

## Politics &amp; Policy

# Ottawa moves from historic lows to highs in immigrant admission scores

*Data show Ottawa relied heavily on one immigration program to meet its immigration targets during the pandemic. Has that approach backfired?*



by Samuel Forster

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A worker is separated from a customer by plexiglass at a Richmond, B.C., fish-and-chips store during the pandemic. (Dreamstime)

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A lot can change in four years.

Today, it has never been harder for immigrants with Canadian work experience to obtain permanent residency. In recent months, applicants with as many as 520 points — accrued through attributes such as age, education and work experience — have not been invited to apply.

“We’re seeing historical highs now,” said Claire MacLean, a Toronto-based immigration lawyer. “The [Comprehensive Ranking System] scores have never been as high as they have been for as long as they have been in the history of the program.”

Four years ago, attaining permanent residency had never been easier. In February 2021, Canada granted permanent residency to more than 27,000 individuals. The Comprehensive Ranking System cutoff was a mere 75 points.

“It was a huge shock,” said Vancouver-based immigration lawyer Meika Lalonde, recalling that period. “It was like all the guardrails were off.”

The admission of large numbers of relatively low-skilled immigrants can have negative downstream effects, policy experts say.

“[H]igh concentrations of low-skill immigrants can pose challenges, especially when they are concentrated geographically and when proper integration and support systems are lacking,” Peter Copeland, deputy domestic policy director at the MacDonald-Laurier Institute think-tank, said in an emailed statement.

“With such persistently high immigration numbers annually, it’s difficult to see how Canada could be realistically integrating immigrants at this rate,” he said.

### **‘Pandemic demands’**

During the pandemic, Ottawa dramatically increased the number of people it admitted through the Canadian Experience Class, its immigration program for individuals with prior Canadian work experience.

“There was a very long period during Covid where [Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada] wasn’t finalizing applications for candidates outside of Canada because they couldn’t travel to Canada,” said MacLean. “Later, the rules changed about who could travel. But during that time, no one, even if they had filed a permanent residency application, could come in.”

This meant the government’s immigration targets were under threat.

In 2020, the government had admitted 185,000 permanent residents, falling short of its 341,000-person target. In 2021, Ottawa’s **goal** was to admit more than 400,000 permanent residents.

The aims of these high targets, Copeland says, include addressing labour market shortages and responding to demographic challenges, such as Canada’s ageing population and declining **fertility rate**.

The Canadian Experience Class immigration program provided Ottawa with a way to keep its admission goals on track, as individuals in this program were primarily already living and working in Canada on temporary permits.

“They were looking to target candidates who were already here and meet their numbers for the year,” said MacLean.

A spokesperson for Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada confirmed this point.

The Canadian Experience Class invitation rounds are “intended to be flexible, and the frequency and volumes of rounds are determined in a way that ensures sufficient clients are invited to meet annual admissions goals,” the spokesperson said in an emailed statement.

On Feb. 13, 2021, the government issued 27,000 Canadian Experience Class invitations, plunging the cutoff score to 75 points.

“It happened on a Saturday, which is unusual. We actually woke up to it, and we thought it was a mistake,” MacLean said, referring to the moment the immigration department published its invitation data. “It was crazy.”

In no other draw that year, did the number of invitations exceed 6,000 or the cutoff score fall below 357.

## Shifting standards

Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada explained the drop in a statement to Canadian Affairs.

“Given the size for the February 13, 2021 round, this contributed to a lower minimum CRS score than what has been seen in other rounds. Round sizes and the CRS scores of those who are invited are what dictates the CRS cut-off scores. These are not set arbitrarily by the Department,” the spokesperson said.

Lalonde, who has practiced immigration law for 20 years, says she has never seen a candidate with a 75-point score. She estimates someone with that score would likely be over 45, without an employer-specific work permit or any postsecondary education.

“Food service supervisors were number one on the list for invitations that year,” said MacLean. “Those would be people who historically would have had lower points scores because their education levels, their English language levels, may be a little bit lower.”

International students with diplomas — rather than degrees — also benefitted. Diploma holders on postgraduate work permits typically have fewer Comprehensive Ranking System points, as the length of the work permit is tied to the length of their educational program.

Copeland notes that Canada’s business community has been influential in **lobbying** for relatively low-skilled immigrants to be admitted, as “some see cheap labour as crucial to business viability.”

Parisa Mahboubi, a senior policy analyst at the C.D. Howe Institute think-tank, says the admission of low-skilled immigrants puts downward pressure on wages.

Another adverse effect, she noted, is that “when the labour market is not strong, immigrants are the first to see high unemployment, and especially immigrants with lower levels of skills.”

## Scaling back

In 2024, the government scaled back its skilled immigration targets in response to political pressure over housing affordability and strained public services. In October, it **said** it would reduce its 2025 permanent resident target from 500,000 to 395,000.

Today, the Comprehensive Ranking System cutoff hovers around 540, a historical high.

Lalonde says she now sees many applicants with Comprehensive Ranking System that would have previously been competitive who are not being invited to apply.

“[These people] are in their late 30s or early 40s, and so they’re losing points for age,” Lalonde said. “They might have one year of Canadian experience in a very skilled occupation. They’ve got an employer-specific work permit. They’ve got a bachelor’s degree. They’ve got good language scores, fluency in English.

“And they’re not making the cutoff.”

Mahboubi says the more restrictive approach to permanent residency invitations means highly qualified applicants are now being passed over.

“It means that we are not selecting some top candidates,” she said. “It means that those top candidates, they are looking at other countries. And also, some of those [people] may have ... the type of qualifications that Canada may need — for example, in the health care sector, in tech or engineering.”

In Copeland’s view, the government’s reliance on immigration as the solution to its domestic challenges may be misguided.

“[I]mmigration will not solve our demographic challenges, since immigrants adopt the behaviours of native Canadians in the second and third generations,” he said.

“Our immigration targets need to be further reduced, a greater emphasis placed on the economic stream to attract skilled immigrants, yes, but a more balanced approach [needs to be] taken in

general,” he said.

“Furthermore, attunement to the broader social implications of excessive immigration is needed, as integration is needed to ensure social unity, trust, and civil society participation is not adversely affected.”

Lalonde says the federal government could be much more systematic in their push for permanent residents.

“This one-off that they did of digging down to get [applicants with] 75 points was, in my opinion, absurd, and showed a lack of planning,” she said.. “It was just sort of like [the government said], ‘Oh, we need more people. Let’s dig way down.’”