

MOVING TO THE COTTAGE: PANDEMIC MIGRATION IN MUSKOKA AND HALIBURTON, ONTARIO, CANADA

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ABSTRACT

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, many regions have seen increased urban–rural migration as people sought relative affordability and outdoor space. In Ontario, Canada, most rural communities experienced population increases as of the 2021 census as a result of in-migration from larger cities, reversing longstanding population decline trends. Using a province-wide survey, interviews and workshops, our research engaged local governments across the province to understand the impacts of these unexpected population gains. Using two case studies in Ontario’s Cottage Country, we find that infrastructure shortages were persistent challenges, as well as conflict between new and existing residents. We also found that migration trends since COVID-19 highlighted the importance of public outdoor spaces in both rural and urban communities, including nature-based spaces.

Keywords: migration, rural, recreation, COVID-19, rural planning.

1 INTRODUCTION

During the COVID-19 pandemic years (roughly 2021–2023) many countries saw a spike in urban to rural migration [1], [2]. A series of factors contributed to this trend, including remote working capabilities and physical distancing measures to mitigate viral transmission, which made rural areas and their open space appealing to those living in high density cities. In Ontario, Canada, many residents migrated from the province’s capital city, Toronto, to second homes in rural areas, or purchased real estate in rural areas where they found relative affordability. This migration was reflected in the 2021 Census of Population, which saw many rural census regions reverse population declines that had been ongoing since 1996.

This paper considers the impact of in-migration on two rural regions in Ontario, Muskoka District and Haliburton County. Through a mixed methods case study approach, our engagement with municipal staff, elected officials, and community partners revealed themes related to environmental impacts of this migration including infrastructure and local government service delivery,, and the value of access to outdoor/green spaces in both urban and rural settings.

2 ONTARIO’S COTTAGE COUNTRY

In Ontario, 16.4% of property owners own multiple properties [3]. Properties that are not primary residences are often used for vacation purposes, colloquially referred to as cottages or cabins. Cottage country in this context generally refers to rural areas located on the Canadian Shield, with a high concentration of recreational properties, often located on or near lakes for access to water-based activities. Cottaging in Ontario is tied to a persistent cultural myth of an empty and wild Canadian landscape, where the experience of the settler or voyageur is performed or celebrated, with an assumed erasure of local peoples [4]. It is worth noting here that ‘cottage country’ typically refers to areas that are relatively undeveloped and sparsely populated. There is a prevalence of forested land, and infrastructure is relatively minimal: many roads are unpaved, and depending on the property, utilities servicing is also minimal. Cottages are often on septic systems in the absence of a water and sewer system, and local government services such as garbage collection is often



non-existent. In this way, the natural environment is relatively unaltered by modern services and development in these areas. In terms of built form, the concept of the cottage has initially referred to a rustic cabin with limited services, though many modern-day cottages are fully serviced single-family houses

Cottagers on Ontario have long been preoccupied with protecting the natural environment. As early as 1989, the Government of Ontario published *Cottage Country: An Environmental Manual for Cottagers* [5], which was distributed to cottage owners to educate citizens on how to mitigate environmental problems specific to the area: water quality, responsible waste disposal, fishing and fish contamination, pollution issues due to fertilizer and rainfall run off, among others. The manual discusses the development limits of small lakes in cottage country and calls for controlling development to maintain the health of the lakes and landscape and warns of the threat of winter cottaging to contribute to overdevelopment.

In terms of geography, jurisdictions that are included in the definition of cottage country are relatively fluid, though scholars have explored these concepts in a series of Ontario's regions including Muskoka District, Rideau Lakes, the Kawartha Highlands, and Haliburton County. This paper highlights the impacts of pandemic urban–rural migration in two of these neighbouring regions, Muskoka District and Haliburton County.

As COVID-19 lockdowns began, many second homeowners opted to relocate to their cottages as lockdown measures were enacted. At the time, this highlighted glaring social inequities between those that had second homes and those without [6], and generated discourse on the ethics of individuals migrating when the actual threat of viral transmission was still unknown. In the subsequent years, urban–rural migration activity has decelerated from its peak in 2022, though population projections suggest some migration will sustain at a steady pace [7]. Our research explored the impacts of pandemic urban–rural migration in rural Ontario communities. This paper will highlight the impacts in cottage country, Ontario by highlighting findings from case studies in Muskoka District and Haliburton County, Ontario.

3 LITERATURE REVIEW: URBAN TO RURAL MIGRATION

In 1998, Halseth [8] wrote about changes and development pressures in Ontario's cottage country, noting that 'the conversion of cottages into year-round homes is an important issue in many rural communities. Conversion generates changes and demands that a host community often finds difficult to manage. Pressures include demands for new or improved levels of services such as paved or widened roadways, garbage collection, water supply, and the like. Changing social structures resulting from conversion can also generate conflicts over attitudes towards local norms, institutions, and political activity in these rural communities.' Halseth's observations are still relevant today throughout Ontario's cottage country and reflects the findings of our study. While many rural communities experienced population decline since the publication of his book, the migration patterns spurred by COVID-19 brought the issues he identified back to the forefront.

While we use a Canadian concept of cottage country, the urban to rural migration trends that occurred during the pandemic years were common in many Westernized countries. In the USA, Petersen et al. [9] studied US Postal Service change of address data to understand inflows and outflows between city centres and rural America. Their findings show that rural counties that had historically experienced out-migration had less net loss of residents, and even net gains throughout the pandemic. This was especially true for counties with outdoor recreation as their main draw. They note that upward trends to rural areas may sustain beyond the pandemic years. They write, 'in the most rural counties net migration rates remained elevated (by ~70 net migrants per 10,000 residents) in 2022/23, suggesting the possibility of



long-term impacts beyond the initial migration response to the pandemic shock' (p. 148). These migration trends raise questions regarding environmental impacts on rural areas throughout the United States.

Rowe et al. [10] summarized a series of articles that explored COVID-19 migration patterns internationally. Their analysis shows that Australia, Germany, Japan, Spain, Sweden and the UK saw similar internal urban–rural migration patterns and a media narrative that suggested a mass urban exodus was occurring. They found that large cities in these countries experienced reductions to population inflow primarily, rather than significant outflows overall. Throughout the countries surveyed, the types of areas they find gaining population are suburban and outer parts of cities, and rural areas largely that serve as second home or holiday destinations. While the total population effects on the cities studied was minimal, they found that the population change impacts in rural areas was significant: an influx of young professionals in countries like Spain saw aging rural communities' demographic profiles trend younger, reversing aging and fertility trends. They conclude, 'Even where an 'urban exodus' is noted, this is seen to be due primarily to the acceleration of the usual centrifugal movements of families with children and older people nearing retirement... the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in just a temporary interruption of business as usual in internal migration behaviour' (p. 5). This study dealt primarily with migration and demographic trends and did not explore environmental impacts to rural areas.

Incaltarau et al. [11] used Eurobarometer survey data to assess population migration trends throughout the EU based in data from 2021. They studied migration intentions among different groups and demographics. Rather than the overall impacts of migration to rural areas, their findings provide context to migration preferences among those moving to rural areas. Interestingly, they found that 'the migration willingness to rural areas seems to be higher where citizens are confident that the EU investments align with the actual rural needs and if they are aware of EU actions addressing the environmental issues. Their belief that they can play an active citizenship role may indeed make them more prone to resettle in rural areas.' It is interesting to note here that they find that rural areas with a commitment to the environmental issue were more appealing to urban–rural migrants, and that the representative persons that would move from urban centres to rural areas are 'extremely preoccupied with environmental issues.' This reflects some of the cultural sentiment in Ontario's cottage country. Those that spend time there are generally drawn to its environmental assets.

Our research is positioned within these broader trends. Ontario's urban–rural migration trends were felt throughout the province, and the impact of this migration is acutely felt in cottage country.

4 METHODS

Our study used a case study approach [12] and mixed methods to understand the impacts of pandemic migration in rural Ontario. The data captured for the two case studies we profile in this paper is the result of workshops and one-on-one interviews with municipal representatives and some community partners (e.g., local business organizations like Chambers of Commerce) in each jurisdiction (Muskoka District, Haliburton County). Research participants also responded to a province-wide survey that had been distributed to municipal employees representing each municipality in Ontario. That survey probed for overall impacts on population change, opportunities and challenges related to in-migration, and social and economic impacts. Environmental impacts were not expressly probed for as many respondents were not well positioned to speak to these, though environmental impacts or future potential environmental impacts were revealed through discussions around infrastructure and service delivery.



Our research focused on engaging participants in municipal government. Local governance in Ontario varies, but ‘in the majority of rural areas there is both an upper-tier municipal government (county or region), and a lower-tier municipal government (typically, referred to as a town, township, city, or municipality). Upper-tier municipalities can be understood as the managers of a large geographic area; they ensure consistency, implement federal and provincial policy, and coordinate regional influence’ [13]. Lower-tier municipal governments typically cover smaller geographical areas and manage infrastructure, land use, and regulatory compliance within their boundaries. By engaging with participants that represented both regional and local governments, we were able to draw observations about the impacts of urban–rural migration on municipal service delivery (e.g. locally managed infrastructure, programming, policies), as well as broader social and economic impacts that participants witnessed at the local level, which have implications for local environmental impacts.

5 CASE STUDIES: MUSKOKA DISTRICT AND HALIBURTON COUNTY

Muskoka District and Haliburton County are two neighbouring, upper-tier, or regional jurisdictions that are commonly known as cottage country. Respectively, Muskoka District saw a population increase of 10% (6,060 persons) between the 2016–2021 census periods, which exceeded its 4% population increase between 2011–2016. Haliburton County grew by 13.9% between the 2016–2021 census (2,509 persons), an increase on the growth rate of 5.9% between the 2011 and 2016 census. Haliburton County’s growth during the pandemic years exceeded its existing growth forecasts by a significant margin. By 2021, its population had reached 80% of its internal population projections generated in 2016, the year of the previous census of population [14].

Since European settlement, both Haliburton and Muskoka’s regional economies had historically grown around lumber and sawmills which established as early as the 1860s. As these natural resource-based industries declined throughout the 20th century, they have become a seasonal cottage destination for urbanites from Toronto, Ottawa, and other surrounding cities. While the regions border each other, Muskoka District is a shorter driving distance from Toronto and is widely understood to be the ‘heart of cottage country’, with a slightly longer history of this type of development. Historically, Haliburton County has seen somewhat slower cottage and recreation-based development, reflected by a sentiment shared by a research participant: ‘Haliburton now is what Muskoka was in the 80s.’

In both regions, the most common form of urban–rural migration that participants witnessed was seasonal residents with cottages winterizing their residences with the intent of residing in them year-round. In addition, many new residents purchased residential properties with some haste. During the peak of real estate activity in 2022, research participants observed that many new residents had purchased cottages or homes sight-unseen, leading to an increase of planning inquiries to the municipality. The following is a quote that captures that activity: ‘...so they [the purchasers] think they’re getting something that looks great on paper and then they show up and say, oh, you know... I’m not allowed to put a dock here because we have sensitive fish habitats, etcetera. So, there was a lot of disingenuous buying, if you like.’ What this quote ultimately illustrates is one of the persistent challenges with urban–rural migration, where new residents from urban centres may not be aware of some of the complexities or regulations that govern rural properties. As the 1989 *Environmental Manual for Cottagers* by Environment Ontario identified, there are many complexities in stewarding a rural property in cottage country and maintaining sensitive habitats. This raises future questions about the environmental impacts of rapid population increases in cottage country.



5.1 Landfills usage and indicators of population change

One of the challenges with urban–rural migration patterns during the pandemic was its unexpected nature for rural municipalities. We asked research participants how they were able to validate their observations in their work, as their existing population projections did not account for the population changes they were witnessing. This line of questioning led to a list of indicators that the municipalities had used to justify any local government investment or response prior to the release of the 2021 Census of Population.

One of the most revealing indicators for Haliburton County staff was their landfill usage. In the absence of municipal garbage collection, residents bring their waste to the landfills and use their landfill card to be permitted to leave their garbage. Staff noted that landfill use in November 2024 was at rates equal to July and August, peak cottage season, prior to the pandemic. This raises questions about waste management in cottage country. If population increases persist, rural communities in cottage country will be required to increase landfill capacity either within or outside of their borders. In a sparsely populated area such as those found in cottage country, landfills and waste management are challenged to provide sustainable waste management either due to lack of funding or resources. Trimble [15] noted a series of barriers to waste management in jurisdictions consistent with what is known as cottage country. They find that, among other challenges, cost to the municipality and awareness, participation, and motivation among residents were barriers to effective waste management. Future research could explore waste management in cottage country further as year-round residents have increased in recent years.

Research participants also noted that building permit data, which is compiled as residents apply for building permits with the local municipality, had indicated that many seasonal cottages were being converted to year-round residences during the pandemic years 2020–2022. As noted previously, the number of planning inquiries about specific properties received by municipalities was another indicator that new residents were moving in. This signals increased development in cottage country to be managed and balanced with the maintenance of the local natural environment.

5.2 Infrastructure and services

A common challenge in both case study jurisdictions was an increase in demand for services by new residents. Recreational facilities and programming, such as a new hockey arena or indoor pools, were common assets that new residents were requesting from their municipal governments. A persistent challenge here that research participants noted was that the expense of recreational programming and capital projects are not necessarily in step with taxation revenue to offset these costs.

One local township experienced an increase in inquiries regarding snow removal in winter on local roads, where expectation for expeditious road clearing had not previously existed. Demand for municipal garbage collection has also increased. In addition, an anecdote was shared regarding the water levels the previous summer. ‘This year our water levels have been slightly lower than average. So folks who’ve been here for a long time just deal with it, but [new residents] are concerned about their docks. [They have asked] the Township to review our bylaws so that they can put bigger docks in.’ Ultimately, the municipality assured new residents that the water level variation they were witnessing was within normal range, again demonstrating a lack of knowledge on local conditions that longer-term residents would have been aware of. This reflects the need for public engagement and education on how to care for and live within the natural environment within cottage country. Again, the 1989



Government of Ontario's Environmental Manual for Cottagers would prove an invaluable resource today as cottage country faces increased development pressures.

A local municipality also noted that it had made significant public realm investments because of urban-rural in-migration. Staff noted that use of public space increased by >5% during and since the COVID-19 years, leading to investments in three dog parks, downtowns and other parts of settlement areas. 'We've hired staff recently within the last eighteen months on the Parks and Rec side to beautify The Township as a whole. So now we have some nice, you know, flower beds and our green spaces are being maintained a lot better because yeah, people want to live in a nice-looking Township.' The investment in dog parks sparked an interesting note regarding the perception of rural areas containing unlimited open space for public use, when in reality, much of the rural landscape is privately owned. The demand for dog parks highlights an increase for municipalities to implement and maintain welcoming public spaces. The prevalence of access to outdoor public spaces reflects the highlighted importance of access to green space on an international scale for human health and wellbeing. In the UK, the Environmental Improvement Plan (2025) includes the commitment to 'make sure that everyone has access to green or blue spaces within a 15-minute walk from home' [16]. This commitment is based on ample evidence of the physical, social, and economic benefits of access to green spaces [17]. Current data on access to green and blue spaces in the UK finds that 'higher percentage of rural households (91%) have access to green or blue space compared to urban households (78%)', though this is based on a definition of green space in rural areas that includes the wider countryside. They note that 'although spaces such as nature reserves, open access land and woodlands were included, the fragmented and scattered nature of these spaces mean that large numbers of rural households are not considered to have access to them. The addition of rural rights of way ... made a big difference for rural households, due to the extensive nature of rural rights of way, providing many more opportunities for a green space experience, in particular where other types are lacking' [18].

A key difference between Ontario and the UK in terms of rural access to green space is that in the UK, the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (CRoW Act) permits some rights of way access to open countryside and wild spaces. In Ontario, while undeveloped Crown Land is technically available to access, there are generally no formal access points. There are also stricter rules about private property access which would not provide general access to green spaces. Our finding about the importance of publicly accessible outdoor green spaces signals opportunities for future research in Ontario and the rest of Canada about green space access.

6 CONCLUSIONS

Rural Ontario is generally quite sparsely populated with many undeveloped areas, especially in cottage country on the Canadian Shield. It contains sensitive habitats, and residents both seasonal and permanent carry sentiments about maintaining the natural environment. Urban to rural migration during the COVID-19 pandemic had varying impacts in Ontario's cottage country. Since recent in-migration by new residents from urban centres, the rural communities that comprise cottage country have been faced with new or increasing demands for service delivery and/or infrastructure that they are often a challenge to address due to cost or other limitations. We find that the draw to rural communities since the COVID-19 pandemic and their relatively open spaces highlights the importance of open and publicly accessible nature-based spaces in communities of all scales. With the natural environment as a driving 'pull' factor to rural areas, our findings highlight the need for further research and investment in understanding the environmental impacts of population increases in these



communities. Under municipal jurisdiction, this may include further investment into waste management or education among new residents on how to steward their land.

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