



**Institute  
for Work &  
Health**

Research Excellence  
Safe Work  
Healthy Workers

# Roundtable on the health and work of newcomers to Canada

Meeting summary



## About the Institute for Work & Health

The Institute for Work & Health is an independent, not-for-profit research organization. Its mission is to conduct and mobilize research that supports policy-makers, employers and workers in creating healthy, safe and inclusive work environments.



© Institute for Work & Health, December 2024.

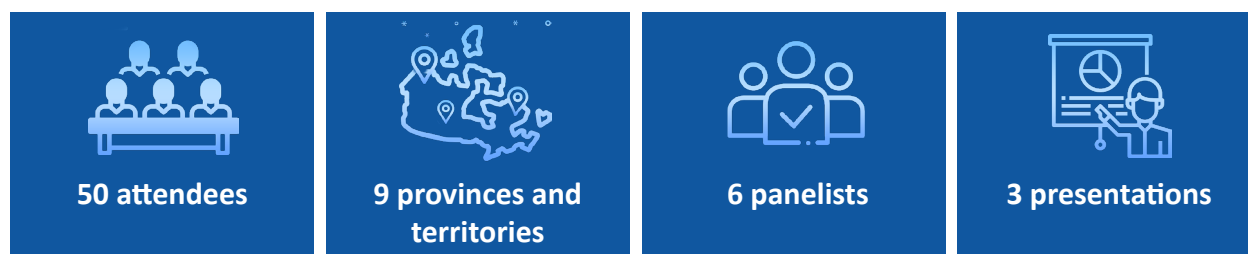
This document is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>  
That means this document can be used and shared as long as IWH is credited as the source, the contents are not modified, and the contents are used for non-commercial purposes.

## Introduction

On November 14, 2024, the Institute for Work & Health (IWH) hosted an invitation only, virtual roundtable on the health and work of newcomers to Canada.

Over 50 people participated from nine provinces and territories, representing settlement and employment services, government, health and safety associations, research organizations, employers, newcomers and workers.

Through three presentations participants learned about health and safety challenges faced by newcomers in the Canadian labour market, ways to facilitate the safe integration of newcomers into the workplace and the importance of plain language in communicating with newcomers. A panel discussion highlighted current activity that is addressing the health and wellbeing of newcomer workers and identified gaps in research and collaboration that can be filled to help ensure newcomer workers are safe and healthy at work. Participants posed thought-provoking questions and added commentary illustrating the complexity of the issues and a will to work together to address them.



## Background

Immigration is key to Canada's economic success and growth and has been used as a mechanism to address labour shortages in many sectors. In 2023, Canada admitted more than 450,000 permanent residents and an additional 804,000 temporary residents.

While significant emphasis has been placed on ensuring employment for newcomers to Canada, less attention has been paid to the quality of employment—in particular safe and healthy work. Recent immigrants (those who've been in Canada fewer than 10 years) and refugees are more likely than Canadian-born workers to have lower quality work conditions and to work in and hazardous jobs a. They are less likely to receive training and to have knowledge in occupational health and safety and worker rights. As a result, newcomer workers experience higher risk of work-related injuries and illness.

Within this context, the Roundtable on the Health and Work of Newcomers to Canada aimed to:

- Establish a shared understanding of the evidence on workplace health and wellbeing of newcomer workers to Canada.
- Identify priority research questions and data needs to address current information gaps of the workplace health and safety experiences of newcomers (including opportunities to evaluate policy, and workplace and program-level interventions focused on the newcomer workforce).
- Identify opportunities to strengthen collaboration across sectors, disciplines, and jurisdictions.
- Shape a research agenda for this shared national issue.

## Highlights of the presentations

The event began with three short presentations.

### Setting the stage

#### Dr. Peter Smith

President and Senior Scientist, Institute for Work & Health

Dr. Peter Smith welcomed participants and provided an overview of what we know from existing research — including research conducted by IWH — on the work and health of newcomers to Canada.

He emphasized that newcomers face challenges entering the Canadian labour market and accessing work that is healthy and safe. They are more likely to work in physically demanding occupations, in temporary jobs, and in small businesses than Canadian-born workers, and they are more likely to report being overqualified for their jobs. Some newcomers also face language difficulties that can interfere with the communication of health and safety information. Recent immigrants are also less likely to feel they can speak up about workplace hazards, potentially due to their need to keep employed.

These factors contribute to a higher injury risk. For example, the risk of serious work injury is twice as high for male recent immigrants compared to Canadian-born men. Particular groups of newcomers, such as refugees and non-permanent residents, are at higher risk of employment that is unhealthy and unsafe.



## Labour market integration, health and well-being of newcomer workers

### Dr. Basak Yanar

Scientist, Institute for Work & Health

Dr. Basak Yanar presented on ongoing research on occupational health and safety (OHS) in linguistically and culturally diverse workplaces. The research builds on past IWH work that highlighted the challenges workplaces face in ensuring the health and safety of newcomer workers.

The current project is looking at how worker characteristics and identity; workplace policies, practices and culture; and the broader socio-economic and policy context interact to shape the experiences of newcomer workers. Yanar presented preliminary findings based on interviews and focus groups with policy-makers, OHS professionals, service providers, employers, and newcomers. Key findings include the following.

- Settlement challenges, language barriers, cultural adaptation, and unsafe working conditions contribute to high levels of physical and psychological health and safety risk among newcomer workers.
- Employers experience challenges related to newcomer workers' OHS knowledge, limited language capacity, as well as limitations in their own resource capacity and confidence navigating different cultural practices around safety.
- Supporting newcomers' safety at work requires setting expectations and conveying information through open, clear and consistent communication (and addressing linguistic and cultural needs).
- An integrated approach to physical and psychological health and safety is needed. Employers recognize the importance of the psychological wellbeing of newcomers but feel limited in their ability to support it. Community organizations and other third parties (such as health-care providers) can play an important role. This is part of a broader need for collaboration among employers, policy-makers and service providers to support the health and safety of newcomer workers.

In response to questions from attendees about building a culture of trust between employers and newcomers, Dr. Yanar emphasized the importance of: accommodating language needs as well as encouraging workers to speak up (which newcomers tend to be particularly reluctant to do); setting clear expectations about safety practices; and being consistent in following up on these expectations, especially when there are safety incidents.

## Approaches and tools to share information – using plain language principles to help newcomers find, understand and use your information

### Jocelyn Pletz

Management Consultant, and Secretary and Newsletter Editor of Plain Canada Clair

When injuries happen in the workplace, particularly with new workers, employers often focus on changing how they deliver their workplace training. One option that is often overlooked is reviewing written materials from a plain language perspective. Research has shown that when employers apply plain language principles, they can reduce costs and help their employees work safely and efficiently. Jocelyn Pletz began by outlining the principles of plain language writing:

- Readers get what they need (**relevant**)
- Readers can easily find what they need (**findable**)
- Readers can easily understand what they find (**understandable**)
- Readers can easily use the information (**usable**)

She also emphasized a number of design elements that support plain language writing. These include the use of bullet points (or numbers, if following a sequence), headings and subheadings, left alignment, short sentences, and templates that allow for consistent formats across similar documents.

Pletz also noted the importance of testing the usability of documents by getting feedback from people who are representative of the intended audience(s). Feedback from a group of employees can also help employers to consider cultural sensitivities in their communications.

When asked about whether plain language is always necessary, Pletz noted that plain language may not be appropriate between subject-matter experts. Pletz remarked that some documents like government regulations are often not written in plain language, but could be, adding that it takes additional time and resources to do this.

## Highlights of the panel discussion

Smith facilitated a roundtable conversation on ways to improve the health and work of newcomers. Panelists from across Canada brought a range of perspectives to the discussion. They are:

- **Anne Tennier**, President and CEO, Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS)
- **Paula Knight**, CEO, Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia (ISANS)
- **Dr. Alain Marchand**, Chief Scientific Officer, Institut de recherche Robert-Sauvé en santé et en sécurité du travail (IRSST)
- **Sandra Lawson**, Assistant Deputy Minister, Fair, Safe and Healthy Workplaces Division, Ontario Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development (MLITSD)
- **Rania Younes**, Senior Manager, National Partnerships & Engagement, Immigrant Employment Council of BC (IECBC)

Panelists began by introducing themselves and highlighting the work their organizations do related to the health and wellbeing of newcomers.

Anne Tennier described how CCOHS ensures materials are available in a variety of languages and is implementing a number of strategies to make information accessible. These strategies include use of plain language principles, ensuring that materials are compatible with mobile phones and exploring the feasibility of online translation tools.

Paula Knight noted that ISANS, the largest settlement agency in the Atlantic region, offers programs for newcomers entering the workforce. The agency provides information about OHS and about rights at work. It also supports employers through programs such as cultural competency training and interpretation support. ISANS uses a holistic approach to its services that takes into account the linguistic and family context of the worker and involves collaboration with other organizations.

Alain Marchand noted that IRSST, an OHS research organization, has been conducting research on newcomer health and safety, including the use of administrative data to look at the pathways of newcomers in the workers' compensation system in Quebec. IRSST has identified a particular need for more research on temporary migrant workers.

Sandra Lawson talked about the role of the Fair, Safe and Healthy Workplaces Division of the Ontario MLITSD. The division promotes OHS and enforces the *Occupational Health and Safety Act*, the *Employment Standards Act* and the *Employment Protection for Foreign Nationals Act*. The division enlists multilingual consultants to support its work and keeps a record of which of its frontline workers have multilingual skills so that communication can occur in the language of the worker. Many fact sheets are available in multiple languages (up to 26). The division also builds relationships with community organizations that can serve as trusted intermediaries with newcomer workers.

Rania Younes described the work of the IECBC, which provides support to employers to attract and retain immigrant talent, in collaboration with government agencies and other organizations. IECBC aims to ensure that OHS resources meet the needs of both employers and newcomers and that they help to establish a safety culture in the workplace.

## Looking ahead: towards a research agenda to support newcomer health and work

The panel conversation then turned to focus on a research agenda to support newcomer health and wellbeing. Panelists and audience members considered the challenges they face ensuring healthy and safe work for newcomers and the types of information they need to continue or improve their work. A number of themes and research questions emerged from the discussion.

### **Evaluation of current initiatives**

Several panelists talked about the need for research to evaluate existing or new initiatives to enhance newcomer OHS, including the effects on worker wellbeing and the return on investment. For example, what activities of settlement agencies are working well and what can be improved?

### **Sector-specific information/research**

Panelists also emphasized the need for more granular information and data. In particular, they highlighted the need for sector-specific information, and sector specific approaches. For example, which sectors are the ones with the highest demands for newcomer workers? How do newcomer integration practices at the workplace vary by sector?

### **Helping employers communicate with newcomers about health and safety**

Discussion also focused on the need for tools to support workplaces in safe integration of newcomer workers. Among the key questions were: How can we enhance cultural competencies in workplaces to improve worker safety and wellbeing? What evidence-based tools are needed to help employers develop clear communications to keep newcomer workers safe?

### **The mental health needs of newcomer workers**

Yanar (in her presentation) and Smith raised the question of how to better support the psychological wellbeing of newcomer workers. Panelists emphasized that mental health issues are complex: they can be shaped by issues in the workplace, the family and the community, so it is important to look beyond the workplace to address them. Yanar's research and panelists highlighted the need for collaboration to support newcomers not just as workers, but as people navigating a range of interconnected settlement challenges. This connected to a broader theme about the importance of collaboration.



### **The need for collaboration**

Panelists emphasized the need for a coordinated, collaborative effort across service providers, regulatory agencies and research organizations to address these issues. One participant suggested this could include collaboration between research organizations and community organizations to create evidence-based tools that take into account the lived experience of newcomer workers.

## **Next Steps**

In closing, Smith noted that this roundtable is the beginning of what will be a continuing conversation on these issues. As the presentations and roundtable discussion emphasized, ensuring safe and healthy work for newcomers to Canada requires collaboration across sectors. In addition to this meeting summary, IWH will share updates on its current research on the work and health of newcomers, news on additional opportunities to identify research priorities, and information on ways workers, workplaces, regulators, and settlement partners can participate in future IWH research.



**Institute  
for Work &  
Health**

Research Excellence  
Safe Work  
Healthy Workers

Institute for Work & Health  
400 University Ave., Suite 1800  
Toronto, Ontario M5G 1S5

T 416 927 2027  
E [info@iwh.on.ca](mailto:info@iwh.on.ca)

[iwh.on.ca](http://iwh.on.ca)



Connect with us on LinkedIn:  
[linkedin.com/company/institute-for-work-and-health](https://linkedin.com/company/institute-for-work-and-health)



Follow us on X  
[x.com/iwhresearch](https://x.com/iwhresearch)



Subscribe to our YouTube channel:  
[youtube.com/iwhresearch](https://youtube.com/iwhresearch)



Sign up online for our monthly e-newsletter  
[iwh.on.ca/subscribe](http://iwh.on.ca/subscribe)