

# Mobile Work in Labrador West

Findings from research conducted by the Community Impacts Team of the *On the Move Partnership* in Newfoundland and Labrador

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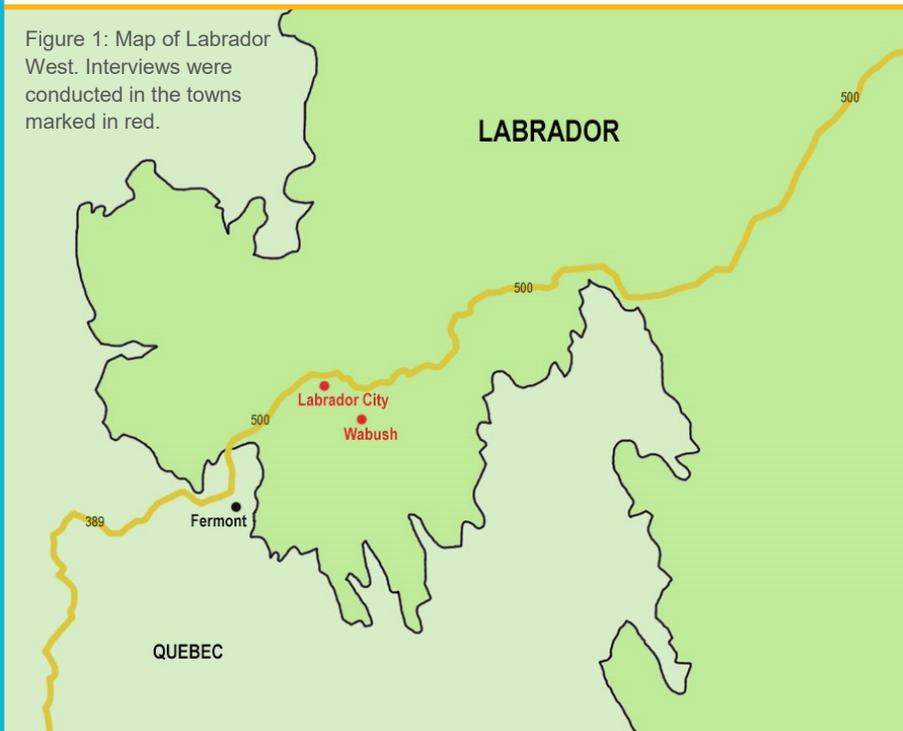
## What is Mobile Work?

Employment-related geographic mobility (E-RGM), or mobile work, involves long-distance commuting across municipal, provincial, or national boundaries to get to and from a place of work. Mobile workers can travel to their place of work by car, bus, or plane, and may commute daily or remain at their place of work for weeks or months at a time. E-RGM also includes multiple or transient worksites, as in the case of homecare workers, and mobile workplaces, such as cargo ships, trains, planes, trucks and fishing vessels (Temple Newhook et al., 2011).

The Community Impacts component of the *On the Move Partnership* sought to identify: 1) how communities are impacted by E-RGM, 2) how various actors have responded to these impacts, and 3) the influence of context (e.g. legislation, corporate policies, proximity to worksite, labour policies, etc.) on E-RGM and related impacts and responses.

Results from the Community Impacts component are based on 182 semi-structured interviews conducted with key informants across Newfoundland and Labrador from 2012 to 2018. 29 interviews were conducted in Labrador. 9 key informants from Labrador City and Wabush participated in this study.

Figure 1: Map of Labrador West. Interviews were conducted in the towns marked in red.



## Mobile Work in Labrador West

Labrador City and Wabush were established in the 1960s as company towns to service iron ore mines, one being located in each of the towns. At the time of this study, Wabush mine had been closed and the mine in Labrador City, IOC mine, remained open, employing mostly permanent residents of the two towns. In 2013, Labrador City, with the support of local unions, opted to discourage fly-in/fly-out (FIFO) operations by preventing work camps within the city limits.

Our findings suggest that **Labrador City and Wabush are host communities for mobile workers**. While the IOC mine employed resident workers,

companies contracted to do work for the mine, such as Dexter, used fly-in/fly-out workers. These FIFO workers came to Labrador West from the Island of Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and also from Quebec and Ontario.

Due to the closure of Wabush mine in 2014, **Labrador City and Wabush also became source communities** for some mobile workers employed at the Vale Nickel Mine in Voisey's Bay, the Muskrat Falls hydroelectric project, and the mine in Schefferville, Quebec. During its peak, some residents were also employed in the Alberta oilsands. The majority of these workers were fly-in/fly-out, but key informants noted that some workers at Muskrat Falls were drive-in/drive-out, choosing to drive to and from the project.

In terms of shifts, workers at IOC mine worked seven days on/seven days off. Key informants stated that this shift schedule was new, having changed from two days on/two days off to three days on/two days off. They explained that Muskrat Falls workers worked two weeks on/one week off and Voisey's Bay employees worked two weeks on/two weeks off.

# How has mobile work impacted communities in Labrador West?

Study participants noted several changes in Labrador West that they felt were the result of E-RGM. These impacts have been grouped into the following themes: Economic, Infrastructure and Service, Sustainability, Social-Cultural, and Planning and Governance.

## Economic

During the boom, Labrador West saw an influx of workers and families who had secured employment at the mines. However, due to the closure of Wabush mine, many residents of Labrador West found themselves unemployed. Some were re-hired by IOC, others found employment as fly-in/fly-out workers, and others chose to move out of Labrador West as a result. Key informants felt that workers who became accustomed to living a more 'luxurious' lifestyle during the boom were hardest hit by the downturn. It was believed that some individuals made purchases during the boom that they could afford when they worked for the mine; however, these purchases quickly became unaffordable once they were unemployed. Foreclosures were common by 2016.

*Well, and even now, like people, a lot of people that worked in the mines and making 40 bucks an hour, you know, they're laid off. Now [they] can't work for less than 40 bucks an hour and the reality is...you get outside those areas, nobody is making 40 bucks an hour.*

During the mining boom in 2013-2014, Labrador West saw growth in new and existing businesses. For instance, new restaurants opened while some businesses, like Caterpillar, expanded/renovated their business spaces. However, the downturn forced several businesses to close, including restaurants and a grocery store. Other businesses had to reevaluate their spending and some workers were laid off as a result. It was also noted that smaller local companies were being bought out by larger companies.

The service sector in Labrador struggled to maintain workers. It was thought that this was partly due to IOC mine hiring workers locally. Temporary foreign workers were brought in to address this need in some businesses; however, key informants suggested that there was still a deficit of service workers, like car mechanics, in the region.

## Infrastructure and Services

Housing affordability and availability was greatly affected dur-

ing the boom. The Towns in Labrador West did not want work camps built, so efforts were made to develop permanent housing for workers and their families. One company, Dexter, was able to develop their own worker accommodations, but on the condition that it would be developed as a hotel rather than as a temporary camp.

During the boom, key informants reported that bungalows were being sold for as much as \$400,000. Rent for a 2-bedroom home started at \$3000 per month in 2013-14 and townhouses would be rented for \$6500. Several workers would rent homes out together, crowding into apartments. It was suggested that some workers with opposite work schedules would even share rooms—when one was at work, the other was sleeping. Residents of Labrador West were also renting out garages, trailers, and basements. Some families chose to live in their cabins and trailers so that they could rent their family homes out to workers. Because workers were able to afford more expensive housing, landlords would increase the costs of rent, forcing some residents out of their homes. Finding shelter for complex-needs residents became extremely difficult for community organizations and some residents needed to be flown out of the community for housing.

*So we had Prestige Homes...they built all of these homes. And like, a friend of mine had bought one, and their next door neighbor literally paid \$20,000 more [for their house] a week later.*

With the downturn in the economy and Wabush mine closing, housing values dropped rapidly. Individuals who had purchased homes during the boom, when they were at their most expensive, found themselves locked into properties that were no longer worth what they paid for them. Key informants in Labrador West estimated that 150 to 200 homes had been foreclosed in the community since Wabush mine closed. Many homes were left vacant in the downturn.

The Wabush Airport was also impacted by the boom. The Airport saw increased congestion due to mobile work during the boom. Traffic decreased significantly following the down-



Figure 2: Homes for sale in Labrador City, August 2016

turn. Increased demand for commercial vehicle parking during the boom, however, necessitated the expansion of long-term and company-specific parking spaces. The parking lot expansion was completed in 2016. It was hoped the expansion would see the airport through the region's next boom.

Some other infrastructure was impacted by mobile work as well. Roads deteriorated quickly due to frequency of use and increased traffic during boom years. More pressure was placed on drinking water and sewage systems due to the number of people in the community. Extra water pumps were installed to provide water to additional housing built to accommodate workers and their families.

## Sustainability

Labrador City and Wabush were developed as company towns to service the mines. With the rise of fly-in/fly-out work in resource sectors, local unions feared that FIFO operations would undermine the local workforce. Town Councils also feared the social repercussions associated with FIFO workers and wanted to preserve the sense of community in Labrador West by encouraging workers and families to move into the community. The decision was thus made to discourage use of FIFO by companies and develop permanent housing for workers and families. In retrospect, key informants questioned whether the impact of this decision had a positive or negative effect on regional sustainability.

## Social-Cultural

Key informants reported that community organizations have struggled to find volunteers due to mobile work. FIFO workers in the community were not thought to be involved in local activities. Job rotations at the mines, Muskrat Falls, and elsewhere, left many workers without time to volunteer. Some community groups had adapted to these challenges by scheduling activities at night, allowing workers to attend. Still, key informants felt that residents were very supportive of community events and activities generally. Residents were very responsive to making donations to causes, for



Figure 3: Company vehicles parked outside Pizza Delight at noon in Labrador City, August 2016

instance. Key informants believed that this had always been characteristic of residents in the region and that donations were not always made in lieu of time spent volunteering. IOC mine was also known to support community events. For instance, key informants shared that once, when Habitat for Humanity could not find enough volunteers to complete a build, IOC paid their workers to take a day off to work on the home.

Key informants felt strongly that temporary foreign workers had contributed positively to their communities. Not only were these workers considered integral to the service sector, but they were thought to add to the local culture by sharing their traditions and customs. For instance, it was noted that the local Filipino community was very active and had even opened a grocery store in Labrador City.

Fears were expressed about mental health challenges among local and mobile workers. From 2014-2016, the region had seen several suicides which significantly impacted the community.

Finally, key informants believed that a strong sense of community was a strength of the region that prevailed through boom and bust. It was felt that Labrador City and Wabush were special because they gave resource workers who did not want to be mobile the option of living and working in the same place, allowing them to form place-bonds.

## Planning and Governance

Planning for the presence of mobile workers, referred to as “the shadow population” by key informants, was raised as a challenge for the municipalities of Labrador West, particularly the maintenance of infrastructure and services. Because shadow populations are difficult to track, census numbers did not include their numbers in the municipal populations and council found it difficult to develop funding proposals to address these impacts. A decision was made to discourage FIFO operations in the region in 2013. Permanent housing was developed to house workers and their families as permanent residents. The impact of this decision has been a topic of debate and the Town of Labrador City Municipal Plan (2016-2026) indicates that the Town is anticipating growth in fly-in/fly-out employment.

Despite these challenges, it was felt that Labrador West had been able to develop effective regional and province-wide partnerships. Some partner organizations included: Habitat for Humanity, Aboriginal Services Centre, IOC's Community Advisory Panel, Labrador West Housing and Homeless Coalition, and Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation. Relations with IOC mine were felt to be positive, with the company offering local employment and supporting community organizations and initiatives. IOC, companies contracted by IOC, and the Town had set up agreements regulating revenues to the town and worker accommodations.

## How have actors responded to the impacts of mobile work at the local level?

Responses to the impacts of mobile work in Labrador West communities came from municipal actors, community organizations, industry, and provincial organizations.

To learn about best practices in planning for FIFO, a delegation from Labrador City was sent to Fort McMurray in 2013. This experience helped inform Council's decision to discourage FIFO in the community. In response to lack of affordable housing during the boom, the Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation raised their rental cap from \$32,500 to \$65,000 to address housing needs of "the working poor" in Labrador West. The Labrador West Housing and Homelessness Coalition worked to provide access to emergency housing for vulnerable and homeless residents; however, demand for shelter necessitated sending some individuals to Goose Bay and St. John's. The Town of Wabush also brought in credit counsellors to assist families with financial planning.

Responding to the downturn, IOC mine re-vamped a community development fund to assist community organizations financially. To address the need for mental health supports, Mental Health and Addictions extended their hours of operations. The community also formed a Mental Health Coalition and mental health and first aid training were offered to front line workers and the general public. A support service, Kindness Connection, was also developed based on a program in Goose Bay. Kindness Connection provides book-bags full of toiletries and clothing items to men in need in the community.

In 2016, a research report was released that will govern the Labrador West Regional Growth Strategy, or Plan BIG. The report was collaboratively developed to assist Labrador

West communities in preparing for boom and bust cycles. The final plan will include scenarios to guide regional planning efforts in several areas including the environment, infrastructure, and housing.

## What else could be done to help Labrador West adapt to the presence of mobile workers?

Communities in Labrador West are experienced in weathering boom and bust cycles; however, key informants felt that planning for these changes was still difficult. In particular, planning for the impact of a fly-in/fly-out workforce has proven to be a challenge. Our study participants had mixed opinions on their efforts to ensure FIFO work was not a fixture of the community. Some felt strongly that their decision was sound while others wondered if allowing some FIFO workers might have been a more balanced approach. For instance, they wondered if housing issues could have been lessened or avoided if work camps had been allowed. They also noted that, despite their unwillingness to host fly-in/fly-out workers, the towns were now seeing residents become fly-in/fly-out workers in order to continue living in Labrador West.

In line with that, it was felt that more needed to be done to plan for housing fluctuations during booms and decreased demand for housing during busts. In particular, more support was needed to provide housing options for vulnerable, fixed-income, and homeless populations, particularly during booms.

During the bust, some individuals who had been employed at Wabush mines were laid off and did not have the certifications necessary to secure a job elsewhere. It was felt that more needed to be done to support workers in getting necessary certifications to keep them employable once unemployed. It was also suggested that credit counselling services needed to be offered to communities prior to booms to assist residents in preparing for downturns.



### About the *On the Move Partnership*

The *On the Move Partnership* is a Canadian research project with international links investigating workers' extended travel and related absence from their places of permanent residence for the purpose of, and as part of, their employment. It is a project of the SafetyNet Centre for Occupational Health & Safety Research at Memorial University and funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), Research Development Corporation of NL (RDC), the Canada Foundation for Innovation (CFI), and several universities and partners. For more information, please visit [www.onthemovepartnership.ca](http://www.onthemovepartnership.ca).

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