



# On the Move: Labour Mobility and Community Capacity

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The Opportunities and Challenges for Labour  
Mobility in Rural and Remote Canada

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From 2013 to 2018, our research team visited communities across Canada to conduct interviews in order to obtain a better understanding of the community impacts associated with mobile workforces used by large-scale industrial projects. As a follow-up to this research, several roundtables were conducted with local stakeholders in Fort St. John, BC to reflect on the key opportunities and challenges to mobilize knowledge emerging from the research. We wish to thank all of the residents, community groups, business members, service providers, industry leaders, policy makers, and municipal staff who took the time to help out and to answer our many questions.

These roundtables would not have been so successful without the support of Mayor Lori Ackerman who is a strong municipal voice to explore these issues with local stakeholders. Mayor Ackerman also generously hosted the OTM researchers and members of the Community Development Institute for dinner at her home.

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Laura Ryser, Greg Halseth, Sean Markey, and Marleen Morris - Prince George, 2018

## Availability

Copies of this report have been provided to the Fort St. John Public Library, the City of Fort St. John, and the Peace River Regional District. Copies of the report have also been provided to all participants. Reports have also been posted on the website of the Canada Research Chair in Rural and Small Town Studies: <http://www.unbc.ca/greg-halseth/canada-research-chair-rural-and-small-town-studies>.

Previous reports about this project include:

- Labour Mobility in Northern BC: Final Report 2017
- A Review of Socio-Economic Characteristics in Mackenzie
- A Review of Socio-Economic Characteristics in Williams Lake
- On the Move: Community Impacts of Long Distance Labour Commuting Summary Report for Mackenzie
- On the Move: Community Impacts of Long Distance Labour Commuting Summary Report for Williams Lake
- On the Move: Mitigating Impacts – A Local Workers’ Perspective in Williams Lake
- On the Move: Mitigating Impacts – A Mobile Workers’ Perspective 2013
- On the Move: Mitigating Impacts – A Mobile Workers’ Perspective 2015

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# ON THE MOVE – LABOUR MOBILITY AND COMMUNITY CAPACITY: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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A key change in Canada’s resource towns has been the growth of mobile workforces. Labour mobility presents numerous opportunities and challenges for workers and communities in rural and small town settings. The On the Move Partnership is a Canadian research initiative investigating workers’ extended travel and absence from their places of permanent residence for work. In Canada, many workers are ‘on the move’. Multiple factors are fueling employment-related mobility in Canada: improvements in transportation and communications, an aging population, mismatches between work opportunities and local labour supplies, rural and remote resource development, an increase in precarious employment, economic volatility, housing costs, as well as policy changes and other developments.

The On the Move Partnership includes more than 45 researchers from 17 disciplines and 24 universities across Canada and internationally, working with more than 30 community partners to carry out research on labour mobility across many sectors in Canada (<http://www.onthemovepartnership.ca>). Research on employment-related mobility is limited, but shows that it is affecting labour recruitment, training requirements, absenteeism, turn-over, productivity and occupational health; physical and social infrastructure needs; policy and planning at municipal, provincial, and federal levels; work-life balance, family relations and community engagement; and regional economic and community development.

British Columbia’s Peace River Region experienced considerable growth and movement of mobile workers as a result of large-scale resource development projects in oil and gas, hydro, mining, and forestry. Recently, the On the Move team partnered with UNBC’s Community Development Institute and the City of Fort St. John through The Forge to connect with 46 industry, business, local government, and service sector stakeholders in a series of roundtables. A public Speaker’s Series event was also attended by 30 stakeholders from the region.



The Forge was formed to develop and implement strategies for a diversified and sustainable economy and to enhance residents’ quality of life in Fort St. John. As a part of its mandate, The Forge organized roundtables around five key areas: local government, business and industry, education, health and non-profit, and social services. Through these roundtables, stakeholders reflected on how the On the Move project’s findings fit with the realities of their work environments, how it would impact their policies and programs, and to explore new research needs related to this work. Key topics included impacts on workers, their families, and communities; challenges and strategies to connect services / supports with mobile workers and their families; gaps in training to prepare the service sector to support mobile workers and their families; housing pressures; implications for community planning and economic development strategies; implications for small business development and workplace environments; and complications of maintaining consistent health programs for mobile workers struggling with injuries, addictions, or mental health issues across different provincial jurisdictions. In this report, we highlight key issues and action items identified in each roundtable.

## 1.0 Local Government

### 1.1 Jurisdiction

The ability of local governments to increase revenues is restricted by the jurisdictional limitations imposed on the property taxation powers of local government.

Outdated local government tax structures remain focused on providing certainty for industry while failing to provide local government stakeholders with the jurisdiction, policy structures, and flexibility with fiscal resources.

### 1.2 Infrastructure Deficits

Municipalities do not have the financial capacity to upfront infrastructure investments in their communities that support resource development.

The ability to maximize opportunities and benefits from the influx of temporary mobile workforces has been impeded by decades of infrastructure deficits.

Despite local government investments, they are not always accompanied by complementary investments in infrastructure and services by senior governments for issues under provincial or federal jurisdiction (i.e. bridges, highways, signage, housing).

Exploration and construction of industry projects have increased labour mobility and exacerbated temporary housing demands when work camps are not put in place in advance of an influx of transient workforces. Local governments have struggled with the expansion of illegal secondary suites and to obtain land releases from Crown land to support housing investments.

Industry and local governments have worked with service providers to negotiate agreements to purchase homes designated to recruit and retain community professionals. Agreements have subsidized rates and a time period in which beneficiaries must find other accommodations.

Local government discussions with housing authorities have also explored adjustments to LICO thresholds that impact access to subsidies.

Investments in transportation planning and infrastructure are needed in advance of rapidly growing construction periods with attention to needs such as intersection traffic lights, staging areas, waiting rooms in camp / airport facilities, parking, etc.

### 1.3 Collaboration

Senior governments must work collaboratively with municipalities to ensure supports are in place to provide reliable infrastructure and services, and meet community and industry needs.

Cumulative management committees and industry leadership groups have monitored and addressed resource development impacts.

## **1.4 Financial Capacity**

With many industries and work camps located outside of municipal boundaries, municipalities do not have the ability to obtain property tax revenues.

Some local governments have pursued amalgamation in order to draw upon a broader tax base to support the needs of the area.

In some source communities, up to 70% of their workforce is commuting long distances. For these local governments, the presence of the remittance economy through mobile work has been critical to retain households and the local tax base.

## **1.5 Information Management**

In preparation for large mobile workforces, communities do not have adequate and timely information about socio-economic impacts to support infrastructure investments.

There is a need for Census data to capture secondary places of residences for mobile workers. Questions about mobile work could also be developed for the Labour Market Survey.

A centralized registry for work camps is needed in order to allow regions to acquire good quality information to inform broader planning and policy decisions for programs and services.

## **1.6 Policies and Regulations**

The emergence of closed and open work camps does not fit the typical model of many land use policies and regulations. Mandates, policies, protocols, and processes must be renewed in order to remain relevant and effective.

Local governments may have underdeveloped policy tools and capacities to assess the development and guide the decommissioning of work camps.

## **1.7 Planning**

Local governments hosting mobile workers have also struggled to manage aspirations for population growth with realistic investments in amenities to improve the local quality of life for people who are committed to living in the community.

Better planning and coordination of shuttles from various camps in order to avoid overwhelming key points in the communities.

## **1.8 Human Resources**

Local governments do not have adequate staffing levels to maintain the breadth of relationships, information, and processes to address the pressures associated with work camp and mobile workforces.

Alcohol and drug addiction issues require additional bylaw and police officer resources.

## **2.0 Business and Industry**

### **2.1 Workplace Protocols and Procedures**

Mobile work is rarely discussed during hiring procedures, with few conversations to assess a worker's experience with mobile work and work camp lifestyles. Instead, hiring procedures, orientation, and training remain focused on job details and use of equipment.

There can be varied communication across supervisors / foremen during orientation and cross-over shift meetings, and inconsistent monitoring and evaluation practices.

### **2.2 Health and Safety**

Prolonged periods of mobile work has led to many health and safety issues, including workplace anxieties, cumulative fatigue prompting accidents towards the end of a shift / rotation, reduced attention to safety in anticipation of completing rotations, inconsistent communication of fatigue management protocols, fear of job loss, and underdeveloped commuting safety protocols.

### **2.3 Work Camp Operations**

Dining facilities, services, and recreational spaces need to be accessible for both day shift and night shift workers.

### **2.4 Skills Development**

In industry work environments, mobile work has provided new opportunities to obtain new skills and cultural sensitivity training, to work in more structured and productive environments, and to develop more social skills by being exposed to different cultures and personality types.

### **2.5 Recruitment and Retention**

Time off for family events and emergencies, paid bereavement leave, and investments in communications infrastructure are key to recruit and retain mobile workers.

Industries are strengthening recruitment and retention approaches by offering mortgage subsidies of up to \$50,000, and supporting initiatives and websites offering information for those considering relocation.

### **2.6 Small Business Opportunities**

Upstream and downstream opportunities to diversify synergies between small businesses and industry remain limited.

The capacity of small businesses has been challenged by buyouts from larger urban and multi-national companies that are not necessarily engaged with the community.



Local government has been proactive to reach out to contractors to ensure opportunities are also rooted locally.

There can be a mismatch between industry and community expectations to connect workers staying in camp with the community.

Mobile worker spending was not sufficient to make up for the impacts of mobile workers on physical and social infrastructure.

In source communities, the remittance income from mobile workers has supported home renovation businesses, recreational vehicle outlets, recreation, and other businesses.

Small businesses in source communities must compete with mobile workers who may take work or jobs at home when they are off rotation, and thus undercut local trades, etc.

## **2.7 Small Business Infrastructure**

With the slow release of Crown land, small businesses have also struggled to obtain land to develop businesses.

## **2.8 Human Resources**

Small businesses are experiencing labour shortages and have difficulty competing with industry wages.

Labour pressures can fluctuate across boom and bust cycles where small businesses may replace youth, immigrants, or temporary foreign workers with people laid off from industry.

During economic downturns, businesses in source communities struggle to compete with high wages offered through mobile work.

## **2.9 Information Management**

Small businesses struggle to understand the scale and cumulative impact of mobile workforces across many industrial operations. Provincial governments need to play a leadership role in regional strategic investments by supporting better data to support an ongoing monitoring process.

Small businesses need to better understand the changing labour market dynamics and their exposure to the boom and bust cycles of mobile work.

## 3.0 Education

### 3.1 Workforce Readiness

Labour mobility and camp lifestyles are rarely covered in school programs, safety training, or job fairs.

The education pathways for mobile workers have also been disrupted by the challenges associated with shift rotations, and boom and bust cycles.

During economic downturns, mobile workers face challenges finding employers to sponsor their education.

Training opportunities are needed to equip mobile workers to use social media and smart phones in these work environments. This is particularly important as human resource departments move to eliminate paperwork for paystubs and travel stipends in favour of smart phones. Workers find this confusing and difficult to track. At the same time, Skype, Facetime, Facebook, What's App, etc. are increasingly used as mechanisms to communicate with family, friends, and co-workers.

Cultural and gender sensitivity training is changing how workers view other cultures and co-workers. Aboriginal people's participation with industry has been strengthened through cultural sensitivity training culturally appropriate workplace adjustments.

Gender differences in mobility throughout the life cycle also need to be reflected in education and training programs.

There is a need to invest in training opportunities for support services (i.e. daycare, teachers, mental health, customer service, etc.).

There have been labour force disruptions as temporary foreign workers employed as live-in caregivers struggle to meet Canadian standards, prompting a series of professional development workshops to learn new skills in the Canadian context and to be ready to apply for stronger positions.

### 3.2 Training for Health and Safety

Training is needed to support worker health at all levels of industry operations. This induces the need to understand the warning signs of fatigue, substance abuse, and mental health stress (i.e. mental health first aid) in the workplace.

Fatigue management training and implementation of protocols should include attention to commuting safety protocols.

### 3.3 Collaboration

Colleges have struggled to obtain industry partnerships for trades training or fill course spots as companies focus on internal training.

Collaboration on education and training is critical, but is often controlled by the Province or larger institutions. The loss of local / regional education services directly impacts small communities.

Schools are noticing changes in children's behaviour as a result of prolonged absence of parents engaged in mobile work, prompting stronger collaboration with social service agencies.

### **3.4 Jurisdiction**

With limited jurisdiction and control over education resources to continuously support and renew industry's workforce, recruitment and retention strategies are undermined as people must leave to pursue education.

### **3.5 Recruitment and Retention**

In some cases, teachers are leaving educational positions due to the high wages attainable for themselves or their spouse through mobile work in the oil and gas sector, resulting in a shortage of instructors.

Teacher shortages can lead to perceptions of limited services and impede efforts to recruit and retain workers and their families who can live anywhere.

### **3.6 Youth Education and Career Development**

With an increasingly ethnically diverse mobile and local workforce, colleges and public schools are seeing more diversity, prompting the expansion of ESL programs.

With limited local opportunities, high school graduates in source communities are viewing mobile work as "the" option.

### **3.7 Education and Training as a Diversification Strategy**

Trades training has become an industry in source communities with the skills acquired only useable through mobile work. Some communities have purposefully decided to become source communities and pursue such educational opportunities as a pathway for development and diversification by connecting with industries and determining workforce and training needs.

## **4.0 Health and Nonprofit**

### **4.1 Health Care Issues**

Health care pressures can be more prevalent during periods of prolonged labour mobility and rapid growth. There can be exhaustion and compounded fatigue from travel and long shift rotations, travel anxieties, fatigue affecting workplace friction and enthusiasm for work, cumulative fatigue prompting accidents towards end of shifts and rotations, difficulty maintaining healthy nutrition habits, concerns about family health, exposure to extreme cold environments, fears about being laid off, and concerns about recovery time.

### **4.2 Health Care Planning**

Despite zero tolerance policies on drug and alcohol abuse, there has been resistance to ensure work camps and industry sites have more comprehensive health plans and strategies in place to connect workers with health care professionals on site.

Health impact assessments of industry projects and their mobile workforces are needed to address the breadth of health care issues.

Greater attention is needed to focus on prevention rather than acute needs.

### **4.3 Worker's Compensation**

Worker compensation claims may not be pursued or suppressed due to fears of job loss or difficulty obtaining future employment.

### **4.4 Training for the Workplace**

Training is needed at all levels to understand the warning signs of fatigue, substance abuse, and mental health stress (i.e. mental health first aid) in the workplace. Unfortunately, gaps in mental health first aid programs remain to support worker health.

### **4.5 Scheduling Health Care**

Health care professionals confront challenges around scheduling continual care and family counselling for clients who are away for different shift rotation schedules.

The influx of mobile workers and people looking for work in host communities is exacerbating pressure on health care resources. Access to emergency room services and walk-in clinics has become more difficult for residents.

### **4.6 Jurisdiction**

There are also complications for addressing health care issues across provincial jurisdictions.

Mobile workers engaged in drug addiction treatment in one province are at-risk of being unable to maintain their treatment as they work in other provincial jurisdictions. Health care workers must pursue complex negotiations of treatment across provincial jurisdictions for their clients.

Health care professionals are not always trained to negotiate multi-jurisdictional regulatory boundaries.

#### **4.7 Pressures on Local Health Facilities**

Larger closed work camps have provided their own doctors, nurses, counselling, and physiotherapy therapy staff, with some gaps with coverage if fly-in, fly-out health care professionals are used. In contrast, open camps do not tend to provide medical staff, resulting in increased pressures on local emergency room and health care services and affecting camp-community relations.

#### **4.8 Health Care Supports for Families**

Service providers are experiencing challenges to connect with spouses who remain at home in isolation and have turned to opioid use.

#### **4.9 Human Resources**

Dry camps that were intended to be in place to improve work camp and workplace safety are prompting concerns about mobile workers commuting to town to drink, prompting concerns about drunk driving, speeding, and highway accidents that invoke further pressures on limited health and emergency personnel resources.

Despite zero tolerance policies, drug use and opioid issues are exacerbated by a lack of health care resources and capacity to connect with mobile workers.

#### **4.10 Recruitment and Retention**

Industry and local governments have worked with service providers to negotiate agreements to purchase homes designated to recruit and retain health professionals. The agreements typically include provisions for a designated subsidized rate and a time period in which beneficiaries must find other suitable accommodations.

## 5.0 Social Services

### 5.1 Cumulative Impacts on Demand for Services

The cumulative impacts of rapid growth are reshaping the stability of social service operations. Where multiple projects may be under construction, the influx of people can lead to an increased demand for services.

### 5.2 Limited Access to Services

Rotating shift schedules impedes the ability to deliver consistent services and reach mobile workers.

There are difficulties to provide outreach supports to workers on site due to strict visitor guidelines that need to be in place at the industry sites.

There continues to be a lack of 24 hour childcare to support shift rotations.

Temporary foreign worker programs are being used to recruit live-in caregivers who must then must be flexible and adjust to the long extended schedules of mobile workers.

### 5.3 Renewing Programs and Mandates

Family resource centres are starting to strategically invest more resources to engage with mobile workers and their families.

Schools have seen changes in children's behaviours during transition periods when a parent leaves for, or returns from, mobile work, prompting efforts to ensure male role models are provided in after school programs.

### 5.4 Financial Capacity

More investments in family counselling programs and shelters are needed to address family violence in both source and host communities.

Community service agencies have been underfunded to address the influx of low-skilled workers looking for work during construction phases, exacerbating pressures for social service organizations.

Funding formulas that are based on per capita funding do not capture shadow populations from mobile workers, with the result that community services and non-profits lack the resources to deliver needed supports.

Accordion (flexible) funding is needed to support community organizations through boom and bust cycles.

### 5.5 Social Infrastructure

Community service agencies lack space to foster collaboration and deliver services.

## **5.6 Training**

Few have staff that are trained to deal with the complex issues associated with long distance commuting.

Opportunities for training in rural and remote communities have been limited by challenges enticing larger training institutions to visit these places to deliver the training and limited resources to send staff to other places.

There is limited training and supports for community social services, protection, and emergency personnel experiencing PTSD as a result of responding to opioid overdoses, fatal accidents, and mental health crises.

## **5.7 Human Resources**

Mobile work and prolonged shift rotations are generating volunteer deficits in communities both due to the prolonged absence of a mobile worker and the withdrawal of the remaining spouse from civil society as they assume more household duties (i.e. for non-profits, volunteer fire departments, sports teams, community clubs, etc.).

Some communities are allocating resources from their recreation department to help build and manage non-profit capacity.

## **5.8 Recruitment and Retention**

Industry and local governments have worked with service providers to negotiate agreements to purchase homes designated to recruit and retain community service professionals. The agreements include provisions for a designated subsidized rate and a time period in which beneficiaries must find other suitable accommodations.

Discussions have also occurred with housing authorities to adjust Low-Income Cut-Off thresholds that impact access to housing subsidies.

## 6.0 Future Directions

Mobile work is a common phenomenon in remote, resource-based regions, particularly during the exploration and construction phases of industry projects. Any time there are large-scale industrial projects being constructed or proposed, there are concerns about labour needs and about broader implications for worker families, communities, and work environments. Many of the policy and program approaches have long been designed to reflect labour that is rooted in place and need to be updated to reflect this mobile labour landscape. Moving forward, there are a series of investments in infrastructure, services, and research that are needed to support this direction.

### 6.1 Coordination

The use of mobile workers will put greater pressure on host communities if senior governments fail to offer the assistance that communities need. Top-down supportive policies and senior government engagement is necessary to develop rapid and comprehensive responses to growth. This should include strategic engagement and more coordinated responses. Delays to address community and economic development needs do little to help communities take advantage of the opportunities that are presented by large-scale industrial development.

### 6.2 Research and Information

Community stakeholders need more information about best practices to leverage industry with government in order to ensure appropriate investments are in place.

There continues to be a limited understanding of the extremes related to mental health issues in work camps.

Local governments and other community stakeholders, however, also struggle to understand the implications of fluctuating commodity prices across many resource sectors and projects that have different timelines.

Mobile work can exacerbate stress in a relationship. There is a lack of good data, however, on the marital status of mobile workers versus local workers.

More research and awareness is also needed on how to effectively mobilize informal social networking and support for mobile workers' families.

A better understanding is needed of the scale and scope of vulnerable people moving to these regions searching for employment and the broader impacts for safety and costs for physical and social infrastructure.

More research is also needed to understand how work camps and industries are formulating best practices and strategies for responding to the opioid crisis.

As communities strive to maximize the benefits from large-scale resource development projects, further research should track the value of contracts sourced locally versus broader procurement spending patterns by industry.



### **6.3 Information Management Systems**

Better information structures, protocols, and processes are needed to better inform local governments about the industry activities taking place in the region.

A centralized registry for work camps is a critical component of this puzzle in order to allow regions to acquire good quality information to inform broader planning and policy decisions for programs and services.

When work camps are not put in place in advance of rapidly growing construction periods, there can be significant housing pressures. There is a lack of research and institutional structures in place to track the number of temporary beds in host communities.

Better models need to be developed by senior governments to track how many camps exist and their impacts on physical infrastructure and resources (i.e. water).

### **6.4 Senior Government Policies**

To create a safer and fairer situation for live-in caregivers, there needs to be better pathways to labour market impact assessments and permanent residence applications, and improved screening of employers.

Moving forward, a better understanding is needed about how the issues raised throughout this project intersect and impact each other across a broader range of exploration, construction, and operations sites in these constantly changing and competitive mobile labour markets. A broader investigation of these issues is necessary to distinguish which mobile labour issues transcend across different market conditions and boom and bust periods as industries respond to market fluctuations.

## Resources

On the Move database: <http://www.onthemovepartnership.ca/resources/ergm-database/>

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