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Ontario's young adults are leaving the province in droves. The soaring cost of living is to blame

The exodus is mostly people between 25 and 35, looking for more affordable places to live



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A record number of people left Ontario in 2022. Analysts blame the soaring cost of living, particularly real estate as the reason most young adults are pulling up roots. (Jonathan Hayward/The Canadian Press)

Ontario might call itself "a place to grow," but Nicole Forster, a 25-year-old nurse from London, Ont., whose pay has been frozen for years in a chronically underfunded healthcare system, doesn't see it that way.

"Staffing issues have been insane. Bill 124, with its limits on nurse increases in pay, has been an insult," she said. "I'm leaving the province at the end of April, early May. In Ontario, it feels like I'm never going to be able to own a house."

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She's moving to Edmonton, a city where the average one-bedroom rental is \$1,099 and an average home cost \$369,286 last month — a far cry from the \$1,774 one-bedroom rental and \$621,912 for an average home in her hometown of London.

Some 50,000 people left Ontario for Alberta or Atlantic Canada in the last 12 months. Analysts blame the soaring cost of living, stagnant wages and low housing affordability as the reasons for the record number of people seeking greener pastures elsewhere —and while the province's population is by no means shrinking, Ontario has never seen this large an exodus before.



Nicole Forster, 25, says a pay freeze imposed on nurses by the province and the soaring cost of living are two of the reasons she's leaving Ontario for Alberta. (Submitted by Nicole Forster)

'Record levels' of outmigration from Ontario

"We're seeing record levels of outmigration from Ontario to other provinces, primarily Alberta and Atlantic Canada," said Mike Moffatt, an economist and the senior director of the Smart Prosperity Institute, an Ottawa think tank looking at the economy.



Analysts blame the soaring cost of living, stagnant wages and low housing affordability as the reasons for the record number of people seeking greener pastures outside Ontario. (John Badcock/CBC)

"Usually, in any given year, about 80,000 people across Canada move to Ontario and another 80,000 leave. In the last 12 months, we've attracted the same amount of people, but we've actually lost an extra 50,000 or 130,000."

Moffatt said most of them are young adults, between 25 and 35, though some seniors are leaving as well. Many of them are moving to communities with lower-priced homes, such as Edmonton, Alta., as well as Saint John and Moncton, NB.

"I think it's clear that given that it's a lot that's in their first-time homebuyer years and they're moving to markets with much lower price homes, that's driving a lot of it."

That fact isn't lost on the Alberta government, which has cheaper homes as a central plank of its "Alberta Calling" marketing campaign. The ads have appeared on public transit in cities such as Toronto and Ottawa, where it's hoped young adults waiting for their stop might heed the siren's call of lower real estate prices and go out west where they'll settle down and start a family.

Alberta capitalizes on Ontario affordability crisis

"Alberta is calling again, and this time we're hoping people from across Ontario and Atlantic Canada answer," said Brian Jean, the province's Minister of Jobs Economy and Northern Development at the re-launch of a campaign he said attracted 33,000 people to Alberta last year.



Even though Edmonton, Alta., is more than twice the size of London, Ont., in terms of population, its vacancy rate is four times higher and rent is, on average, \$700 a month cheaper. (Chelsea Kemp/CBC)

"We have the most affordable housing in all of Canada. People now, for instance, can sell their house in Toronto or in Vancouver and buy four houses here, live in one and rent three. That's the kind of market we have right now."

"No sales tax, low cost of living, very affordable — this is exactly what job seekers will get when they call Alberta home."

Back in Ontario, Moffatt said the campaign is having the desired effect.

“No sales tax, low cost of living, very affordable.”

- Brian Jean, Alberta's minister of jobs economy and northern development

"There's a lot of frustration in Ontario from people who have well-paying jobs but still can't afford a home. They're looking at the fact that you can get a place in Edmonton cheaper than Tillsonburg or anywhere in southwestern Ontario — that looks like a very attractive proposition."

The only solution, Moffatt said, is for Ontario to fix its housing affordability problem before it's too late.

"We're going to have this situation where we need to build a lot more homes, but we're not going to be able to do that because all the roofers and plumbers and electricians that are moving across the country, so I do think this is a problem both economically but also socially."

"I don't think it's a great thing for our young people that they feel if they want to buy a home, raise kids that they're not able to do that in Ontario, and they need to go somewhere else."