Leaving the city

Towards a better understanding of contemporary counterurbanisation in southern Ontario

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Résumé / Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the trend of counterurbanisation, prompting a significant out-migration from major cities to rural and small-town municipalities. This research examines the contemporary drivers and impacts of counterurbanisation in southern Ontario, Canada, focusing on the relationship between this demographic shift and exurban development. The study utilises a mixed-methods approach, combining a statistical analysis of Census data with interviews of local planning professionals. The findings reveal that the pandemic has amplified pre-existing push and pull factors, driving residents from the Greater Toronto Area to seek more affordable housing, a quieter lifestyle, and access to natural amenities in exurban communities. The influx of new residents has resulted in rapid growth and development pressures, impacting housing affordability, infrastructure capacity, and community dynamics. The research underscores the need for proactive planning policies, effective community engagement, and collaboration between different levels of government to ensure sustainable and equitable growth in these communities. The study contributes to the broader understanding of counterurbanisation and its implications for regional planning and development at the urban-rural interface.

La pandémie de COVID-19 a accéléré la tendance à la contre-urbanisation, provoquant un exode important des grandes villes vers les municipalités rurales et les petites villes. Cette étude examine les moteurs et les impacts contemporains de la contre-urbanisation dans le sud de l'Ontario, au Canada, en se concentrant sur la relation entre ce changement démographique et le développement exurbain. L'étude utilise une approche mixte, combinant une analyse statistique des données du recensement et des entretiens avec des professionnels de la planification locale. Les résultats révèlent que la pandémie a amplifié les facteurs d'attraction et de répulsion préexistants, poussant les habitants de la région du Grand Toronto à rechercher des logements plus abordables, un mode de vie plus calme et l'accès à des équipements naturels dans les communautés exurbaines. L'afflux de nouveaux résidents a entraîné une croissance rapide et des pressions en matière de développement, ce qui a eu un impact sur l'accessibilité des logements, la capacité des infrastructures et la dynamique des communautés. L'étude souligne la nécessité de politiques de planification proactives, d'un engagement communautaire efficace et d'une collaboration entre les différents niveaux de gouvernement afin de garantir une croissance durable et équitable dans ces communautés. L'étude contribue à une meilleure compréhension de la contre-urbanisation et de ses implications pour la planification régionale et le développement à l'interface urbain-rural.

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Introduction

Counterurbanisation is a concept that emerged in the late twentieth century and is characterised by a significant out-migration from major cities to rural or small-town municipalities (Berry, 1976). Historically, counterurbanisation has been primarily associated with an outflux of wealthy populations seeking amenity-rich “countryside” settings (Mitchell & Bryant, 2020). However, the impetus for this movement has evolved in contemporary times, fuelled by complex factors that have gained newfound significance in a post-COVID world. Public health challenges and concerns about safety in densely-populated urban areas have led many residents to re-evaluate the benefits of urban living. The appeal of major cities is increasingly being questioned, especially as remote work and digital connectivity make it feasible for individuals to live farther from their workplaces. Challenges related to housing availability, cost of living, and social isolation that increasingly plague major cities have further exacerbated these debates and have led many households to reconsider their urban living arrangements for suburban, exurban, or periurban alternatives.

In the context of southern Ontario, population projections demonstrate that it is not urban cores, like the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), but settlements at the urban periphery that are slated to grow most rapidly over the next twenty years (Ontario Ministry of Finance, 2021). This regional growth reflects larger trends towards rural and small-town living that are increasingly notable in North American and European contexts. Exurban or periurban settlements, defined as extremely low density housing development in amenity-rich environments, are among the fastest-developing regions

across these geographies and reflect a growing residential preference for inhabiting the urban periphery (Berube et al., 2006; Taylor & Hurley, 2016). Access to natural amenities and a return to "village" living are gaining social and cultural appeal as urban centres continue to densify. However, these smaller exurban settlement areas are considerably less resourced than highly populated and established central metropolitan cores in facilitating and managing growth (Ontario Institute of Planners, 2001). Changing demographics and settlement expansion can cause rural displacement, ecological fragmentation, and community conflict (Charmes, 2009; Nelson, 2018). Counterurbanisation and its associated impacts have been discussed more broadly in literature on rural geographies and exurban development in North American and European contexts, suggesting it is a global phenomenon that warrants further study.

This research draws a contemporary portrait of the rural-urban interface in Ontario by analysing intra-provincial migration trends and development in the urban periphery. An analysis of Canadian Census data provides insight into demographic shifts occurring in rural and small-town (RST) communities across southern Ontario, particularly looking at the relationship between counterurban migration and exurban development. The impacts of these settlement patterns on growing communities are examined through discussion with local planning professionals. The resulting analysis demonstrates both the challenges associated with a COVID-related boom in counterurbanisation, but also highlights where innovative policies or responses have emerged in RST municipalities. This project adds to discussions surrounding the challenges of rapid growth and exurban development, and suggests planning and policy priorities for RST municipalities experiencing counterurbanisation. More broadly, this research aims to contribute to social and cultural discussions about the evolving relationship among urban, suburban, exurban, and rural settlements.

1.1 Scope and Constraints

Counterurbanisation is a relevant area of research across varied geographies, but particularly in those places with strong metropolitan centres that have a regional influence. Literature on counterurbanisation demonstrates historic trends of outward migration from urban centres is particularly characteristic across highly developed cities in Europe and North America (Taylor, 2011; Mitchell & Bryant, 2020). This research paper is focused on contemporary counterurbanisation trends in southern Ontario as the most densely populated and urbanised region in Canada. The Greater Toronto Area (GTA) in Ontario is recognised as a hub of economic activity, cultural diversity, and urban innovation that has consistently drawn a steady stream of residents, businesses, and immigrants over the years (Heisz, 2005). Evidence suggests increased interest from urban and suburban residents in this metropolitan centre, such as Toronto, Vaughan, and Mississauga, wanting to relocate to rural and small-town (RST) municipalities. The escalation of counterurbanisation and growth in non-metropolitan areas raises critical questions regarding who is leaving urban centres and why they are choosing to do so. It also prompts an examination of how these patterns of counterurbanisation are impacting recipient municipalities and altering regional planning approaches.

The evolving landscape of southern Ontario presents an opportunity for research to address these inquiries in the GTA and regional communities. By investigating intra-provincial migration trends between the GTA and RST municipalities, research can uncover the driving forces behind this shift in residence and the direct implications for growing communities. Increasing housing costs, economic gentrification, and increasing socio-economic inequality are all concerns for rapidly changing RST municipalities (Halfacree, 2020). Additionally, continued patterns of exurban development pose challenges to sustainable development and land conservation across southern Ontario. This project seeks to highlight contemporary trends of counterurbanisation, offering insights into the motivations, impacts, and policy implications associated with the evolving southern Ontario landscape by answering the following questions:

To what extent is counterurbanisation occurring in southern Ontario? How are trends of counterurbanisation affecting planning in rural and small town (RST) communities?

1.2 Approach and Methods

This study employs a mixed-methods research approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data to achieve the research objectives and provide a robust analysis of counterurbanisation in southern Ontario. A descriptive statistical analysis of Census data from both 2016 and 2021 is used to gain a basic understanding of what counterurban trends are emerging across the southern Ontario geography. The project explores trends at the Census division (CD) and Census subdivision (CSD) level to gain understanding of emerging regional and subregional demographic trends. In this analysis, indicators of counterurbanisation, based on qualities drawn from the literature, are used to determine geographic areas implicated in contemporary counterurban trends. This includes key qualities such as high population growth rates, particularly those occurring faster than in the closest Census Metropolitan Area (CMA); an increase in the intra-provincial migration rate, both at the one-year and five-year mobility status; and a high growth rate in local dwelling count. This analysis is scoped to CSDs that are outside of CMA suburban areas and which are classified as small population centres, as defined by Statistics Canada (between 1,000 and 30,000 residents). It is of note that some larger settlements are included which shifted from small population centres to larger population centres between the 2016 and 2021 Canadian Census.

The second component of this research project builds on the first component, incorporating a series of semi-structured interviews with planning professionals from municipalities or counties in southern Ontario. Interview locations were scoped based on the rural and small-town (RST) communities identified during the quantitative analysis as having exurban characteristics, and participants were recruited through municipal websites, email, and LinkedIn. Interviews were approximately 45 to 60 minutes and took place over video call (hosted via Microsoft Teams or Zoom). Ten interviews were completed with planning professionals across southern Ontario, with three participants from the CD (county) level, six intermediate and senior planners from

the CSD (municipal) level, and one planning consultant and academic researcher. Participants were asked questions related to their knowledge as planning professionals working in rapidly-growing RST communities. An interview guide was developed that focused on three main themes: knowledge and awareness of local demographic changes; local trends in housing and development activity; and community governance and decision-making. Ethics approval was not required for this research project, as all participants are professionals acting in their official capacities (rather than as private citizens).

Qualitative data was interpreted through thematic analysis. The analytical approach involved a combined deductive and inductive coding process to gather insights from the interview transcripts (Nowell et al., 2017). An initial codebook was developed based on existing literature and interview guide themes. These included broad and encompassing codes such as housing options, affordability, and infrastructure, that were then filtered upon further analysis. While reading through the transcripts, coding became an iterative process, wherein additional codes and subcodes were added and adjusted to make the analysis more robust and reflective of the content emerging from the interviews. While this research project provides valuable insights into counterurbanisation in southern Ontario, there are a few limitations to consider in the research approach. Firstly, the research relies solely on Census data and interviews with planning professionals, which may not fully capture the experiences and perspectives of all residents in RST communities. Additionally, the research focuses on the specific geographic region of southern Ontario, limiting the translation of the findings to other contexts. Further research into the experiences of exurban homeowners in southern Ontario would provide valuable insights more specific to the motivations of counterurbanisation and complement the findings of this project.

2

Literature review

Counterurbanisation, defined as the movement of populations away from urban centres towards smaller towns and rural areas (Mitchell, 2004), has garnered increasing attention in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Concerns surrounding the trajectory of urban development and the liveability of contemporary cities are increasingly debated in the face of record-breaking housing costs and public safety concerns, resurging social and cultural interest in rural living. The motivations for counterurban migration and its implications on rural and small towns has been well-documented since the mid- to late-twentieth century, and the following section offers a literature review that delves into the existing body of knowledge surrounding the definition, drivers, and impacts of counterurbanisation. The review examines the historical and theoretical underpinnings of counterurbanisation, highlights the relationship between counterurbanisation and exurban development, assesses the implications for urban planning, and ultimately identifies gaps in the literature and future research directions.

2.1 Definition and scope of counterurbanisation

Many phrases and terms have been used to describe the demographic trends between metropolitan and rural areas over the years. Since the industrial revolution, the migration of rural residents towards cities was often viewed as an inevitable decline of rural areas; cities offered better wages, diverse job opportunities, educational opportunities, and more attainable housing options. However, cities across the global north saw a "population turnaround" starting in the mid-1970s leading to a revival of rural regions (Halfacree, 2020). Although Spectorsky (1955) was among the first to investigate those "scenic rural areas beyond the edge of cities" (p. 261), it was Berry (1976) who examined the contemporary factors that contributed to this counterurban movement in North America, citing urban challenges like pollution and crime, and a desire for a closer connection to nature as major drivers. Since the term "counterurbanisation" was first coined by Berry in 1976, the phenomenon has been a prominent and ongoing theme in rural and regional studies. Particularly from the 1970s into the late twentieth century, counterurbanisation was a widely-studied phenomenon in Anglo-American urban centres. These early studies into the out-migration of wealthy urban households laid the foundation for understanding broad cultural push and pull factors that drive relocation from urban and suburban to other areas.

Population studies have demonstrated how counterurbanisation has fluctuated in intensity and geography in the decades that followed, often influenced by economic cycles and changing societal values (Davis & Nelson, 1994; Nelson & Sanchez, 1997; Beale & Kassel, 2005; and more). While some scholars delineate counterurbanisation as a fairly simple process, "whereby the rural is being repopulated and the urbanising forces of the industrial revolution reversed" (Vallance, 2014, p. 1956), others have pointed to a more nuanced explanation of the return to the rural. Mitchell (2004) observed that counterurbanisation was particularly pronounced during periods of economic prosperity, when individuals had greater flexibility to choose their living environments. Counterurban migration is highly involved in broader socio economic forces and residential mobility factors that allow for household relocation and regional development. Mitchell (2004) has built on the definition of counterurbanisation that emerged during the late twentieth century, putting forth a three-pronged framework of counterurbanisation occurring in non-metropolitan areas – exurbanisation, displaced urbanisation, and anti-urbanisation. These categories recognise the dynamic influences on counterurban movement and provide insight into different motivations for counterurban migration. Although counterurbanisation and exurbanisation are popularly linked, Mitchell's (2004) framework demonstrates that counterurban migration may take place between the suburban, exurban, periurban, or rural geographies in relation to urban centres.

2.2 Counterurbanisation and exurban development

Counterurbanisation can occur between different geographic contexts; however, recent literature has focused on the qualities and characteristics of periurban or exurban landscapes, as it is considered the most widely inhabited geography across

Figure 2.1: Example of the extremely low density developments characteristic of the exurbs. Source: Realtor.com

North America and as such, the most common settlement implicated in trends of counterurbanisation. Located in the urban periphery, the exurban, or periurban, is a abstract landscape that straddles between city and country – neither truly urban or rural, the exurban fringe is one of the most desirable places for new development and is among the fastest growing parts of many countries, Canada included (Buxton et al., 2006). In its simplest explanation, the exurban landscape represents settlement areas "beyond the suburbs," where growth is occurring rapidly and happening in a haphazard and disconnected fashion (Harris & Vorms, 2017). Whereas previous flights from the city may have resulted in suburban or rural growth, more recent research points to exurbia as the primary recipient of urban out-migration. In 1992, it was Nelson that argued a rising occupancy of "rural territory beyond the suburbs, but within long distance commuting range of urban employment opportunities" (p. 356). This growing trend marked a distinct settlement pattern, separate from the traditional division of urban, suburban, and rural. Distinguishing exurban development as an unprecedented residential landscape suggests it is an area of interest to better understand physical, social, and economic changes happening in Northern American settlement patterns.

Differentiating the physical characteristics of exurban and periurban geographies from suburban or traditional rural settlements is critical to understanding contemporary counterurbanisation. Despite its status as the dominant settlement pattern across North America, exurban development has been difficult to define beyond "houses in scenic, natural areas on relatively large acreages" (Taylor & Hurley, 2016, p. 1). Also referred to as exurbia, penurbia, or periurban space (Harris & Vorms, 2017), a series of distinguishable physical qualities have emerged which are shared across most developed countries. A useful qualitative description was offered by the Brookings Institution, which defined exurban geography as having three distinct components: located "within the orbit" of a metropolitan core, extremely low housing density, and relatively high population growth (Berube et al., 2006, p. 2). This simplified structure helps distinguish exurban and periurban as distinct from conventional suburban development. Importantly, the exurbs are primarily residential with newer housing, and

have considerably less commercial land uses than the suburbs (Berube et al., 2006). Others have categorised exurban settlements as primarily greenfield residential development with a proliferation of “lifestyle blocks” and high amenity value (e.g., scenic views, village-like qualities, etc.) (Vallance, 2014). The built form of exurbia can thus be summarised as an “in-between” form of development, not yet the suburbs but no longer wholly rural in nature.

Exurban development is more than geographically distinct in built form, but can also be identified as structurally separate from the suburbs. In a conventional suburban development, residents are dispersed through sprawling housing development but the core identity and relationship to the urban centre remains intact. The social and economic ties to the urban core are much weaker in the exurbs than the suburbs, as residents are leaving the city and “jumping a jurisdictional boundary” (Vallance, 2014, p. 1956). Periurban and exurban settlements are adjacent to central metropolitan areas, but are separated both politically and economically from the urban centre. This structural differentiation through planning policy, economic conditions, and municipal jurisdiction paints exurbia as not just a geographic zone at the edge of the city, but a distinct settlement with different social and cultural entanglements. As Taylor (2011) argues, “exurbia is outside of the city, free from comprehensive regional planning policy, and embodies many social ideals of connection to nature and good family life” (p. 325). Indeed, the natural landscape is foundational to the social identity of exurbia as a place deeply connected to nature and thus distinct from suburban life. The “wild natural” or “pastoral rural landscapes” on which exurban development and in turn, exurban identity, is predicated, are cited as a core social and cultural tenet of these communities (Taylor, 2011, p. 331). Exurban residents often see suburban subdivisions as a symbol of urban sprawl and in contrast, they view themselves as protectors of rural landscapes (Harris & Vorms, 2017). However, as many observers have argued, exurbia tends to be a highly-manicured and idealised reproduction of natural settings, rather than carefully-stewarded natural landscapes (Blum et al., 2004; Luka, 2017). Regardless, the conservation of the natural landscape is of utmost importance in the land use and planning processes of exurban settlements and distinguishes them from other geographies.

The emerging social ideals of exurbia are further complicated by those who populate the urban-rural interface. Exurbanisation requires “the in-migration of urban people and their capital to rural areas,” and consequently it leads to a highly varied socio-economic landscape (Taylor & Hurley, 2016, p. 6). Previously rural regions with economic ties to agriculture, exurban regions are typically populated by generational farming households with strong ties to the community and to the land. Exurban development leads to an influx of “city people who have deliberately chosen the rural landscape as a setting for their homes,” who often possess an idealised interpretation of agricultural landscapes (Taylor, 2011, p. 324). Perhaps paradoxically, these populations are actively seeking a rural experience, but simultaneously expect and desire the same urban amenities of city living. Bringing an influx of urban capital, it is often the new exurban

Figure 2.2 (Left): Example of exurban development patterns. Source: Realtor.com.

Figure 2.3 (Right): Exurban houses are typically large dwellings on large lots. Source: Braestone Development.

residents who have social and economic power in community politics and decision-making in relation to long-time rural residents. Herzog (2015) notes the complex social landscapes that result from processes of exurbanisation, that can range from isolated settlements with poverty, to comfortable middle-class zones, to luxurious settlements for the upper-class. As a result, exurban settlements cannot easily be defined by the local population; rather, the combination of extremely low-density residential settlement areas with other utilitarian land uses results in a diverse social interpretation of exurban communities.

As the most rapidly growing and developing regions in North America, exurbia is a critical space of study to not only examine development activity that arises from counterurbanisation, but the social and cultural implications of these trends as well. From a planning perspective, there are major entanglements between greenfield development and housing affordability, ecological fragmentation, and conservation of prime agricultural land (Liu & Robinson, 2016). However, questions of who is participating in the transition of exurban space, how this change is governed, and how the consequences of this development are addressed are compelling for the ideological and social understandings of place (Taylor & Hurley, 2016). Examining these processes of contemporary counterurbanisation, and as such the development of exurban settlements, is a starting point to better understand the social, political, and economic challenges of urban dispersion. From a planning perspective, the intersection of counterurban trends and exurban landscapes begets questions of growth management, residential development, and ecological stability that are critical to address in a period of rapid climate change and increasing social inequality.

2.3 Drivers of counterurbanisation

Popular explanations for counterurbanisation have historically been simplified to narratives of wealthy, amenity-seeking households looking to flee the woes of declining urban centres. However, literature on counterurban migration points to a more complex combination of social, environmental, and economic factors that underscore the dynamic movement of populations between urban, suburban, exurban, and rural settlements. It is often households with high residential mobility – that is, typically affluent retirees – that seek out exurban environments; however, productivist economies can attract working class populations and some literature points to "third-age" migrants that return to former childhood residences or birthplaces as a subset of counterurban trends (Mitchell & Bryant, 2020). Other attempts have been made to move literature beyond the documented discourse of affluent counterurbanisation. Remoundou et al. (2016) propose a theory of crisis-led counterurbanisation that showcases how, amidst regional financial crisis, rural areas are increasingly viewed as socio-economically resilient places of retreat and opportunity, especially amongst younger and unemployed populations. As such, counterurban movements cannot be attributed to any single factor nor any specific demographic. The following section summarises popular literature on the various drivers of contemporary counterurbanisation.

An amenity lens in counterurban migration is a popular approach that underscores push/pull factors between urban and rural spaces. Amenity migration is defined as a "distinct pattern of human migration characterised by the seasonal or permanent movement of largely affluent urban or suburban populations to scenic/nature-rich and/or culturally rich areas" (Gosnell & Abrams, 2011, p. 9). This approach builds on historical narratives of affluent households that seek to escape the city, but points more directly to those factors that draw these populations to periurban and rural environments. Spectorsky's mid-century exurbanites were seeking three things: "something inexpensive, something quiet and remote, but something not too far from New York City's galleries and museums" (1955, p. 19). These motivations still stand as exurban residents desire remoteness within commuting distance to the urban centre, but ecological factors have taken greater prominence in patterns of counterurbanisation over time (Cadieux & Taylor, 2011). Indeed, the physical surroundings of exurban development is a key element for amenity-seeking migrants. Buckle & Osbaldiston (2022) highlight the significance of environmental values like open space, forests, and coasts in Australian counterurbanisation movements. The lifestyle being sought by counterurban populations is only afforded by the physical surroundings of exurban space – residential developments that prioritise village-like qualities, the presence of natural amenities, and agricultural activity (Vallance, 2014; Mitchell & Bryant, 2020; Luka, 2017).

Further research in rural studies indicates that positive social representations of rural living are foundational to amenity-driven counterurbanisation. The rural idyll, as defined by Halfacree (2020), is a social framing of rural and remote areas as "near-utopian" geographical sites, where happiness, health, scenic beauty, and overall social harmony

can be achieved. In the post-COVID context, the rural idyll is an especially pertinent motivator for amenity-driven counterurban migration, as cities are increasingly emblematic of economic decline, social inequality, and community fragmentation. For example, Halfacree (2020) indicates that positive representations of rural life go beyond the expressly physical elements of the countryside – boasting amenities like open space and active living opportunities – to broader social concepts of "a slower pace of life, greater sense of community, friendly and welcoming environment[s], and less criminality" (p. 56). This was further explored by Vallance (2014), who argued that the periurban village's very success is tied to the social elements of place; that is, a destination that offers new residents a feeling of security, status, and community that cannot be achieved in urban settings. Thus amenity-driven counterurbanisation can be interpreted as much about achieving community and sense of place, as it can be associated with the physical immersion in natural landscapes.

Counterurban flows associated with amenity migration have been shown as "highly selective" towards higher-income households, middle-aged and retired adults, and property owners (Halfacree, 2020). Steady income, economic security, and residential mobility tend to operate in tandem, and recent research associates COVID-19 counterurban movements specifically with amenity and lifestyle migration, particularly for affluent and middle-class populations seeking social distancing (Argent & Plummer, 2022; Buckle & Osbaldiston, 2022). However, the populations retreating from urban centres to the countryside are not expressly affluent households with high residential mobility. Younger, lower-income households tend to migrate away from major metropolitan centres in the "drive-until-you-qualify" phenomenon, as housing costs have historically been lower at the urban periphery than in central areas. There is extensive evidence that urban retreat in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first century was motivated by high housing costs in the urban core (Mitchell & Bryant, 2020; Neptis Foundation, 2004). Economising – that is, seeking lower housing prices or overall living costs – is a common cause of counterurbanisation that correlates with pronounced periods of economic downturn. It is possible that contemporary counterurbanisation may be following similar trends, as housing prices reach new peaks across major Canadian cities and pandemic-related social and economic challenges continue to persist.

2.4 Impacts of counterurbanisation

The study of counterurbanisation is relevant to ongoing discussions surrounding the classification of settlement areas and the changing relationship between urban and rural environments. However, the implications of counterurban migration extend beyond population dispersion to encompass regional and localised planning challenges. Counterurbanisation pressures and resulting exurban development can lead to conflict over rural identity and community governance, particularly between new exurban and long-standing rural residents. Trajectories of growth and development and their effects on local rural character and quality of life is hotly debated, with long-term residents highly concerned about development activity (Smith & Krannich, 2000). This conflict

emerges in local land use and planning decisions, where the desire for a pastoral rural landscape among some new exurban residents can also diverge from the economic desires of others who benefit from more utilitarian land uses (Smith & Sharp, 2005). Exurban residents have also demonstrated greater sensitivity to polluting or undesirable byproducts of the agricultural industry (e.g., noise, odour), resulting in social and legal constraints for long-standing local farmers (Nelson, 1992). Źróbek-Różańska & Zadworny (2016) demonstrate how rural spaces have come to serve increasingly urban functions during periods of intense migration, and as such have become places of conflict between long-term residents and newcomers. Notably, the different cultural expectations between newcomers and "old-timers" place strain on social ties and community in exurban areas; newcomers have been associated with a narrow interest in local community life beyond those elements directly utilised, such as schools or recreational facilities (Salamon, 2003). In France, research has shown that the politics of periurban municipalities have become associated with economic objectives and as such are increasingly governed like private residential clubs (Charmes, 2009). In these areas, the policies and practices of local governments and councils are shifting away from prioritising the public good and instead catering to the interests and principles of the economic sphere.

The implications of counterurbanisation have been deliberated in reference to housing policy and second-home ownership in rural communities (Gallent, 2014). There is evidence that COVID-related counterurbanisation has accelerated across Europe, which in turn has increased socio-spatial inequalities related to housing affordability and availability (Colomb & Gallent, 2022). Aberg & Tondelli (2021) demonstrate how an influx of urban residents to the Swedish countryside and rising second-home ownership poses a risk to gentrification through rising housing prices and the displacement of people and rural traditions. Further research into the rapid out-migration from urban centres in Australia reinforce the argument that counterurbanisation affects affordability in rural housing markets (Argent & Plummer, 2022; Buckle & Osbaldiston 2022). Amenity-rich rural and small-town communities are viewed as geographies where changing housing markets and socio-economic disparities can contribute to rural gentrification. Nelson (2018) has discussed the concept of rural gentrification in the context of changing demographic, social, physical, and cultural landscapes, arguing that "gentrification implies the in-migration of middle- and upper-class households into new residential spaces, and migration is both a spatial and temporal process" (p. 44). Whereas most rural gentrification scholarship uses the permanent change of residence as an indicator of gentrification, as is the case in counterurbanisation, Nelson (2018) argues that the definition should include periodic and cyclical movements related to second-home development that initiate similar changes in housing stock, labour market and cultural landscape (Chi & Marcouiller, 2012; Darling, 2005; Nelson et al., 2014). Rural gentrification has been widely studied in relation to the displacement of long-term residents, the erosion of traditional livelihoods, and the potential for increased inequality, but there is little research specific to processes of rural gentrification in the context of southern Ontario.

Counterurban growth has also been discussed in relation to the strain on infrastructure capacity and servicing constraints in rural and small-town (RST) municipalities. A central challenge across RST municipalities, growth rates often outpace the capacity of existing water, wastewater, and roadway systems, requiring substantial investments in service upgrades and expansions. The substantial cost of infrastructure required to accommodate housing growth, coupled with the reluctance of beneficiaries (such as developers) to directly contribute, strains existing municipal fiscal arrangements. Solving the issues of provisioning and financing local infrastructure has been a long-standing feature of Canadian planning policy (Tassonyi & Conger, 2015). Development charges are a financing tool used by planning authorities in Ontario to pay for growth-related capital costs associated with new development (Baumeister, 2012). Historically, development charges emerged as an alternative revenue source for municipalities when government funding decreased (Clayton, 2014). However, relying heavily on development charges to finance growth-related water and wastewater infrastructure can pose difficulties. As a primary funding source, municipalities may find development charges lead to economic inefficiency due to overconsumption, reductions in housing affordability by increasing development costs, and inequity between users in new and existing developments (Clayton, 2014). Conventional debt-financing is also used to fund infrastructure expansion, but the unpredictable housing market and potential cost overruns exacerbate financial burdens, making many municipalities hesitant to take on debt or participate in intricate financing arrangements (Fenn, 2024). However, rapid growth and housing pressures necessitates exploring alternative solutions and the perennial struggle to fund municipal infrastructure suggests further research into infrastructure solutions in RST municipalities is warranted.

The sprawling development associated with exurban growth has been well-discussed in relation to its implications on ecology and conservation. The expansion of residential development into rural and peri-urban areas can lead to habitat fragmentation, loss of biodiversity, and increased pressure on natural resources. Scholars like Lait (2018) and Luka (2008) have documented the negative environmental effects of cottagers and exurban dwellers, including increased pressure on lake ecosystems due to permanent residency, construction of large dwellings, and violation of shoreline re-naturalisation bylaws. The literature contends that the very presence of cottagers and exurban residents, attracted by the natural beauty of the area, leads to its urbanisation and environmental degradation.

2.5 Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has seemingly revitalised counterurban movements across North American and European landscapes, acting as an accelerant of pre-existing trends. Media outlets argue that the pandemic has accentuated the push factors from urban areas, such as high housing costs, density, and concerns about disease transmission (Hague, 2021). The GTA has experienced a persistent housing crisis, characterised by escalating prices and limited supply, pushing many residents to seek more affordable options. The pandemic has exacerbated these challenges as Toronto,

the heart of the GTA, experienced some of the most pronounced housing price increases in Canada during the pandemic (Walks, 2021). This surge in prices, coupled with the increased flexibility afforded by remote work, has incentivised many individuals and families to relocate to smaller towns and rural areas within southern Ontario. Concurrently, the pull factors of smaller communities, including affordability, perceived safety, and access to nature, have become even more appealing. Research specific to southern Ontario highlights the region's unique susceptibility to counterurbanisation trends. The Greater Golden Horseshoe, encompassing the GTA and surrounding regions, has long grappled with issues of housing affordability and urban sprawl (Neptis Foundation, 2004). This research suggests that the pandemic has not fundamentally altered the drivers of counterurbanisation but has rather amplified their significance. The resulting impacts of a COVID-related population boom in RST municipalities, and its role in planning processes, should be further examined to provide insights into growth-related challenges and policy responses.

2.6 Literature gaps and future research directions

Literature on the characteristics, drivers, and implications of counterurbanisation vary greatly across geographies and indicate the need for localised and regional understandings of urban-rural migration. Planning research should continue to identify drivers of urban out-migration to better understand dissatisfaction with cities and provide insight into how smaller and less-resourced municipalities can govern rapid change in response to counterurbanisation. However, understanding the implications of increased population size and growth rates in exurban municipalities cannot be overemphasised for their importance to municipal policy and planning. Examining local trends of migration and growth help direct key services and infrastructure expansion for communities, including emergency services, schools, hospitals, roads, and social services.

While existing literature provides valuable insights into counterurbanisation as a broad trend across North American geographies, several gaps remain. Primarily, more research is required to assess the long-term impacts of counterurban trends. It is unclear whether COVID-related counterurbanisation represents a temporary shift or a more enduring transformation of settlement patterns, and little to no research has examined the specific geographic context of southern Ontario. Additionally, research should delve deeper into the planning shifts occurring as a result of contemporary counterurbanisation. While many studies have examined the impacts of amenity-driven counterurban migration, little research has examined how planners are responding to this demographic shift and the emerging policy responses of municipalities. Moreover, further investigation is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of urban planning interventions in mitigating the negative consequences and maximising the positive outcomes of counterurbanisation. Consequently, this research attempts to document emerging challenges specific to COVID-related counterurban migration, and to identify urban planning strategies arising as a result. Although not exhaustive, this project aims to set out planning policy priorities for rural and small-town municipalities grappling with the effects of contemporary counterurbanisation.

3

Southern Ontario: An evolving landscape

Southern Ontario is home to the largest Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) in Canada, resulting in a provincial planning policy regime that favours urban development and densification in the central Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Rural and small-town municipalities, regardless of their distance from this urban core, are often viewed as peripheral to the growth forces at play within the GTA, or at best as satellites in a distant orbit. To manage the growth of the CMA, curb suburban sprawl, and protect prime agricultural lands in the area, regional planning initiatives were implemented by the Liberal provincial government around the turn of the century to control urban development and establish strategic planning objectives (Government of Ontario, 2005). Notably, the establishment of the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH) has directed regional growth and development planning across southern Ontario since 2005 and continues to serve as a major piece of provincial planning policy today.

3.1 Historical growth and development

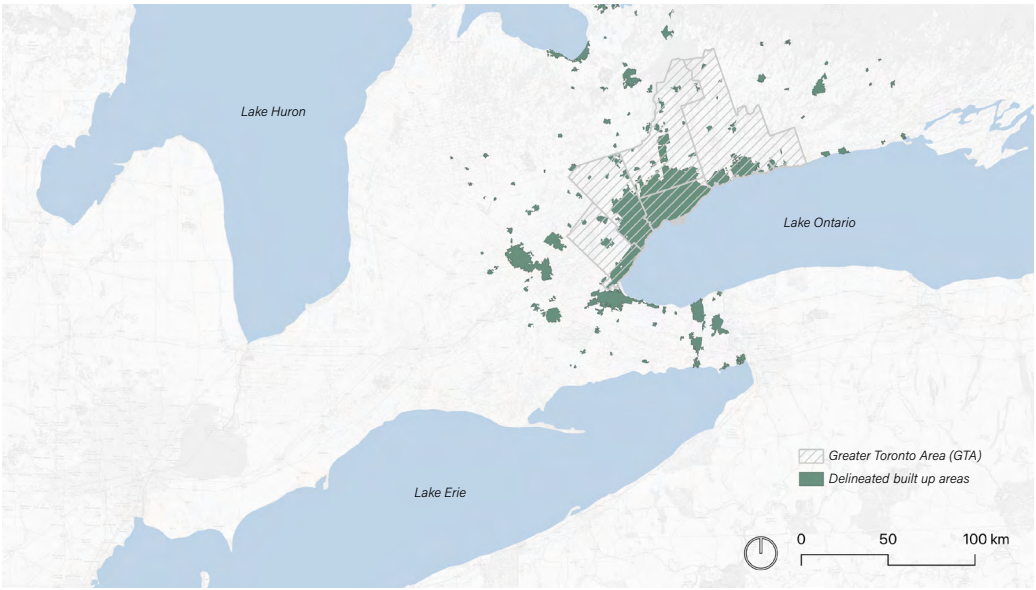
Since its adoption, the Growth Plan for the GGH and subsequent editions have operated in tandem with Provincial Policy Statements and the Greenbelt Act (2005) to focus on transit-oriented densification, limited greenfield development, and smart growth planning objectives (Government of Ontario, 2005; Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, 2005). Working in conjunction with the protection of rural communities and natural heritage features, both the Growth Plan for the GGH and the Provincial Policy Statement call for increased intensification within built up urban areas given projected population growth within the GGH. Under the Places to Grow Act (2005), the government has directly designated 16 settlement areas within the GGH, defined as "delineated built up areas", to accommodate growth through intensification and densification: Brant, Dufferin, Durham, Haldimand, Halton, Hamilton, Kawartha Lakes, Niagara, Northumberland, Peel, Peterborough, Simcoe, Toronto, Waterloo, Wellington, and York (Government of Ontario, 2005; Ali, 2008; Eidelman, 2010). Under this directive, southern Ontario has seen an expanded regional rail network and high development activity across the GTA, as well as in the identified settlement areas north of the Greenbelt.

Although the GTA has prioritised transit-oriented densification, regions north of Toronto continue to see massive residential development on greenfield sites with limited or nonexistent access to public transport. Population growth rates in municipalities outside of the CMA have consistently been higher than the provincial average since the late twentieth century, and development activity has mirrored this growth. Larger settlements, such as Barrie and Orillia in Simcoe County, have been major population centres given their proximity to major highways and reduced commuting distance from the GTA (Neptis Foundation, 2004). Continuing development activity within these growth centres is expected, responding directly to the Growth Plan. However, rural and small-town municipalities (RST) on the shores of Georgian Bay and Lake Simcoe, have also been some of the fastest growing communities in Canada. In 2004, the Neptis Foundation published a watershed report specific to Simcoe County, which they deemed the "New Growth Frontier" given the region's rapid growth rate. In their study, they demonstrate that although Simcoe County's share of Toronto-related region population had grown only slightly between 1976 and 2001 (4.4% in 1976 to 5.6% in 2001), its share of population growth almost doubled between the 1976-1981 and 1996-2001 periods. Moreover, Simcoe County is the only jurisdiction in the GGH – including Toronto – in which more housing units were built between 1991 and 2001 than between 1981 and 1991 (Neptis Foundation, 2004). Exurban municipalities, such as Wasaga Beach and Innisfil, continue to see high development activity and rapid residential growth. In Ontario, affordability has been a major driver of this outward growth, as the average house price is typically less expensive in RST municipalities relative to the GTA.

Rapid residential development outside of Toronto (CMA) has only accelerated over time, given the affordability and availability of developable land outside of the GTA and

Figure 3.1: Map of Census CMAs and CAs across southern Ontario. Source: 2021 Canadian Census boundary files.

Figure 3.2: Map of delineated built up areas from the Growth Plan for the GGH. Source: Government of Ontario, 2005.



Greenbelt area. Development patterns outside of the CMA are the "product of policy-driven, market-driven, and demographic factors" (Neptis Foundation, 2004). Large-scale, comprehensively planned developments appeal to residential preferences for spacious single-family, detached dwellings. Large lots and automobile-oriented streetscapes are typical of these communities, and demonstrate exurban and periurban development patterns of extremely low density. Notably, residential developments are often centred around the local amenities, whether it be a ski resort or shoreline community, and the proliferation of lifestyle marketing across southern Ontario speaks to the growing appeal of exurbia. Developers promote projects at the urban-rural interface as being "surrounded by nature" and describe these master planned developments as "quaint" communities where "neighbours know one another" (Fernbrook Homes, 2024; Thomasfield Homes, 2024). Large-scale greenfield development is also driven by the financial constraints that define how developers operate. As indicated in the literature, local planning departments in RST municipalities lack capacity and funding mechanisms to plan for integrated residential growth and

Figure 3.3: Windfall at Blue masterplan. Source: Edenoak Developments.

municipal servicing, and as such, developers build bigger developments to cost front-end servicing infrastructure (Neptis Foundation, 2004). Moreover, typical suburban or exurban greenfield projects are justified and accepted by smaller municipalities that are seeking local investment and economic development opportunities.

> "This charming enclave looks like it has always belonged here. It is a place destined to remain one of Blues' premier neighbourhoods from generation to generation."
>
> – Windfall at Blue, Edenoak Developments, Town of Blue Mountains, Ontario

Projects on greenfield sites in RST municipalities have been further promoted by the provincial government's increased use of Minister's Zoning Orders (MZOs) across southern Ontario to expedite growth in particular places. In 2024, a new Provincial Planning Statement has been proposed by the province of Ontario that will replace the current A Place to Grow: Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe and the Provincial Policy Statement, 2020 (Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, 2024). Whereas under current policy, a planning authority may only allow the expansion of settlement area boundary at the time of a comprehensive review, the new Statement would permit the planning authority to identify a new settlement area or allow a settlement area boundary expansion at any time in an effort to scale up housing production across the province. Rather than require the following, the new Statement asks authorities to consider the capacity of existing infrastructure and the impacts on agricultural lands and operation, among other items. Additionally, the Statement would encourage (but would not require) planning authorities to establish density targets for new settlement area expansion lands as appropriate, based on local conditions. It would encourage both large and fast-growing municipalities to plan for a minimum density target of 50 residents and jobs per gross hectare. The implications of this new policy on RST municipalities is yet to be seen, although it is evident that the cutting of municipal red tape points to a proliferation of existing exurban development patterns in those settlements.

In short, the rapid population growth north of the GTA has placed local planning departments into a reactive regulatory environment; developers have defined the dominant growth pattern, often exploiting the economic opportunity afforded by regional growth, which less-resourced municipalities are eager to endorse. The result is a sprawling exurban environment, where low-density development continues to fragment landscapes and encroach on rural settings. Little research has critically investigated the impact of demographic trends and development activity in RST municipalities since initial regional planning policies such as the Growth Plan were introduced. An analysis of Census data between 2016 and 2021 can offer insights into contemporary counterurbanisation across southern Ontario and its relationship to exurban development.

3.2 Census trends in Ontario

When Ontario's Growth Plan was first published in 2005, municipalities outside of the GTA but within the GGH saw a major surge in development activity and population growth. These population trends continue today, with more recent provincial projections indicating that Census divisions (CDs) outside of the GTA are slated for the highest growth rates by 2046. As to be expected, CDs within the GTA, including Toronto and its suburbs – York, Peel, Durham, and Halton – are slated to see the largest increase in population among regions and will account for just over 50 percent of Ontario's net population growth to 2046 (Ontario Ministry of Finance, 2021). However, some of the next highest population growth rates of over 40 percent are set to occur within exurban municipalities located outside of the suburbs. This includes Dufferin County (+59.5%), Wellington County (+57.2%), and Simcoe County (+49.7%). These CDs can be characterised as the urban-rural fringe, marking the edge of the Toronto CMA. Moreover, the next-largest growth bracket, ranging from 30 to 40 percent, and which is on par with the City of Toronto proper, is expected in the largely-rural regions of Bruce and Grey Counties (Ontario Ministry of Finance, 2021). These are CDs with high agricultural activity, and a few small urban settlement areas that serve as major service centres for the county population. This is reflective of a broader population trend across Canadian municipalities, as Statistics Canada reported that population growth rate for areas outside CMAs was at its highest in over 20 years (Statistics Canada, 2024). Looking at these provincial projections, it is evident that growth is anticipated across both suburban and exurban areas over the next 20 years, alongside growth in the GTA.

A quantitative analysis of 2021 Census data brings forth insights into the movement of populations between urban centres, such as the GTA, and those communities located in exurbia, particularly as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Looking at migration patterns is key to understanding population growth in Ontario, and subsequently the presence and relevance of counterurbanisation. Net migration gains, from international sources, other parts of Canada, or other areas in Ontario, are expected to be the major source of growth across CDs in the coming years (Ontario Ministry of Finance, 2021). It is anticipated that migration gains from other parts of the province will also drive population increase in exurban and rural regions across southern Ontario. As became

evident during the 2020 pandemic, a desire to escape from urban centres led to a perceived exodus from the GTA to RST municipalities at a much quicker rate than anticipated. This was particularly noted across southern Ontario, where many exurban settlements have long been recipients of seasonal residents and have extensive tourism economies. Following the release of 2021 Census data, Statistics Canada noted that a record number of people have opted to relocate outside of the biggest CMAs in the country. Both Toronto and Montréal saw the largest net losses to migratory exchanges with other regions of their respective provinces since at least 2001 to 2002. Conversely, rural areas in Ontario and Québec both saw the highest gains from intra-provincial migration since at least 2001 to 2002 (Statistics Canada, 2022a), and there was an overall faster growth recorded in peripheral municipalities (+6.9%) compared with central municipalities (+5.5%). Those settlements which Statistics Canada indicate as small urban centres (approximately 10,000 population size or larger) were among the most rapidly-growing, and typically comprise multiple smaller municipalities (e.g., a combination of towns, hamlets, and villages). These characteristics indicate a growing preference for exurban landscapes. The rapid growth in more distant suburbs and exurbs demonstrates broader population trends of urban spread and outward migration (Statistics Canada, 2022b). Lower housing prices, greater availability of residential developments, and proximity to nature have all been posited as explanations for these migratory patterns.

In reviewing Census trends from 2016 to 2021, this research suggests that two distinct settlement typologies are growth recipients of contemporary counterurban migration

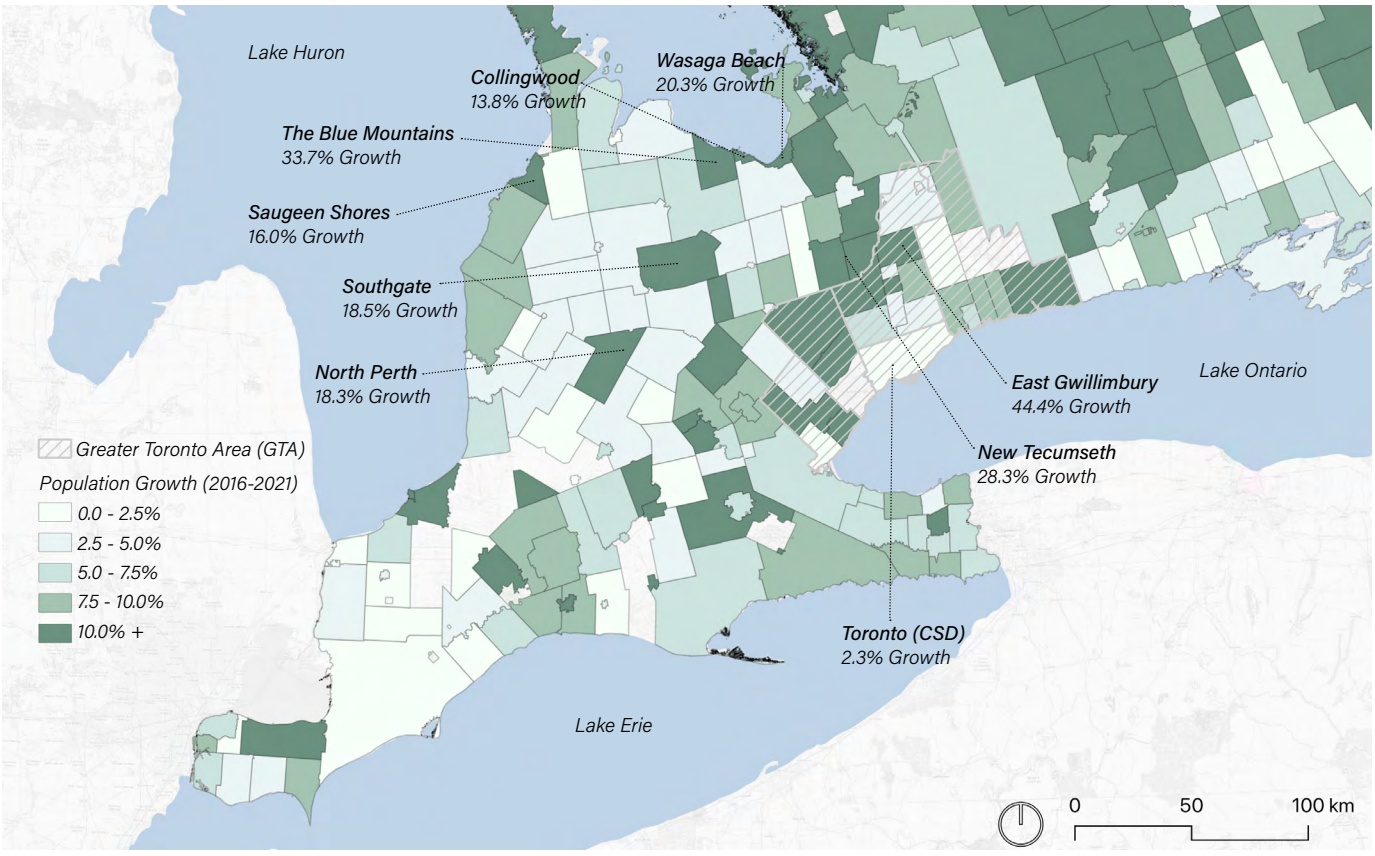


Figure 3.4: Map of population growth in CSDs with positive population change from 2016-2021. Source: Canadian Census, 2021.

in southern Ontario. The first group of RST municipalities include places such as New Tecumseth, Innisfil, and East Gwillimbury, which all boast strong regional connections to Toronto and are already growth-recipient areas relative to the GTA. All located in the CD of Simcoe County, these municipalities have been incorporated into regional planning schemes for the GGH since the first Growth Plan and are more closely connected through transit and highway connections. These municipalities are on the larger size of small population centres (closer to 30,000 residents), with some transitioning out of the category due to growth between 2016 and 2021; however, the development of these communities still share the low-density settlement pattern of the exurbs. While growth in these municipalities is not surprising, it is the rate at which these municipalities have grown that demonstrate emergent counterurban trends. For example, East Gwillimbury saw a 44.4 percent population growth rate between 2016 and 2021, and New Tecumseth a 28.3 percent growth in population – both exponentially higher than the provincial growth average and preceding growth rates in their CSDs. Bradford West Gwillimbury, along the GO rail line, also saw a 21.4 percent population increase. In comparison to Toronto's 2.4 percent population growth in the same time period, particular attention must be paid to the rate of development in these communities.

Growth in these settlements can be framed as counterurbanisation in that more households are explicitly choosing to reside in smaller, less urban municipalities. However, it is the migratory data that points to the relationship between high-growth RST municipalities and larger CMAs, and which corroborate actual counterurban movement. Of the migratory population that had moved to East Gwillimbury in the past year from all other CSDs in Canada, 67 percent were intraprovincial migrants, meaning they had moved from another municipality specifically in Ontario. This number was even higher looking at the five-year mobility status – 83 percent of households that had moved to the CSD from another place in Canada between 2016 and 2021, had moved from another Ontario municipality. These numbers are similarly high among East Gwillimbury's neighbouring municipalities: 62 and 76 percent respectively for the one-year and five-year intra-provincial migration rates in New Tecumseth, and 65 and 71 percent for Bradford West Gwillimbury. This data indicates that a large proportion of recent growth in rural and small-town municipalities can be attributed to the movement of households from more urbanised municipalities.

Table 3.1: Fastest-Growing Small Population Centres in Ontario, 2016-2021 . For full data list, see Appendix B. Source: Canadian Census, 2021.

CSD	CD	Population (2021)	Pop. Change (2016-21)
East Gwillimbury	York	34,637	44.4%
Georgian Bay	Muskoka	3,441	36.9%
The Blue Mountains	Grey	9,390	33.7%
Carling	Parry Sound	1,491	32.5%
Grand Valley	Dufferin	3,851	30.3%
McKellar	Parry Sound	1,419	27.7%
Thorold	Niagara	23,816	26.7%
Magnetawan	Parry Sound	1,753	26.1%
Seguin	Parry Sound	5,280	22.7%
Kettle Point 44	Lambton	1,233	22%
Toronto	**Toronto**	**2,794,356**	**2.3%**

Table 3.2: 10 Fastest-Growing Small Population Centres in Bruce, Dufferin, Grey, Simcoe, and Wellington Counties, 2016-2021. For full data list, see Appendix B. Source: Canadian Census, 2021.

CSD	CD	Population (2021)	Pop. Change (2016-21)
The Blue Mountains	Grey	9,390	33.7%
Grand Valley	Dufferin	3,851	30.3%
Wasaga Beach	Simcoe	24,862	20.3%
Southgate	Grey	8,716	18.5%
Saugeen Shores	Bruce	15,908	16%
Springwater	Simcoe	21,701	13.9%
Collingwood	Simcoe	24,811	13.8%
Penetanguishene	Simcoe	10,077	12.4%
Tay	Simcoe	11,091	10.5%
Centre Wellington	Wellington	31,093	10.3%
Toronto	**Toronto**	**2,794,356**	**2.3%**

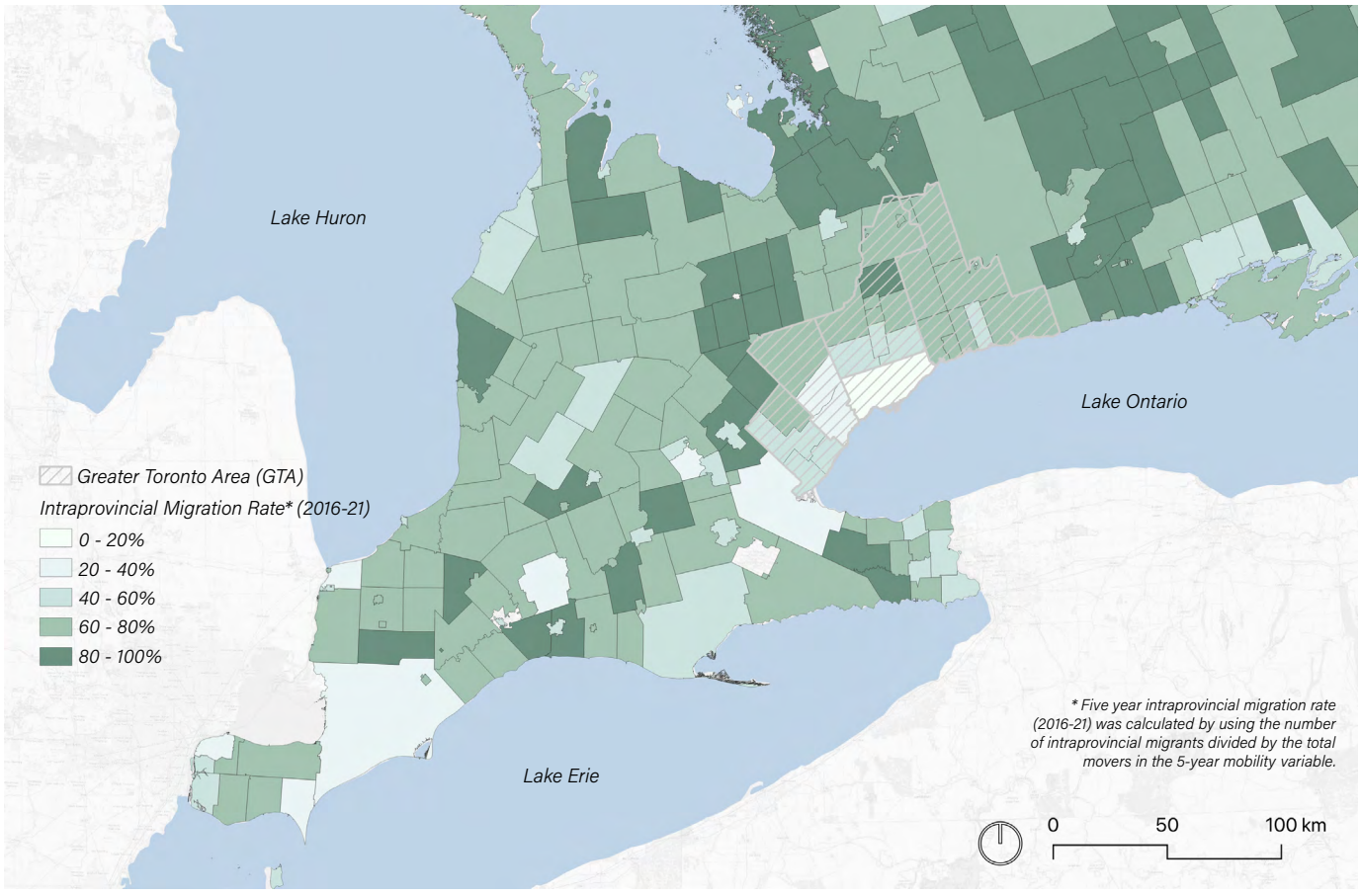
Table 3.3: One-Year and Five-Year Intraprovincial Migration Rates of Growing Communities, 2016-2021. For full data list, see Appendix B. Source: Canadian Census, 2021.

CSD	CD	1-Year Intraprovincial Migration Rate	5-Year Intraprovincial Migration Rate
East Gwillimbury	York	67%	83%
New Tecumseth	Simcoe	62%	72%
Bradford West Gwillimbury	Grey	65%	71%
Collingwood	Simcoe	58%	63%
Wasaga Beach	Simcoe	74%	75%
Town of Blue Mountains	Grey	81%	82%
Saugeen Shores	Bruce	56%	58%
Toronto	**Toronto**	**12%**	**16%**

The second group of high-growth settlements in southern Ontario are amenity-rich municipalities characterised by a high proportion of seasonal residents and second home ownership. This includes places such as Wasaga Beach (+20.3%), the Town of Blue Mountains (+33.7%), Collingwood (+13.8%), and Saugeen Shores (+16.0%), that all share tourism-based economies and possess a relationship to metropolitan cores through seasonal residents that own local property. These locations are popular vacation and leisure places, with proximity to nature and outdoor amenities. Notably, these settlements are physically much further from major CMAs, but still have high accessibility, and overall smaller total populations. Moreover, these municipalities more commonly see extremely low-density development patterns typical of exurbia. The Town of Blue Mountains (TBM) is alongside East Gwillimbury in the top-ten fastest growing municipalities in Canada, and saw a population growth of 33.7 percent between 2016 and 2021. TBM notably saw huge net intraprovincial migration gains, with 81 percent intraprovincial migrants at the one-year mobility status, and a similarly high rate of 82 percent at the five-year mobility status. Again, these trends are reflected across municipalities of the same size and amenity features, indicating a growing preference for exurban living that can be associated with counterurban migration.

These growth rates are not isolated to municipalities peripheral to, or on the fringe of, the GTA. Similar migratory patterns between CMAs and peripheral municipalities are apparent across CDs in southern Ontario. For example, Middlesex County is seeing extreme growth in smaller municipalities such as Lucan Biddulph (+20.9%) and Strathroy-Caradoc (+14.4%), compared to London (+10.0%), and growth in Niagara's Thorold (+26.7%) is majorly outpacing central Niagara Falls (+7.2%). Although direct correlations cannot be made using the Census data, it is evident that demographics and migratory patterns are changing across southern Ontario; exurban and periurban communities are growing, and fast. These spaces are still categorised as rural or small-town (RST) municipalities, but are evidently and functionally shifting in response to economic and social changes from population growth. Drawing from this data, I performed outreach to various municipal planners and county staff involved in planning and development across rapidly growing municipalities. The following section outlines key findings from these informant interviews.

Figure 3.5: 5-Year Intraprovincial Migration Rates. Source: Canadian Census, 2021.



4

Findings and analysis: Planning for counterurbanisation

Counterurban movement across southern Ontario prompts investigation into the planning policy and development strategies that have emerged in smaller municipalities to manage rapid growth and its associated implications. Previous studies into growth management policy show that rural and small-town (RST) municipalities experiencing population growth are challenged by significant factors, most of which are beyond local control (including financial, institutional, and infrastructure constraints). The Ontario Professional Planners Institute (OPPI) has noted that, among other concerns, municipalities across the province are facing a lack of financial support with growth management strategies, exacerbated by the downloading of planning responsibilities from provincial planning authorities; widespread land economics that support residential sprawl; disconnection between short-term development goals and long-term objectives for growth management; and not unexpectedly, public opposition and political resistance to growth alternatives (2001). Working within these constraints, municipal planners must address the needs of a growing and varied population with limited resources.

To better understand the impacts of growth associated with contemporary counterurbanisation, and ways in which it has impacted planning policy, 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted with planning professionals from rapidly-growing municipalities or counties across southern Ontario. Interview participants were asked a series of questions related to their knowledge of changing demographics in their community to gauge the extent to which counterurban trends are being

recognised or planned for by municipal staff. Moreover, targeted questions sought to highlight perceptions of push and pull factors of migration, as well as provide insight into demographic trends that were not captured in the Census analysis. The portrait of regional counterurban population change that emerged confirmed and expanded upon existing trends in literature. Questions were then posed to highlight how such change has impacted housing and development activity, and community governance in recent years. This section offers an overview of the complex and multifaceted challenges faced by RST municipalities in southern Ontario as they navigate the forces and impacts of contemporary counterurbanisation. It highlights the need for proactive planning policies, effective community engagement, and collaboration between different levels of government to ensure sustainable and equitable growth in these communities.

4.1 Counterurban growth in the exurbs

Discussion with planners and county staff demonstrated that growth is occurring across southern Ontario municipalities, and is seen as both a planning challenge and an economic opportunity for many communities. Planning professionals spoke to regional growth and demographic change occurring at the Census division (CD) and subdivision (CSD) levels, particularly during the COVID-19 context. As one participant noted, their county has been "*an agricultural-based, rural-based community since the beginning of time and lots of [their] growth pressures have been in the very recent, [and] near future [...] over the past twenty years or so.*" Whereas growth has been continual, the rate at which population change is occurring has grown exponentially since the COVID-19 pandemic and is perceived as fundamentally altering the identity of the community. However, this change has not been dispersed across communities equitably. In discussing the prevalence of new growth, one participant noted that it is widely acknowledged that "*the Town of Blue Mountains is [...] Ground Zero,*" in terms of exurban development, and rather than general growth across the periphery, "*some sub-regional trends are different from other sub-regional areas.*" This was reinforced through a discussion with county officials on trickle-down migration, where counterurban movement to larger exurban communities has led to the displacement of existing residents to more dispersed settlements. Given that most rural and small towns are characterised by a diversity of settlements (typically an amalgamation of various hamlets, villages, and service centres), it is unsurprising that certain regions are more popular for new residents. Based on discussions with planners, it is the primarily village municipalities that are seeing a "*dramatic shift and change [...] that are used to more rural environments.*" This reinforces trends seen in the Census analysis, demonstrating certain exurban zones – including high-amenity tourism towns and agricultural regions – are growing at a much faster rate than others.

The origin of new population growth was largely attributed to migrants from major CMAs across southern Ontario, including the GTA and the Kitchener-Waterloo region, pointing to the presence of counterurban migration. Motivations driving this relocation were primarily attributed to push factors; urban centres were framed by participants as places to escape from, and places from which new residents were fleeing. Almost all

participants spoke to the relocation of urban residents to their community to "*escape urban areas*"; that is, "*a lot of permanent residents have also come up from the GTA, but they moved here from the GTA for a specific reason and it was to get out of that highly-urbanised centre.*" Major urban centres are framed as relatively unclean, unsafe, and expensive places to live. Moreover, it is not just Toronto, but explicitly suburban GTA municipalities like Richmond Hill, Markham, and Vaughan that were named by planners as the origin of new residents. The suburbs no longer appear to offer the same sense of escape from the urban core that they once did; rather, new residents are leaving the GTA for "*peace and quiet*," and not to "*come and sit in another subdivision development.*" Many participants indicated that a high proportion of population growth stems from owners of second homes who have chosen to permanently relocate to their seasonal residences. The ramifications of this migrant origin group are further discussed below with regard to housing and development activity.

Interestingly, although new residents indicate a permanent shift in primary residence to smaller municipalities, many planners noted that these households maintained a strong connection to the GTA (or their urban centre of origin), stating they are seeing "*a higher influx of people that are choosing to buy in [our county] and commute to the GTA, and maybe were former GTA residents.*" This urban-rural relationship, which many participants attributed to employment in the urban centre coupled with the availability of remote work options, differentiates this period of counterurbanisation from historical trends that saw a distinct severance from the city. With the expansion of regional rail and highway connections, participants argued that residents can "*still work in downtown Toronto and take the GO rail or GO bus without having to live in downtown Toronto.*" Predominantly, it points to the residential preference for the benefits of exurban development over both rural or suburban alternatives. Wherein previous periods of urban out-migration, migrants sought out rural areas to explicitly sever ties to the urban centre, pandemic counterurbanists are seeking the distance from urban centres for specific residential preferences but upholding the economic and social benefits of living in major cities.

In discussing the demographic characteristics of new residents, interviewees spoke of qualities that have been previously established in counterurbanisation literature. The majority of migrants were described as amenity-seeking, middle- to high-income earners from older demographic cohorts. Speaking to this trend, one planner noted that "*obviously [our municipality] attracts a certain demographic of people just because of how expensive it is, so it's not as if we're attracting lower-income individuals who really just can't afford to live here [...] It's always been a place for people who had enough money to come to.*" This aligns with a view of counterurban migrants as new retirees who are no longer tied to specific workplace, and seeking different lifestyle opportunities through the natural landscape and recreational amenities. For the majority of this demographic, the ability to relocate is both driven by and afforded by their origin in a larger urban centre, as "*many people have been able to liquidate assets in the Greater Toronto real-estate markets and leverage them into a better lifestyle up*

here." Reinforcing the suggestions found in existing literature, most participants pointed to the natural environment, amenities, and opportunities for active living as primary attractors for new residents. The possibilities of "*having more space, feeling like you can breathe and not just be surrounded by development*" coupled with "*proximity to active-lifestyle ingredients, whether or not it's water, hiking trails, or whatever*" were widely mentioned by interviewees as the greatest assets of their municipalities, and something that was highly valued by residents and planners alike.

Some participants spoke of additional demographic groups that are considerably less visible in existing research on counterurbanisation: a recent increase in young families, or younger professionals, and a notable increase in new immigrant families were cited by many planners as (perhaps surprisingly) contributing significantly to growth. Whereas many exurban communities historically have tended to see an influx of senior populations and retirees, multiple participants referred to *"a younger population or growing younger population, [and] immigrant population.*" The explanation for these emerging trends is two-fold, according to interviewees. Primarily, housing affordability continues to be a significant barrier to homeownership in CMAs and many households have been priced out of the major (sub)urban centres. Particularly in pre-COVID growth, participants noted that "*a lot of it was actually to do with affordability, in years past [...] the ring outside the GTA was essentially a lot more affordable to move into.*" What was once known as the "drive-until-you-qualify" phenomenon – a term used to describe the outward growth in suburbs pushed by those looking to buy a dwelling simply driving outward until they could find one they could afford – is now seeing purchasers going beyond what were previously considered the suburban limits. Instead, periurban and exurban spaces that are much farther from urban centres are seen as a more affordable option, and one of the last places that offers opportunities for homeownership.

While seeking affordable ownership options may be a primary push factor for these demographics, other participants also hinted at larger social and cultural preoccupations promoting growth in their municipality. The rural identity and lifestyle associated with exurban municipalities emerged as a motivation for the relocation of younger individuals across interviews. As one participant stated: "*There's an idea out there right now about moving to a rural community [...] the pace of things and feeling like you can settle a bit more.*" Indeed, rather than pointing motivations directly to economic necessity or certain amenity-seeing behaviour, the resurgence of counterurban trends can be explained in terms of broader social and cultural underpinnings. Scenic landscapes, "slower" living, and a "return" to the rural lifestyle have gained popularity across generations and are now motivating relocation to landscapes perceived as more natural, rugged, and/or "authentic". As seen with other elements of contemporary counterurbanisation, this trend is associated with and accelerated by conditions of COVID-19, as "*people see places like this and feel like it will create this lifestyle for them that they've been longing for, especially since the pandemic.*" While this aligns with what drove earlier waves of amenity-driven urban-to-rural migration, the proximity and availability of open spaces took on greater prominence in the COVID era.

Almost all participants noted that a boom in population growth occurred during the first year of the coronavirus pandemic, primarily attributed to two main factors: the rise of remote-work options and a popular desire to leave dense metropolitan living environments. As one participant stated: "*It was mostly COVID that was the driver to get people up here [...] people aren't constrained anymore with where they live.*" The ability to work remotely has allowed for the relocation of seasonal residents that were previously constrained by urban-based employment; during the pandemic, "*If you were working remotely anyway, then you could just work remotely in, you know, Blue Mountains or Grey Highlands just as easily as you could in downtown Toronto*." Multiple participants noted that although rapid growth occurred during the pandemic period, the rate has since stabilised or in some cases, even seen a reversal since the 2020 peak. One interviewee noted:

"We saw a big influx of people coming to the area from the larger centres [...] for example, selling a place in Toronto and having the money to just come out and buy what they want and to do what they want with the property [...] Just more recently and speaking to local area residents, a lot of these properties are now up for sale and people are moving back to the cities."

Although people were drawn to the "*largely rural*" environments as a means of escape, the lack of urban amenities or city services has been cited as a deterrent for new residents. This was particularly poignant in relation to the presence of a younger demographic, as "*the younger population kind of come up here to dip their toe into the rural experience, but don't always end up staying.*" For many, the allure and imagery of rural living does not necessarily correspond to the realities of exurban life. The resulting population patterns demonstrate what one participant described as "*an ebb and flow [...] I think in the early days of lockdowns of 2020 and everything else, we saw a lot of people start to full-time inhabit those second homes. In some cases, we've seen people move back out and say 'Hey, listen, I thought I'd like to be living in rural Ontario, but you know, there's no Starbucks nearby' or there's no whatever*." The transiency of new residents, both physically and temporally, speak to the uncertainty shrouding contemporary counterurban trends. Therefore, many municipal planners were hesitant to make claims about the continuance or permanence of counterurbanisation in their community, but acknowledged that regardless, population booms during this period had affected both development activity and planning priorities. These perspectives reinforce pre-pandemic growth projections that indicate high, but steady growth across Simcoe, Grey, and Bruce counties as opposed to exponential growth rates.

4.2 Changes in local housing and development

Population booms across rural and small-town municipalities in southern Ontario have directly impacted housing markets and ongoing development in these regions. Interview participants were asked to discuss the implications of counterurban growth rates on local housing supply and development activity. For some participants, it was evident that development was emerging in response to counterurban growth as well as being pushed and promoted by local developers seeking to capitalise on these trends. Interviewees noted witnessing "*a ton of new housing developments going on [in our municipality] right now*" and "*signs everywhere for luxury condominiums or waterfront condominiums.*" Moreover, this new development is being "*marketed towards a certain group of people or a certain demographic – usually retirees who, you know, have a bit more of that financial cushion.*" However, other participants from more rural areas with less precedence for growth noted that development is "*not really at that post-COVID stage yet, where somebody that bought in late 2022 is already starting to build, but maybe they're starting to submit their applications.*" Regardless of the timeline of production, all participants noted that the current state of housing development in their community has yet to catch up with population growth, compounding unfettered property speculation in certain regions and astronomical housing prices across southern Ontario exurban municipalities. More development activity is required to provide much-needed housing supply.

In some regions, active development applications are reaching all-time highs, promoting further growth and development in their community. As one housing development coordinator stated: "*I won't say [the development is] unregulated, because we are doing our best with those checks and balances, making sure we have the best development possible, but the whole mindset is growth and development to spur economic growth in the community.*" A common trait shared among RST municipalities, property investment and land development are primary economic drivers for destination regions (often in conjunction with tourism). Population growth, and the associated boom in development activity, is a primary objective for many municipal councils as it continues to fund the local economy. However, planners and local authorities try to reframe this as an opportunity to achieve additional objectives; one participant aptly described their role, arguing that *"promoting growth, it's not our strategic directive. The directive is to, you know, facilitate appropriate growth.*" Given the rate of community change, many municipalities are nevertheless finding it difficult to break the status quo and facilitate that appropriate growth. Expanding development is growing increasingly complex across exurban municipalities, as many planners noted; one lamented that "*the easy land to develop has all been developed [...] the harder land to develop is now under pressure.*" In some cases, municipalities are not seeing conflict in terms of urban areas encroaching on rural or agricultural lands, "*at least not yet,*" whereas others are publishing growth management plans that include boundary expansions. Some smaller municipalities, with strong economic ties to their natural amenities, are turning to nature conservation as a means of valuing the local landscape. One participant discussed their work on a Natural Heritage Study, where the town is seeking to "*assign*

a dollar value to [features] to say these assets actually provide us with this much [...] sort of financial incentive," and others are hiring in-house biologists to assist with development review. Particularly in those communities closer to the periphery of the GTA, planners noted that utilising prime agricultural lands to accommodate growth is now inevitable.

In municipalities with high numbers of second homes and robust tourism economies, recent growth has led to entanglements of development applications and permitting for new construction relating to the retrofitting of seasonal dwellings to four-season residences. According to one participant, new residents are "*buying up seasonal properties, or maybe taking seasonal properties that they already owned and started living in them full-time.*" This was mentioned by multiple planners working across development approvals, noting that "*a lot of those [existing] cottage residences have been converted, renovated to be winterised.*" This speaks to the origin of migrants – previously seasonal residents (cottagers) choosing to permanently relocate to second-home settings, including vacation towns. However, beyond conversions, many property owners are completely altering existing building footprints. Regions that have historically had smaller, single-storey cottage structures are now seeing larger detached, single-family dwellings that are characteristic of any suburban development. A local planning director explained that "*the type of development that you can see on the land has changed. So what used to be a small cottage type structure looks just like a house that you'd see anywhere in southern Ontario,*" and "*large houses are being built, you know, they demolish the old cottage and replace it with a bigger [house].*" Not only does this have implications on neighbourhood character, but the resulting strain on resources and infrastructure capacity was cited as a concern by multiple participants. Planners spoke to their own reservations about the impacts full-time residences have on shoreline integrity, water servicing, and local identity.

Any new residential development is primarily occurring in existing settlement areas that have been slated for additional growth in official plans. Estate lots and detached, single-family dwellings are commonplace across these municipalities and continue to be built in response to residential preferences. In discussing the type of construction seen in their predominantly rural, but highly touristic region, one development planner noted it is primarily "*custom-built homes...[developers] are providing what the consumer wants, and they're typically the larger single-detached homes.*" However, the increasing cost of land is forcing some adjustments in development patterns. As opposed to estate lots, many planners have indicated a shift to smaller lot sizes coupled with larger single-detached dwellings. One participant remarked that they see developers "*trying to fit huge houses on small lots. And so they're looking for modifications to zoning, setbacks or whatever, so that they can be able to do that. They're just trying to fit in more houses into their development so that they can make more money.*" Whether these dwellings are being built singularly – in the case of conversions – or within a development of many properties is not of concern to most municipal planners, who are more preoccupied with the lack of housing options being afforded to existing residents.

The continued production of single-detached dwellings and private condominium apartments and townhouses "*is still catering to those individual property owners.*" Some planners indicated that their municipality is struggling with a deficit in rental units and more diverse housing tenure and structure types.

Many participants noted that development applications are shifting to incorporate more housing diversity through an increase in town and rowhouses, and semi-detached houses as opposed to single family detached dwellings traditional to greenfield development. The reasoning is less attributed to addressing housing needs in the community, but more so the result of land economics at play in these municipalities. One interviewee argued that it is the cost of land that "*has driven the demand for growth. It's driven a lot of developers to utilise their land more sustainably by increasing their densities,*" and even "*greenfield developments are also experiencing higher densities.*" But it is not just housing types that are shifting in response to both growth and development costs; rather, the qualities and characteristics of exurban development are adjusting to meet the needs of new demographics. As one planner noted, "*now there are sidewalks on the road and all that kind of stuff, so there's a sort of change there in terms of the types of people who are using the space, especially the public spaces.*" A desire for active lifestyles, corresponding with previously urban residents, an increase in families, and policies supporting active transportation, could all be considered contributing factors to create more urban built forms.

With intensifying housing pressures, both in supply constraints and exploding costs, a few participants noted that developments are being proposed in the form of larger buildings, or "*three to four storey apartments. So not really big towers, but those structures are larger for the community and those are seen as large city, city-type structures and not small-town structures.*" These developments range in housing tenure, more commonly providing private condominiums to those seasonal residents or retirees looking to downsize. However, some participants see the trend toward larger buildings as an opportunity to increase rental housing options in their community, which are in a deficit across rural and small-town municipalities. As the cost of land increases in response to growth, planners indicated that there is "*less interest overall in some of those larger sort of estate type lots and we are seeing more interest in some of those smaller product types.*" These types of developments are viewed favourably by local planning authorities, given that they increase the accessibility of housing; however, participants indicated that higher densities are posing challenges to the servicing capacity of many towns in relation to emergency services and community amenities. Associated upgrades to community services and local policy reviews bring additional costs and burdens to the already-overwhelmed local planning departments.

Many participants spoke to the increased focus on gentle densification measures, both from provincial and community directives, as a manner of facilitating appropriate and acceptable growth in their community. Additional residential unit (ARU) or additional dwelling unit (ADU) programs are increasingly seen as viable housing options given the

conflicting need for more diverse housing options and community pressure to maintain neighbourhood character. In referring to the type of development activity across their county, one participant noted that "*there is still going to be quite a bit of larger lots and we don't anticipate seeing much change other than perhaps, maybe you know, seeing gardens suites or seeing additional dwelling units [...] that's what the province is now promoting.*" Secondary suites and garden suites are more popular among rural and small-towns, as it promotes aging-in-place in communities where there are higher-than-average senior populations. However, community concern over the impacts of ADUs are still inhibiting the uptake of this housing option. In these cases, growth in "*the form of intensification,*" such as garden suites or secondary suites, is seen "*as a devaluation of [...] small-town features.*" Whereas some perceive gentle densification as a solution to bringing less visible change to their community, others still see infill as a deterrent to "*neighbourhood context and character.*" Despite shifts in development caused by land economics or even residential preferences, most participants do not anticipate significant change in overall development patterns in the near future.

Although the continuance of counterurban migration is indeterminate, interviewees spoke to the continued ramifications of pandemic growth on their municipalities. A participant spoke to the complex and interrelated factors that continue to impact planning and development, stating: "*We have a push from immigration. We have a push [...] from a COVID standpoint, we have a push from industry. We have a push from developers here.*" Counterurban growth has contributed to various development pressures on municipalities, in turn forcing them to provide housing, infrastructure, and social services, and quickly. And it is not just residential development that is shifting in these communities – pandemic-related counterurban growth has taken its toll on local economies as well. The pressure on main streets to cater to new demographics is altering the daily life of these communities. For example, "*if you've got a little village that has, you know, three art galleries, but no grocery store or little general store where you can just go and get your day-to-day supplies, you know that's maybe one sign that our villages are changing.*" It is evident that a growing population, pushed by counterurban motivations, continue to shape the landscape of southern Ontario municipalities. A changing demographic and shifting development activity point to communities undergoing distinct and swift change. The extent to which this change has impacted RST municipalities does not stop with the built form and a growing ex-urban population. Rather, multiple complex and pressing challenges emerged across interviews as the by-product of COVID-related contemporary counterurbanisation.

4.3 Emerging challenges: Infrastructure and servicing capacity

A growing population and increased development activity requires expanded capacities for water and wastewater supply, alongside hydro and other necessary services. While this is not an undocumented challenge specific to contemporary counterurbanisation, per se, the rapid and unprecedented pressure on the local housing supply in the past five years has placed many planning and development departments in difficult positions. Discussions with planners illuminated the precarious position of most towns

in being able to support further residential expansion in their municipality, regardless of the type of development (be it detached, single-family dwellings on greenfield sites, or more recent trends towards "gentle densification"). Multiple pressures on development, including counterurban growth, provincial housing targets, and the expansion of local manufacturing plants in response to growth (e.g., large employers such as Bruce Power and Honda, and the emergence of regional healthcare campuses), are placing local planning authorities in a critical position on how and when to expand municipal servicing to provide much-needed housing supply. As such, infrastructure and servicing capacity are an emerging and leading challenge impacting municipal planning policy in response to counterurban migration.

Water and wastewater capacity appear to be the two primary barriers to development in rapidly-growing communities. In the case of high-growth population centres on the outskirts of the GTA, such as East Gwillimbury and New Tecumseth, servicing capacity simply cannot keep up with the rate of new development. In those towns witnessing a high proportion of seasonal property owners who have become permanent residents, many municipal services systems have not been designed for full-time use and cannot support the increasing number of cottage conversions. Most participants highlighted that the situation of local water and wastewater plants was uncertain at the time of the interview; as aptly put by one participant, "*we're sort of in the middle of figuring out what to do with our servicing infrastructure,*" pointing to the growing and unresolved problem of water and wastewater in these communities. Others have established that growth brings "*servicing limitations for water and wastewater especially, but even more recently, hydro servicing has constrained supply,*" indicating that servicing challenges are developing as growth continues. Whereas historical plans have ensured most communities operate within their capacity up until now, plant upgrades are required now, or in the very near future, in many municipalities given the rate and consistency of growth in recent years. In some municipalities, such as the Town of Collingwood or Tiny Township, interim control by-laws have been implemented to restrict development until a comprehensive plan is developed to address the infrastructure gaps (Mendler, 2023). On one hand, a lack of consistent funding makes planning and implementing necessary servicing upgrades difficult. On the other hand, choosing to not upgrade guarantees that any further development, and its associated economic benefits, becomes impossible for the community. A manager of planning and development spoke to this trend across exurban municipalities, arguing that infrastructure will "make or break" the growth trajectories for most communities: "*A theme within southern Ontario in the outskirts of the GTA [is that] if communities have enough water or wastewater flows to be able to grow themselves*."

The management strategies that have emerged across municipalities to increase servicing capacity vary on their access to independent tax bases and federal and provincial funding programs. As one participant explained, with the limited tools available to planning departments, "*we don't have the tax base nor do we have the income to support that much of a plant upgrade,*" which in turn restricts growth and

development. The costs of expansion are complicated and often only become apparent on a long-term basis; municipalities need to consider replacing ageing infrastructure, building out new capacity, and maintaining it over time. Most planners were of the view that new development should pay for any further extensions to infrastructure, that is, "*development should pay for development.*" Following this reasoning, many planning departments have increased their development charges as a means to fund upgrades, as "*that is essentially one of the only tools besides taxation [...] to fund that infrastructure.*" Although Ontario's Development Charges Act (1997) is being heavily deployed to fund servicing expansion by collecting development levies, some communities are reluctant to increase development charges without diversifying alternative funding options. Many respondents argued that increased development charges pass these fees onto households already facing increased housing costs, and agreed that it is not a solution for long-term infrastructure maintenance.

To access additional funds, some municipalities have turned to Community Improvement Plans (CIPs) as means of securing grants and loans. Operating with the Planning Act (1990), CIPs require municipalities to develop special planning areas to justify provincial funding. Although effective, participants noted this method comes with its own restrictions and often requires adherence to provincial policy objectives that may not align with local needs. Some planning departments expressed interest in the Tax Increment Financing Act (2006), which operates outside of the provincial Planning Act (1990) and "*offers another way communities can try to target the types of growth they want to see*." Although never previously used in Ontario for residential development, the Act operates similarly to land value-capture schemes, which is an increasingly popular policy option for large-scale infrastructure projects. Largely, frustration was expressed at the limitation of the most recent Housing Accelerator Fund (HAF) from the federal government; although promoted as a means to secure funds for increasing housing supply, applicants could not apply for necessary infrastructure projects, thereby preventing most rural and small-town municipalities from securing any form of applicable funding. Without reliable finance measures, many growing exurban communities are faced with high infrastructure pressures and limited development to offer relief.

In other communities with higher-income households, residents are choosing to inhabit areas with servicing restrictions as a means of maintaining the village-like quality of their community. Preventing the expansion of municipal services ensures their community "*stays small [...] they see the extension of services into that area as the potential to open up development and intensify what's already existing there.*" Planners noted frustration with these attitudes, as many private property owners refuse to connect to municipal servicing, which in turn reduces the financial viability of developing infrastructure in existing settlement areas. To overcome financing restrictions, but continue to provide necessary housing supply, planners are turning to more strategic employment of the tools available to them. In some cases, official plans are "*putting minimum densities in so that those areas that have all of the infrastructure in*

place to allow for [...] more intense development." Similarly, municipal housing strategies are being established such that "*supply has to be relocated to areas that are more poised to be able to support and service the growth in recent years*." However, these objectives do not always align with county-level or provincial policy statements, leading to conflict between varying levels of planning authorities.

In recent years, the provincial government has updated mandates concerning density and housing production in an attempt to address the housing supply shortage across Ontario. Multiple interviewees referenced the implications of legislation, such as Bill 23: More Homes Built Faster Act (2022) and Bill 185: Cutting Red Tape to Build More Homes Act (2024), operating in tandem with counterurban growth on local planning policy and development activity. Notably, the provincial government has mandated density targets in existing settlement areas and imposed production numbers depending on existing development patterns. Municipalities in Census divisions such as Simcoe and Grey Counties are responsible for allocating these targets across towns, villages, and hamlets, leading to frustration in some communities that desire more or less local development. The use of Minister's Zoning Orders (MZOs) has also increased across the province, which can enable developers to bypass local planning authorities to encourage growth and expedite development in certain communities. One participant noted their community saw "*a developer go to the province and get three MZOs approved [in one year], which wasn't really planning that had been used [in our county] before, just because they were seeing the need for, you know, lots of growth in that community.*" While MZOs operate as a tool to shorten development delays caused by municipal turnaround timelines, many participants saw this top-down approach as less favourable. The resulting development is "*very out of the local hands. It's very much a provincial decision*," and one participant claimed that it promotes "*a housing-only mentality.*"

In an attempt to speed up development, maintain the momentum of growth, and in turn meet provincial expectations on new construction, many planners are working with existing tools, such as municipal zoning by-laws. Interview participants discussed updates to their zoning by-laws to be "*more permissive*" of gentle density, sometimes "*reducing or eliminating parking minimums.*" Planners are also leveraging their relationships with developers, hosting bi-annual forums to discuss development charges and local infrastructure. One participant indicated it is imperative to communicate to developers "*there could be a day in the future where we have to turn them down because we can't afford to put in a sewage treatment plant.*" However, in other cases, managing growth is a waiting game for many municipalities. With rapidly changing provincial policy, many planning authorities must wait for the Ontario government to solidify planning objectives, and county governments to provide guiding frameworks that must be adhered to. Ultimately, given current development constraints across exurban communities, many participants spoke to the "*mismanaged expectations on all sides.*" There is a discrepancy between provincial mandates, the expectations of politicians, and the capacity of local planners in terms of how development can and

should take place in rural and small-town communities facing exurban pressures. In the meantime, development is a game of local politics – settlement boundary expansion, re-zoning approvals – all culminating in "*a Council-approved process where Council prioritises how we utilise land, and growth, and what those priorities are and [how] those principles then are applied.*"

4.4 Emerging challenges: Community governance and decision-making

The presence of change and high development activity across exurban municipalities is inevitably leading to community growing pains, as noted by almost all participants in discussing governance and decision-making. Many interviewees discussed greater community presence in planning and development processes, attributed to a larger full-time population and increased development activity. While the majority of community engagement correlated to well-documented "Not-In-My-Backyard" (NIMBY) demographics – that is, largely affluent and older populations – many participants argued that the landscape of planning stakeholders has changed considerably in recent years. As one manager stated, "*It's no longer community group versus council or community group versus the developer […] It's not two sides, it's multidimensional now.*" As populations grow, so do the various perspectives of ownership over the community and the lens through which people are viewing growth. For example, many participants noted the distinct perspectives that diverge between long-term residents and landowners, and those who own second homes (cottages or vacation properties). As described by one planner:

> "There is a huge gap between the people who either have lived here for a long time, or who have had enough money to be able to move here recently, and who are able to enjoy all the amenities that the town has to offer, versus the people who we need to be able to work those service positions at the restaurant or the grocery stores or at the car wash or whatever, who can't find housing."

Development is seen quite favourably for some, who struggle to secure housing, and as a detriment to the core identity of the community to others. While most residents become engaged on larger-scale, high-profile developments, many planners recognised a larger trend of those interested in cultivating and maintaining the rural identity of their community taking on municipal leadership roles. As has been revealed in previous studies (Charmes, 2009), new residents with more social and economic power can quickly infiltrate and influence council decision-making. Planners have noted this development in their own communities, explaining that they have "*seen new members of Council in the last election cycle come about because of these types of applications*," referring to large-scale greenfield developments and MZOs in particular.

Within the exurban context, maintaining and conserving the natural and agricultural landscape is highly valued by exurban residents; however, the way these environments are perceived varies across groups. Long-term residents view "*the rural landscape a lot*

differently than somebody that has retired to a rural area and, you know, has this pastoral vision of what farming should be." This is particularly poignant around encroachment on natural spaces, which are highly valued in the identity and lifestyle of exurban spaces. Oftentimes, it is newer exurban residents that uphold the vision of the rural idyll and place development as diametrically opposed to conserving environmental amenities. However, recent pushes towards infill, gentle densification, and 15-minute city policies are viewed as equally-threatening to exurbia. These planning policies have "*created fears in the community that we are going to restrict people's travel and, you know, we're trying to become Toronto essentially.*" Environmental rhetoric is employed to prevent both greenfield expansion, in the form of land conservation, and infill, usually around tree-cutting. Ultimately, most participants stated plainly that residents "*just want to keep what they have there and not overpopulate the area,*" which is difficult to achieve in a rapidly-growing community.

"Everyone wants to be the last one to move here."

The resistance to change and the rate at which it is occurring is leading to many residents feeling that "*the community is growing beyond what they can control.*" Many planners expressed frustration at the community response to growth and pushback against all forms of development. Although sympathetic that many seasonal and new residents have relocated seeking the quietude of small-town life, there is a consensus that cottage regions are still settlement areas favourable for further development. As one county planner expressed, "*even though their cottage might be adjacent to a lake […] those areas are considered settlement areas*" and are prioritised for residential expansion over greenfield or rural areas – municipalities are "*more supportive of subdivision development where there is already existing development.*" Generally, there is noticeable discontent with those individuals who are considered "*transplants from Toronto,*" who themselves have benefitted from development but "*don't necessarily like the changes that are happening […] they want to maintain the small-town feel of the area.*" Whereas this sentiment is still present among many long-term permanent residents, the relative value of a small-town or village identity often contradicts issues of housing accessibility and affordability in ways that diverge from those newer residents. Moreover, the visibility of new residents in local politics can cause long-term residents to feel "*a bit left out and not valued in the community.*" In a tale as old as time, the influx of new residents with diverse perspectives and priorities is creating a complex and dynamic landscape for community governance and decision-making. Planners and local leaders must navigate these challenges to ensure that growth is managed in a way that is both sustainable and equitable for all residents.

4.5 Emerging challenges: Affordability and local economy

The question of who belongs in rural and small-town (RST) municipalities is at the forefront of many planners' minds while discussing the rapid change occurring across their communities. Ensuring that long-term residents are included, that new residents continue to feel welcome, and that the municipality can continue to attract economic investment is a tricky balancing act, and one that has not come easy according to many participants. All municipal staff interviewed indicated that the growth associated

with the COVID-19 pandemic aligned with a dramatic increase in housing prices for their community. The boom in housing costs is not isolated to rural and small-towns, but the particular strain of new growth on housing availability, and in turn affordability, is evident in exurban communities with limited development opportunities and a considerable level of economic inequality. Many participants stated that producing affordable and accessible housing has become the primary policy priority for local planning departments, and new community-led housing strategies have emerged to address housing supply shortages.

As destination places, exurban communities tend to have both higher-than-average senior and working populations. A lack of higher education institutions restricts the local talent pool and inhibits economic development across and beyond tourism and service industries. Manufacturing and agriculture continue to employ large swaths of the population, and regional commuting for an industry job are not uncommon. With increasing housing costs associated with both the pandemic and contemporary counterurbanisation, most planners noted that "*the biggest issue is that workers can't afford to live*" in these communities anymore. Discussions with participants highlighted that counterurban growth in recent years has led to a series of investments by local employers, such as the Bruce Power expansion and a new Honda manufacturing plant in Simcoe; however, this economic investment is viewed less as an opportunity and more as an additional strain on an already precarious housing situation. In the face of growth, planners are asking themselves: "*What do we need to do as a region or a planning community to make sure that we're still able to attract and retain talent in this area and that we're not losing out to other areas?*"

Whereas many large metropolitan centres are struggling to supply low-income and subsidised housing options, RST municipalities are lacking any form of housing suitable to middle-income earners. In discussing local housing strategies, planners indicated that the objectives lay in increasing affordable ownership options and rental options, or "*the moderate income earner*." Rather than letting the development industry continue to focus on larger, more expensive dwellings, planners are actively "*finding out who needs to be accommodated, [and] what kind of accommodation they need [...] the service sector is really important to us.*" For seniors and a rapidly aging population, lack of diverse housing options is posing further challenges. The ability to "downsize" – that is, transition from a large single-family house to a smaller dwelling – is no longer an option to many households, both due to a lack of smaller options and the inflated housing markets. One planner explained, "*In the past, people aging-in-place have downsized, where now we see a lot of people who have paid off their mortgages, but they're still unable to downsize because they can't afford to.*" As a result, larger dwellings are not becoming available to the younger families and professionals moving to the region and leading to broader concerns about the rapidly-aging population.

Whereas achieving any form of housing supply is difficult with infrastructure restrictions, RST municipalities are looking to find innovative policy responses that address housing

shortages and include all residents, not just high-income, amenity migrants. As development charges increase to fund infrastructure, municipalities are choosing to use "*targeted development charge relief [...] the normal approach would be to exempt development charges for all sorts of stuff. Well, we could be a little more strategic and say [...] only [for] buildings that have three-bedroom units or buildings that are accessible for people with physical disabilities*." Local housing action plans, and zoning by-laws that facilitate affordable housing options are all major project portfolios across planning departments, and planners are manipulating what is available to them to achieve key affordability measures. Two main strategies emerged across interviews: re-focusing on surplus municipal lands and leveraging relationships with higher-levels of government to build social and affordable housing units. Many RST municipalities struggle to induce production of this type of housing, when compared to urban centres, especially given the near-absence of non-profit developers. County governments are working to scale up affordable housing construction, with one higher-tier respondent noting "*accelerated interest from our local municipalities to offer lanes to our housing division to build on for housing.*" One lower-tier actor completed this picture by noting how local municipalities are vying against one another for affordable housing projects, trying to demonstrate the greatest need in their community: "*It's really trying to attract the county to build in your municipality. That's one of the big goals here.*" As such, county and municipal planners are pursuing collaborations between residents, developers, and councils to build capacity for this type of development.

The challenges emerging from contemporary counterurbanisation are extensive and interrelated. Planners in exurban municipalities are facing unprecedented growth rates and rapidly changing communities, both in form and population. Rapid growth is proliferating development pressures in their communities, including the presence of new economic investments, ambitious provincial housing mandates, and developers seeking to capitalise on counterurban trends. Discussions with planners highlight that counterurban migration has resulted in shifting development activity, with traditionally rural environments taking on more urban forms to accommodate growth through densification measures and shifting local economies. However, multiple planning challenges are restricting local municipalities' ability to accommodate and facilitate further growth. Most notably, infrastructure and servicing is a major barrier and difficult to finance for rural and small-town communities. Additionally, residents' attitudes surrounding development are diverse and divisive, forcing planners into positions of mediators and educators as development planning occurs. Lastly, housing and development pressures are contributing to growing affordability concerns for local residents, workers, and local municipal staff, all of whom hope to see continued investment in their communities.

5

Discussion: Adjusting to growing pains

The findings of this research highlight a clear trend of counterurbanisation fuelling the rapid growth of exurban areas across southern Ontario, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is evident in the significant population increase, intra-provincial migration from the GTA, and an overall increase in the number of dwellings in these areas. Population trends seen in Census divisions that are largely exurban or rural – including Grey, Simcoe, and Bruce counties – are consistently higher than average growth rates across Ontario in recent years. Planners primarily view the motivations driving this relocation as a combination of push and pull factors from urban centres, with residents seeking a quieter lifestyle, more space, and more direct access to natural landscapes. These findings reinforce narratives of amenity-driven migration articulated by scholars such as Gosnell & Abrams (2011) and Cadieux & Hurley (2011). However, the availability of remote work, prompted by the pandemic, has further enabled this shift, allowing people to maintain urban employment while capitalising on the benefits of exurban living. These findings corroborate existing literature on counterurbanisation, while providing a current portrait of regional demographic shifts and patterns occurring in southern Ontario. While these quantitative population findings speak to prominent factors in contemporary residential mobility, further insights are derived from interviews with key informants.

Discussions with municipal planners and county staff validate Census data trends suggesting that the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated counterurban migration across southern Ontario, apparently driven by factors such as remote-work options,

affordability concerns, and a desire for a slower-paced lifestyle. Rapid exurban growth is being recognised by local planning departments, who note that new residents are primarily amenity-seeking, middle-to-high-income earners from older age groups; however, local planners have also acknowledged an increase in young families, younger professionals, and immigrant families. The origin of this population growth is largely attributed to migrants from major CMAs, particularly the GTA, seeking to escape the crowding and costs associated with urban areas. While the natural environment and active lifestyle opportunities are primary draws for new residents, some have moved back to major cities due to the lack of urban amenities or city services in smaller settlements. Interviewees assert that the influx of new residents has significantly impacted housing and development activity and has altered the identity of their communities, with a specific struggle to balance burgeoning housing needs while maintaining local rural qualities. The continuance of counterurban migration and pandemic-driven growth is uncertain, and many municipal planners hesitate to make claims about how strongly it will continue and for how long. Despite this, the discussions with local planners and county staff indicate that the ramifications of counterurban growth in southern Ontario exurban municipalities are significant and continue to shape development of these areas.

Development patterns are shifting in response to population growth, housing preferences, and housing economics associated with counterurban growth. Planners noted that new housing supply is largely occurring in existing settlement areas, with some areas now seeing conflict between maintaining prime agricultural lands and growth encroachment. For the time being, however, new development is primarily taking the form of custom-built dwellings driven by consumer preferences. Familiar patterns of exurban development continue to dominate – summarised by one respondent as "*large single 'estate' dwellings surrounding a golf course*" – contributing to a proliferation of low-density developments with large houses on large lots. However, housing pressures are acute and affordability is a major concern as housing prices have increased exponentially since the pandemic. These trends reinforce findings from existing literature, proposing a process of rural gentrification in southern Ontario through rising housing prices and displacement of existing rural residents to other settlements.

Many planners noted that the qualities and characteristics of development are adjusting to meet the needs of new demographics from counterurban growth, with a focus on gentle densification measures, smaller lot sizes, and higher densities with a greater diversity of housing types, all of which are seen as more favourable than conventional exurban or suburban patterns. While there is a push for increased housing diversity across communities (particularly towards rental units and more dense housing forms), this is largely attributed to land economics rather than an attempt to address community housing needs. While the primary purpose of development charges remains funding growth-related infrastructure without burdening existing taxpayers, municipal planners are also using them as a planning tool to influence development patterns.

Planners are working within existing frameworks to employ strategic zoning updates and engage with developers to facilitate growth while upholding local priorities for development. This research highlights how exurban development is responding to new growth in new forms through more intense development and as such is placing pressures on municipalities to quickly provide both hard infrastructure and social services, including community amenities.

5.1 Infrastructure is a key barrier to development

In rapidly-growing exurban communities, servicing capacity (particularly for water and wastewater) poses a significant challenge to further residential expansion and provide much needed housing supply. These findings corroborate existing literature on the limitations of municipal infrastructure to further community development, although servicing restrictions are also framed as a positive inhibitor to unwanted growth by existing community members. As noted by one respondent, "*that's kind of what people like about those types of areas, is that it is a limiting factor to development*." Municipalities must balance the need for infrastructure upgrades to support growth with limited funding and the desire to maintain the unique character of their communities. Municipal financing tools such as Ontario's Development Charges Act (2005) and the Planning Act's (1990) Community Improvement Plans can provide some financial assistance for infrastructure expansion; however, frustrations exist regarding the restrictions of certain funding programs and the top-down approach of provincial housing mandates. The interplay between local, county, and provincial planning policies further complicates decision-making on pursuing alternative financing measures for infrastructure, such as Tax Increment Financing (TIF), and creates uncertainty for municipalities navigating counterurban growth.

Smaller municipalities, with limited staff, resources, and infrastructure experience, require simplified and accessible financing arrangements that can support housing-enabling infrastructure while reducing the risk and uncertainty of an ever-changing local housing market. Federal and provincial governments should prioritise fundings opportunities and financing tools specific to housing-enabling infrastructure expansion (e.g., water, wastewater, and roadways) to achieve housing targets set out across rural and small-town (RST) municipalities. Options like public-private partnerships, innovative financing models, and collaborations with public entities emerge as potential pathways (Fenn, 2024); ultimately, federal and provincial housing policies should focus on creating infrastructure solutions that require minimal financial expertise and effectively mitigate financial and political risks for RST municipalities. By prioritising user-friendly approaches and fostering knowledge-sharing, municipalities can navigate the challenges of infrastructure financing, ultimately enabling much-needed housing development in RST communities.

5.2 Affordability is a growing concern

Communities are grappling with the challenges of rapid growth on housing affordability. The limitations to increasing housing supply are challenging; without immediate relief,

local housing markets are increasingly pushed into extreme conditions. Planners are seeking innovative policy responses to address housing shortages to include all residents, particularly middle-income earners, seniors, and service workers. Sharp economic differences are characteristic of exurban municipalities, particularly those with a high rate of second-home ownership and extensive tourism economies. Service workers are increasingly priced out of local markets and rental housing options are diminishing with the rise of short-term accommodations, as has been previously documented in literature on rural gentrification (Nelson, 2018). Strategies such as targeted development charge relief, re-focusing on surplus municipal lands, and leveraging relationships with the county for social and affordable housing units are being explored. Planners are also working to become a "*more welcoming community and more diverse*" to attract first-generation Canadians and young people to fill job vacancies – a difficult task when facing persistent anti-growth sentiments from existing local residents. These communities also face unique challenges in providing affordable housing compared to urban centres, given an absence of non-profit developers in provisioning subsidised and non-market housing options. Collaboration between residents, developers, and councils is essential to build capacity for affordable housing development in rural and small-town municipalities moving forward, and to mitigate affordability concerns arising with counterurban growth.

5.3 Attitudes towards growth are diverse

"There's that change in mindset [...] we're paying attention to what is being built and we're asking questions and one of them is why?"

The presence of change and rapid development in exurban municipalities is leading to growing pains and challenges with community identity, governance, and decision-making. One of the largest challenges associated with counterurban change involves cultivating and maintaining exurban / rural identities, while meeting necessary targets for housing and development. Many residents value maintaining the natural and agricultural landscape as a key tenet to their community, but there are diverse perspectives on the value of development and how it impacts local identity. Existing literature emphasises the central role of the "rural idyll" in attracting and supporting counterurban migrants, and community growth poses a major threat to this notion (Halfacree, 2020). Both municipal planners and local residents are championing the struggle to conserve natural amenities in response to rapid pandemic-related counterurban growth. Local planning authorities are embarking on policy programs centred on natural heritage features to support existing conservation authorities and promote the protection of amenities that are key to both community identity and local economies. The influx of new residents with varying social and economic backgrounds is influencing municipal leadership and planning policies, as amenity migrants work to influence local councils to restrict or prevent development activity and fund pro-environment movements.

Planners must work to develop growth management policies that balance the important contributions both housing development and environmental conservation bring to the community, ensuring that the needs are met and wishes respected for various kinds of RST residents. As succinctly stated by one participant, the primary objective of growth management in these communities is to reconcile "*high demand to live there [...] accommodate high growth and not change the flavour and the character of the*

community and that takes extra attention to detail." This research indicates that recent counterurban trends have changed the way planners think about their roles and responsibilities. Many respondents noted a shift to more reflexive planning practice as they facilitate and manage counterurban growth. The local changes have "*cultivated a more of a willingness to embrace new approaches*" with planners looking to solve difficult challenges with innovative policy solutions. In other cases, participants stated that: "*It's really causing us to look in the mirror very deeply and try to cut through the fluff that's always just been in there and really get at the heart of what we want to happen in the community.*" Across interviews, planners have argued that there is no point in resisting the changes coming with COVID-related counterurbanisation. Recognising the trend towards a rapidly growing urban periphery is forcing them to be prepared and to consider their community not as an isolated incident, but a subset of a larger regional movement. From a regional perspective, rather than rejecting new residents or resisting urban development strategies, "*it's better to recognise that [...] we are intrinsically linked to the GTA.*" And when it comes to growth, the sentiment shared across participants was that "*it's better to embrace it than to not embrace it.*"

5.4 Counterurban challenges are not isolated

A key takeaway of this research is that the wave of counterurban growth in southern Ontario is not an isolated phenomenon. While some regions are growing more rapidly, particularly those communities with a large proportion of second-home ownership, many rural and exurban municipalities are grappling with similar challenges related to infrastructure strain, housing affordability, community dynamics, and economic impacts. These shared challenges highlight the need for collaboration and knowledge-sharing between municipalities to develop effective and sustainable solutions. The downloading of responsibilities onto already strained local planning authorities calls for responses that leverage shared resources and governance models. Establishing regional planning bodies or frameworks can help coordinate growth management strategies, infrastructure investments, and housing policies across multiple municipalities. This can ensure a more balanced and equitable distribution of growth and resources across rural and small-town (RST) municipalities.

Particularly in terms of infrastructure constraints, pooling resources and expertise can help municipalities achieve economies of scale and share the financial burden of upgrading and expanding essential services. These partnerships are already emerging in response to recent growth; for example, New Tecumseth and the Town of Collingwood recently signed a shared agreement to jointly fund a water and wastewater treatment plant expansion to service both communities (Town of New Tecumseth, 2024). However, further collaboration would be beneficial, particularly on housing strategies. Limited capacity to produce non-profit and non-market housing options could be remedied through collaboration on affordable housing projects, including the development of shared ownership models and rental units. Ultimately, working together to advocate for policy changes and secure funding from higher levels of government can strengthen the collective role of rural and exurban municipalities in regional growth planning, and address a range of common challenges that these communities continue to face.

6
Conclusion

The ongoing counterurbanisation trend in southern Ontario, marked by sustained and rapid growth in rural, exurban, and periurban communities, presents multifaceted challenges for municipal planners. As this research has demonstrated, pandemic-related counterurbanisation continues to be particularly acute across the landscape of southern Ontario and has brought forth challenges related to infrastructure provisioning, community conflict, housing affordability, and rural gentrification – longstanding issues that remain unresolved. Planners often find themselves at the nexus of diverse interests and objectives, navigating the complex interplay between ambitious provincial housing mandates, conflicting conceptualisations of place among residents, opportunities for local economic development, and achieving principles of sustainable development. Although local planners are navigating pandemic-related counterurban growth through a variety of innovative strategies, the current trajectory of exurban development is unlikely to be sustained given economic and environmental constraints in facilitating growth. However, the prevalence of exurban development and increased counterurban movement speaks to interesting ideas around the urban-rural interface as a place of desire and cultural significance.

The intersection of counterurban trends with exurban landscapes raises critical questions about growth management, residential preferences, and conceptualisations of place in the face of climate change and social inequality. While twenty-first-century planning emphasises urban densification, a growing preference for smaller, more connected communities highlights the enduring appeal of exurban lifestyles as a means to connect with nature and one another. As indicated in this research, counterurban trends are expected to continue or increase as cities grapple with increasing unaffordability and concerns around safety and livability. Despite this preference for exurban living, low-density and amenity-driven development patterns are not sustainable, and contribute to ecological fragmentation and social stratification of place. Continued research on the social, political, and economic facets of this urban dispersion is critical to understanding and navigating how counterurban growth and exurban development can change to become more equitable and sustainable. Examining who participates in this transition, how it is governed, and the consequences of various decision pathways will all be critical for comprehending the evolving notions of place and community in southern Ontario.

This research provides insights into the challenges facing southern Ontario's rural and small-town municipalities in response to COVID-related counterurbanisation, and emerging responses by local planning departments in facilitating and managing this growth. However, future research could expand the scope to include more diverse communities, and incorporate perspectives from residents, businesses, and community organisations. By addressing these research gaps, planners can further refine understandings of this complex trend and provide further insights into contemporary motivations for counterurbanisation; shed light on the urban-rural interface from a social and cultural perspective; and ultimately enable municipalities to better navigate the challenges and opportunities that emerge from counterurban migration.

7

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Appendix A
Interview Guide

Introduction / Knowledge of Counterurbanisation Trends

1. Can you tell me briefly how long you have been working in municipal planning and about your role and responsibilities within the municipality?
2. What demographic changes are being recognised in the community in the past five years?
3. Why do you think people are interesting in living in your municipality?
4. Are there any specific demographic groups or segments of the population that seem to be driving this migration, and from where are they coming?

Perspectives on Local Housing Markets and Gentrification

1. How has local housing production responded to increased population growth?
2. What do you think the impact of growth has been on housing affordability?
3. What kind of challenges are unfolding in the local housing market in response to growth, outside of affordability?
4. In the context of [municipality], do you believe gentrification is occurring? If yes, what are its specific characteristics as observed here?

Community Governance & Decision-Making

1. To what extent do you interact with community members and residents in your work?
2. Can you elaborate on community activity in the planning and development process?
3. What relationships or attitudes between citizens do you observe in the community / community consultation meetings?
4. How have community planning priorities changed in the past five years?

Concluding Perspectives

1. As a local planner, how do you feel about population changes happening in the region?
2. What is your biggest concern in planning for your community today, in the context of current population growth trajectories?
3. If I have additional questions or would like to clarify something, can I reach out to you?

Appendix B
Data Tables

B1. Population Change of Small Population Centres (1,000-30,000), Top 100, 2016-2021
B2. One-Year Intraprovincial Migration Rates of Small Population Centres (1,000-30,000), Top 100, 2021.
B3. Five-Year Intraprovincial Migration Rates of Small Population Centres (1,000-30,000), Top 100, 2021.

Source: Canadian Census, 2021.

B1. Population Change of Small Population Centres (1,000-30,000), Top 100, 2016-2021

GEO UID	CD_name	CSD_name	Population, 2021	Population % change, 2016 to 2021
3519054	York	East Gwillimbury	34637	44.4
3544065	Muskoka	Georgian Bay	3441	36.9
3542045	Grey	The Blue Mountains	9390	33.7
3549036	Parry Sound	Carling	1491	32.5
3522010	Dufferin	Grand Valley	3851	30.3
3549028	Parry Sound	McKellar	1419	27.7
3526037	Niagara	Thorold	23816	26.7
3549043	Parry Sound	Magnetawan	1753	26.1
3549003	Parry Sound	Seguin	5280	22.7
3538056	Lambton	Kettle Point 44	1233	22
3539060	Middlesex	Lucan Biddulph	5680	20.9
3543064	Simcoe	Wasaga Beach	24862	20.3
3510045	Frontenac	North Frontenac	2285	20.1
3515044	Peterborough	Trent Lakes	6439	19.3
3544027	Muskoka	Lake of Bays	3759	18.7
3502048	Prescott and Russell	Russell	19598	18.6
3542005	Grey	Southgate	8716	18.5
3531040	Perth	North Perth	15538	18.3
3509024	Lanark	Beckwith	9021	18
3509028	Lanark	Carleton Place	12517	17.6
3515019	Peterborough	Curve Lake First Nation 35	1244	17.5
3532004	Oxford	Tillsonburg	18615	17.3
3549096	Parry Sound	Parry Sound, Unorganized, Centre Part	2495	16.4
3544053	Muskoka	Muskoka Lakes	7652	16.2
3515037	Peterborough	North Kawartha	2877	16.1
3541045	Bruce	Saugeen Shores	15908	16
3558028	Thunder Bay	Shuniah	3247	16
3512058	Hastings	Faraday	1612	15.1
3557008	Algoma	St. Joseph	1426	15
3546005	Haliburton	Highlands East	3830	14.6
3546015	Haliburton	Minden Hills	6971	14.5
3539015	Middlesex	Strathroy-Caradoc	23871	14.4
3546024	Haliburton	Dysart et al	7182	14.4
3543009	Simcoe	Springwater	21701	13.9

GEO UID	CD_name	CSD_name	Population, 2021	Population % change, 2016 to 2021
3515023	Peterborough	Douro-Dummer	7632	13.8
3543031	Simcoe	Collingwood	24811	13.8
3547008	Renfrew	Greater Madawaska	2864	13.7
3515003	Peterborough	Asphodel-Norwood	4658	13.4
3515013	Peterborough	Cavan Monaghan	10016	13.4
3543072	Simcoe	Penetanguishene	10077	12.4
3515030	Peterborough	Havelock-Belmont-Methuen	5083	12.2
3509030	Lanark	Mississippi Mills	14740	12
3510035	Frontenac	Central Frontenac	4892	11.9
3557035	Algoma	Huron Shores	1860	11.8
3538040	Lambton	Lambton Shores	11876	11.7
3560090	Kenora	Kenora, Unorganized	7475	11.7
3502044	Prescott and Russell	Casselman	3960	11.6
3519049	York	King	27333	11.5
3560034	Kenora	Sioux Lookout	5839	10.8
3543071	Simcoe	Tay	11091	10.5
3523025	Wellington	Centre Wellington	31093	10.3
3532038	Oxford	East Zorra-Tavistock	7841	10.2
3547046	Renfrew	Horton	3182	10.2
3541069	Bruce	Northern Bruce Peninsula	4404	10.1
3546018	Haliburton	Algonquin Highlands	2588	10.1
3543068	Simcoe	Tiny	12966	10
3510005	Frontenac	Frontenac Islands	1930	9.7
3534024	Elgin	Southwold	4851	9.7
3539033	Middlesex	Middlesex Centre	18928	9.7
3547002	Renfrew	Arnprior	9629	9.5
3522012	Dufferin	Mono	9421	9.4
3526011	Niagara	Port Colborne	20033	9.4
3543019	Simcoe	Ramara	10377	9.4
3543023	Simcoe	Oro-Medonte	23017	9.4
3511035	Lennox and Addington	Addington Highlands	2534	9.3
3515015	Peterborough	Selwyn	18653	9.3
3541015	Bruce	Huron-Kinloss	7723	9.3

GEO UID	CD_name	CSD_name	Population, 2021	Population % change, 2016 to 2021
3507065	Leeds and Grenville	North Grenville	17964	9.2
3509021	Lanark	Perth	6469	9.1
3551043	Manitoulin	Wikwemikong Unceded	2728	9.1
3558001	Thunder Bay	Neebing	2241	9.1
3526047	Niagara	Niagara-on-the-Lake	19088	9
3534020	Elgin	Central Elgin	13746	9
3543021	Simcoe	Essa	22970	9
3514024	Northumberland	Alnwick/Haldimand	7473	8.8
3549046	Parry Sound	Strong	1566	8.8
3541055	Bruce	South Bruce Peninsula	9137	8.6
3540063	Huron	Ashfield-Colborne-Wawanosh	5884	8.5
3510020	Frontenac	South Frontenac	20188	8.3
3522001	Dufferin	East Garafraxa	2794	8.3
3523001	Wellington	Puslinch	7944	8.3
3543015	Simcoe	Severn	14576	8.3
3523009	Wellington	Guelph/Eramosa	13904	8.2
3502036	Prescott and Russell	Clarence-Rockland	26505	8.1
3526014	Niagara	Wainfleet	6887	8.1
3526057	Niagara	Lincoln	25719	8.1
3544018	Muskoka	Bracebridge	17305	8.1
3530035	Waterloo	Woolwich	26999	8
3549014	Parry Sound	Perry	2650	8
3512046	Hastings	Marmora and Lake	4267	7.9
3518039	Durham	Brock	12567	7.9
3548027	Nipissing	Bonfield	2146	7.8
3501042	Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry	North Stormont	7400	7.7
3541024	Bruce	Kincardine	12268	7.7
3537003	Essex	Leamington	29680	7.6
3552093	Sudbury	Sudbury, Unorganized, North Part	2902	7.6
3509039	Lanark	Lanark Highlands	5737	7.5
3512036	Hastings	Madoc	2233	7.5
3512076	Hastings	Hastings Highlands	4385	7.5
3512001	Hastings	Tyendinaga	4538	7.4

B2. One-Year Intraprovincial Migration Rates of Small Population Centres (1,000-30,000), Top 100, 2021.

GEO UID	CD Name	CSD Name	Population, 2021	Mobility status 1 year ago - Movers	Mobility status 1 year ago - Movers - Intraprovincial migrants	1 Year Intraprovincial Migration Rate
3538007	Lambton	Dawn-Euphemia	1968	95	95	100%
3515037	Peterborough	North Kawartha	2877	255	225	88%
3507042	Leeds and Grenville	Athens	3042	250	215	86%
3557008	Algoma	St. Joseph	1426	135	115	85%
3514024	Northumberland	Alnwick/Haldimand	7473	680	570	84%
3554008	Timiskaming	Cobalt	989	120	100	83%
3547008	Renfrew	Greater Madawaska	2864	260	215	83%
3546005	Haliburton	Highlands East	3830	430	355	83%
3522019	Dufferin	Melancthon	3132	370	305	82%
3522001	Dufferin	East Garafraxa	2794	250	205	82%
3526014	Niagara	Wainfleet	6887	440	360	82%
3549060	Parry Sound	Powassan	3346	210	170	81%
3542037	Grey	Chatsworth	7080	445	360	81%
3542045	Grey	The Blue Mountains	9390	1330	1075	81%
3522010	Dufferin	Grand Valley	3851	535	430	80%
3512058	Hastings	Faraday	1612	150	120	80%
3523017	Wellington	Erin	11981	1135	905	80%
3558066	Thunder Bay	Manitouwadge	1974	295	235	80%
3522008	Dufferin	Amaranth	4327	585	465	79%
3549096	Parry Sound	Parry Sound, Unorganized, Centre Part	2495	170	135	79%
3518039	Durham	Brock	12567	1260	995	79%
3549019	Parry Sound	Armour	1459	95	75	79%
3548094	Nipissing	Nipissing, Unorganized, North Part	1591	95	75	79%
3515044	Peterborough	Trent Lakes	6439	590	460	78%
3511030	Lennox and Addington	Stone Mills	7826	700	540	77%
3552013	Sudbury	Markstay-Warren	2708	305	235	77%
3549003	Parry Sound	Seguin	5280	390	300	77%
3546015	Haliburton	Minden Hills	6971	715	550	77%
3515030	Peterborough	Havelock-Belmont-Methuen	5083	385	295	77%
3523009	Wellington	Guelph/Eramosa	13904	1400	1070	76%
3515013	Peterborough	Cavan Monaghan	10016	1060	810	76%
3534042	Elgin	West Elgin	5060	360	275	76%
3549071	Parry Sound	Nipissing	1769	125	95	76%

GEO UID	CD Name	CSD Name	Population, 2021	Mobility status 1 year ago - Movers	Mobility status 1 year ago - Movers - Intraprovincial migrants	1 Year Intraprovincial Migration Rate
3544053	Muskoka	Muskoka Lakes	7652	660	500	76%
3543019	Simcoe	Ramara	10377	1150	870	76%
3548027	Nipissing	Bonfield	2146	205	155	76%
3546018	Haliburton	Algonquin Highlands	2588	245	185	76%
3514014	Northumberland	Cramahe	6509	775	585	75%
3543015	Simcoe	Severn	14576	1200	905	75%
3522016	Dufferin	Mulmur	3571	345	260	75%
3532027	Oxford	Zorra	8628	625	470	75%
3543071	Simcoe	Tay	11091	1065	800	75%
3556048	Cochrane	Smooth Rock Falls	1200	140	105	75%
3548001	Nipissing	South Algonquin	1055	40	30	75%
3543064	Simcoe	Wasaga Beach	24862	3700	2755	74%
3558044	Thunder Bay	Nipigon	1473	155	115	74%
3510045	Frontenac	North Frontenac	2285	290	215	74%
3551017	Manitoulin	Northeastern Manitoulin and the Islands	2641	305	225	74%
3512076	Hastings	Hastings Highlands	4385	435	320	74%
3526021	Niagara	West Lincoln	15454	1000	735	74%
3526028	Niagara	Pelham	18192	1610	1180	73%
3539060	Middlesex	Lucan Biddulph	5680	505	370	73%
3549028	Parry Sound	McKellar	1419	130	95	73%
3542005	Grey	Southgate	8716	1260	920	73%
3515023	Peterborough	Douro-Dummer	7632	600	435	73%
3510035	Frontenac	Central Frontenac	4892	435	315	72%
3512001	Hastings	Tyendinaga	4538	340	245	72%
3554036	Timiskaming	Armstrong	1199	70	50	71%
3512026	Hastings	Centre Hastings	4801	385	275	71%
3543009	Simcoe	Springwater	21701	1855	1320	71%
3543068	Simcoe	Tiny	12966	1160	825	71%
3514004	Northumberland	Brighton	12108	1055	750	71%
3507004	Leeds and Grenville	Edwardsburgh/Cardinal	7505	690	490	71%
3548031	Nipissing	Chisholm	1312	85	60	71%
3514045	Northumberland	Trent Hills	13861	1440	1015	70%
3534030	Elgin	Dutton/Dunwich	4152	355	250	70%

GEO UID	CD Name	CSD Name	Population, 2021	Mobility status 1 year ago - Movers	Mobility status 1 year ago - Movers - Intraprovincial migrants	1 Year Intraprovincial Migration Rate
3543023	Simcoe	Oro-Medonte	23017	2235	1570	70%
3512046	Hastings	Marmora and Lake	4267	420	295	70%
3514020	Northumberland	Port Hope	17294	1895	1330	70%
3547046	Renfrew	Horton	3182	285	200	70%
3526057	Niagara	Lincoln	25719	2645	1850	70%
3532045	Oxford	Blandford-Blenheim	7565	530	370	70%
3526065	Niagara	Grimsby	28883	3075	2135	69%
3548034	Nipissing	East Ferris	4946	310	215	69%
3543005	Simcoe	Clearview	14814	1365	945	69%
3543072	Simcoe	Penetanguishene	10077	810	560	69%
3544002	Muskoka	Gravenhurst	13157	1360	940	69%
3523043	Wellington	Minto	9094	900	620	69%
3532018	Oxford	Ingersoll	13693	1410	970	69%
3549066	Parry Sound	Callander	3964	460	315	68%
3544065	Muskoka	Georgian Bay	3441	460	315	68%
3541004	Bruce	South Bruce	5880	410	280	68%
3514019	Northumberland	Hamilton	11059	755	515	68%
3547003	Renfrew	McNab/Braeside	7591	595	405	68%
3509039	Lanark	Lanark Highlands	5737	500	340	68%
3539027	Middlesex	Thames Centre	13980	950	645	68%
3552001	Sudbury	French River / RiviËre des FranÁais	2828	155	105	68%
3557028	Algoma	Thessalon	1260	170	115	68%
3542029	Grey	Hanover	7967	865	585	68%
3538040	Lambton	Lambton Shores	11876	1080	730	68%
3543003	Simcoe	Adjala-Tosorontio	10989	980	660	67%
3540010	Huron	Bluewater	7540	535	360	67%
3519054	York	East Gwillimbury	34637	4280	2880	67%
3549046	Parry Sound	Strong	1566	135	90	67%
3538015	Lambton	Brooke-Alvinston	2359	165	110	67%
3518020	Durham	Scugog	21581	1875	1250	67%
3512036	Hastings	Madoc	2233	165	110	67%
3501042	Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry	North Stormont	7400	660	440	67%
3540063	Huron	Ashfield-Colborne-Wawanosh	5884	475	315	66%
3509001	Lanark	Montague	3914	295	195	66%

B3. Five-Year Intraprovincial Migration Rates of Small Population Centres (1,000-30,000), Top 100, 2021.

GEO UID	CD Name	CSD Name	Population, 2021	Mobility status 5 years ago - Movers	Mobility status 5 years ago - Movers - Intraprovincial migrants	5 Year Intraprovincial Migration Rate
3549071	Parry Sound	Nipissing	1769	610	530	95%
3548013	Nipissing	Papineau-Cameron	982	200	180	95%
3549019	Parry Sound	Armour	1459	340	315	94%
3538007	Lambton	Dawn-Euphemia	1968	415	350	94%
3546005	Haliburton	Highlands East	3830	1370	1265	93%
3512058	Hastings	Faraday	1612	695	620	93%
3551011	Manitoulin	Assiginack	1008	275	235	93%
3510045	Frontenac	North Frontenac	2285	935	845	92%
3507017	Leeds and Grenville	Front of Yonge	2595	685	580	92%
3546018	Haliburton	Algonquin Highlands	2588	1115	1000	92%
3522016	Dufferin	Mulmur	3571	1165	1040	92%
3509024	Lanark	Beckwith	9021	3265	2800	91%
3549043	Parry Sound	Magnetawan	1753	630	545	91%
3515044	Peterborough	Trent Lakes	6439	2610	2315	91%
3549028	Parry Sound	McKellar	1419	530	445	91%
3547008	Renfrew	Greater Madawaska	2864	990	815	90%
3559090	Rainy River	Rainy River, Unorganized	1423	490	410	90%
3522012	Dufferin	Mono	9421	3055	2710	90%
3557051	Algoma	Macdonald, Meredith and Aberdeen Additional	1513	420	375	89%
3522001	Dufferin	East Garafraxa	2794	920	820	89%
3547046	Renfrew	Horton	3182	965	850	89%
3543003	Simcoe	Adjala-Tosorontio	10989	3250	2860	89%
3558028	Thunder Bay	Shuniah	3247	945	795	89%
3510005	Frontenac	Frontenac Islands	1930	485	395	89%
3512001	Hastings	Tyendinaga	4538	1180	1010	89%
3549046	Parry Sound	Strong	1566	550	465	88%
3544027	Muskoka	Lake of Bays	3759	1565	1335	88%
3523009	Wellington	Guelph/Eramosa	13904	4410	3790	88%
3543019	Simcoe	Ramara	10377	3925	3355	88%
3526014	Niagara	Wainfleet	6887	1650	1415	88%
3557011	Algoma	Laird	1121	320	280	88%
3514014	Northumberland	Cramahe	6509	2355	1990	87%

GEO UID	CD Name	CSD Name	Population, 2021	Mobility status 5 years ago - Movers	Mobility status 5 years ago - Movers - Intraprovincial migrants	5 Year Intraprovincial Migration Rate
3549060	Parry Sound	Powassan	3346	1110	930	87%
3549003	Parry Sound	Seguin	5280	1585	1340	87%
3507052	Leeds and Grenville	Merrickville-Wolford	3135	1140	940	87%
3539047	Middlesex	Adelaide-Metcalfe	3011	770	650	87%
3557008	Algoma	St. Joseph	1426	520	410	87%
3522019	Dufferin	Melancthon	3132	1040	895	87%
3511030	Lennox and Addington	Stone Mills	7826	2295	1890	86%
3552013	Sudbury	Markstay-Warren	2708	925	780	86%
3543015	Simcoe	Severn	14576	4875	4080	86%
3556056	Cochrane	Moonbeam	1157	360	300	86%
3523001	Wellington	Puslinch	7944	2765	2355	86%
3509001	Lanark	Montague	3914	1205	975	86%
3544065	Muskoka	Georgian Bay	3441	1625	1360	86%
3548034	Nipissing	East Ferris	4946	1445	1190	86%
3507006	Leeds and Grenville	Augusta	7386	2125	1715	86%
3543068	Simcoe	Tiny	12966	4735	3880	86%
3522008	Dufferin	Amaranth	4327	1600	1330	86%
3512076	Hastings	Hastings Highlands	4385	1580	1295	85%
3543071	Simcoe	Tay	11091	4050	3320	85%
3557095	Algoma	Algoma, Unorganized, North Part	6050	1745	1435	85%
3522010	Dufferin	Grand Valley	3851	1670	1395	85%
3526021	Niagara	West Lincoln	15454	4270	3545	85%
3554094	Timiskaming	Timiskaming, Unorganized, West Part	3210	940	790	85%
3515030	Peterborough	Havelock-Belmont-Methuen	5083	1745	1440	85%
3552004	Sudbury	St.-Charles	1357	570	455	85%
3515023	Peterborough	Douro-Dummer	7632	1935	1585	85%
3552093	Sudbury	Sudbury, Unorganized, North Part	2902	900	745	85%
3519054	York	East Gwillimbury	34637	16040	13300	85%
3546015	Haliburton	Minden Hills	6971	2805	2315	85%
3515013	Peterborough	Cavan Monaghan	10016	3165	2610	85%
3542037	Grey	Chatsworth	7080	2095	1750	85%
3523017	Wellington	Erin	11981	3875	3220	85%
3509010	Lanark	Drummond/North Elmsley	8183	2310	1810	85%
3543023	Simcoe	Oro-Medonte	23017	7630	6305	85%

GEO UID	CD Name	CSD Name	Population, 2021	Mobility status 5 years ago - Movers	Mobility status 5 years ago - Movers - Intraprovincial migrants	5 Year Intraprovincial Migration Rate
3543009	Simcoe	Springwater	21701	7880	6510	85%
3514019	Northumberland	Hamilton	11059	3125	2520	84%
3514024	Northumberland	Alnwick/Haldimand	7473	2445	2005	84%
3543021	Simcoe	Essa	22970	9925	7080	84%
3549014	Parry Sound	Perry	2650	960	785	84%
3543072	Simcoe	Penetanguishene	10077	3135	2570	84%
3507021	Leeds and Grenville	Leeds and the Thousand Islands	9804	2775	2190	84%
3532045	Oxford	Blandford-Blenheim	7565	2065	1695	84%
3532012	Oxford	South-West Oxford	7583	1960	1625	84%
3515005	Peterborough	Otonabee-South Monaghan	7087	2070	1665	84%
3557066	Algoma	Prince	975	250	195	84%
3540063	Huron	Ashfield-Colborne-Wawanosh	5884	1570	1280	84%
3549066	Parry Sound	Callander	3964	1315	1080	84%
3507014	Leeds and Grenville	Elizabethtown-Kitley	9545	2720	2130	84%
3548031	Nipissing	Chisholm	1312	365	295	84%
3515003	Peterborough	Asphodel-Norwood	4658	1695	1360	83%
3531013	Perth	Perth South	3776	755	610	83%
3534024	Elgin	Southwold	4851	1380	1135	83%
3547070	Renfrew	North Algona Wilberforce	3111	900	680	83%
3549056	Parry Sound	South River	1101	450	365	83%
3542045	Grey	The Blue Mountains	9390	4490	3665	83%
3538031	Lambton	Point Edward	1930	590	460	83%
3542053	Grey	Georgian Bluffs	11100	3500	2830	83%
3540050	Huron	Morris-Turnberry	3590	820	650	83%
3512026	Hastings	Centre Hastings	4801	1405	1100	83%
3549096	Parry Sound	Parry Sound, Unorganized, Centre Part	2495	905	715	83%
3558090	Thunder Bay	Thunder Bay, Unorganized	6221	1915	1520	83%
3512046	Hastings	Marmora and Lake	4267	1650	1295	83%
3514004	Northumberland	Brighton	12108	4090	3170	83%
3515037	Peterborough	North Kawartha	2877	1170	940	82%
3507004	Leeds and Grenville	Edwardsburgh/Cardinal	7505	2415	1920	82%
3534020	Elgin	Central Elgin	13746	4460	3570	82%
3547020	Renfrew	Brudenell, Lyndoch and Raglan	1552	445	340	82%
3547003	Renfrew	McNab/Braeside	7591	2250	1680	82%