Business Staff, “Immigration Pilot Expands in Sudbury”; Arangio, “Northern Communities Want a Permanent Foreign Worker Immigration Program, Sources Say”; Thunder Bay Chamber of Commerce, “Make the Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot Permanent.”

53 Lamothe, “Immigration Report Shows Skills Don’t Always Match Job Market.”

54 Public Policy Forum, “Beyond the Big City.”

55 Government of Ontario, “Ontario Removing Unfair Work Barriers for Skilled Newcomers.”

56 One-year retention rate represents the percentage of immigrant taxfilers continuing their residence in the geographical area of intended destination one year after admission. This does not take into account immigrants migrating in from another destination.

57 Labelle, *Magnetic North*; and Esses and Carter, *Beyond the Big City*.

There is also a trend where immigrants destined to live in smaller centres in Canada either do not land in these regions or leave after settlement for larger cities.<sup>58</sup> Data for select communities in Northern Ontario suggest that immigrants landing in small population centres who decide to leave their intended location are more likely to remain in Ontario but relocate to a larger city instead of relocating to another small population centre in the province or leaving the province altogether.<sup>59</sup>

### Indigenous people in the region have higher unemployment rates but the gap is closing

In Northern Ontario there are disparities in labour market outcomes among Indigenous people, with disparities greatest in Northwestern Ontario. (See Table 1.) In 2021 in Northwestern Ontario, Indigenous people had lower participation rates and higher unemployment rates compared with the non-Indigenous populations in the region. In Northeastern Ontario, while Indigenous people were more likely to be participating in the labour market than the non-Indigenous population, unemployment rates were higher among the Indigenous populations living in the region.

It is worth noting, however, that the gaps in unemployment between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations in Northeastern and Northwestern Ontario have been closing.

Across both regions, between 2016 and 2021, the unemployment rate among the Indigenous population has decreased while the unemployment rate has increased in the non-Indigenous populations. (See Chart 8.)

Barriers to participation in the workforce exist for Indigenous people in Canada. Among the Indigenous population in Thunder Bay, these include low literacy and education levels, a lack of cultural awareness among co-workers, racism and discrimination, navigating the interview process, and not having a driver's licence.<sup>60</sup> Another factor contributing to the employment gaps seen in Indigenous populations in Northern Ontario is the health of the Indigenous workforce. Research has shown that compared with non-Indigenous populations in Canada, Indigenous populations have higher rates of diabetes, obesity, mental health issues, and other health conditions.<sup>61</sup> These health disparities are a result of the impact of colonization, which has resulted in socioeconomic inequalities among Indigenous people in Canada. For example, Indigenous populations in Canada are more likely to face food insecurity, crowded housing, and lower levels of educational attainment. These factors all play a role in the health of Indigenous people and affect their participation in the labour force.<sup>62</sup>

**Table 1**

Indigenous people have worse labour market outcomes than non-Indigenous people in Northern Ontario, 2021 (per cent)

	Northern Ontario		Northeastern Ontario		Northwestern Ontario	
	Non-Indigenous	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous	Indigenous
Participation rate	57.0	55.8	56.3	57.7	59.0	53.4
Employment rate	51.3	48.4	50.5	49.8	53.5	46.4
Unemployment rate	10.0	13.4	10.3	13.6	9.3	13.0

Note: Includes the population age 15 and older.

Sources: Statistics Canada, Census Profile, 2016 and 2021 Census; The Conference Board of Canada.

58 Esses and Carter, *Beyond the Big City*.

59 Bozheva and Esses, "IMBD Analysis of Immigrant Settlement Geography and Retention Rates for CMAs and CAs in Ontario, 2002–2016"; and see Table 13 in the [data download](#).

60 McGraw, "The Adventures of Employment and Training."

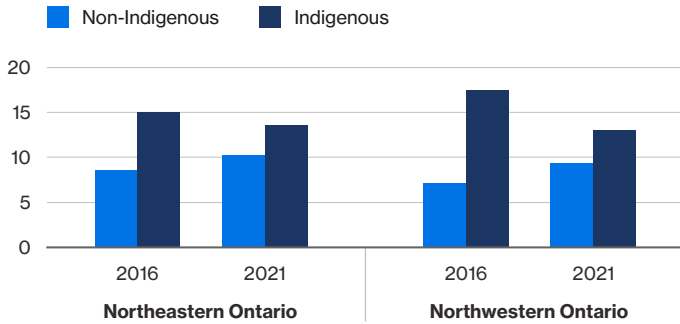
61 Wilk, Maltby, and Cooke, "Residential Schools and the Effects on Indigenous Health and Well-Being in Canada."

62 Durand-Moreau, Lafontaine, and Ward, "Work and Health Challenges of Indigenous People in Canada."



**Chart 8**

The gaps in unemployment between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in the region are closing (unemployment rate)



Note: Includes the population age 15 and over.  
Sources: Statistics Canada, Census Profile, 2016 and 2021 Census; The Conference Board of Canada.

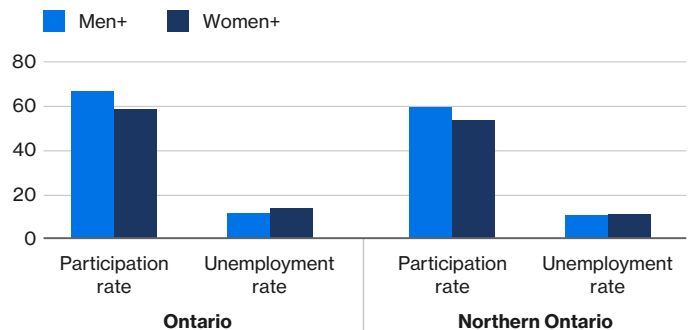
Many Indigenous people in the labour force in Northern Ontario also participate in the traditional economy. In Ontario, about one-third of First Nations people living off-reserve in 2017 participated in hunting, fishing, or trapping, gathered wild plants, or made carvings, drawings, jewellery, or other kinds of artwork.<sup>63</sup> However, for many Indigenous employees there can be challenges in managing the demands of employment in the wage economy with land-based activities. In fact, the standard work schedules associated with employment in the wage economy may prevent Indigenous people from participating in cultural and land-based activities. Conference Board research has shown that the inability to participate in land-based activities as a result of work schedules is an important contributor to employee turnover for Indigenous people.<sup>64</sup>

**Women with children have lower participation rates**

Closing the gap in labour market outcomes between men and women in Northern Ontario can help fill labour shortages in the region. In 2021, women in Northern Ontario had lower participation rates than men. This is a trend seen in Ontario as a whole. (See Chart 9.) One notable barrier to women’s employment in Northern Ontario is the availability of childcare.<sup>65</sup> In Ontario in 2022, there was still a substantial gap in participation rates between males and females for employees with children.<sup>66</sup> At the same time, the gender gap in labour force participation was almost closed between men and women without children. Research shows that women in Canada are more likely to be employed part-time, with childcare responsibilities as one of the top reasons why they chose this type of employment.<sup>67</sup> While the \$10 a day childcare introduced by the Ontario government aimed to address some of the issues surrounding childcare affordability, challenges still remain for parents. These include a shortage of early childhood educators and childcare spaces.<sup>68</sup>

**Chart 9**

Women had lower rates of participation in the labour market than men in Northern Ontario, 2021 (per cent)



Note: Gender refers to an individual’s personal and social identity as a man, woman, or non-binary person (a person who is not exclusively a man or a woman). Men+ includes men (and/or boys) as well as some non-binary persons while women+ includes women (and/or girls), as well as some non-binary persons. Includes population age 15 and over.  
Sources: Statistics Canada, Census Profile, 2021 Census; The Conference Board of Canada.

63 Statistics Canada, “Labour Market Experiences of First Nations People Living Off Reserve.”

64 Fiser, MacLaine, and Lalonde, *Working Together*.

65 Gillis, “Dire Shortages of Childcare Workers Could Shut Sudbury Daycares.”

66 Financial Accountability Office of Ontario, “Women in Ontario’s Labour Market.”

67 Moyser, “Women and Paid Work.”

68 Khan, “Ontario Needs to Spend Millions for \$10 a Day Child-Care Plan to Work in Toronto”; Financial Accountability Office of Ontario, “Women in Ontario’s Labour Market.”

### Women are under-represented in the trades

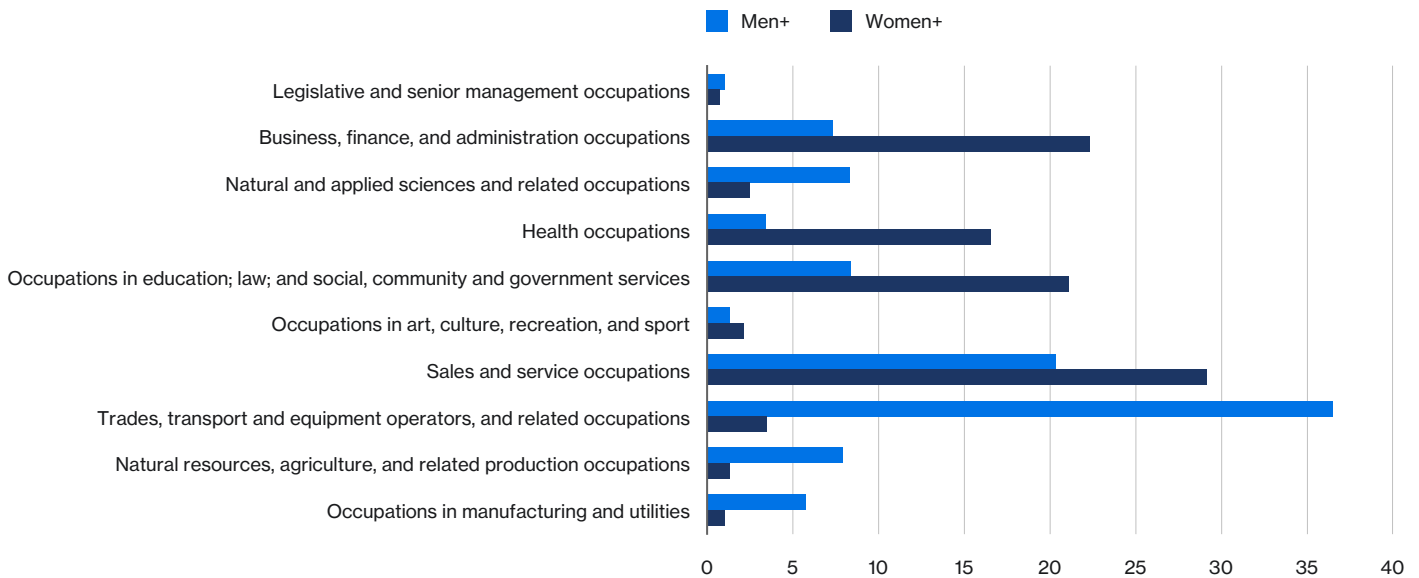
Women and men also work in different occupations in Northern Ontario. In 2021, the top occupations for women were sales and service occupations; occupations in business, finance and administration; and occupations in education, law, and social, community and government services. For men, the top occupations were trades; occupations in sales and service; and occupations in education, law, and social, community and government services. (See Chart 10.)

Similar to other regions in Canada, women are an untapped workforce in the skilled trades in Northern Ontario. In 2021 in Northern Ontario, there were roughly 10 times more men than women employed in trades occupations and there were six times more men than women employed in natural resource occupations.

This under-representation of women in the skilled trades and natural resource occupations is consistent across Northeastern and Northwestern Ontario.<sup>69</sup> Barriers to greater participation in the trades and natural resource sectors include inflexible workplace practices, lack of women in senior leadership and as mentors, and lack of opportunities for career advancement.<sup>70</sup> Additionally, some women report that they still face instances of sexism on job sites, which are detrimental to attracting and retaining women in the trades.<sup>71</sup> However, the gender gap in skilled trades in the region has improved since 2016, where there were over 16 times more men than women employed in the trades and nearly 10 times more men than women working in natural resource occupations.<sup>72</sup>

#### Chart 10

Women are an untapped workforce in the trades, and transport and equipment operator occupations in Northern Ontario, 2021  
(per cent employed in the occupation)



Note: Occupation is presented at the 1-digit level of the National Occupational Classification System. Gender refers to an individual's personal and social identity as a man, woman, or non-binary person (a person who is not exclusively a man or a woman). Men+ includes men (and/or boys) as well as some non-binary persons while women+ includes women (and/or girls), as well as some non-binary persons. Includes the employed population age 15 and over.  
Sources: Statistics Canada, Census Profile, 2021 Census; The Conference Board of Canada.

69 Statistics Canada, Census Profile, 2021 Census of Population.  
70 Mining Industry 'Human Resources Council, *Strengthening Mining's Talent Alloy*.  
71 Swadden, "It Still Feels Unwelcoming."  
72 Statistics Canada, Census Profile, 2016 Census.

### Mental health of the population is impacting labour market outcomes

The existing mental health and addictions crisis in Northern Ontario not only has an important social impact but also impacts the labour market in the region.

Evidence of the mental health crisis in Northern Ontario includes self-reported high rates of depression among residents, increasing opioid-related emergency visits and deaths across the region, and large rates of homelessness.<sup>73</sup> In fact, the homeless population in Thunder Bay and the Cochrane census division are more than two times greater than in Ottawa, Hamilton, and Waterloo.<sup>74</sup> The challenges of the pandemic have also exacerbated this mental health crisis.<sup>75</sup> The effect of this crisis is even more pronounced in Indigenous communities in Northern Ontario. Data show that hospitalization rates for mental health and addiction issues with band members are six times higher than the provincial rates.<sup>76</sup> There have been calls by chiefs of First Nations in Northern Ontario to declare a public emergency and social crisis within communities in the region.<sup>77</sup> Disparities in infrastructure, services, and social determinants of health all contribute to the mental health crisis currently ongoing in Northern Ontario. This includes the shortage of medical professionals, inaccessibility of care, and a lack of affordable housing in the region.<sup>78</sup>

In a report commissioned by the Mental Health Commission of Canada produced in 2011, the economic impact of mental illness and addiction on the Canadian economy was estimated to be around \$50 billion annually, with the cost projected to increase in the future.<sup>79</sup> This includes costs for healthcare utilization, social services, but also the costs associated with poor labour market outcomes.

Mental illness contributes not only to unemployment but on the job it can contribute to underemployment, absenteeism, and lower productivity.<sup>80</sup> Investments are needed to improve supports for people in Northern Ontario struggling with mental health and addictions. Supporting recovery can facilitate the transition back into the labour market.

### Access to post-secondary education and attainment in the region falls short of the province

Contributing to the shortage of labour in Northern Ontario is a skills gap, with fewer people in the region having a secondary and post-secondary degree compared with the province as a whole. At the same time, the reduced availability of post-secondary program offerings in the region limits students' options for staying in the region during their post-secondary education.

#### Skills gaps exist in the region

Compared with Ontario, there is a higher proportion of the population in Northern Ontario without a formal education while at the same time a lower proportion of the population has a post-secondary education. (See Chart 11.) In 2021, 20 per cent of the population 15 years and older in Northern Ontario had no formal education compared with 15 per cent the province. And only 51 per cent of the population in Northern Ontario completed a post-secondary education compared with 58 per cent in Ontario. In addition, the population in Northern Ontario with a post-secondary education is more likely to have completed a trades or apprenticeship certificate or a college education and less likely to have completed a university certificate or diploma compared with the population in Ontario.

73 Parsons, *More Than Just a Number*; and NOSM Reports, "The Epidemic Within the Pandemic."

74 Parsons, *More Than Just a Number*.

75 Mental Health Commission of Canada, *Mental Health and Substance Use During COVID-19*.

76 Law, "Staggering Mental Health, Addiction Stats Push Northern First Nations to Call for Emergency Declaration."

77 Ibid.

78 NOSM Reports, "The Epidemic Within the Pandemic"; and Parsons, *More Than Just a Number*.

79 Smetanin and others, *The Life and Economic Impact of Major Mental Illnesses in Canada*.

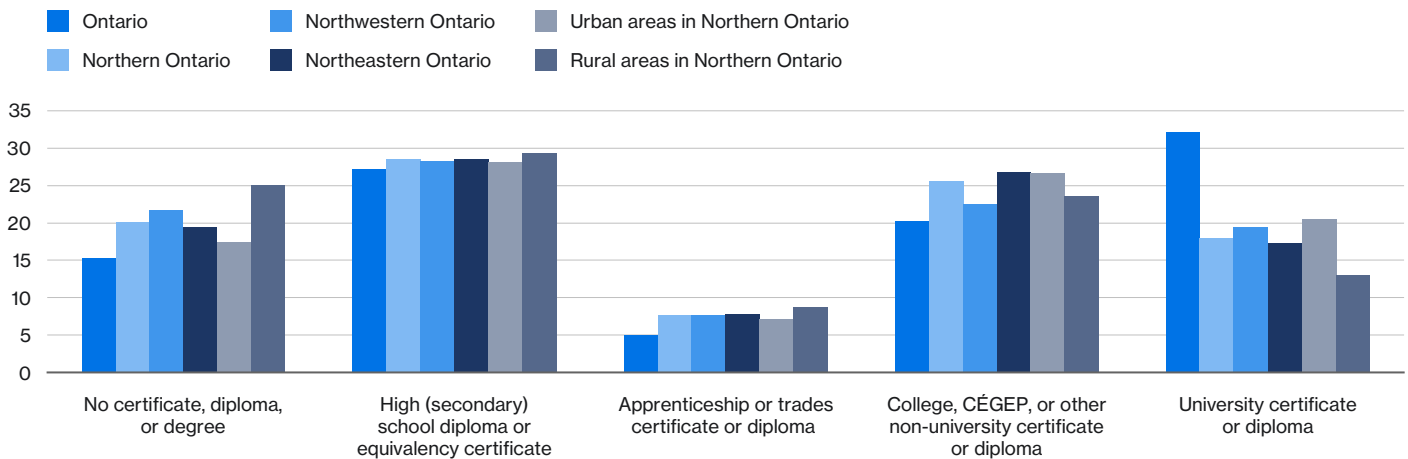
80 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Sick on the Job?*



**Chart 11**

Post-secondary attainment is lower in Northern Ontario than Ontario, with the greatest gaps observed in university degrees, 2021

(per cent with category as highest level of attainment)



CÉGEP = collège d’enseignement général et professionnel

Note: Urban and rural areas were defined using Statistics Canada’s statistical area classification types. See the Methodology for more information.

Includes population age 15 and older.

Sources: Statistics Canada, Census Profile, 2021 Census; The Conference Board of Canada.

Looking across the region, education attainment was comparable across Northeastern and Northwestern Ontario. But in 2021, a skills gap did exist between the populations living in rural and urban areas in Northern Ontario. The population in rural areas in Northern Ontario were more likely to have no formal education and less likely to have completed post-secondary education than the population living in urban areas, with the gap being largest for university certificates or diplomas.

**High school graduation rates fall below the province’s rates**

High school graduation rates did increase across most school boards in Northern Ontario between 2016 and 2021.<sup>81</sup> However, in many of them, the four-year graduation rate fell below the provincial rate. Looking across the region, Northwestern Ontario school boards reported worse outcomes. In 2021, more school boards in Northwestern Ontario reported graduation rates below the provincial rate than Northeastern Ontario.

**Local access to post-secondary education is limited in the region**

Research has shown that youth from Northern and rural regions of Canada are less likely to pursue post-secondary education than those in Southern urban regions.<sup>82</sup> One main barrier to post-secondary education for Northern and rural students is proximity to institutions.<sup>83</sup> Northern and rural students often have to leave their home communities and relocate to Southern urban areas to pursue their education as program offerings are limited in Northern post-secondary institutions. And among those youth who leave rural areas, some research suggests that only about 25 per cent of them return to their rural community.<sup>84</sup> This out-migration for post-secondary education contributes to the loss of skills and lower levels of post-secondary education seen among the workforce in Northern Ontario. In the future, rural and Northern communities in Northern Ontario may lack the skilled workers needed to take on emerging employment opportunities.

81 See Table 14 in the [data download](#).

82 Zarifa, Hango, and Milian, “Proximity, Prosperity, and Participation.”

83 Ibid.

84 Dupuy, Mayer, and Morissette, “Rural Youth.”

In Ontario, the majority of colleges and universities are located in the province's south. While there are some institutions in urban centres in Northern Ontario, there are few local opportunities. Table 2 shows the number of program completions from different schools in Northern Ontario in 2019. More than 80 per cent of graduates from post-secondary institutions in Northern Ontario were from an institution in Northeastern Ontario. Cambrian College and Canadore College of Applied Arts and Technology had the largest number of graduates.

Students from Northern and rural areas in Canada are also less likely to enter science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM-related) fields, which also relates in part to the availability of programs within these regions.<sup>85</sup> Many of the programs offered at post-secondary institutions in Northern Ontario are in the field of business, humanities, health, arts, social science, and education fields (BHASE) with fewer

programs in STEM-related fields and graduation and professional fields.<sup>86</sup> Across Northern Ontario in 2019, around 75 per cent of program completions were in BHASE-related programs.<sup>87</sup> The programs with the highest completions were business management and health professions and related programs. However, there have been increases in program completions between 2014 and 2019 in some STEM-related fields, including computer and information sciences and support services, and engineering technologies and engineering-related fields.

The number of students graduating from Northern Ontario post-secondary institutions has been increasing. Comparing program completions between 2014 and 2019, there has been a 30 per cent increase in program completions among post-secondary institutions in Northern Ontario.<sup>88</sup> Many post-secondary institutions in Northern Ontario have increased enrolments by accepting an increasing number

**Table 2**

Cambrian College and Canadore College had the largest number of graduates among public post-secondary institutions in Northern Ontario in 2019

	Location	Count	Per cent
Algoma University	Northeastern Ontario	360	2.0
Cambrian College	Northeastern Ontario	3,400	18.8
Canadore College of Applied Arts and Technology	Northeastern Ontario	3,027	16.7
Collège Boréal d'art appliqués et de technologie – Parent Institution	Northeastern Ontario	615	3.4
Laurentian University	Northeastern Ontario	1,932	10.7
Laurentian University – Off-Campus Centres	Northeastern Ontario	387	2.1
Nipissing University	Northeastern Ontario	1,311	7.3
Northern College of Applied Arts and Technology – Parent Institution	Northeastern Ontario	2,289	12.7
Northern Ontario School of Medicine, East Campus	Northeastern Ontario	33	0.2
Sault College of Applied Arts and Technology – Parent Institution	Northeastern Ontario	1,215	6.7
Université de Hearst	Northeastern Ontario	33	0.2
Confederation College of Applied Arts and Technology	Northwestern Ontario	1,515	8.4
Lakehead University	Northwestern Ontario	1,935	10.7
Northern Ontario School of Medicine, West Campus	Northwestern Ontario	27	0.1
<b>Total</b>		<b>18,080</b>	

Note: The data count post-secondary program completions by public post-secondary institution in Northern Ontario in 2019. Sources: Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs; The Conference Board of Canada.

85 Hango and others, "Roots and STEMS?"

86 The Canadian Press, "Northern Ontario Needs More Local Post-Secondary Education."

87 See Table 15 in the [data download](#).

88 Ibid.

of international students.<sup>89</sup> The revenue generated from international students has allowed some colleges that have experienced a provincial freeze in funding to expand program offerings and build new facilities. However, the increase in international students has placed strain on the existing affordable housing crisis in many communities in the region.<sup>90</sup> In response, the federal government placed a limit on international students in 2024 to ease the housing crisis, but this had an impact on several institutions' program offerings. Colleges in Ontario saw the largest drop in allotments for international students.<sup>91</sup> At the same time, incentivizing and facilitating the path to permanent residency for international students provides the opportunity to bring skills to the Northern Ontario labour market—but only if the necessary infrastructure to accommodate skilled labour in the region is available.

As discussed, there is a large amount of out-migration among young adults in Northern Ontario who are leaving the region to pursue post-secondary education. But disparities in education between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people also contribute to the skills gap in the region.

### Disparities in education for Indigenous people

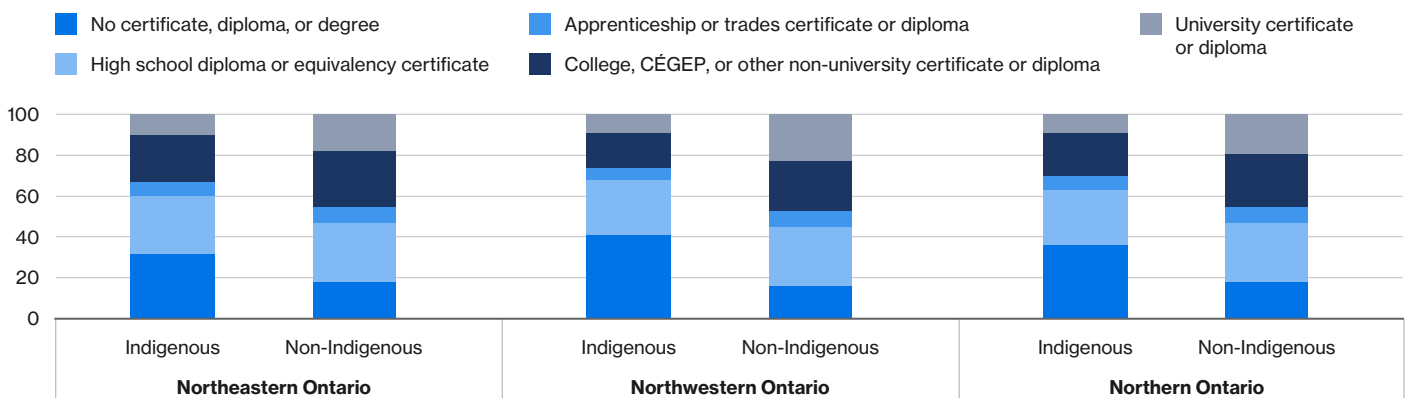
Similar to the rest of Canada, Indigenous populations living in Northern Ontario have lower rates of education than non-Indigenous people in the region. In 2021, 35.6 per cent of the Indigenous population in Northern Ontario did not have a formal education compared with only 17.8 per cent in the non-Indigenous population living there. (See Chart 12.) The data also show that disparities in education for Indigenous peoples are greater in Northwestern Ontario than in Northeastern Ontario.

While there are disparities among Indigenous people across all levels of education in Northern Ontario, the gaps are greatest in the attainment of a university certificate or diploma. In 2021, 19.5 per cent of the non-Indigenous population in Northern Ontario held a university certificate or degree compared with only 9.3 per cent of the Indigenous population in the region.

Access to education in Northern Ontario is a barrier for Indigenous people in the region. There are over 100 First Nations communities in Northern Ontario.

**Chart 12**

Disparities in educational attainment between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations are greatest in Northwestern Ontario, 2021  
(per cent with category as highest level of attainment)



Note: Includes population age 15 and older.  
Sources: Statistics Canada, Census Profile, 2021 Census; The Conference Board of Canada.

89 Friesen, "Ontario Colleges Are Fuelling Unprecedented Growth in International Students."  
90 Ibid.  
91 Crawley, "Ontario Colleges to Face Biggest Hit From Foreign Student Cap."



And historically federally funded on-reserve schools have received less funding than provincially funded public schools.<sup>92</sup> In addition, some First Nation students must leave their communities to attend primary and secondary school. Enhancing the funding of First Nation education would support better access to quality education and help close the skills gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Northern Ontario. The integration of language and culture in schools, improved infrastructure and more qualified teachers, and funding for extracurricular activities were all identified by teachers in Ontario and First Nation youth, parents and family, and Elders as top priorities to improve First Nation primary and secondary education in Ontario.<sup>93</sup>

Northern Ontario has several Indigenous institutes that support post-secondary education of Indigenous people by providing access to education in, or in close proximity to, communities. However, these institutes

are under-funded by the province and the funding they do receive is short-term. As a result, academic programming can not be provided consistently, and programs are often limited.<sup>94</sup>

## Business ownership in Northern Ontario

Self-employment in Northern Ontario is lower than in Ontario as a whole. (See Table 3.) In 2021, 10.1 per cent of the labour market in Northern Ontario was self-employed compared with 14.6 per cent in Ontario. In 2021, business ownership was comparable across Northeastern Ontario at 10.4 per cent and Northwestern Ontario at 9.2 per cent. However, a higher proportion of people living in rural regions of Northern Ontario were self-employed compared with the population living in urban regions.

**Table 3**

Rates of self-employment are lower in Northern Ontario than Ontario as a whole, 2021 (per cent)

	Total population	Men+	Women+	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous
Ontario	14.6	17.5	11.4	9.9	14.6
Northern Ontario	10.1	11.8	8.2	6.2	10.8
Northeastern Ontario	10.4	12.1	8.6	7.2	10.9
Agloma	9.4	10.6	8.0	5.7	9.9
Cochrane	8.7	10.2	7.0	5.7	9.3
Manitoulin	18.2	23.9	12.0	7.7	24.2
Nipissing	11.0	13.1	8.8	9.0	11.3
Parry Sound	18.8	22.0	15.4	9.5	19.6
Greater Sudbury	8.5	9.7	7.3	7.4	8.7
Sudbury	11.1	12.6	9.5	8.3	11.8
Timiskaming	12.1	14.2	9.8	8.8	12.5
Northwestern Ontario	9.2	11.0	7.3	4.8	10.4
Kenora	8.5	10.0	7.0	3.7	11.8
Rainy River	12.8	15.9	9.5	6.3	15.1
Thunder Bay	9.1	10.8	7.1	5.8	9.5
Urban Northern Ontario	9.1				
Rural Northern Ontario	12.0				

Note: Gender refers to an individual's personal and social identity as a man, woman, or non-binary person (a person who is not exclusively a man or a woman). Men + includes men (and/or boys) as well as some non-binary persons while women+ includes women (and/or girls), as well as some non-binary persons. Includes the population in the labour force age 15 and over.

Sources: Statistics Canada, Census Profile, 2021 Census; The Conference Board of Canada.

92 Indigenous Services Canada, "Let's Talk On-Reserve Education."

93 Ibid.

94 Canadian Federation of Students—Ontario, Factsheet: *Indigenous Education*.

Finally, between 2016 and 2021, self-employment grew in the whole of Ontario faster than in Northern Ontario.<sup>95</sup> During that five-year time period, there was a 3 per cent growth in self-employment in the population in Ontario compared with only 1.5 per cent in Northern Ontario. The increase in self-employment is comparable between Northeastern Ontario at 1.4 per cent and Northwestern Ontario at 1.5 per cent.

Northern Ontario has a higher proportion of smaller businesses with under 50 employees compared with Ontario as a whole. In 2021, 36 per cent of businesses in Northern Ontario had between one and 49 employees compared with 29 per cent across the province. However, the proportion of self-employed individuals working on their own at a business without employees is lower in Northern Ontario than in the province itself.<sup>96</sup>

In 2021, the top industries that businesses in Northern Ontario were operating in were real estate, rental and leasing, construction, and retail trade.<sup>97</sup> Almost 40 per cent of businesses in Northern Ontario were operating in one of these industries. Comparing Northern Ontario with the province of Ontario, there is a smaller proportion of profession, scientific, and technical services in Northern Ontario but a higher proportion of businesses in retail trade, accommodation and food services, and healthcare and social assistance.

While there were little differences in the industries that businesses were operating in between Northwestern and Northeastern Ontario, there were notable differences between urban and rural regions of Northern Ontario. In rural areas of Northern Ontario, there were more businesses in several sectors, including agriculture, forestry, fishing, and hunting; the educational sector; and the accommodation and food services sector than in more urban areas.

But in urban areas of Northern Ontario, there was a larger representation of businesses in retail trade; real estate, rental, and leasing; and healthcare compared with more rural areas.

### Challenges ahead for business owners

Independent polling of business owners in Canada by the Canadian Federation of Independent Business in 2022 suggests that 76 per cent plan to leave their business within the next 10 years, with 41 per cent planning an exit between one and five years. The majority of owners (75 per cent) will be leaving their business due to retirement. Retirement of small business owners in Northern Ontario will likely be more pronounced given the aging demographic in the region. This will amount to a large change of assets in the Northern Ontario economy. The poll also found that only about one in 10 business owners in Canada has a formal succession plan, which supports a smooth transition to the next generation of small business owners.<sup>98</sup> Going forward, there will be a need to support succession planning in the region.

There will also be a need to encourage, incentivize, and support the next generation of entrepreneurs in Northern Ontario. In Northern Ontario, 47 per cent of Anglophone and 43 per cent of Francophone youth and young adults surveyed were interested in becoming entrepreneurs. Types of business supports they were interested in accessing include access to capital, evaluating a business plan, mentorship, and access to co-working spaces.<sup>99</sup> Improving Internet infrastructure in Northern Ontario will be essential in supporting businesses looking to access markets outside of their region.

95 See Table 16 in the [data download](#).

96 See Table 17 in the [data download](#).

97 See Table 18 in the [data download](#).

98 Bomal, Cruz, and Pohlmann, *Succession Tsunami*.

99 Ouellet and Lefebvre, *A Reason to Stay*.

Small business owners in Northern Ontario report that the top barrier to both success and growth of their business was attracting and retaining skilled labour.<sup>100</sup> And the pandemic accelerated labour shortages in the region.<sup>101</sup> In some cases, the pandemic resulted in people retiring early while lockdowns and the transition to remote work resulted in people changing jobs. To fill vacant positions, businesses in Northern Ontario are increasing wages and offering more work flexibility and perks to attract workers.<sup>102</sup> Small businesses are also offering more skills-training opportunities to their employees to build the skills they need from within their current workforce as opposed to attracting skills from outside.<sup>103</sup> Skills-training opportunities offer employees a chance to grow and advance their career within a business, which also supports retention.<sup>104</sup> However, local access to skills-training can be limited.<sup>105</sup>

### Indigenous people in the region are less likely to own a businesses

Indigenous people in Northern Ontario have lower rates of self-employment than non-Indigenous people—a trend that is seen in both Northeastern and Northwestern Ontario in 2021. (See Table 3.) In 2021 in Northern Ontario, 6.2 per cent of the Indigenous population was self-employed compared with 10.8 per cent of the non-Indigenous population living in the region. It is worth noting that in Parry Sound and Manitoulin, which have the highest rates of self-employment in Northern Ontario, disparities in entrepreneurship are greatest between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Similar to the total growth of business ownership, the province of Ontario has also seen a larger increase in Indigenous business owners compared with Northern Ontario between 2016 and 2021.<sup>106</sup> Over this period, in Ontario

there was a 2.8 per cent increase in self-employment among Indigenous people. But self-employment among Indigenous people increased only by 1.2 per cent in Northern Ontario, with the growth being 1.1 per cent in Northwestern Ontario and 1.4 per cent in Northeastern Ontario.

Entrepreneurship can provide more flexible work arrangements and support participation in the economy outside of traditional industry. For Indigenous people living in remote communities where employment opportunities are limited, entrepreneurship can strengthen local economies, reduce the number of youth leaving the community for employment opportunities, and provide the opportunity to give back to the community by providing goods or services.<sup>107</sup> The Ontario government's Indigenous Procurement Program continues to support procurement opportunities for Indigenous-owned businesses. Providing tax incentives to industry to support Indigenous procurement would also benefit business and economic development in Indigenous communities. However, important supports for Indigenous entrepreneurs include access to capital, wrap-around business supports, and culturally relevant business advice. The local presence of business supports within remote communities even just a few times a year is also essential.<sup>108</sup>

100 Decima Research, *Quantitative Survey on the State of SMEs in Northern Ontario*.

101 Northern Ontario Business Staff, "Labour Shortages and Supply Chain Issues Hinder Ontario's Rebound"; Romaniuk, "Sudbury Businesses Battling Labour Shortages During Pandemic"; and Taschner, "North Bay Business Survey Finds Labour Shortage, Community Safety Issues."

102 Crawley, "Noticing a Labour Shortage?"

103 Participant interview.

104 Kennedy Insurance Brokers Inc., "Top Recruitment Challenges Facing Northern Ontario Small Businesses in 2019."

105 Participant interview.

106 See Table 16 in the [data download](#).

107 Gresch, Thomspson, and Shaw, *Business in the North*.

108 Ibid.

# Conclusion

The central issue impacting Northern Ontario’s labour market is a shrinking labour pool. Northern Ontario’s population is aging faster than the Canadian population and the out-migration of residents is contributing to a shortage of labour and skills in the region.

In the last five years, migration to Northern Ontario has increased through efforts to attract skilled labour to the region, either internationally or from within Canada. These efforts will remain important. The existing shortage of housing remains a major barrier to attracting new residents to the region, and limited offerings of post-secondary education contribute to the number of young people leaving the region. Important barriers to the settlement of immigrants to the region also need to be addressed, including the recognition of international education, the availability of settlement services, and access to cultural and religious infrastructure. There is also an opportunity for employers to work together to ensure that meaningful employment opportunities are available not only for skilled immigrants but also for family members.

While efforts to improve labour force participation for Indigenous populations in the region are under way, important barriers still need to be addressed—especially among First Nations populations living in remote communities in the region. These include improving access to education and services in community to help prepare people to take on employment opportunities and supporting entrepreneurship to grow the economy and employment opportunities in these remote communities. The legacy of colonial policies and residential school systems along with gaps in wealth, housing, and access to services have contributed to health disparities in Indigenous populations in Northern Ontario, all of which impact labour force participation.

Moving forward, communities, governments, and industry will have to work together to develop innovative strategies that attract and retain labour in Northern Ontario. This includes promoting inclusive communities and work environments. Industry and post-secondary institutions can also work together to offer programs in occupations that are in demand. And increased funding to Indigenous post-secondary institutes in the region can support the offerings of programs within community. However, funding needs to reflect the cost of getting training into the “community”.





## Appendix A

# Methodology

In the project *Learning From One Another: A Comparative Analysis of Labour Market Needs and Corresponding Skill in Northern Ontario, Yukon and Nunavut*, The Conference Board of Canada in partnership with the Future Skills Centre takes a comparative look at the labour markets in Northern Ontario, Yukon, and Nunavut.

Our analysis of factors shaping the labour market in Northern Ontario applied a mixed-methods approach that includes qualitative analysis, cross-sectional data analysis, and historical time series analysis. Specific research activities included:

- a review of academic and grey literature (public policy, industry, etc.) on key labour market issues in the region and Northern economies. The review included documents from academic, public (federal, territorial, and Indigenous governments), and private sector sources.
- a review of data sources, including databases maintained by Statistics Canada and relevant federal and provincial government departments. This includes but is not limited to the following databases:
  - Census, Statistics Canada
  - Annual Demographic Estimates, Statistics Canada
  - Labour Force Survey, Statistics Canada
  - Longitudinal Immigration Database, Statistics Canada
  - Job Vacancy and Wage Survey, Statistics Canada
  - Canadian Employer–Employee Dynamics Database, Statistics Canada
  - Emsi’s Canadian dataset accessed through Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, Government of Ontario

## Defining Northern Ontario

Northern Ontario was defined using the geographical boundaries from Statistics Canada and the Government of Ontario. This definition includes the census divisions of Algoma, Cochrane, Manitoulin, Nipissing, Parry Sound, Greater Sudbury, Sudbury, Timiskaming, Kenora, Rainy River, and Thunder Bay. However, this definition of Northern Ontario differs from the Federal Economic Development Agency for Northern Ontario, which also includes Muskoka in its definition of Northern Ontario.

Northern Ontario was also broken down into Northeastern and Northwestern Ontario using the geographical boundaries defined by Statistics Canada and the Government of Ontario. Northeastern Ontario includes the following census divisions: Algoma, Cochrane, Manitoulin, Nipissing, Parry Sound, Greater Sudbury, Sudbury, and Timiskaming. Northwestern Ontario includes the census divisions of Kenora, Rainy River, and Thunder Bay.

## Defining urban and rural areas in Northern Ontario

Statistics Canada statistical area classification types were used to define urban versus rural areas in Northern Ontario. The index categorizes census subdivisions on a scale from 1 being the most urban to 7 being the most rural. In this research, the following census subdivision types were included in urban areas: census subdivisions within a census metropolitan area; census subdivisions within a census agglomeration with at least one census tract; and census subdivisions within a census agglomeration having no census tracts. Rural areas included the following census subdivision types: census subdivisions outside of census metropolitan area/census agglomeration area having strong metropolitan influence; census subdivisions outside of census metropolitan area/census agglomeration area having moderate metropolitan influence; census subdivisions outside of census metropolitan area/census agglomeration area having weak metropolitan influence; and census subdivisions outside of census metropolitan area/census agglomeration area having no metropolitan influence.

## Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on employment and education estimates in Canada

It is worth noting the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic may have had on estimates of education and employment in the 2021 Census and annual iterations of the Labour Force Survey between 2020 and 2023. This includes the impact of the pandemic on data collection as well as that of the lockdowns on employment and education pursuit and attainment.<sup>1</sup> The pandemic also had an impact on the data collection for the 2021 Census for Indigenous and Northern communities in Canada. The response rate for the 2021 Census for Indigenous and Northern communities was 85.6 per cent, down from 92 per cent in 2016.<sup>2</sup>

1 Statistics Canada, “Guide to the Census of Population, 2021: Appendix 1.4.”

2 Indigenous Services Canada, “An Update on the Socio-Economic Gaps Between Indigenous Peoples and the Non-Indigenous Population in Canada.”

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- Alcia Brink, Program Manager, Embark, Confederation College of Applied Arts and Technology
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Amanda Thompson

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