



Sarnia-Lambton

IMMIGRATION PROFILE

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Introduction

In the Sarnia-Lambton region, as in many smaller urban and rural areas in Ontario, immigrants and temporary residents play important roles in fostering diverse, sustainable, and prosperous communities. Many of the immigrants and temporary residents in the region arrive directly from other countries through immigration programs, temporary foreign worker programs, on student visas, or as refugees. Others arrive via secondary migration from elsewhere in Ontario or Canada.

As they settle into their new communities, many immigrants and temporary residents need support to ensure a successful transition. This support may range from short-term and nominal, such as help with finding housing, a family doctor, or childcare, to longer, sustained supports, such as those to improve language proficiency or to obtain skills training and employment. Broad awareness of the various services that are available in the community is crucial for ensuring that migrants receive adequate support and that appropriate referrals are made when necessary.

Regional Overview

The Sarnia-Lambton region in Southwestern Ontario is located on the Canadian-American border and is bordered on the east by the St. Clair River and, to the north, Lake Huron. The region contains 11 lower-tier rural and urban municipalities and three First Nations: Aamjiwnaang; Kettle and Stony Point; Walpole Island First Nation and, Bkejwanong Territory. Sarnia is the area's largest centre, and commuting to work is a fact of life for many in the region—of its nearly 29,000 commuters in 2021, about half spent more than 15 minutes getting to work and more than 10,000 routinely spent up to 29 minutes on the road (Statistics Canada 2023a).

Demographics

The region is growing, although at a rate below the provincial average. The Statistics Canada 2021 Census listed Lambton County's total population in private households as 126,050, an increase of 1,455 people compared to the 2016 census (124,595) (Statistics Canada 2022a).

Much of this population increase appears to have taken place in Sarnia and the surrounding municipalities. According to the 2021 Census information for the Sarnia census agglomeration, which includes some surrounding communities, the total population in households in 2021 (96,285) represented an increase of 1,400 people from its 2016 population of 94,885 (Statistics Canada 2022b). In 2024, the population estimate for the Sarnia census agglomeration was 108,636 (Statistics Canada 2025b).

Municipal and First Nation Governance

A brief overview of municipal and First Nation governance in the region provides insights into how services are coordinated and delivered. The municipalities all belong to the County of Lambton, an upper-tier municipality whose roles include the delivery of services such as longterm care and senior housing, social services such as Ontario Works, the Ontario Disability Support Program and rent-geared-to-income funding, social housing, libraries, and arts and culture programming. It also administers provincial offences, such as traffic tickets and parking fines, and provides planning services for 10 of its 11 municipalities. (Sarnia conducts its own planning.)

Delivering community health initiatives is another upper-tier responsibility. Unlike most Ontario municipalities, which operate boards of health that are formed as a separate entity and are governed by a mix of elected officials and members of the public, Lambton County directly delivers these services and county councillors form its Board of Health (Vega 2021). Public health also oversees the county's emergency medical ambulance services and collaborates on public health issues with the First Nations communities.

The traditional lands and territories of the Three Fires Confederacy (Ojibwe, Potawatomi, and Odawa First Nations) on which the Sarnia-Lambton region is located are subject to treaties 29 (1827), 21 (1819), 7 (1796), and 2 (1790); Walpole Island First Nation, Bkejwanong Territory is unceded. All of the three First Nations communities have agreements with the federal government, and their funding and governance falls under the auspices of the Indian Act. In 2018, with the launch of the Anishinabek Education System that serves 23 Anishinabek communities in Ontario, Aamjiwnaang became self-governing in the delivery of on-reserve education from junior kindergarten to Grade 12 (Ontario 2018; Aamjiwnaang First Nation 2025). It is useful to note the difference in how these jurisdictions are funded because the funds for services such as health care, child and family services, and education are intended to benefit First Nations residents. Programs operated in these communities are, therefore, unlikely to be available to immigrants or temporary residents.

Local Economy

The Sarnia-Lambton region has many of the economic features of the neighbouring municipal areas of Huron-Perth, London-Middlesex, Chatham-Kent, and Windsor-Essex. Like these communities, it possesses a mixture of urban and rural businesses and activities, although in markedly different proportions that may be of great appeal to migrants, particularly those seeking permanent residency. Manufacturing, specifically petrochemical manufacturing, plays a dominant role in the local economy, with the Sarnia-Lambton region being the centre of the province's chemical manufacturing industry and the seat of the country's second-largest oil and gas refinery cluster. Nova Chemicals is the region's largest private-sector employer, with nearly 1,000 people working at its four plants (Sarnia Lambton Economic Partnership 2025; Morden 2024a).

This focus has significantly shaped other industries, such as construction, which, from 2016 to 2021, was one of the fastest-growing local industries in the region in terms of its percentage gain in employment numbers (Sarnia Lambton Workforce Development Board 2025). Regular and large-scale seasonal maintenance at refineries and their related facilities requires a specially skilled construction pool that can be available when needed, sometimes in the form of on-site contractors, and scale up to meet seasonal demand.

The petrochemical industry has brought the opportunity of well-paying work to residents for nearly 70 years, but over the past 20 years, these jobs have become more precarious as the industry responds to the pressures of global competition, government policies promoting green energy, and more stringent environmental controls. In 2021, manufacturing's workforce share of the total local workforce declined 7.7% to 5,995 from its employment numbers of 6,495 in 2016 (SLWDB 2025). The sector has responded by investing in and diversifying into biochemical and clean energy manufacturing and obtaining government supports for research and development.

This precarity can also affect other major employment sectors. The growth in employment in the area's construction industry of nearly 20% between 2016 and 2021, for instance, is likely to have been tied to short-term projects, such as the recent construction of a new facility for Nova completed in 2023 and the demolition and remediation of the former coal-fueled Lambton Generating Station in St. Clair Township.

Indeed, the uncertainty in this sector has likely contributed to high levels of unemployment in the region that in 2024 vacillated between 8.2% to 10.2%. More than a third of Employment Ontario's clients were jobless for less than three months, and nearly a quarter remained unemployed for more than a year (SLWDB 2025).

Immigration to Sarnia-Lambton

Like many communities across Canada, Lambton County is undergoing significant demographic changes. These include an aging population, a declining birth rate, and the departure of youth pursuing study or work in other locations. The region's economic, social, and political leaders have long recognized that encouraging immigration is a necessary and welcome strategy to help fill the gaps as people retire (WOWC Workforce Strategy 2021a; WOWC Workforce Strategy 2021b, p. 9-10; SLEP 2018, p. 8).

Yet immigration to the region is not keeping up. In 2021, the Lambton region's population included approximately 12,195 immigrants or 9.7% of its total population. This is a slight decrease from approximately 12,390 immigrants in 2016, which was 9.9% of the population (Statistics Canada 2022a).

The census information ranked the United Kingdom, the United States and the Netherlands as the top three places of birth for the region's immigrant population in both 2016 and 2021. For recent immigrants who had arrived in Canada within the previous five years, the top places of birth in 2016 were the United States, India and the United Kingdom, whereas in 2021 the top places of birth for recent immigrants were India, the Philippines, and Jamaica.

The 2021 Census indicates that in the Sarnia census agglomeration, approximately 10,080 or 10.5% of the population were immigrants (Statistics Canada 2022b). This is again a slight decrease from approximately 10,400 immigrants in 2016, which was 11.0% of the population. The top three places of birth for the area's immigrant population were similar to those of Lambton County, though Syria was in the top three places of birth of recent immigrants, rather than Jamaica. In 2021, just over 30% of immigrants in the Sarnia census agglomeration were visible minorities, whereas over 80% of recent immigrants were visible minorities. Slightly less than a third of the city's immigrant population in private households had immigrated at an age of less than 15 years old, while roughly two thirds had immigrated at working age (15 to 64 years; Statistics Canada 2022b).

Temporary Residents

Statistics Canada (2025a) defines temporary residents as “a person from another country with a usual place of residence in Canada and who has a work or study permit or who has claimed refugee status (asylum claimant, protected person or member of related groups). Family members living with work or study permit holders are also included unless these family members are already Canadian citizens, landed immigrants (permanent residents), or non-permanent [temporary] residents themselves.”

Statistics Canada's 2021 statistics indicate that temporary residents numbered approximately 1,445 people and made up 1.1% of the Lambton region's population and numbered approximately 1,360 people and made up 1.4% of the Sarnia census agglomeration population (Statistics Canada 2022a; Statistics Canada 2022b).

It is reasonable to assume that international students constituted a large share of this population, given that in January 2024, Lambton College calculated its international student population to be 1,900 at its Lambton campus (Morden 2024b).^[1] Most of the remaining share of temporary residents are migrant workers under the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program or Temporary Foreign Worker program (Vega 2023).

[1] In 2024, Lambton College, in partnership with private colleges Queen's College of Business, Technology and Public Safety in Mississauga and Cestar College of Business, Health and Technology in Toronto had obtained 9,639 international student permit holders (Ouellet & Crawley 2024).

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