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Immigration and Regional Renewal

Place-based policies bring skills to localities that need them

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Executive Summary

This policy brief provides a comparative overview of place-based immigration approaches and their relevance for regional development. It reviews existing place-based visa schemes in Australia and Canada, assessing their design, governance arrangements, and early outcomes in directing skilled migrants to regions facing demographic decline and labor shortages. It also examines the current proposal for a place-based visa in the United States, analyzing its objectives, institutional logic, and potential implications. As neither the EU nor its member states currently operate formal place-based visa schemes, the report assesses the existing EU policy landscape and local initiatives that support rural revitalization and migrant integration, and considers how these experiences could inform the future development of place-based visa approaches in Europe.

Australia has established a structured Regional Migration Program with a tiered classification system for designated areas. It includes point-tested and employer-sponsored [visa subclasses \(491 and 494\)](#) linked to permanent residency (PR) through [Subclass 191](#). The program offers benefits such as expedited visa processing, extended work rights for graduate students from abroad, and access to broader occupational lists in regional areas. Australia's model has demonstrated success in redistributing immigration flows, improving employment outcomes, and strengthening regional (non-metropolitan) communities.

Canada implemented decentralized, community-driven immigration strategies through the [Provincial Nominee Program \(PNP\)](#), the [Atlantic Immigration Program \(AIP\)](#), and, until the end of 2024, the [Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot \(RNIP\)](#). These programs allow local stakeholders to select and support newcomers, resulting in high retention and integration rates. Canada is also piloting new place-based initiatives such as the [Rural Community Immigration Pilot \(RCIP\)](#) and the [Francophone Community Immigration Pilot \(FCIP\)](#), showcasing the effectiveness of adaptive and inclusive policy design.

In the **United States**, the [Economic Innovation Group \(EIG\)](#) has developed a formal place-based visa program that has been introduced into legislation as the [Heartland Visa Act](#). This innovative, community-driven model aims to revitalize counties with shrinking populations and economic distress by linking skilled immigrants to designated regions through a dual opt-in system. The Heartland Visa proposal would introduce a significant geographic dimension to the US immigration framework, echoing the other international practices analyzed here.

The EU and member states do not currently have any place-based visa schemes, but EU policies and local initiatives in member states increasingly recognize immigration as a strategic tool to revitalize rural areas facing demographic decline and economic stagnation. Projects such as [Welcoming Spaces](#) and the [Share Network](#) empowered rural communities to integrate migrants through inclusive planning, community sponsorship, and capacity-building. National programs in countries including **Germany**, **Italy**, and **Spain** complement these efforts by linking labor needs to migration pathways. EU frameworks such as the [Rural Vision](#) and the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund ([AMIF](#)) support these initiatives. Local agency, cross-sectoral cooperation, and tailored integration models are key to their success, but the lack of place-based or regional visas together with free movement in the EU undermine these efforts to some extent.

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Key Comparative Findings

Key success factors for attraction and retention of skilled and highly skilled immigrants with the goal of fostering regional development:

- **Geographic Targeting:** Australia's and Canada's models employ clear geographic criteria to direct immigration to areas of high demand.
- **Community Involvement:** Canada's RNIP and AIP showcase the value of community endorsement and support systems.
- **Pathways to Permanency:** Programs that link regional residency to permanent status have better retention outcomes.
- **Support Infrastructure:** Access to language training, credential recognition, healthcare, and housing are crucial for success.
- **Policy Adaptability:** Pilot programs and data-driven evaluations allow flexible and responsive policymaking.

Policy Recommendations

- Institutionalize community-driven selection processes.
- Create transparent pathways to permanent residency.
- Offer targeted incentives for foreign graduates of local colleges and universities.
- Invest in infrastructure, public services, and integration support.
- Promote entrepreneurial and family-friendly migration options.
- Monitor outcomes and maintaining flexibility.
- Strengthen public-private partnerships and community narratives.

Conclusion

Place-based immigration policies offer a powerful tool for fostering inclusive economic growth, demographic resilience, and social cohesion in lagging regions. Drawing on successful international models, national and regional governments should design immigration systems that integrate local participation, development goals, and long-term settlement strategies.

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Introduction

The demographic and economic decline of rural regions has emerged as a critical challenge in contemporary policy discourse. While urbanization continues to dominate global settlement patterns, approximately [43% of the world's population](#) remains in rural areas. These communities frequently contend with declining populations, demographic aging, and structural economic shifts that exacerbate regional disparities. The scholarly literature increasingly addresses the role of migration policy—specifically, place-based immigration models—as a strategic instrument to reverse these trends.

Demographic Challenges in Rural Areas

A growing body of research documents persistent population decline in rural regions. In a comparative analysis of 696 subnational regions across Europe, [Niall Newsham and Francisco Rowe](#) demonstrate that rural areas are overwhelmingly characterized by demographic contraction or stabilization at low levels. Similar patterns are observed in Australia, where [Neil Argent](#) reports natural decrease and net outmigration across rural New South Wales. These findings are consistent across high-income countries and signal the structural nature of rural demographic decline.

In tandem with population loss, rural areas are also experiencing pronounced aging. As younger cohorts relocate to urban centers in pursuit of education and employment, rural populations comprise older residents in increasing proportions. This demographic imbalance poses critical challenges to service provision and labor market sustainability. Angel Paniagua highlights that rural areas in North America are particularly affected by this trend, with limited infrastructure to support aging populations.

Economic Stagnation and Structural Vulnerability

Economic stagnation in rural communities is tightly coupled with demographic shifts. [A study by Ahmed Almihdar, Nicky Morrison and Louise Crabtree-Hayes](#) published in 2023 links rural population decline in Australia to economic volatility and a lack of sectoral diversification. Similarly, [a 2016 study](#) by Carson and colleagues examines resource-dependent regions in Sweden and Australia, illustrating how geographic isolation and industrial restructuring contribute to declining economic viability. The literature thus converges on a view of rural economic challenges as both cause and consequence of demographic change.

Place-Based Immigration as a Policy Innovation

In response to these structural pressures, place-based and regional immigration policies have emerged as a promising area of policy innovation. Unlike conventional immigration systems that prioritize national or employer-specific criteria, place-based models are designed to align migration flows with regional development objectives. These schemes typically empower local actors to participate in migrant selection, settlement support, and integration strategies.

Methodology

This paper is based on desk research, expert interviews, and focus groups with local governments, NGOs, and migrants across Australia, Canada, the United States, and Europe (2023–2025). More information in [Annex](#).

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Place-Based Visa Policies

Emerging practices and lessons learned from Australia, Canada, and the United States can inform the development of place-based migration and regional immigrant integration programs globally.

Australia: Regional Migration Program

Policy Rationale and Objectives

Australia has actively promoted regional migration—often referred to as “rural immigration”—through targeted visa pathways intended to attract skilled workers, international graduates, and employer-sponsored candidates to areas outside Sydney, Melbourne, and Brisbane. The overarching goal of these measures, according to the [Department of Home Affairs](#), is to stimulate regional economic development, alleviate labor shortages, and encourage a more balanced population distribution across Australia.

Australia’s Regional Migration Program is a cornerstone of the country’s strategy to address demographic imbalances and labor shortages in non-metropolitan areas. Through a structured approach that includes visa incentives, tailored residency pathways, and post-study benefits, the program encourages skilled workers and foreign graduate students to settle in regional communities.

Policy Design, Eligibility, Incentives, and Constraints

Australia’s Regional Migration Program presents a robust and adaptable model for other nations grappling with uneven demographic and economic trends. By employing a tiered classification of geographic areas and linking visa incentives to long-term settlement opportunities, the program effectively redirects immigration toward areas with high demand. The integration of educational and employment pathways into regional migration strategies further strengthens the program’s capacity to support sustainable regional development. Overall, Australia’s approach demonstrates that targeted immigration policies can achieve both economic objectives and social resilience across diverse communities.

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Infobox: Key Facts—Australia’s Regional Migration Program

<p>Key Features</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • targets skilled workers to address labor shortages in regional areas of Australia • provides pathways from provisional visas such as Subclass 491 to permanent residency such as Subclass 191 • includes state/territory nomination or family sponsorship requirements for eligibility • requires applicants to live, work, and study in designated regional areas • offers points-based selection for skilled migrants based on age, experience, and qualifications • supports both temporary and permanent regional skilled visas • encourages long-term settlement and economic development in non-metropolitan Australia • facilitates inclusion of eligible family members in visa applications • adjusted regularly to respond to regional labor market needs and policy priorities
<p>Objective</p>	<p>address labor shortages and demographic imbalances outside Sydney, Melbourne, and Brisbane</p>
<p>Regional Area Categories</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Category 1: major metros (no incentives) • Category 2: cities/major regional centers such as Perth, Adelaide • Category 3: regional towns/rural areas (highest level of incentives)
<p>Key Provisional Visas</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subclass 491: Skilled Work Regional (state/family sponsorship) • Subclass 494: Employer-Sponsored (regional job offer) <p>→ Both lead to Subclass 191 (Permanent Residency)</p>
<p>Permanent Residency Pathway</p>	<p>Subclass 191: Requires 3 years regional residence and minimum income threshold</p>
<p>Foreign Graduate Student Incentives</p>	<p>post-study work rights extension</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • +1 year (Category 2) • +2 years (Category 3)
<p>Policy Benefits</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • stimulates rural economies • enhances population distribution • improves migrant employment and integration • supports key sectors such as healthcare, agriculture

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Designation of Regional Areas

The [Department of Home Affairs](#) classifies the country's geographic regions into three distinct categories for the purpose of migration incentives.

- Category 1 encompasses metropolitan areas—specifically Sydney, Melbourne, and Brisbane—that are not eligible for regional migration incentives.
- Category 2 includes cities and major regional centers such as Perth, Adelaide, and the Gold Coast. These areas qualify for regional visa benefits.
- Category 3 comprises regional centers and other regional areas that are typically smaller towns and rural communities. These areas receive the highest level of support and incentives.

Applicants who choose to live and work in Category 2 or 3 regions benefit from additional points under the Skilled Migration Points Test. Furthermore, [they receive priority in visa processing and gain access](#) to regional occupation lists that feature a broader range of eligible professions.

Policy Evolution

Australia's regional skilled migration program has evolved over the past two decades through several visa subclasses to address workforce shortages in regional areas and to encourage long-term settlement outside major metropolitan centers. The Australian government introduced, modified, and eventually replaced various visa subclasses (475, [487](#), [489](#)) between 2007 and 2019 to address economic and demographic needs.

From 2019 onwards, the Australian government undertook major reforms to modernize the regional migration system and enhance migrant retention. These reforms introduced the [Subclass 491 \(Skilled Work Regional\)](#) and [Subclass 494 \(Skilled Employer-Sponsored Regional\)](#) visas, both of which form part of the current migration framework. The [Subclass 191 Visa](#), introduced in 2022, serves as the dedicated permanent residence pathway for regional provisional visa holders.

Current Policy Framework

Currently, Australia's modern regional migration framework is built around provisional visas that encourage skilled migration to regional areas and provide a clear route to permanent residency. The provisional visa categories form the initial stage of the skilled regional migration pathway.

[Subclass 491](#), the **Skilled Work Regional (Provisional) Visa**, is a points-tested visa that allows skilled workers nominated by a state or territory government or sponsored by an eligible family member to live, work, and study in designated regional areas for up to five years.

Similarly, [Subclass 494](#), the **Skilled Employer-Sponsored Regional (Provisional) Visa**, enables Australian employers in regional areas to sponsor skilled workers for occupations they cannot fill with local talent. This visa is also valid for up to five years.

The [Subclass 191 Visa](#) became available on November 16, 2022, and forms the main route to permanent residency for holders of the Subclass 491 and Subclass 494 visas. To qualify for the Subclass 191 Visa, applicants must have lived and worked in designated regional areas for a minimum of three years while also demonstrating that they have earned the required taxable income during that period. Successful applicants gain permanent residence status, which grants access to Medicare and wider social benefits.

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Australia has also introduced additional incentives to retain graduate students from abroad in regional areas, particularly through [extensions of the Temporary Graduate Visa \(Subclass 485\)](#). Students who complete a degree at a university campus located in a Category 2 region may receive a one-year extension of their post-study work rights, while graduates from Category 3 regions may receive a two-year extension. These measures aim to facilitate the integration of international graduates of Australian colleges and universities into local labor markets and to increase the likelihood that they will remain in regional communities for the long term.

These visa schemes link temporary settlement directly to long-term immigration opportunities, thus fostering stability and integration in regional communities.

Outcomes and Evidence

In the table below, data on the number of regional visas granted highlights a structural shift in the skilled migration program over the past decade. The Subclass 489 visa dominated until 2019, but was phased out following the introduction of the Subclass 491 visa in November of that year. In contrast, the 491 visa shows strong growth through March 2024. This trajectory underscores the policy shift toward regional migration and the attractiveness of the new framework.

The Subclass 191 visa, introduced in late 2022 as the permanent residency route, illustrates the expected lag effect. Fewer than 50 grants were made in 2020–21, rising to 6,024 in 2022–23 and 1,105 in the partial 2023–24 year. This pattern reflects the time required for provisional visa holders to meet eligibility criteria, reinforcing the staged nature of the regional migration strategy.

Overall, the data highlights a clear policy-driven transition from the Subclass 489 visa to the Subclass 491 visa, alongside the gradual emergence of the Subclass 191 as the permanent residence pathway.

Financial Year	Grants 489	Grants 491	Combined (489 + 491)	Grants 191	Notes / Source
2016-17	6,263	–	6,263		Annual FOI data for 489 grants. FOI document FA19/07/00171
2017-18	8,503	–	8,503		Same Annual FOI data for 489 grants.
2018-19	9,342	–	9,342		Same Annual FOI data for 489 grants.
2019-20	12,707	2,175	14,882		489 = 12,707; 491 = 2,175. (abcdiamond.com.au)
2020-21	~1,691	~4,054	~5,745	<50	Approximate – 489 figure derived from monthly data; 491 from departmental table.
2021-22	1,156	13,898	15,054	<235	Government report – Administration of the Immigration and Citizenship Programs (13th edition)
2022-23	3,487	23,129	26,616	6,024	Same government report; 489 = 3,487; 491 = 23,129.
2023-24*	1,067	26,312	27,379	1,105	Same government report; 491 figure to 31 Mar 2024; 489 figure full-year may still be finalized.

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Regional governments, employers, and migration professionals have widely regarded Australia's skilled regional migration framework—particularly the transition from the Subclass 489 visa to the Subclass 491/191 pathway—as a significant improvement. The following analysis synthesizes stakeholder reception with empirical evidence on labor markets, productivity, population sustainability, and long-term economic outcomes.

- **Policy Reception and Systemic Improvements:** Regional governments have consistently endorsed the Subclass 491 visa as a more effective tool for directing skilled migrants to areas outside metropolitan centers. The five-year visa validity period and the clearer permanent residence pathway under Subclass 191 are cited as major strengths. Migration practitioners likewise note that the reformed nomination and sponsorship framework creates greater clarity for applicants and employers.
- **Labor-Market Impact and Productivity Gains:** Empirical research demonstrates that regional skilled migration contributes significantly to local productivity, innovation, and workforce expansion. Regions with larger migrant populations [exhibit higher wage growth and productivity](#) levels. Specifically, a 10% increase in migrant share is associated with a 1.3% rise in regional wages, reflecting spillover effects from complementary skills and innovation. Further modeling finds that a **1 percentage-point rise in annual migrant inflow** increases employment of Australian-born workers by **0.53%**, indicating that migration expands—rather than displaces—local employment. Post-2020 **labor** shortages intensified these effects. [A study](#) by Kim Houghton documents that international migrants helped meet critical **labor** demand in over **103 regional Local Government Areas (LGAs)** where the Australian-born population was simultaneously declining. These findings underscore that regional skilled migrants are essential not only for filling gaps in key sectors—such as healthcare, care of the elderly, agriculture, and engineering—but also for generating broader economic multipliers.
- **Population Sustainability and Regional Demographic Renewal:** Migration has become the primary driver of population stability and growth across regional Australia. Based on the numbers of Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), the [Centre for Population](#) reported **1.3% population growth** in regional areas (114,000 people) during 2023–24, one of the highest rates in the past decade. Net overseas migration accounted for **68,000 people**, offsetting natural population decline in several regions. The [Regional Australia Institute](#) further documents that **166,073 people moved from capital cities to regional areas between 2016 and 2021**, nearly triple the rate of the previous five-year period, with overseas-born migrants playing a substantial role in these movements. These patterns confirm that regional migration programs have become essential mechanisms for maintaining community viability, sustaining service provision, and counteracting aging population trends.
- **Long-Term Economic Contributions:** Long-horizon modelling by [Migration Council Australia](#) indicates that migration will add approximately **\$1.6 trillion to GDP by 2050**, raise overall workforce participation by **15.7%**, and increase GDP per capita by **5.9%** relative to a low-migration scenario. Such projections highlight the structural importance of migration in sustaining Australia's long-term productivity and fiscal capacity, particularly in regions experiencing demographic stagnation or population decline.
- **Regional Visa Uptake and Pathways:** Recent visa outcomes illustrate strong and growing engagement with regional skilled migration pathways. Subclass **491 visa grants increased from 4,054 in 2020–21 to 26,312 by March 2024**, reflecting rising demand for regional settlement options. Permanent residency pathways also show success: **Subclass 191 grants reached 6,024**

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in 2022–23, demonstrating effective progression from provisional to permanent migration status according to the visa statistics of the [Department of Home Affairs](#) and the [Regional Australia Institute](#). High uptake rates reinforce the alignment between migrant aspirations, employer needs, and government regional development objectives.

Overall, Australia's regional skilled migration programs enjoy strong institutional support and demonstrate measurable economic, demographic, and productivity benefits. They channel skilled labor into priority regions, foster long-term settlement, stabilize population structures, and contribute significantly to national economic performance. The combined evidence suggests that the regional visa framework is a core pillar of Australia's broader strategy to enhance regional resilience and distribute the benefits of migration more evenly across the country.

Challenges Overcome

During the establishment and enhancement of these visa categories, policy stakeholders faced various obstacles. Key challenges included:

- **Administrative Complexity and Transition Issues:** The shift from Subclass 489 to 491 required significant policy and operational adjustments including new nomination systems across states and territories, updated IT systems for assessment, coordination between federal and state governments, and communication to applicants of changed rules.
- **Stakeholder Frustration and Perceptions:** Some applicants, migration agents and regional employers raised concerns about the provisional duration, regional residence obligations, and the clarity of the permanent residence pathway under earlier 489 rules. The reform to 491 helped to address some of these by making the pathway more transparent (3 years regional residence + employment to 191 visa) under 491.
- **Regional Retention and Settlement Issues:** Even with grants, ensuring that visa-holders lived, worked, and stayed in regional zones remained challenging. Some regions struggled to retain skilled migrants beyond the provisional term due to limited employment progression, social infrastructure, family needs, or mobility back to major cities.
- **External Shocks:** The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 posed a significant disruption to visa processing, travel, offshore migration streams, regional employment setups, and settlement support. It effectively tested the resilience of the regional migration pathway and demanded policy adjustments including concessions for delayed residence requirements. For example, a [parliamentary question on notice](#) mentioned that around 8,725 holders of 489/491 visas were outside Australia as of June 2021, illustrating the disruption to regional residence conditions.

Over time, refinements to the policy, clearer guidance from the Department of Home Affairs, and expanded state nomination schemes have helped stabilize the program and increase grant numbers for the Subclass 491 stream.

Canada: Community-Driven Place-Based Immigration

Policy Rationale and Objectives

While Australia uses a points-based system with mandatory residency in designated regions, Canada relies on community-driven programs where job offers and local endorsements encourage settlement without strict geographic enforcement. Canada has developed a comprehensive and evolving system of community-driven immigration programs designed to attract and retain newcomers in provinces, rural communities, and northern communities experiencing demographic decline and labor shortages.

Canada’s place-based immigration approach demonstrates the value of decentralized, community-led policies in addressing demographic and economic challenges. By empowering local stakeholders, offering clear and accessible pathways to permanent residence, and ensuring strong integration support, these programs help build resilient, thriving communities. The Canadian experience offers important lessons for other countries seeking to harness immigration as a tool for local development and long-term national prosperity.

Infobox: Key Facts—Canada’s Place-Based Immigration Programs

<p>Key Features</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community focus: attracts immigrants to smaller, rural, or underpopulated communities • Labor market alignment: targets skills and occupations in demand locally • Community or employer involvement: selection includes provincial, territorial, or local input • Pathway to permanent residence: provides a route to permanent residency, directly or via pilot programs • Settlement support: offers integration assistance such as language training and housing • Federal–subnational partnership: balances national standards with local priorities
<p>Main Programs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provincial Nominee Program (PNP) • Atlantic Immigration Program (AIP) • Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot (RNIP) closed 2024 • Rural Community Immigration Pilot (RCIP) launched 2024 • Francophone Community Immigration Pilot (FCIP) launched 2024
<p>Community Designation Criteria</p>	<p>population under 50,000 and ≥75 km from a metropolitan area, or up to 200,000 if classified as remote by Statistics Canada.</p>
<p>Candidate Eligibility</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ≥one year work experience in the last three years • language proficiency (CLB/NCLC) • job offer from an eligible employer • educational equivalence to Canadian high school • proof of funds (unless employed in Canada)

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Community Role	Communities and Economic Development Organizations (EDOs) recommend candidates, support integration, and deliver services such as mentorship, housing, and toolkits.
Permanent Residency Pathway	All programs lead to permanent residence. Community endorsement is required before federal processing.
Policy Strengths	Decentralized, community-led design promotes demographic renewal, economic growth, and strong local integration support.

Policy Design, Eligibility, Incentives, and Constraints

Foundational Framework

The **Provincial Nominee Program (PNP)**, established in 1998, marked the beginning of Canada's modern place-based immigration strategy. The PNP started as a pilot in 1998 and further developed over more than 10 years until it became a permanent program in 2009. Its policy design varies across jurisdictions and can include both employer-driven and points-based selection mechanisms. Federal-provincial agreements enabled provinces and territories to nominate immigrants whose skills aligned with local labor market needs. The PNP has since expanded across all provinces and territories except Quebec and Nunavut. A detailed [Statistics Canada analysis](#) highlights the differences in PNP program design across provinces. According to the Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship (IRCC) [Departmental Results Report 2023–24](#), the PNP remains one of Canada's largest economic immigration programs, admitting more than **108,000 newcomers** in the most recent reporting cycle.

Evolution of Additional Policies

The [Atlantic Immigration Pilot \(2017–2021\)](#), launched in 2017 and made permanent in 2022, is specifically designed for employers in the Atlantic provinces of Canada. It facilitates recruitment and mandates individualized settlement support plans for newcomers. Created to address chronic labor shortages and population decline in the region, it targets skilled workers and international graduates to the Atlantic provinces Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island.

The [Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot \(RNIP\)](#) (2019–2024) expanded immigration policies to small, remote, and northern communities. It enabled designated communities to recommend candidates for permanent residence based on local needs. Originally, the RNIP had been prolonged until 2025 after it was initially planned to end in 2022.

To continue supporting rural and Francophone communities after the RNIP's conclusion, the government announced two new pilots in March 2024 that were both officially launched on 30 January 2025:

- The [Rural Community Immigration Pilot \(RCIP\)](#) expands community-driven immigration of skilled workers to additional rural regions. Currently, the RCIP includes 14 participating rural and remote communities across Canada, specifically selected for their readiness to support and benefit from skilled immigrants.
- The [Francophone Community Immigration Pilot \(FCIP\)](#) aims to strengthen Francophone minority communities outside Quebec, supporting Canada's goals of linguistic diversity and balanced local development. The FCIP specifically targets six Francophone-minority communities

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across Canada. These regions were selected for their capacity to support and benefit from skilled French-speaking immigrants, and each community works with designated employers to fill local labor gaps.

Current Policy Framework

The PNP remains Canada’s primary immigration mechanism for Canadian provinces. The AIP provides permanent residence to skilled workers and international graduates with job offers from designated Atlantic employers and mandates individualized settlement support plans, facilitating long-term retention.

Both current pilots, the RCIP and the FCIP, maintain core features of the former RNIP, including employer partnerships, community evaluation, and pathways to permanent residence. Full annual reporting is expected in future IRCC publications.

Canadian Immigration Programs and Pilots

Program / Pilot	Years Active	Purpose	Key Features	Replaced By
Provincial Nominee Program	1998–present	allows provinces and territories to nominate immigrants who meet local labor market and economic needs	points-based selection; provincial nomination; pathway to permanent residency	still active
Atlantic Immigration Program	2017–present (permanent since 2022)	attracts and retains skilled workers and graduates in Atlantic Canada to address demographic and labor challenges	employer-driven; job offer required; settlement plan; language and education criteria	still active
Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot	2019–2024	brings skilled immigrants to smaller rural and northern communities facing labor shortages	community endorsement; job offer required; focus on rural/northern regions	Rural Community Immigration Pilot
Rural Community Immigration Pilot	2025–present	continues supporting rural communities with employer-driven recruitment after RNIP ended	employer-driven; designated rural communities; streamlined application process	new program replacing RNIP
Francophone Community Immigration Pilot	2025–present	strengthens Francophone minority communities outside Quebec by attracting French-speaking immigrants	French language requirement; employer-driven; community partnership focus	new program; no predecessor

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Eligibility

Eligibility for community participation in RNIP, RCIP, and FCIP is based on [demographic and geographic criteria](#). Communities typically must:

- have a population under **50,000** and be located at least **75 km** from a major metropolitan area, or
- have up to **200,000** residents but be classified as remote under the **Statistics Canada Remoteness Index**.

Eligibility for applicants is based on common [federal eligibility criteria](#) across the place-based programs including:

- at least **one year** of full-time work experience in the last three years
- language proficiency in English or French at **CLB or NCLC standards**
- education equivalent to a Canadian high school diploma
- a valid job offer from an employer in a participating community
- proof of settlement funds unless already working in Canada

Communities may impose additional criteria linked to local economic priorities.

Outcomes and Evidence

This table presents a comparative overview of several Canadian immigration programs, highlighting their scale and evolution in recent years. The Provincial Nominee Program (PNP) is the longest established and major pathway, with approximately 88,300 nominees admitted in 2022 alone and a total of 752,700 from its inception until the end of that year, according to [Statistics Canada](#). Cumulated figures were expected to have reached more than 1,000,000 nominees admitted by the end of 2025. This figure underscores the program’s central role in supporting provincial labor markets and population growth, as provinces continue to rely on the PNP to address local needs.

Program	Period / Year	Number of visas/placements/admissions (approx)	Notes / Source
Provincial Nominee Program	by end 2025	> 1,000,000 nominees admitted since its inception	estimate based on Statistics Canada
Atlantic Immigration Program	2017-2022	> 17,100 principal applicants & families	IRCC Annual Report 2023
Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot	by end 2024	~ 8,580 newcomers granted Permanent Residency through RNIP	Canada.ca IRCC news release
RCIP / FCIP	announced March 2024; launched Jan 30 2025	no full year admissions data as yet	

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Overall, the data illustrates Canada's dynamic approach to immigration policy. Established programs such as the PNP continue to grow, while newer initiatives such as the RNIP, RCIP, and FCIP expand opportunities for newcomers in less-populated regions. This strategy not only supports economic development but also helps to balance demographic trends across the country. As new pilots mature, data will provide further insight into their effectiveness and impact on Canadian society.

These place-based immigration programs are widely viewed as positive policy innovations. They are credited with helping to distribute newcomers more evenly across Canada, supporting economic growth in smaller communities, and addressing local labor shortages. Researchers and policymakers note that these programs have increased the geographic dispersion of immigrants, reducing the concentration in major cities and encouraging settlement in rural and less-populated regions. The high community involvement and the relatively high retention rates show that the programs are well received by stakeholders at the local level and immigrants.

A standout feature of Canada's regional immigration strategy is the central role of **community involvement and integration**. In both the RNIP and AIP, **Economic Development Organizations (EDOs)** are tasked with recommending candidates, collaborating with employers, and delivering settlement support. Communities contribute through initiatives such as mentorship programs, housing assistance, and connections to local services. For example, the [Pembina Valley Local Immigration Partnership](#) has developed cultural competency toolkits to support inclusive practices within host communities according to [Kelly and Nguyen](#). Importantly, community endorsement is a mandatory prerequisite before an applicant can proceed to the federal immigration stage.

The impact of Canada's place-based immigration programs has been both measurable and positive. By the end of 2024, RNIP enabled over 8,500 newcomers to obtain permanent residence in smaller and remote communities, helping to stabilize and grow local populations. Communities participating in the RNIP report a **93% retention rate**, and **88% of participants** express a strong intention to remain in their new communities [long-term](#). Moreover, immigrants in these programs report a strong sense of belonging and experience lower rates of discrimination compared to national averages. From a demographic perspective, newcomers help stabilize and sustain critical services such as education, healthcare, and retail in areas facing population decline. [Research](#) by Melissa Kelly and Michelle Nguyen confirms that successful integration is often tied to both robust community support and prior Canadian experience, such as through international study or temporary residency.

The **Atlantic Immigration Program (AIP) increased retention rates of skilled workers significantly**, according to [CIC News](#). After the AIP's introduction, Nova Scotia's one-year retention rate for skilled workers rose from 21.5% in 2016 to 63.9% in 2020—hence, contributing to local population growth. The AIP welcomed over 17,100 principal applicants and their families between 2017 and 2022. Newfoundland and Labrador's one-year rate grew from 55% (2016) to 66.4% (2020). Five-year retention rates in Atlantic Canada are rising, with New Brunswick reaching 56% for the 2016 cohort.

Since its inception in 1998, the **Provincial Nominee Program** has admitted [over 900,000 immigrants](#), many settling outside major urban centers, supporting population growth in provinces and territories across Canada. Nationally, about 89% of provincial nominees who landed in 2019 stayed in their intended province at the end of the landing year. Five years later, retention rates ranged from 39% to 94% depending on the province, with Ontario, Alberta, and British Columbia showing the highest rates, and Atlantic provinces the lowest.

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Challenges Overcome

The establishment of Canada's regional immigration programs required overcoming several significant challenges. These challenges encompassed administrative, legal, and operational complexities that necessitated innovative policy solutions.

- **Balancing Federal and Provincial Jurisdictions:** A key challenge was reconciling immigration responsibilities between federal and provincial governments. Before the PNP was introduced, immigration was managed mainly at the federal level and flowed to big cities. Shifting authority to provinces required the negotiation of new intergovernmental agreements. These agreements had to ensure that provincial nominations addressed the local labor market needs and met federal standards for admissibility, security, and settlement support. Establishing clear mechanisms for coordination and oversight was essential to maintain consistency and integrity in Canada's immigration system.
- **Addressing Local Labor Market Needs:** Many rural and smaller communities in Canada faced persistent labor shortages, worsened by low immigration levels. Programs such as the AIP and RNIP were introduced to address this challenge. The main difficulty was attracting and retaining skilled workers in these regions, which required strong community involvement, active employer participation, and effective support systems to help newcomers integrate and stay.
- **Ensuring Effective Integration and Retention:** A critical challenge was ensuring that immigrants could successfully integrate into smaller and rural communities. This required providing adequate settlement services—such as language training, housing assistance, and community orientation—as well as offering a clear pathway to permanent residency. With ongoing policy refinement and an increase in integration support, retention rates rose.
- **Legal and Policy Innovations:** The introduction of local immigration programs required significant legal and policy innovations that took into account the labor market needs, requirements, and conditions in structurally and culturally varying regions. Key challenges included creating new legislative frameworks to allow pilot programs like the RNIP to operate with defined timelines, then extending or transitioning them as needed. Programs such as FCIP also demanded the development of specific eligibility criteria and community engagement strategies to support targeted groups, requiring coordination across multiple levels of government and adaptation of existing immigration laws. Combining regional flexibility with national standards is [a major achievement](#) of this program.
- **Overcoming Administrative and Operational Challenges:** Implementing these programs involved overcoming administrative and operational challenges such as coordinating between multiple levels of government, ensuring consistent application of program criteria, and managing the processing of applications efficiently. The success of these programs relied on the establishment of clear guidelines, effective communication channels, and robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess outcomes and make necessary adjustments.

In sum, the establishment of Canada's community-driven immigration programs involved overcoming challenges related to intergovernmental coordination, addressing local labor market needs, ensuring effective integration and retention of immigrants, implementing legal and policy innovations, and managing administrative complexities. These efforts have contributed to a more balanced and effective immigration system that supports the economic and demographic development of communities across Canada.

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The United States and the Heartland Visa Proposal

The Heartland Visa proposal constitutes a significant innovation in the landscape of US place-based immigration policy, marking the most ambitious such initiative since the early 20th century. Originally developed by the [Economic Innovation Group \(EIG\)](#), the Heartland Visa is designed to attract high-skilled immigrants to counties experiencing persistent population decline and economic stagnation. Although the [Heartland Visa Act of 2024 \(S. 5644\)](#) formally introduced this concept to Congress, as of December 2025, the legislation has not progressed beyond committee consideration and remains a proposed, rather than operational, immigration pathway.

Historically, the United States has relied on immigration as a catalyst for innovation, entrepreneurship, and demographic renewal. However, unlike countries such as Canada and Australia, the United States has not implemented a place-based immigration mechanism that channels newcomers into specific geographic regions in need of revitalization. The Heartland Visa proposal seeks to address this policy gap by offering a geographically targeted immigration pathway. Its primary objective is to encourage high-skilled immigrants to settle in economically distressed counties, particularly in the Midwest, Great Plains, and other regions collectively referred to as the American heartland. The program is explicitly modeled on successful international precedents, such as Canada's [RNIP](#) and Australia's regional [visa subclasses](#).

Policy Design and Objectives

The [EIG's policy blueprint](#) recommends that counties qualify for Heartland Visa participation based on three principal criteria: evidence of demographic decline or stagnation since 1980; the availability of affordable housing; and demonstrated community readiness, as reflected in integration strategies and local support networks. Counties must voluntarily opt in and demonstrate their capacity to support newcomers through partnerships with employers, civic institutions, educational systems, and local nonprofits.

The Heartland Visa is fundamentally distinct from employer-sponsored visas. It is place-based rather than employer-based, granting recipients a three-year visa that is renewable once, for a total of six years. Visa holders are required to reside in the designated county for the duration of the visa, although remote work for employers outside the county may be permitted. Selection is managed through a points-based ranking system that considers age, wage potential, and local ties, with visas allocated quarterly. Provided that income and residency benchmarks are met, recipients may pursue permanent residency, thereby offering a pathway to long-term settlement.

The Heartland Visa is designed to address several interrelated policy objectives. First, it seeks to reverse demographic decline in US counties that have experienced continuous population loss since 1980, a trend driven by declining birth rates, aging populations, and out-migration. Second, the program aims to alleviate persistent labor shortages in key sectors such as healthcare, advanced manufacturing, education, and skilled trades. Third, it aspires to bolster entrepreneurship and innovation, given that immigrants are statistically more likely to start new businesses, file patents, and drive high-growth ventures. Notably, the Economic Innovation Group reports that [only 4.4%](#) of newly arrived high-skilled immigrants currently settle in distressed counties, despite these areas being home to 20% of the referring US population.

Expected Economic Impact

Although the Heartland Visa is still only a legislative proposal, economic modeling and international case studies suggest that the program could stabilize local populations, enhance fiscal vitality, and renew labor markets.

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Immigrants contribute to local consumption, housing demand, and tax bases, while also replenishing the workforce. Evidence from Canada's RNIP and Australia's regional visas indicates that immigrants placed in smaller communities exhibit high retention rates, particularly when local institutions provide robust integration support.

Political Prospects and Legislative Status

The Heartland Visa has advanced from concept to proposed legislation. The [Heartland Visa Act](#) was introduced in Congress in December 2024 by Senators [Todd Young \(R-IN\)](#) and Joe Manchin (D-WV), marking a rare example of bipartisan immigration reform. The proposal has received [formal endorsements](#) from influential stakeholders, including the **US Conference of Mayors** and organizations such as Americans for Prosperity, Engine, and the American Enterprise Institute. The endorsements in the [Support Letter of 2024](#) reflected a growing consensus that place-based immigration reform could be an effective tool for revitalizing rural and postindustrial regions.

The bill was promptly referred to the Senate Judiciary Committee, where, as of December 2025, it remains at the "Introduced" stage. Despite [bipartisan endorsements](#), the Heartland Visa faces significant legislative and political barriers. Immigration reform is a polarized issue in the United States, and broader debates over border security and asylum policy overshadow targeted visa proposals. Without prioritization by Senate leadership or strong executive-branch support, the bill's advancement remains uncertain. The absence of a companion bill in the House and the current lack of scheduled committee hearings indicate that the proposal is still in the early stages of the legislative process. As a result, federal agencies have not yet begun regulatory preparations, and the designation of eligible counties or the establishment of immigrant application channels will follow as the bill advances. The proposal's future development will depend on evolving congressional priorities and ongoing policy discussions.

In sum, the Heartland Visa represents a strategic and innovative approach to US immigration policy, explicitly linking immigration to regional economic development. While the proposal is grounded in strong economic rationale and supported by international precedent, its future depends on congressional action that has yet to materialize. If enacted, the Heartland Visa could fundamentally reshape the economic trajectory of numerous counties struggling with population loss and economic stagnation, signaling a shift toward more sophisticated, regionally targeted immigration strategies in the United States.

The EU: Migration Policy Landscape and Targeted Approaches

Migration remains one of the most politically salient and debated issues within the EU. Over the past decade, the union has faced significant migratory pressures, most notably during the 2015 migration crisis, which prompted a series of policy reforms and intensified debate among member states. In response, the EU has sought to balance humanitarian obligations with security concerns, which has resulted in a complex and evolving policy framework. The adoption of the new [Pact on Migration and Asylum](#) marks a turning point, as it aims to harmonize asylum procedures, strengthen border management, and increase solidarity among member states. The pact is scheduled to be implemented by June 2026, with some member states [advocating](#) for earlier adoption of its provisions, according to the 2024 [European Migration Network Asylum and Migration Overview](#). The political climate has shifted toward stricter migration controls, influenced by the rise of right-wing and anti-migration parties in several member states. This has led to more restrictive migration policies with increasing emphasis on deportations, external border security, and cooperation with third countries to manage migration flows, according to reports by [InfoMigrants](#) and [Context](#).

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Targeted Migration Policies and Place-Based Approaches

While the EU does not operate formal place-based visa programs at the supranational level—unlike Australia, Canada, or the proposed US Heartland Visa—there is growing interest in targeted migration policies. The new Pact on Migration and Asylum introduces mechanisms for more coordinated management of migration, including solidarity measures that allow member states to choose among relocating asylum seekers, providing financial contributions, and supporting border management. Pilot projects and regional initiatives have emerged, particularly in response to labor shortages and demographic challenges in specific regions. For example, the EU’s [Talent Partnerships](#) and the Migration Partnership Facility have supported pilot labor mobility schemes such as Digital Explorers in Lithuania and PALIM in Belgium and Morocco, which facilitate targeted migration to address sectoral and regional needs. Additionally, the [Alpine Space Programme \(OUT4INGOV\)](#) focuses on youth migration and regional development in the Alpine region, aiming to counteract brain drain and depopulation. [At the national level](#), countries such as Germany have experimented with skills mobility partnerships and pilot recruitment schemes to attract talent to regions facing labor shortages (according to a [background paper](#) to the World Development Report 2023 by Jan [Schneider](#)).

EU-Funded and Local Initiatives for Rural Revitalization

In response to widespread demographic decline and socio-economic stagnation in rural regions, the EU has supported a range of targeted initiatives to attract and integrate immigrants. These programs not only address labor shortages and service gaps but also contribute to long-term social cohesion and sustainable development in depopulating areas.

The [Welcoming Spaces Project](#) (2020–2024), funded under the EU’s Horizon 2020 program, was a flagship research and innovation initiative that considered how shrinking regions across Europe could become more attractive and inclusive by integrating migrants. The project operated in five countries—Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, and Spain—and aimed to identify synergies between local revitalization goals and migration-driven opportunities.

The [Share Network](#), coordinated by the [International Catholic Migration Commission \(ICMC\) Europe](#), is another prominent platform that promotes refugee and migrant integration into smaller and rural communities in the EU. Through funding from various EU programs, including [AMIF](#), the Share Network advances **community sponsorship, capacity building, and local reception strategies**. A key focus of Share’s work is to enable **municipalities and local actors** in rural areas to take a proactive role in refugee resettlement and labor migration integration. The network provides toolkits, policy recommendations, and peer exchange platforms that empower rural communities to become welcoming environments. Recent projects have also linked **community sponsorship models** with labor market access and **educational inclusion**, thereby promoting holistic integration pathways.

Complementing these initiatives is the [European Commission’s](#) (2021–2040) and the [EU Rural Pact](#), which explicitly recognize the role of migration in rural resilience. The policy framework encourages member states and local authorities to use EU funds strategically—including those from the EU [Cohesion Policy](#), [European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development \(EAFRD\)](#) and [AMIF](#)—to support migrant integration as part of rural regeneration. The Vision underscores the importance of **inclusive governance**, digitalization, and access to services in enhancing the attractiveness of rural life for both native populations and newcomers. These initiatives signal a shift away from a view of migration as solely a national responsibility to a view of it as a **localized opportunity** for innovation, cooperation, and renewal.

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Examples of Place-Based Initiatives in EU Member States

Many EU countries face significant depopulation in rural and remote areas. As a response, national and regional governments have begun to explore labor migration strategies to address demographic imbalances and workforce shortages in sectors such as agriculture, eldercare, and construction.

Germany: Targeted Skilled Immigration and Rural Integration Labs

Promoting exchange and policy learning, Germany's [Skilled Immigration Act \(2020, revised in 2023–24\)](#) offers the possibility for employers to recruit and retain international talent. [Land.Zuhause.Zukunft](#) is an initiative that helps rural districts develop strategies for integrating migrants and refugees. It supports local solutions in areas such as housing, employment, and community engagement.

Italy: Riace and Other Reception Towns

Italy's "[welcoming towns](#)" model has gained international recognition, particularly for localities such as **Riace** in Calabria and **Sant'Alessio in Aspromonte**, which have successfully attracted migrants to reverse population decline. Funded partly through the national asylum and AMIF programs, these municipalities offer housing, job training, and civic inclusion pathways. Many towns are part of the [Sistema di Accoglienza e Integrazione \(SAI\) network](#), which supports decentralized reception and integration.

Spain: Proyecto Arraigo and Revitalization Networks

In Spain, initiatives such as [Proyecto Arraigo](#) work directly with depopulated municipalities to match migrant families with rural job opportunities and housing. Operating in collaboration with local governments and employers, the program has facilitated hundreds of successful placements, particularly in Castilla y León, Aragón, and Extremadura. Additionally, [Red Nacional de Pueblos Acogedores](#) supports coordination between villages receiving migrants and promotes intercultural community-building.

Poland: Local Partnerships for Integration

In smaller towns in eastern Poland, municipal governments have initiated **local integration strategies** for Ukrainian and Belarusian migrants, with support from AMIF and cross-border cooperation funds. These include **school-based inclusion programs, municipal advisory centers**, and partnerships with local employers. In the Białystok and Lublin regions, Welcoming Spaces highlights [pilot programs](#) that link rural agricultural labor needs with immigrant recruitment.

The Netherlands: Kennisplatform Integratie & Samenleving (KIS)

KIS has supported municipalities in rural provinces such as Drenthe and [Zeeland](#) in developing tailored integration plans for newcomers. Programs include **civic orientation courses, housing schemes, and employer engagement**, often backed by national policy instruments such as the [Dutch Civic Integration Act](#).

Together, EU-funded programs and local initiatives demonstrate a growing recognition of the essential role immigration can play in the revitalization of rural areas. What sets successful models apart is the combination of **local agency, cross-sectoral collaboration, and multi-level governance**. Policies that center rural municipalities as active agents in migration and integration are not only socially equitable but also strategically aligned with Europe's long-term demographic and territorial cohesion goals.

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Integration and Funding Mechanisms

The EU supports migrant integration through various funding instruments, including the [AMIF](#), the [European Social Fund](#), and the [European Regional Development Fund](#). These funds enable member states and regions to develop tailored integration programs, often involving local authorities and civil society partners.

The Relevance of Place-Based Approaches in the EU

Although the EU does not have a formal place-based visa system, the policy trajectory suggests increasing openness to targeted migration approaches, especially as demographic and labor-market pressures intensify. EU and national policies share the policy objectives of place-based visa schemes and proposals in that they aim to rejuvenate aging rural areas, address labor shortages, and support integration through immigration. Similar to Canada's RNIP model, EU-supported projects have often relied on local actors such as NGOs, municipalities, and regional development agencies to implement integration strategies. Nonetheless, there is no policy or proposal that specifically ties visas to regions. This would be contrary to the fundamental principles of free movement and non-discrimination that underpin EU law and the Schengen acquis.

However, ongoing reforms under the Pact on Migration and Asylum, combined with pilot projects and regional initiatives, indicate a gradual shift toward more nuanced and regionally responsive migration policies. The effectiveness of these measures will depend on continued political negotiation, member-state cooperation, and the ability to balance security, humanitarian, and economic objectives.

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Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

What Makes Place-Based Immigration Work?

Australia, Canada, and the United States (through the proposed Heartland Visa) have each pursued or proposed visa models that localize immigration to address regional labor shortages, demographic imbalances, and uneven economic development. They have done so in distinct ways, with both shared principles and divergent implementation strategies.

AUSTRALIA	CANADA	UNITED STATES
<p>Regional Migration Program</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designated regional areas for migration • Skilled Work Regional (Provisional) Visa • Pathways to permanent residency • Incentives for international graduates 	<p>Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communities qualify based on size and remoteness • Provincial Nominee Program and RNIP pathways • Community involvement in integration • New pilots introduced in 2024 	<p>Proposed Heartland Visa</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counties eligible based on economic criteria • Dual opt-in model for communities and immigrants • Addresses demographic and labor market issues • Pathway to permanent residency

A cross-national comparison reveals several critical success factors:

- **Clear Geographic Designation:** Australia and Canada define eligible areas using consistent metrics such as remoteness indices or urban hierarchy, ensuring that incentives target genuinely underserved regions.
- **Pathways to Permanency:** Programs that link temporary residence with permanent settlement, such as Subclass 191 in Australia or the RNIP in Canada, tend to yield higher retention and integration outcomes.
- **Community Engagement:** Canada's community-driven approach through the RNIP and AIP offers a promising model of local stakeholder involvement, which increases social capital and immigrant satisfaction.

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- **Support Services:** Providing language training, job matching, housing support, and credential recognition is critical for successful integration. These services are especially important in regions with limited infrastructure.
- **Policy Flexibility and Responsiveness:** Canada's use of pilot programs to test and scale new approaches allows for adaptive learning. The United States could benefit from this incremental policy development approach.

Overall, place-based immigration policies align economic and demographic goals with localized integration strategies. While Australia and Canada have established frameworks in place, the US proposal offers a vision for how such a system could be adapted in a different federal context. As demographic challenges and labor market mismatches persist globally, place-based immigration becomes an increasingly relevant and valuable tool in national policy toolkits.

Potential Political Benefits

Place-based visa programs and targeted immigrant integration strategies have the potential to generate political benefits by empowering states and regions in policymaking, more directly linking the needs and priorities of regions to immigration policies. This approach decentralizes policymaking on immigration—a contentious and polarizing issue in national politics—and adopts a more pragmatic and needs-based approach,

Across these contexts, place-based immigration policies and integration initiatives strengthen rural and lagging areas by:

- granting local and regional authorities a formal role in migrant selection and integration, thereby increasing their influence in policymaking
- encouraging the formation of advocacy coalitions that unite local governments, businesses, and civil society around shared interests
- enhancing the visibility of rural challenges and opportunities in national and international policy areas
- providing rural communities with demographic and economic resources that bolster their bargaining power in intergovernmental negotiations

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Policy Recommendations

Place-based immigration policies offer tailored solutions to address the interlinked crises of economic and demographic decline in certain regions and states and ensures that immigrants arrive where they are needed, welcomed, and likely to remain. Drawing from the analysis of the policies in this paper, future policy designs should prioritize balanced regional growth, economic inclusion, and integrated community engagement, taking into consideration the following recommendations.

Recommendations for National Governments

- **Establish clear and accessible pathways to permanent residency.**

National governments should ensure that place-based visa programs include well-defined and attainable pathways to permanent residency. This can be achieved through criteria such as a minimum duration of stay in designated regions, income thresholds, and continuous residency requirements. These measures foster long-term commitment to regional development and provide clarity and stability for immigrants planning their futures.

- **Provide targeted incentives for international graduates.**

Governments should design policies that incentivize international students who graduate from regional campuses to remain in those areas. This may include longer post-study work rights, reduced barriers to permanent residency, and priority access to regional jobs. Such incentives help convert temporary residents into long-term contributors to the regional economy.

- **Encourage entrepreneurial pathways.**

Immigration policy should include pathways for entrepreneurs, small business founders, and self-employed professionals to settle in less populated areas. Governments can support these individuals with simplified visa procedures, access to startup capital, and mentoring programs tailored to rural business contexts. This approach leverages the creativity and economic potential that immigrants often bring.

- **Monitor outcomes and maintain policy flexibility.**

National agencies must implement mechanisms to track and evaluate the performance of place-based immigration programs. Key indicators such as employment rates, retention, community engagement, and service utilization should inform policy adjustments. This ensures programs remain responsive to real-world challenges and opportunities.

- **Ensure affordable housing and infrastructure support.**

To make regional settlement viable, governments must fund infrastructure development, including affordable housing, public transportation, and broadband connectivity. These elements significantly influence immigrants' decisions to stay long-term and should be integrated into regional immigration frameworks.

- **Offer language and education support.**

Host governments should invest in job-specific language programs and systems to recognize and validate foreign qualifications. These resources should be accessible both in-person and online, to ensure coverage in remote areas. Language proficiency and credential recognition are critical to unlocking immigrants' full economic potential.

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- **Improve access to healthcare and social services.**
Immigrants often relocate with their families, making access to education, healthcare, and childcare essential. National policies should prioritize investment in these services within regional communities to promote inclusive development and long-term settlement.
- **Streamline legal and administrative support.**
Governments should simplify and digitize visa applications and administrative procedures. Establishing regional legal support hubs will make it easier for immigrants to navigate the system, especially in remote areas. This reduces bureaucracy and enhances transparency.
- **Promote a positive public image of immigration.**
Public awareness campaigns that highlight immigrants' success stories and their contributions to local economies can foster public support. Positive narratives and inclusive messaging play a key role in reducing discrimination and building welcoming communities.

Recommendations for Local and Regional Governments

- **Institutionalize community-driven selection.**
Local governments should actively participate in nominating visa candidates and shaping settlement processes. Programs like Canada's RNIP show that when communities help select immigrants, alignment with local labor market needs improves. This increases both retention and integration.
- **Create welcoming programs and community engagement opportunities.**
Regional authorities should invest in activities that promote intercultural exchange, such as mentoring initiatives, community events, and civic engagement programs. These efforts strengthen social cohesion and cultivate a sense of belonging among newcomers.
- **Address structural barriers that affect retention.**
Local governments should assess and improve core infrastructure such as education, housing, healthcare, and transportation to make regional life more attractive and sustainable for immigrants. Coordination across departments and community stakeholders is key to success.
- **Foster public- and private-sector collaboration.**
Municipalities should facilitate partnerships among employers, NGOs, and local organizations to enhance recruitment and settlement efforts. This includes co-funded services, workforce development grants, and shared housing or transport solutions tailored to immigrant needs.

By linking migration with place-specific development strategies, policymakers can achieve multiple objectives: boosting local economies, supporting population growth, and strengthening social cohesion.

Annex

Methodology

This policy paper integrates multiple qualitative research methods to develop a comprehensive understanding of place-based and regional immigration policies.

Desk Research on Academic Literature and Policy Papers

A review of academic research, policy reports, and legal documents was conducted to map the current landscape of place-based immigration. The review included peer-reviewed journal articles, governmental publications, and reports from international organizations and think tanks.

Expert Interviews

Expert and background interviews were carried out with policymakers, migration scholars, legal experts, and representatives of NGOs in North America, Canada, Australia and Europe. Experts were selected based on their involvement in the design or evaluation of place-based immigration programs. The interviews provided nuanced insights into practical implementation challenges, policy successes, and emerging trends.

Focus Group Debates

Structured focus group debates were organized to include a range of perspectives from stakeholders including administrative staff of local governments, community organizations, international NGOs, city networks and migrants. These discussions highlighted ground-level challenges in migrant integration, service provision, and regional collaboration.