

Is Manitoba's immigration 'success' worth crowing over?

By: Patrick Grady

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The Manitoba Provincial Nominee Program (PNP), which played a key role in helping to attract almost 16,000 immigrants to Manitoba last year, got a lot of press last April.

Immigration Minister Jason Kenney touched off the controversy, announcing the Manitoba government would no longer be on the receiving end of some \$36 million for immigrant settlement services. The province reacted strongly claiming this would ruin the program, which was critical for the province's population and development strategy.

This largely turned out to be a tempest in a teapot, as all the federal government wanted to do was to administer these programs the same way it was in every other province and territory outside Quebec and not to cut funding as the province feared. As is often the case in Canada, the media coverage focused on the intergovernmental spat over who would get to spend the money and take the credit and not on the performance of the PNP itself.

The key question was never asked: Is the Manitoba PNP really as successful as everyone seems to believe?

The Manitoba program is one of the earliest PNPs and can be considered something of a prototype for the others that followed. The program was launched, by federal-provincial agreement, in 1999. It is one of the largest programs, accounting for 39 per cent of the 33,722 principal applicant immigrants (PA) admitted through the program from 2005 to 2009. It accounts for 91 per cent of principal applicant immigrants admitted to Manitoba in economic immigration categories, so it has become the main instrument for selecting economic immigrants to Manitoba. Through family ties and networks, the PNP also leads to subsequent family class immigration.

The Citizenship and Immigration Canada evaluation published last November provides some useful data from the immigration database that cast doubt on the rosy picture painted by the federal and provincial enthusiasts of the Manitoba program.

For all time horizons -- one year after arrival, three years and five years -- principal applicants under the PNP residing in Manitoba had the absolute lowest employment income of those of any of the provinces. For example, after three years, the average employment income of a principal applicant in Manitoba was only \$32,800 compared to \$70,100 in Alberta, \$57,600 in British Columbia and \$53,600 in Saskatchewan.

A more comprehensive indicator of the success of immigrants going to a particular province is the average employment income for all immigrants, including family members earning employment income that can be tabulated from the census. While it shows a big increase in the number of recent immigrants in Manitoba from 8,420 in 2000 to 12,600 in 2005, it also reveals the average employment income of immigrants was only slightly higher for the most recent cohort (arriving between 2001 and 2004), rising from \$20,380 in 2000 to \$21,307 in 2005, and thus did not keep pace with average employment earnings for non-immigrants in the province.

Moreover, it is significant that recent immigrants to Manitoba continued to do worse than total recent immigrants to Canada, earning only 88.9 per cent of average income of all recent immigrants to Canada.

The bottom line is that the Manitoba Government might be successful at attracting more immigrants, but the immigrants themselves are continuing to perform poorly in the labour market, actually doing worse than recent immigrants in the rest of the country.

Instead of remedying the poor performance of recent immigrants, the Manitoba Provincial Nominee Program seems to be making the situation worse from both a provincial and national point of view.

Indeed the average employment income of immigrants arriving in Manitoba after the start of the PNP is so low as to give rise to concerns that the increasing number of immigrants the Manitoba government has been so successful in attracting are likely to end up costing both the provincial and federal governments far more in increased spending on social, health and other benefits than the governments will be able to collect in taxes and other revenues, leaving Canadian taxpayers to pick up the bill.

Given the likely fiscal cost of higher immigration to Manitoba, why is the Manitoba PNP considered such an unmitigated success that the Manitoba and federal governments are fighting to take credit?

Patrick Grady is an Ottawa-based economist with global-economics.ca.