

Welcoming Communities Analysis

Resident Integration and Belonging in Thunder Bay, Ontario.

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RESEARCH

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CEDC
COMMUNITY ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

CITY OF
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 **Thunder Bay
Multicultural Association**





Welcoming Communities Analysis: Resident integration and belonging in Thunder Bay, On.

Uncovering newcomers' experiences with housing, transit, healthcare, Child Care and community services & offering practical recommendations to help strengthen Thunder Bay's welcoming environment and support long-term newcomer integration.

The City of Thunder Bay is currently experiencing one of its largest periods of immigration, driven by efforts from municipal, provincial and federal government, as well as key not-for-profit organizations, to enhance the local economy and workforce. As a result, there is growing cultural, religious and linguistic diversity across the city, with small businesses and community services aiming to adapt accordingly. As a response, the Thunder Bay Community Economic Development Commission (CEDC), City of Thunder Bay Community Services Department (CTB) and Thunder Bay Multicultural Association (TBMA) partnered to conduct a Welcoming Communities Analysis – aiming to help key organizations understand Thunder Bay's current landscape and develop strategies to make the city more welcoming and supportive of newcomers.

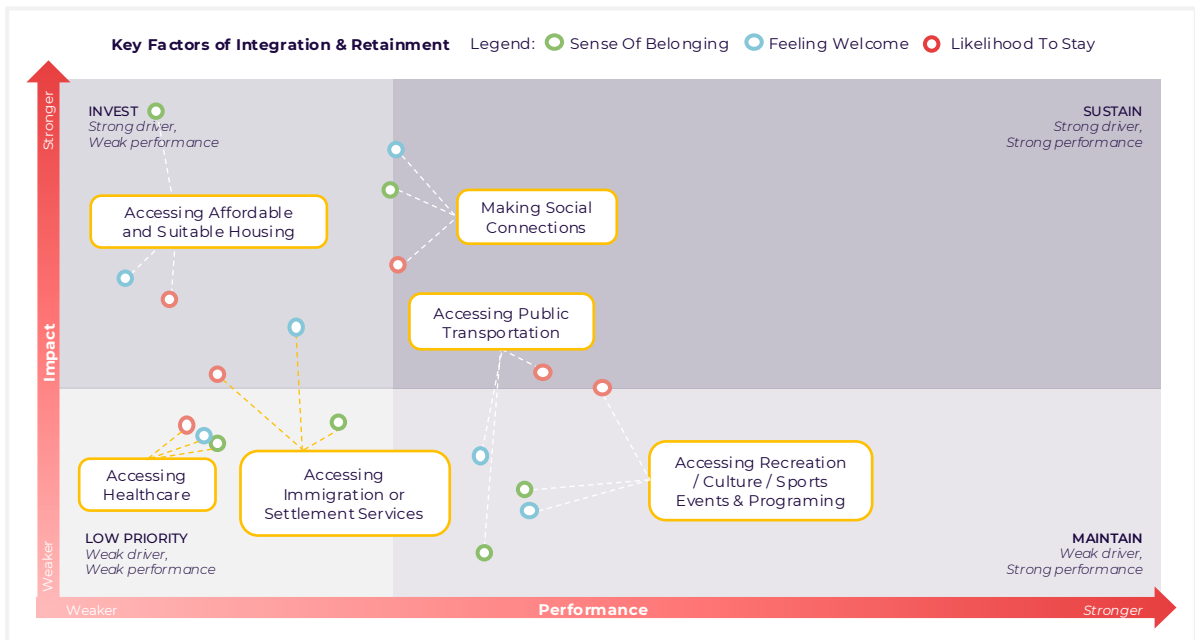
This report shares findings from a multi-phased Welcoming Communities Analysis, conducted by Environics Research for Thunder Bay Community Economic Development Commission, the City of Thunder Bay Community Services Department and Thunder Bay Multicultural Association. The research included pre-consultation interviews with city stakeholders, as well as a survey and a series of focus groups with recent newcomers to Thunder Bay. The survey collected responses from 127 newcomers (those who arrived within the past 10 years), with a margin of error of plus or minus 8.7 percentage points at a 95% confidence level, providing a foundation for understanding key themes and trends.



Belonging and Staying in Thunder Bay: What Matters Most to Newcomers

To assess how various aspects of life in Thunder Bay affect newcomer integration and retention, we used statistical techniques to determine which factors are most predictive of integration outcomes. To visualize such, we used a Performance and Impact Matrix that plots level of impact by current performance.

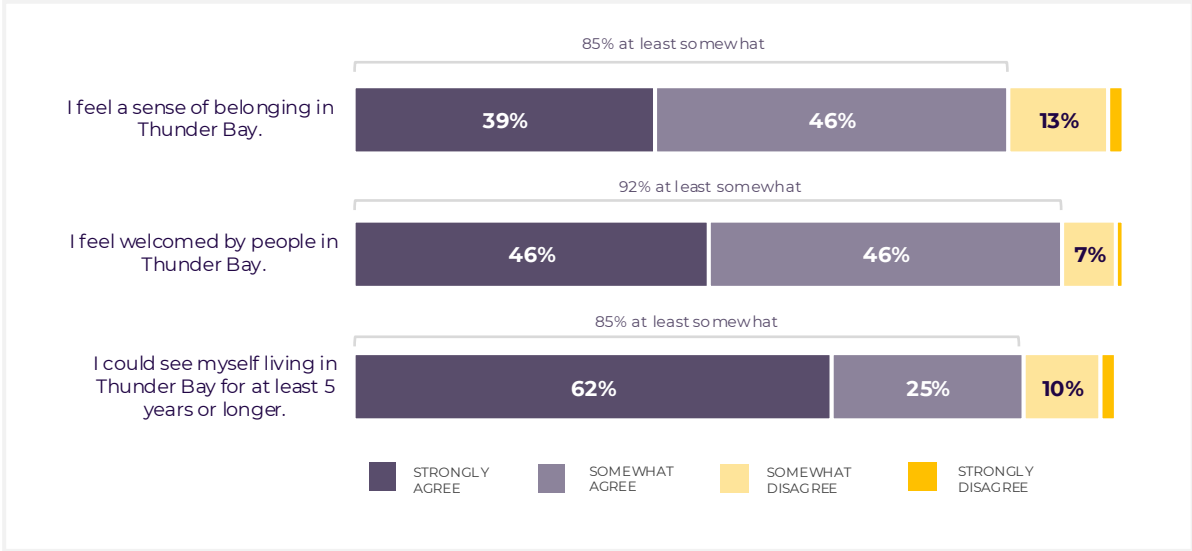
Our analysis identifies two key factors that have the greatest impact on newcomers' sense of belonging and retainment in Thunder Bay. First, **accessing affordable and suitable housing** and second, **making social connections**. Both aspects underperform among newcomers but rank high in their level of impact on integration and retainment. In other words, these areas are not working well for many newcomers, yet they strongly shape whether people feel like they belong. This makes them top priorities for targeted improvement.



Most newcomers express **positive sentiment about their integration** into Thunder Bay but consider finding a job in their field or that accepts their qualifications the **biggest challenge**.

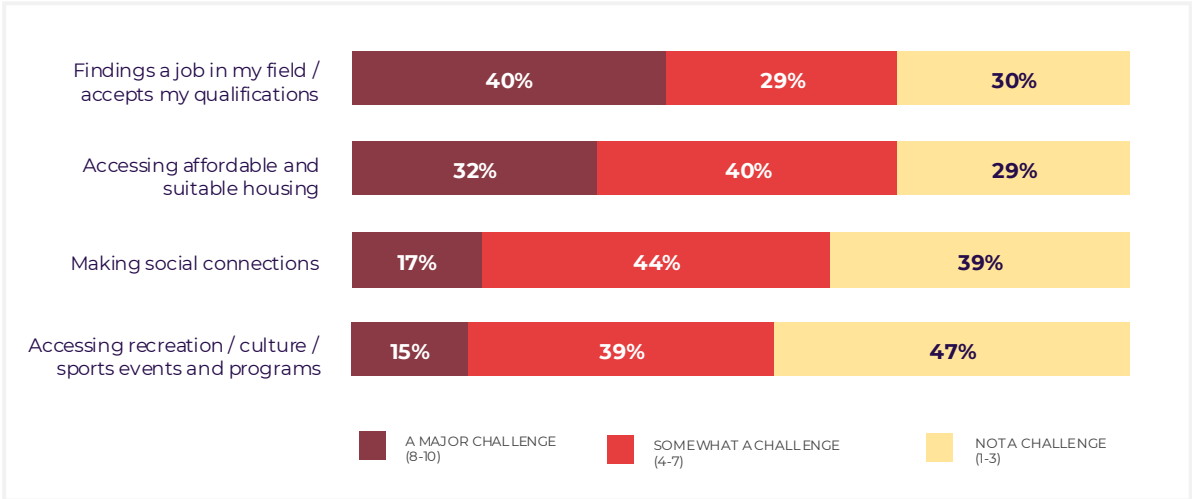
General Feelings of: Belonging, Feeling Welcomed and Retainment

Q15: Please state whether you agree or disagree with the following statements.



Biggest Challenges for Newcomers

Q16: Please rate the level of challenge you experienced when settling into Thunder Bay, on a scale from (1) "Not a challenge at all" to (10) "A major challenge."



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Insights on Housing

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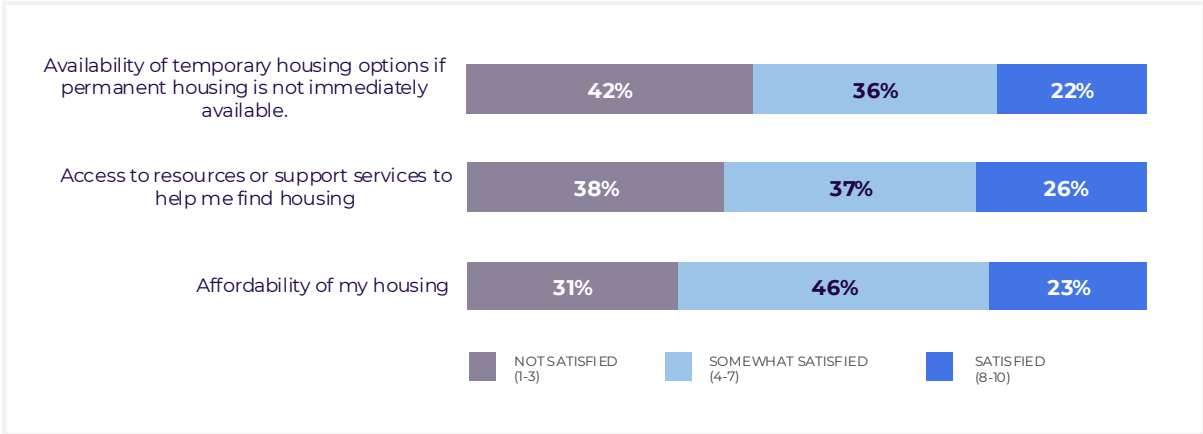


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Multicultural Association**

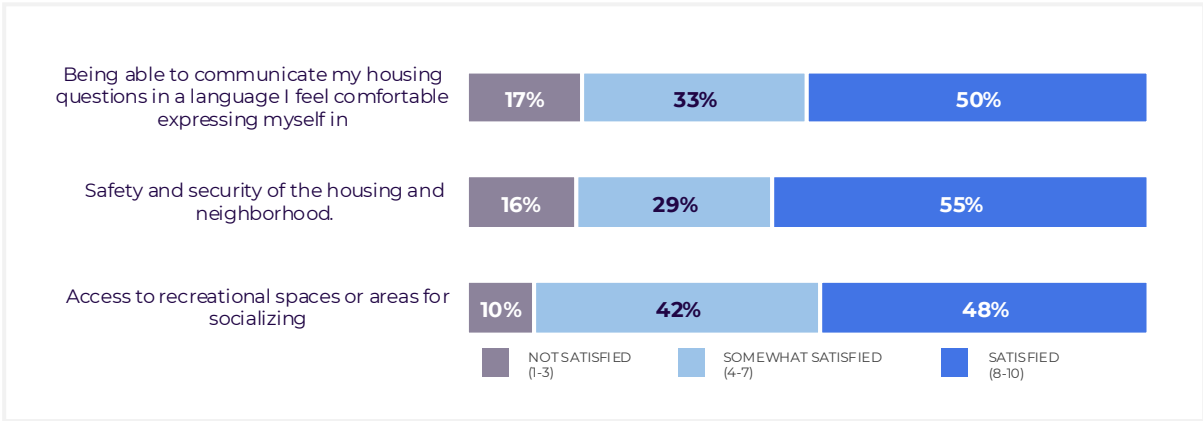
Newcomers **express lower satisfaction** with the **availability of temporary housing** when permanent options are not immediately accessible, as well as with the resources available to help them find housing and the overall affordability of housing.

Satisfaction With Journey To Find A Home & Living Situation

Q24/Q25. When thinking about your journey to find somewhere to live in Thunder Bay or on your current living situation, please evaluate the following aspects on a scale of 1 – Not at all satisfied to 10 – Very satisfied.



In contrast, they report **higher satisfaction** with being able to communicate housing questions in a language they are comfortable with, the safety and security of their neighbourhoods, and access to recreational spaces for socializing.



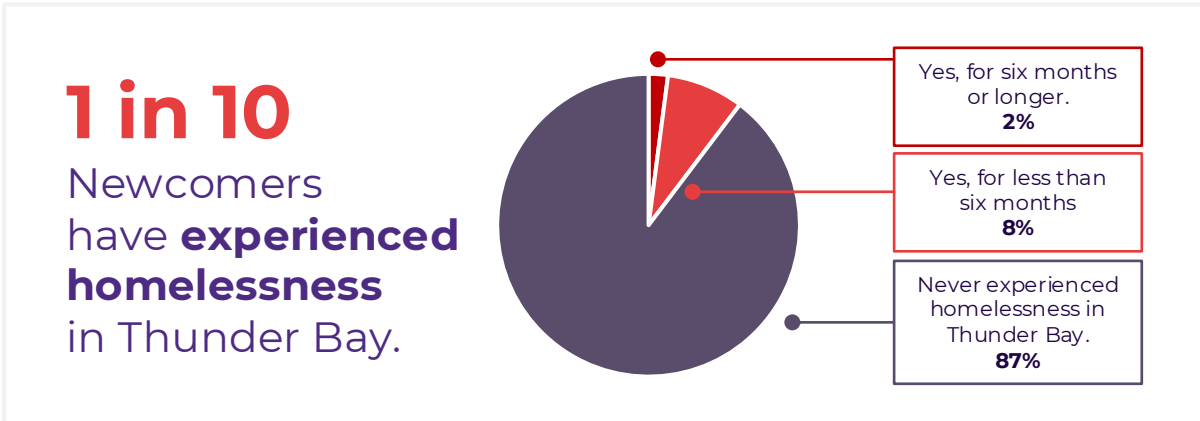
For newcomers, **housing affordability** is a distinct challenge when settling in.

While most newcomers found the rental and home-buying process generally clear and transparent, challenges arose from the limited availability of temporary housing, lack of access to support resources, and housing affordability concerns. About four in ten (43%) newcomer renters spend between \$501 and \$1,000 on rent each month. Over one-quarter (28%) spend between \$1,001 and \$1,500, while two in ten (20%) pay more than that.

Table 4: Amount Spent On Rent By Income Level
 Q20: How much do you currently spend on rent every month? (Subsample: Renters; n=107).

Monthly amount spent on rent (\$)	Total	Income level (less than \$45k)	Income level (\$45k-<\$80k)	Income level (\$80k-<\$150k)
NET: 1000 or less	51%	65%	35%	50%
\$500 or less	8%	12%	2%	25%
Between \$501 and \$1000	43%	53%	33%	25%
Between \$1001 and \$1499	28%	16%	39%	50%
NET: \$1500 or more	20%	16%	27%	-
Between \$1500 and \$2000	14%	14%	16%	-
\$2000 or more	6%	2%	10%	-
Prefer not to say	1%	2%	-	-

According to our survey, one in ten newcomers to Thunder Bay have experienced homelessness. Among this proportion, 2% have experienced chronic homelessness, being without shelter for over six months. At the same time, nearly 4 in 10 newcomers surveyed reported experiencing discrimination while searching for housing, with an additional 2 in 10 saying they had faced discrimination while living in their current home, often involving a landlord or neighbour. The nature of these experiences ranged from landlords refusing to rent or treating them unfairly, to broader acts of racial bias and social exclusion.



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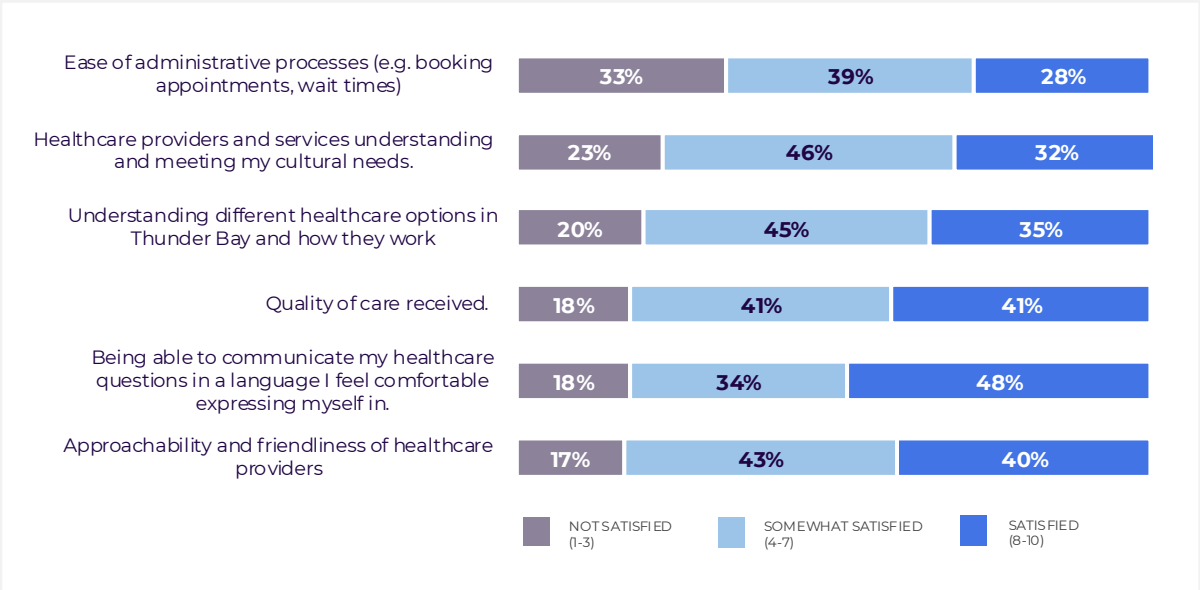
Insights on Healthcare



Newcomers are **fairly satisfied with language accessibility** in healthcare, but **gaps in cultural awareness** can lead to misunderstandings.

Satisfaction With Healthcare Services

Q30. When it comes to the health care you have received in Thunder Bay so far (for yourself or a family member who lives with you), how would you rate the following aspects on a scale of 1 – Not at all satisfied to 10 – Very Satisfied.



Cultural barriers are highlighted as a significant concern, particularly in healthcare contexts that require sensitivity and accurate understanding, such as sexual health or infant care. While there is general satisfaction with being able to communicate healthcare questions, focus group participants emphasized that language translation is not the core issue – Instead, challenges stem from a lack of understanding in how the healthcare system operates. For example, navigating waitlists or understanding clinic procedures and available options.

Most newcomers lack a family doctor or regular healthcare provider, largely due to difficulties finding doctors accepting new patients, limited knowledge of how to navigate the system, and uncertainty about their healthcare benefits.

2 in 10
Newcomers have a **family doctor**

“I know I have benefits, but I don’t completely understand which ones and how to find out.”

– Focus group participant

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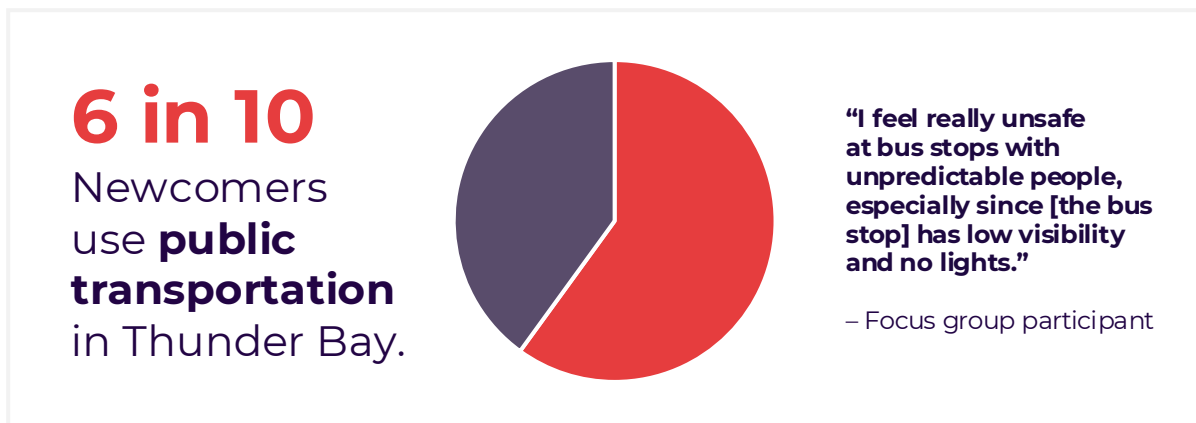
Insights on Transit



Satisfaction is generally above average but drops when it comes to **comfort and safety** while waiting for the bus and **reliability of transit services**.

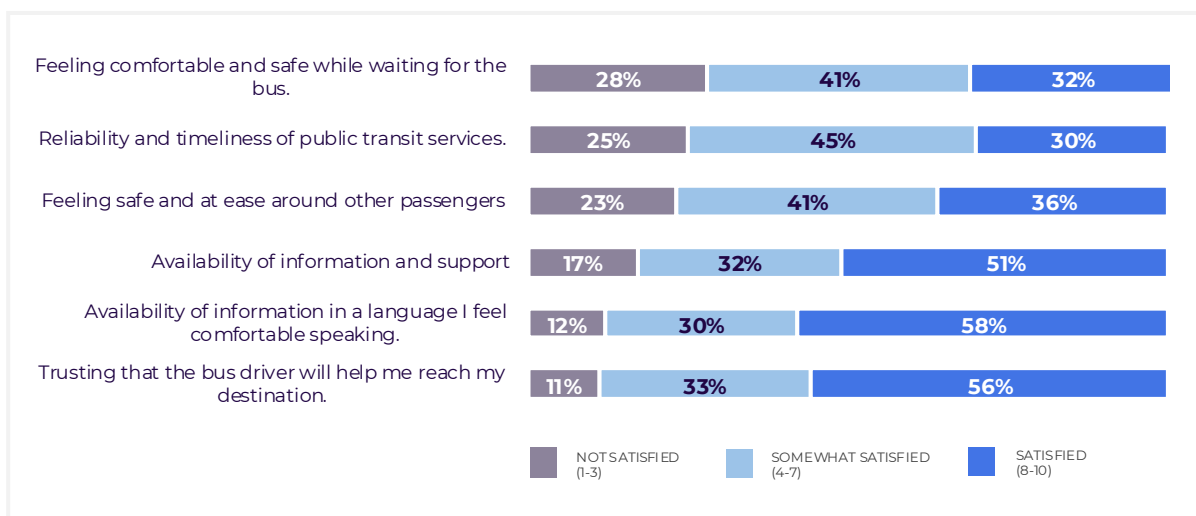
A majority of 6 in 10 newcomers use public transportation in Thunder Bay. Newcomer satisfaction is above average for several key aspects of the public transit experience including availability of information and support in a language they feel comfortable speaking and trusting the bus driver will help them reach their destination.

Concerns around comfort, safety, and ease around other passengers, however, are prevalent. Focus group participants shared feelings of unease – particularly when waiting at bus stops at night or encountering intoxicated or unpredictable passengers. Many described these experiences as a “culture shock.”



Satisfaction With Using Public Transit

Q32. When it comes to using public transportation in Thunder Bay, how would you rate the following aspects of your experiences on a scale of 1 – Not at all Satisfied to 10 – Very Satisfied?



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Insights on Community Services



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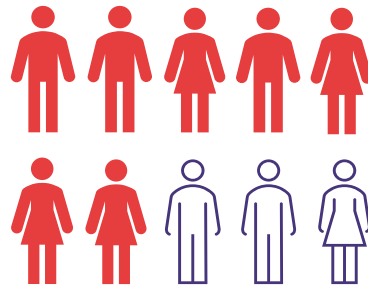
 Thunder Bay
Multicultural Association

Higher satisfaction with **community services** is likelier among newcomers who feel a **strong sense of welcome and belonging in Thunder Bay.**

Newcomers reported above-average satisfaction with community services, including programs for children and youth and cultural representation in events. Notably, satisfaction was highest among newcomers who reported a strong sense of welcome and belonging in Thunder Bay, as well as those planning to remain in the community for at least five more years. When asked about their participation in community activities, groups, and programs, a majority of newcomer survey respondents report engagement through a place of worship (70%).

7 in 10

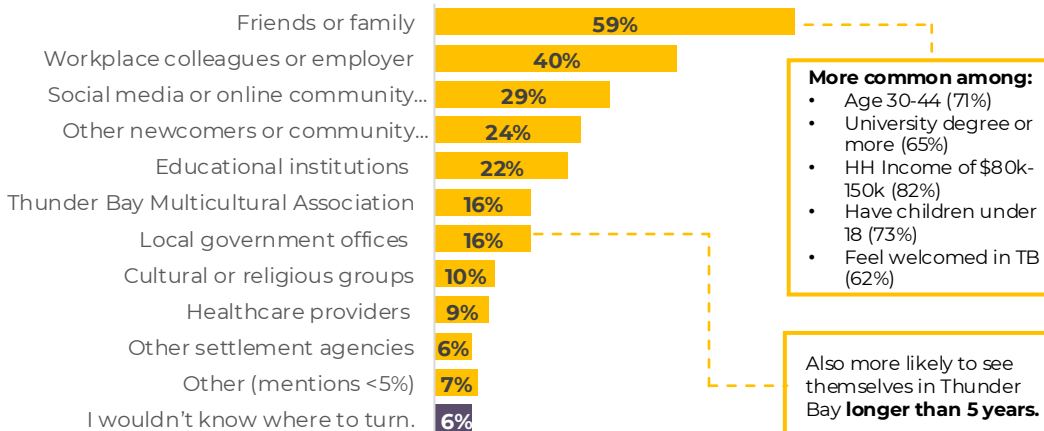
have taken part in **community activities** or programs at a place of worship since arriving



Close to six in ten newcomers would turn to friends or family if they had questions about how something works in Thunder Bay. Four in ten mention workplace colleagues or employer. Since newcomers often rely on informal networks to learn about community events, those who are not yet connected to any community may face challenges accessing these opportunities.

Where To Turn For Help

Q36. If you had questions about how something works in Thunder Bay (e.g., finding Child Care, enrolling in school), who would you most likely turn to for help? Please choose your top 3.



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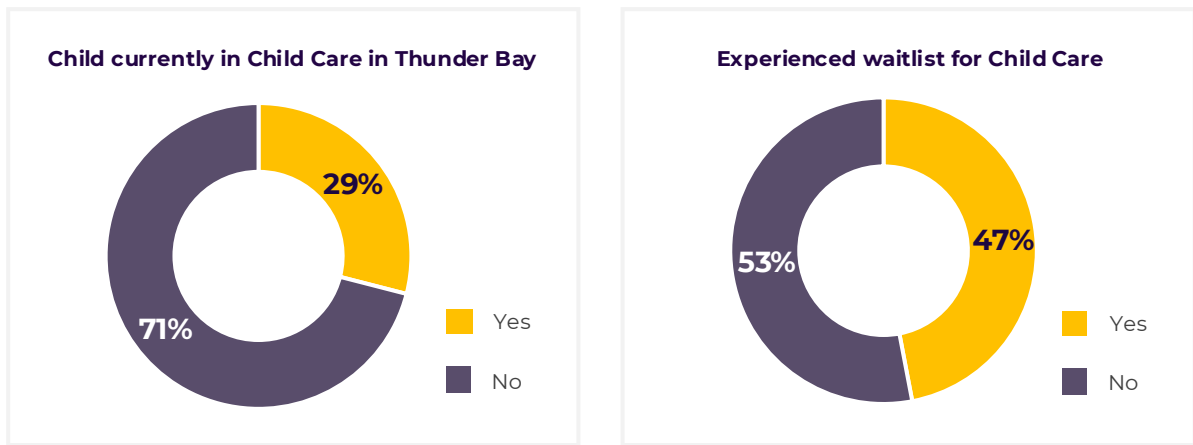
Insights on Child Care



Three in ten newcomer parents have children enrolled in Child Care in Thunder Bay.

Opportunities for greater dialogue with other parents and providers are welcomed.

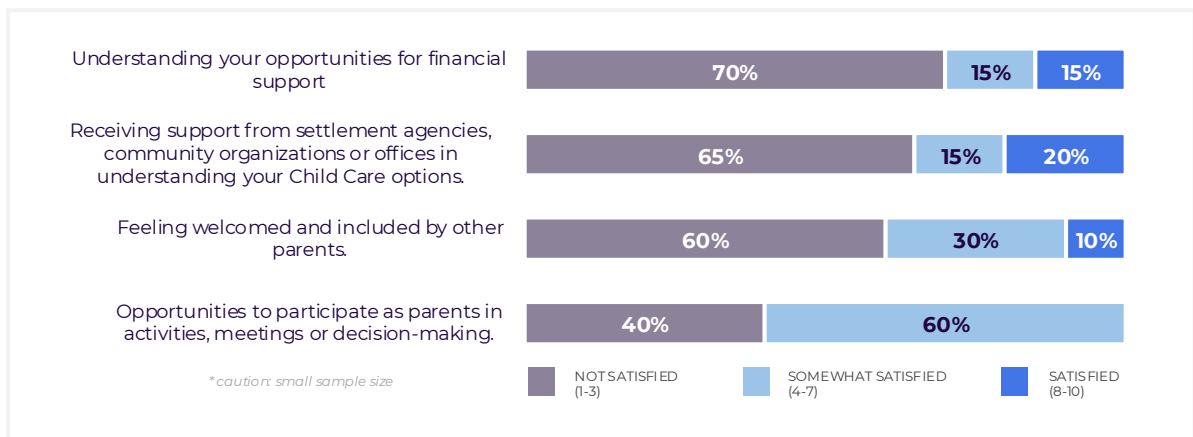
While broad Child Care trends are documented in Ontario open data, there is little on how immigrants interact with the Child Care system in Thunder Bay, including how many immigrant families use licensed Child Care, and any potential barriers they have faced. Within the *Welcoming Communities Analysis* survey, three in ten newcomer parents with children of Child Care age currently have a child enrolled in Child Care in Thunder Bay. About half have experienced being waitlisted.



Beyond needing improved support navigating Child Care access and financial assistance, newcomer parents reported dissatisfaction with feeling welcomed and included by other parents, as well as limited opportunities to participate in activities or meetings. Focus group participants emphasized the importance of increased communication with Child Care providers and other parents to build trust, confidence, and understanding of cultural norms and expectations.

Satisfaction With Child Care Services/Waitlist

Q41/42. Because you indicated that your child has been in Child Care/experienced waitlist while living in Thunder Bay, please rate your satisfaction with the following aspects on a scale of 1 – Not at all satisfied to 10 – Very Satisfied.



Welcoming Communities Analysis

Overarching Recommendations





Overarching **Recommendations** for Thunder Bay

Recognize Newcomers as a Distinct Population with Unique Needs

Newcomers to Thunder Bay should be recognized and supported as a distinct population that is not solely defined by income level or language needs, but by a broader set of unique experiences and challenges. Evolving data tells us that many barriers newcomers face stem from cultural differences, unfamiliarity with how systems and programs work, and misaligned expectations, rather than purely financial hardship. Programs and services should be designed and evaluated through a newcomer-specific lens, reflecting the fact that the key drivers of satisfaction and integration such as housing, social connections, and mental health support transcend income levels. A one-size-fits-all approach, particularly one that equates need primarily with low income, risks missing the mark. Instead, tailored approaches that reflect newcomers' cultural, informational, and systemic navigation needs will better support integration and long-term retention.

Collaborate with Newcomers on a Centralized, Information Hub

Establish a centralized, newcomer-focused hub (physical, digital, or both) where newcomers can access clear, plain-language information about services, systems, and day-to-day life in Thunder Bay. The Thunder Bay CEDC is already developing a 'Welcome Guide' with information on services, opportunities, and lifestyle in the City. To be most effective, this resource should be co-created with newcomers and informed by these research findings, ensuring the content reflects real needs, uses accessible language, and avoids bureaucratic or overly complex wording. Many newcomers shared that information is too often scattered, outdated, or hard to understand, especially for those without established social networks. The result is confusion around basic but essential processes including getting on Child Care waitlists, booking driving tests, or understanding housing and healthcare options. A centralized resource, built with and for newcomers, would fill this communication gap and mitigate loneliness that comes from navigating integration alone.

Optimize Data Sharing to Help Service Providers Better Understand and Respond to Newcomer Needs

Local agencies and municipal bodies, such as the City of Thunder Bay and CEDC, regularly collect valuable community-level data. However, this information is not consistently shared with frontline service providers - such as housing providers, healthcare clinics, community centres, and recreation programs - who need it to better understand evolving demographics and adapt their services accordingly. Creating stronger systems and protocols for timely, relevant data-sharing would help these organizations tailor programming, anticipate needs, and build more culturally responsive and accessible services. Many service areas currently rely on generalized population data, which does not capture key differences in the newcomer experience. For example, while emergency department wait times and mental health indicators are publicly reported, they are not disaggregated by immigration status, limiting their utility in equity-based planning. There is a clear opportunity to explore the development of an equity-informed data framework which would prioritize disaggregated data collection by key population characteristics such as immigration status, ethnicity, and language.



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Your community is evolving, too.

Design your own consultation to uncover key drivers and barriers to integration and retainment, all grounded in your local reality. With consultative evidence, policy and strategy become rooted in local insights, creating a foundation for smarter planning, stronger community buy-in, and long-term newcomer success and well-being.

Contact us for more
insights from the
**2025 Welcoming
Communities
Analysis Initiative.**
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