

Immigrants do better in small towns

Although large cities like Montreal are still magnets for immigrants, small towns actually yield them greater prosperity, a new study has found.

The earnings gap between immigrants in large cities and those in towns with populations less than 100,000 - like Joliette, about 60 kilometres north of Montreal - is more than double in the first year of arrival, the study by Statistics Canada says.

And immigrants in small towns swiftly overtake their Canadian neighbours' incomes, earning two per cent more after four years and 18 per cent more after 11 years in the community.

Immigrants' better rates of higher education and the small towns' steeper immersion in either French or English may explain their success, said André Bernard, the study's author.

Big cities may provide a false sense of security, he added, because ethnic communities there can shelter people too much and hinder them from integrating and learning language skills needed for work.

The findings are culled from income tax reports of roughly 4 million people, including about 400,000 immigrants, between 1992 and 2005, Bernard said.

A large majority of immigrants - about 75 per cent - settle in Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver. Less than three per cent choose to live in very small towns like Ormstown (pop. 3,600), about 50 kilometres southwest of Montreal.

For those who do go small, the payoff is unmistakable.

The initial income gap between immigrants and the rest of the population is 37 per cent for those living in very large urban areas. This gap decreases gradually and rather slowly, falling under the 10 per cent mark in the twelfth year.

But in small urban areas, the initial gap is only 14 per cent, and in the fourth year, the gap is reversed, with immigrants'



earnings surpassing non-immigrants' earnings by 2 per cent.

"It may just be easier for immigrants to turn their academic advantage into jobs" in the smaller towns, he said, noting that Canadians there have relatively lower levels of education.

Agusti Nicolau, assistant director of the Intercultural Institute of Montreal, said large cities can be intimidating for some newcomers.

"It might be easier for some people to make connections in smaller areas," he said.

Marie-Thérèse Chicha, a professor of industrial relations at the Université de Montréal, noted earnings in smaller communities are generally lower for everyone, not just immigrants.

The study's findings, she said "may just show that it's easier for immigrants to get jobs there because Canadians aren't as interested in small town jobs."

Lamine Foura, 38, a Montreal engineer and community radio host who is originally from Algeria, said the study might give people misconceptions about country life.

"It's not like everyone should now rush out to live in the rural areas," Foura said.

Large cities provide crucial support networks for immigrants, he said.

"I'm certain most of the immigrants who are successful in smaller towns got their jobs before they moved there."

The larger, more important context for immigrants is that they are arriving in Canada more highly skilled than those who arrived several decades ago, Foura said. And yet they face a crisis that is present in both urban and non-urban areas: employers' refusal to recognize academic credentials or work experience abroad.