

Attracting and Retaining Young People in the Niagara Area

The Young Are the Restless



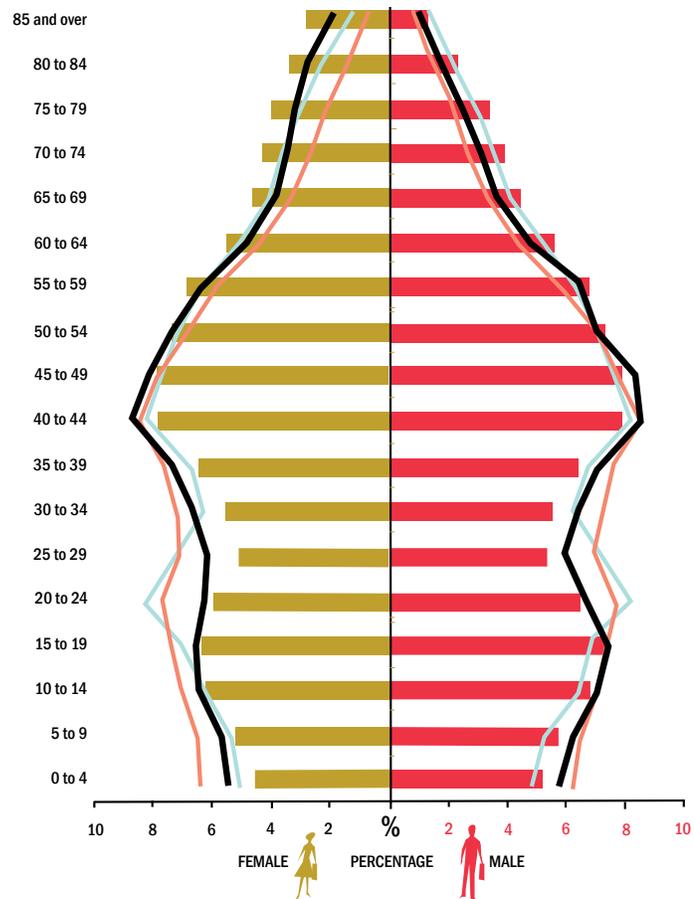
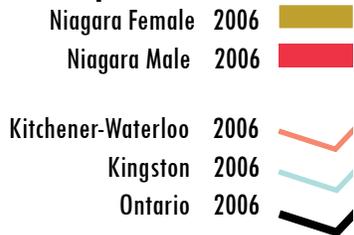
There has been a great deal of concern in the Niagara area about our perceived inability to retain and attract young people. The purpose of this policy brief is to examine the current situation in Niagara and compare it to similar areas and to pose some possibilities for improving our situation. The first section

will present some statistical information. The second section reports on several focus groups of young people currently living in Niagara or who have left the Niagara area. The third section presents some thoughts on future action.

Figure 1

shows the age distribution of females and males in the Niagara area compared to the Ontario profile and the profiles of two comparable municipalities—Kingston and Kitchener-Waterloo. It indicates that the age profile of Niagara is quite similar to other areas with the exception of the 20-44 year old age range and the senior range of 60+. Niagara has more than its share of senior citizens and less than its share of young people.

2006 Population



Our Demographic Profile: Niagara has fewer young people (age 20-39) than similar jurisdictions in Ontario.

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Why do we have this profile? OUTFLOWS and INFLOWS

Figure 1 gives us a snapshot of what Niagara looked like in 2006. How did we arrive at this state? The population of an area at any point in time consists of people who were born in the area, adjusted for people who have chosen to leave the area, and others who have chosen to move into the area from elsewhere.

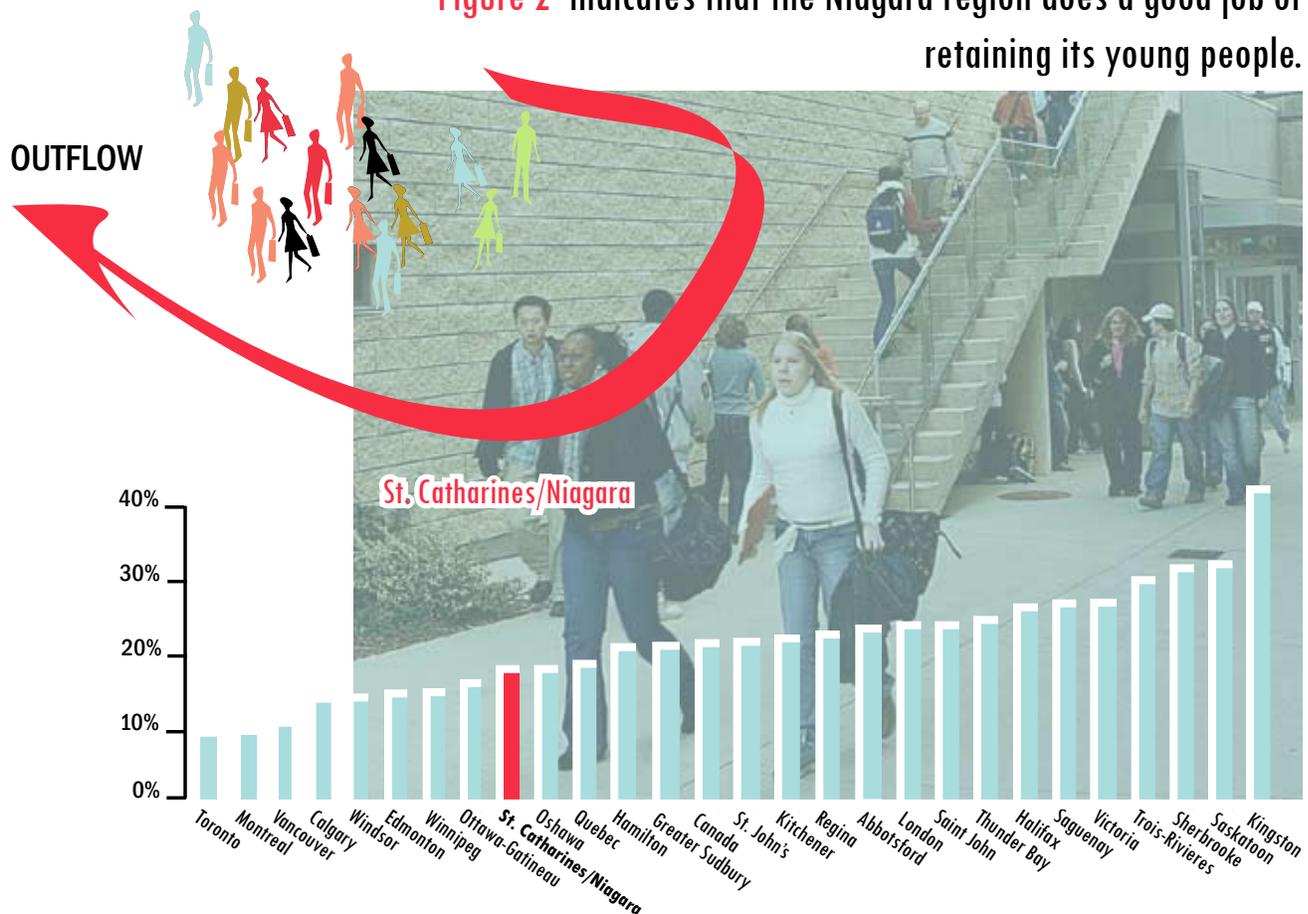
Young people move. They are starting careers; they are not tied down by home ownership, mortgages or families. In fact, they are frequently making decisions about where

they want to go to find a life partner, a career, and a place to live.

What has the effect of these inflows and outflows been on Niagara? We sometimes say that Niagara does not do a good job of retaining young people and this is frequently supported by anecdotal accounts of Janie and Johnny up the street who had to leave to get good jobs.

Figure 2 shows the percentage of 25-34 year olds who left areas between 2001 and 2006. It indicates that the truth is that Niagara does a fairly good job of retaining young people. Less than 18% of young people left in the 2001-2006 period.

Figure 2 indicates that the Niagara region does a good job of retaining its young people.



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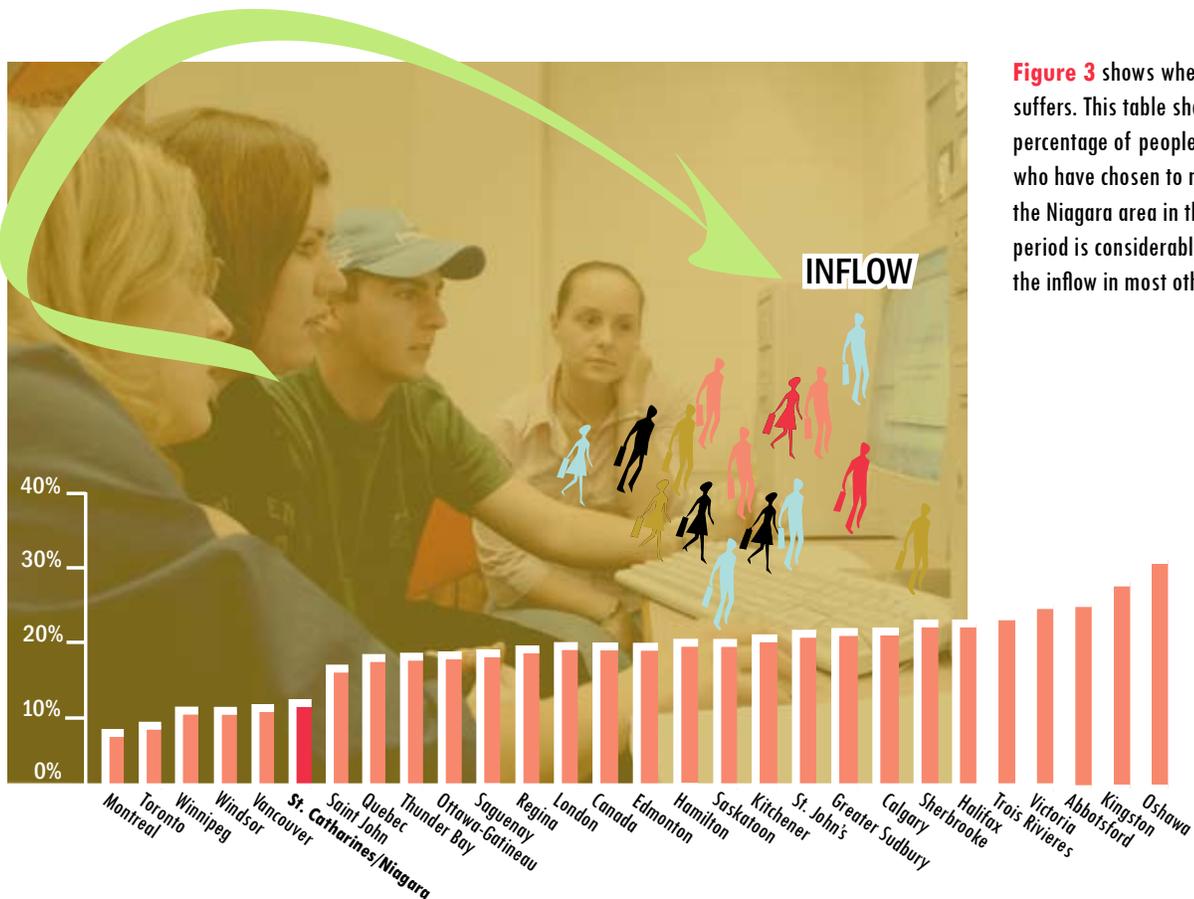


Figure 3 shows where Niagara suffers. This table shows that the percentage of people aged 25-34 who have chosen to move into the Niagara area in the 2001-06 period is considerably less than the inflow in most other areas.

Whereas Niagara was close to the top of the list in terms of its ability to retain young people, **Figure 3** indicates that we find ourselves close to the bottom of the list in terms of our ability to attract young people from other areas.

These figures are important because we need to understand the exact nature of the issue we are facing. The truth is that we do quite a good job of retaining young people in this area. Of course, we could do better, but it is inevitable that some young people will leave. They might want to follow a life partner; they might want to follow the sun or the snow to recreational opportunities; or they might have a specific occupational goal that can only be fulfilled in another location. This analysis shows us that our major

problem is that we are not attracting footloose young people from other areas into the Niagara area.

[NOTE: Statistics Canada's definition of the St. Catharines-Niagara Census Metropolitan Area does not include Grimsby and West Lincoln.]

SOURCE: Calculated from: Statistics Canada. 2007. Age Groups (14) and Sex (3) for the Population of Canada, Provinces, Territories, Census Metropolitan Areas and Census Agglomerations, 2006 Census - 100% Data (table). Topic-based tabulation. 2006. Census of Population. Statistics Canada catalogue no. 97-551-XCB200612. Ottawa. Released July 17, 2007, and Statistics Canada, 2006 Census of Population, Statistics Canada catalogue no. 97-566-XCB2006012.

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What do the young people tell us? The GRAPHS can show

us a broad overview of what has happened, but they don't tell us much about **why** it has happened. To try to understand the why, we conducted seven focus groups involving a total of 51 young people who currently live in the Niagara area. These included high school students, students from both Brock University and Niagara College, as well as some slightly older young people who are currently living and working in the Niagara area. We also sent a questionnaire to a number of young people who have left the Niagara area in the last few years.

It's telling that we heard almost nothing negative about the Niagara area in the focus groups. Not surprisingly, a few participants started out with what seems to be the anthem of young people everywhere: "This place is boring. Nothing ever happens here." However, even the sourpusses came around during the course of discussions with the others.

After the initial complaints about "this place is boring," it became clear that no one was positively looking forward to getting out of Niagara because they disliked it so much. On the contrary, there was significant discussion about the natural beauty of the area, the easy access to biking and hiking opportunities, the lack of crime (although there was some disagreement about this), and the general positive feel of a small place rather than a big, impersonal city.

Given the age of the discussants, it wasn't surprising that considerable discussion focused on the local bar and music scene, which most respondents viewed very positively. They did regret the lack of a large concert venue except the one at the Casino which caters more to an "adult contemporary" crowd.

There was much discussion of the sense of community that participants experienced in the area. Some who had lived in smaller places suggested that Niagara was just right—large enough to have most services, but not too large. One participant who was raising a young child made a conscious decision to move from Toronto to Niagara because she felt that it would be safer to raise a child in a smaller area. A number of people also mentioned the low cost of living as a positive factor.

However, there was a lament from a number of participants that they would have to leave the Niagara area to find the kind of job they wanted. "I'd prefer to stay here. I grew up here. I like the area. It has everything you need, except jobs." There was little discussion of manufacturing jobs. Younger people seem to accept that their parents' manufacturing jobs are gone from this area and will not be returning.

Young people see the Niagara area as moving toward an economy that caters to seniors and tourists. They recognize the importance of new jobs to replace the fading manufacturing jobs, but they lament the lack of diversity in jobs available and they also lament the general picture that this paints of the region.

"I guess there's a stigma of Niagara that you're either working with the elderly or you're working in tourism . . . From commercials, all you hear about is [Niagara's] wine industry or its tourism in Niagara Falls. If [young people are] not interested in working in either of those industries, then they'll just go find jobs elsewhere."¹

¹ Stephanie Engelage, as reported in: Monique Beech, "The Voices of our Future," *The Standard* (St. Catharines, Ont.), January 26, 2008, p. A1.

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The job situation as a prime component in the decision to stay or leave was supported by the comments of the group of respondents who were a bit older and had moved out of the region. Most expressed regret at having to leave, and even raised the possibility of returning. However, those hopeful comments were balanced by references to practical problems such as spousal employment issues or having contributed to a pension plan with their current employer. It seems that once people have left, it is very difficult to attract them back at a future time, no matter what the strength of family ties or nostalgic feelings.

In some discussions, the concern about the lack of jobs led to a discussion about a more general malaise. Participants sometimes discussed what they regarded as the prevalence of bad neighbourhoods, people on welfare, and drug use. Safety was an issue that provoked contradictory views. Some participants felt exceptionally safe in the Niagara area. Others expressed concerns about specific geographic areas. In truth, all of these problems are probably no worse in Niagara than in other areas, but young people frequently have no experience of other places, so they imagine that these concerns are greater in Niagara than in other places.

A discussion about jobs frequently led to a more general discussion about transportation issues. Some participants felt constrained in their job search because of the difficulty of traveling between communities in the Niagara area.

“It’s very challenging to commute in the Niagara region because everything is so scattered. There’s no straight buses—like you can’t go from St. Catharines to Port Colborne



to Welland . . . So you [are] pretty much required to drive to just about anywhere, especially with the winters, you need a car.”

In addition to the young people born and raised in the Niagara area, this area has a major asset in the young people who come here to attend Brock University and Niagara College. In general, they were as enthusiastic about the area as the more permanent residents, but there were sometimes flaws in the picture.

One student used the phrase, “Brock bubble.” The students expressed satisfaction with the malls, restaurants, and bars. However, they felt that they did not get to know people outside “the bubble.” Therefore, they are not really a part of the Niagara area — or part of the broader community.

“The more I sit here talking about this, I think maybe I don’t have enough information. I wouldn’t mind knowing more and I think maybe a lot of people would enjoy knowing more about what the actual opportunities are around the area.”

Difficulty in getting around the entire region without a car surfaced again in this discussion. Their world was somewhat bounded by where they could walk or easily ride the bus. They had heard a great deal about the beauty of the Niagara region and lamented that they were not familiar with it, but they just did not have a convenient means of transportation to see the entire area.

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The students were realistic in recognizing that this is a

two-way street. They recognize that the relationship between the community and the students at Brock and Niagara has sometimes been uneasy. However, many of these students make a major contribution to the community in the form of fundraising, volunteering to work with youth, and in a variety of other endeavours. Much of this work is done as part of “teams” representing their institutions.

This team effort is desirable because it highlights the institutional nature of their contribution, but it can also prevent the members of the team from integrating with other community organizations. Some students clearly wanted to break out of the bubble, but needed some assistance in doing so. If students could be made to feel more a part of the region, they might be more likely to stay.

The Focus Groups discussed Richard Florida’s three basic questions:

QUESTION 1:

What do you want to do when you graduate?

Respondents were clearly focused on pursuing a career related to their studies. Some talked about further education, but that was also career-related.

They were clearly job-oriented.

QUESTION 2:

Where do you want to live when you graduate?

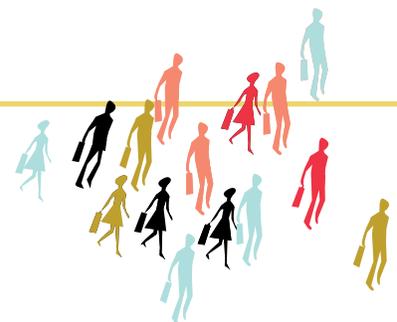
Most were somewhat sad to report that they recognized that they would have to leave this area to pursue their desired career. They were sad about this because they almost all enjoyed living in this area and felt that it had much to offer.

QUESTION 3:

What would we have to do in our region to make this the kind of place where you’d want to stay?

Jobs. Jobs. Jobs.

Particularly access to a diverse range of interesting jobs.



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Where do we go from here?

The statistical analysis tells us that our major weakness is attracting footloose young people from other areas; we do a fairly good job of retaining our own young people.

The focus groups tell us what the young people living here like and don't like about the area.

The next step is to determine what we in the region can do to retain the young people who grow up here (which we already do fairly well anyway), and attract footloose people from other areas (which we don't do so well)

Jobs, jobs, jobs, but the right mix of jobs

It seems clear that jobs are the key to attracting and retaining young people, which raises the next question of how to develop the interesting diverse jobs that are attractive to young people. Traditionally, creating jobs in a region was a matter of attracting new businesses so that people would follow the businesses. Richard Florida, in his book *The Rise of the Creative Class*, has turned that reasoning on its head and suggested that it is more important to attract talented people, then businesses will follow.

This is the classic chicken and egg dilemma. Young people don't stay here because they feel there are no jobs; attractive businesses don't locate here because they don't see the talented people here that they need.

The best strategy might be to sidestep the argument about the chicken or the egg and develop strategies that highlight the bright spots of this region for both people and businesses.

Focus on lifestyle

The participants in our focus groups and visitors to the Niagara area always comment on how beautiful the area is—the natural settings along the Niagara River and the

escarpment; the openness and well-kept nature of the agricultural areas; the older residential areas in city centres.

But it's not just physical beauty; there are many other aspects of lifestyle that are attractive. According to the recent Metrolinx Draft Regional Transportation Plan, the average daily commute time in the Greater Toronto Hamilton Area is 82 minutes—41 minutes each way. We could not find the comparable figure for Niagara, but it seems unlikely that anyone living and working in the Niagara area would require 41 minutes to commute to work.

Housing prices are also very affordable. In our statistical analysis, we were surprised to see that Toronto and Vancouver do not attract many young people, until we realized that young people cannot afford to live there. Young people can afford to live in Niagara. Many of our respondents felt that Niagara was just the right size—large enough to have a good range of shopping and entertainment; small enough to offer a sense of community without the hectic nature of big-city living.

Good jobs don't count if you can't get there

The lack of good transportation to get around the entire Niagara area was mentioned many times by participants in our focus groups. From the job-seeker's perspective, the job market can become very small and restricted if its boundaries are defined by how far you can walk, ride your bike, or take public transit (if you are lucky enough to live in one of the cities with public transit). This also affects the experience of students residing here. A number of them lamented that they were not able to experience all elements of the Niagara area because they were limited in their ability to get around.

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These students are a valuable resource that pass through this community.

Reach out to Brock University and Niagara College students.

They told us that they enjoy their time here. Yet they usually leave. If they became more integrated into community activities, they might be tempted to stay.



Attract our share of immigrants.

If Canada depended only on our rate of natural increase in population, the size of our population would be shrinking. The only reason that the population of Canada is increasing is because of immigration. Currently 75% of those immigrants settle in Montreal, Toronto, or Vancouver; 50% settle only a few kilometres up the road in Toronto. Niagara is like most other small and medium size jurisdictions in that it does not attract very many immigrants. Yet one would think that these immigrants would be attracted by many of the lifestyle issues mentioned above.

We need to work on attracting more immigrants to this area. It's frequently said that immigrants head for one of those three large cities because members of their community have preceded them there, and new immigrants feel comfortable settling in with previous immigrants. The Niagara area already has some successful immigrants

from most areas. We should draw on the expertise of these people to help us attract other members of their communities.

Be positive.

An area needs to be conscious about the image it's projecting. It's possible to create a downward (or upward) spiral that has a life of its own. When people in an area always emphasize the downside and always see the negative, that starts to become the prevailing attitude in the area. It is important for leaders to focus on the positives without ignoring the presence of certain problems.

Conclusion.

The Niagara area is a great place to live. Everyone seems to agree on that. However, there is a justified concern about where the leaders of tomorrow will come from, if all the best and brightest move elsewhere. This is an urgent issue that needs to be dealt with as soon as possible.