

'Demand is bigger than what we can produce': How immigrants help build the homes they hope to one day live in

Temporary foreign workers hired to tackle housing shortage

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Albert Rosales, left, and Diego Rodriguez are temporary foreign workers hired to build prefabricated walls, floors and trusses that can then be shipped and turned into homes. (Carla Turner/CBC)

This is Part 2 of *Unsettling*, a series on immigration from CBC Calgary. Join us for a live show exploring the challenges and opportunities faced by immigrants. It's on Thursday at 7 p.m. (doors open 6 p.m.) at the Central Library, 800 Third St. S.E. [Register for free here](#).

About 10 kilometres southeast of Okotoks, in a facility with views of the mountains, 39-year-old Albert Rosales is both exacerbating and helping solve the housing crisis.

Rosales moved to Alberta from Mexico in late August, hired by Integrity Group of Companies to help build prefabricated walls, floors and trusses that can then be shipped to a site and turned into homes.

Integrity started building these products for agricultural use (think barns and workshops) but has pivoted to respond to the demand for housing. Ninety per cent of what they build now is for residential use.

- **IN DEPTH** [The housing crisis is leaving Ukrainian evacuees homeless in Calgary. Here's why](#)
- [Starting from scratch: How Ukrainian newcomers are adjusting to life in Calgary](#)

They can't keep up to demand, according to the company's chief operating officer, Scott Myer.

"Oh yeah, like our volume, pure, pure volume, we've increased 25 to 40 per cent every year for the last four years and that isn't going away. And honestly, I could increase that twofold, threefold simply by opening our doors to more people," Myer said.

The problem? There still aren't enough workers.

"The demand is bigger than what we can produce by miles," Myer said.

Part of the problem or part of the solution?

Myer and his team have devised a solution; they've hired temporary foreign workers like Rosales to fill the gap.

There's a downside to this solution. Those workers also need somewhere to live.

Myer acknowledges the irony.

"It is a conundrum that we're under, right? Like we are exacerbating the problem but with the solution in mind."

So far, Integrity has hired 11 temporary foreign workers, with another 12 arriving over the next year. Five Ukrainian workers are also on the shop floor.

In all, about 10 per cent of their workforce comprises temporary workers.

Rosales is one of two foreign workers who arrived from Mexico in August 2023.

He first moved to Australia to work in construction but found it was too far from his family in Mexico, so he set his sights on Canada.

He had three job offers from Canadian companies and picked Integrity for the money and the good vibes he got.

"Let's say, the bonus, the extras, the income, all the opportunities, all the package in general," Rosales said.

"So I decided for this and most important about the feeling of the staff members."

From workmate to roommate

Integrity knows housing is at a premium, especially in Okotoks, which is the closest city to the work site.

So six months before the first temporary foreign worker arrived, the company asked staff if they'd be willing to rent out a room to incoming workers and drive them to the job site as well.

Myer says the company founder now has three of them renting space in his house while the operations manager has two.

The foreign workers are driven to and from work as part of a carpool program established by Integrity.

Why no locals?

Myer says Integrity turned to the temporary foreign workers (TFW) program after years of posting jobs that went unfilled — there just aren't enough people working in the trades.

"When I talk to some of our builder partners, you look at framers that they've had building for them for 20-25 years [and] are entering retirement stage, and there isn't that next group coming through the trades," Myer said.



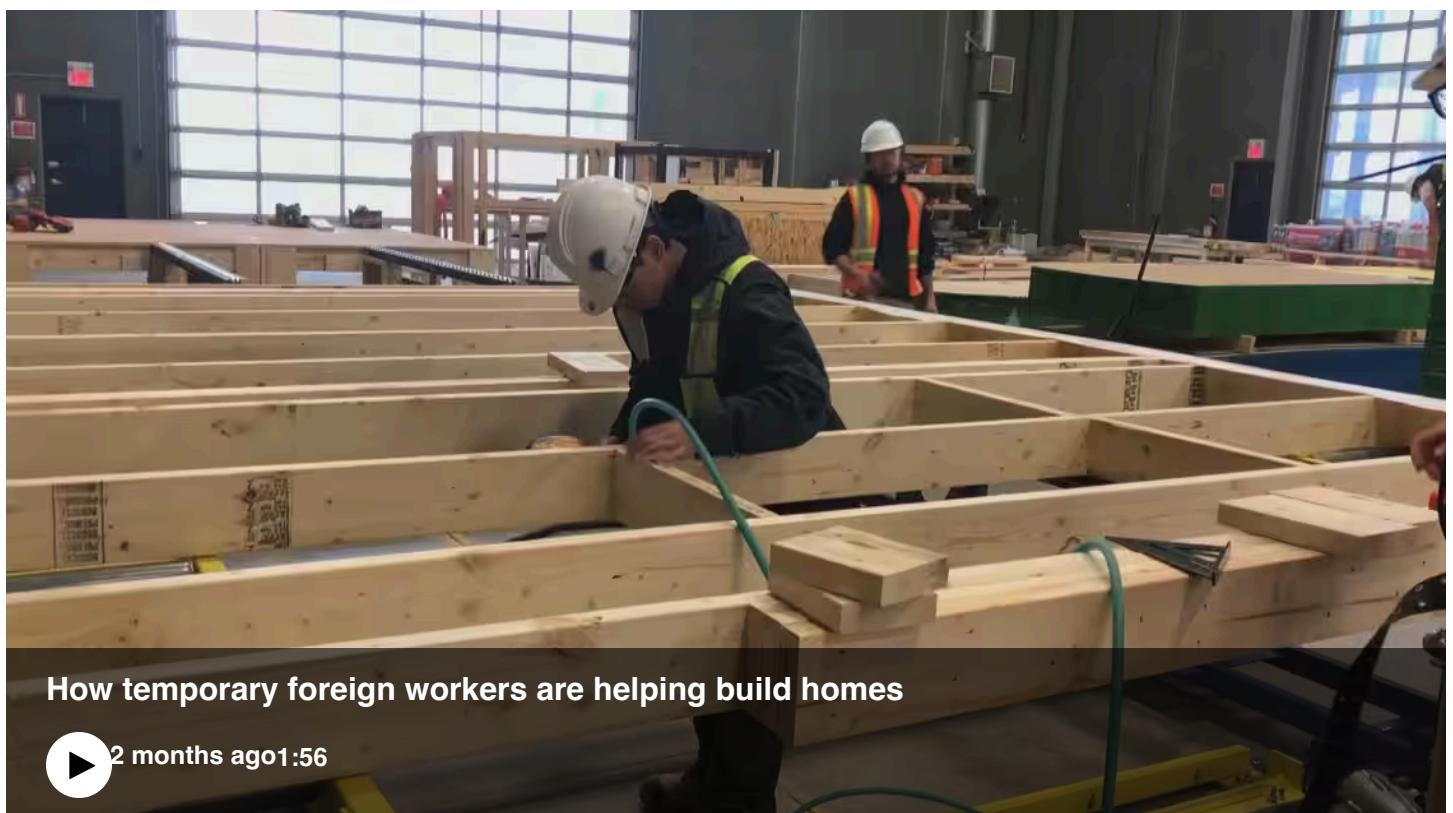
Scott Myer, who is the chief operating officer at the Integrity Group of Companies says around 10 per cent of the company's workforce are temporary workers. (Carla Turner/CBC)

And retention is a problem, too. Integrity's operations manager Elliott Leblanc says they get stuck in a cycle where they hire, the worker gets some experience and then moves on.

With temporary foreign workers, they have signed a two-year contract.

"Most [Canadian-born] people, if you hired them and you put a two-year contract in front of them, they'd be like, 'I'm not signing that,' you know?"

WATCH | "There's demand in the market that we can't keep up to"



The demand for housing across the country is sky-high, and construction company Integrity Group has seen that first-hand. They employ several temporary foreign workers, who they say help increase the company's production capacity.

Causing the crisis or suffering from it?

A [recent poll](#) by Leger finds an increasing number of Canadians are starting to link immigration to the housing crisis.

And last week, The Canadian Press [reported](#) that internal documents show that federal public servants had warned the government two years ago that large increases to immigration could affect housing affordability and services.

The deputy minister, among others, was warned in 2022 that housing construction had not kept up with the pace of population growth.

University of Calgary immigration researcher Robert Falconer says immigrants account for 98 per cent of Canada's population growth, so of course they are adding to the stress on the housing supply.



Integrity Group of Companies' operations manager Elliott Leblanc says retention is a major problem in the construction sector with many workers choosing to move on after gaining work experience. (Carla Turner/CBC)

"It's a major factor, and I say that actually without blame towards the immigrants themselves.... You know, it's a simple matter of arithmetic of when the number of individuals exceeds a certain supply of houses, it pushes [the] housing crisis up."

But immigrants are also feeling the impact of a tight housing market.

Anurag (he does not use a last name because he says it would identify his caste and he doesn't believe in the caste system) moved to Calgary from India in the fall of 2021 to work on a PhD at the University of Calgary.

"The reason why I chose University of Calgary or the city in general is because it's due to the affordability," Anurag said.

At first, he rented a place that afforded him quiet space to do his research and writing.

Then costs went up and he was forced to reconsider his decision.

He now lives with five roommates.

"With the rent increase and increase in the prices of everything ... that made things difficult, you know? Like after coming here, like the things which I expected here are not happening that way. And, yeah, it's not going great now," Anurag said.

Anurag wants to work in academia but plans to look for opportunities outside Canada.

And the story he tells of Calgary to his family back home isn't always a rosy one.

"You know, if someone is asking like should I come here for our undergrad or master's, I would totally say no. The reason why is because I don't want them to go in debt," he said.

Faisal Riaz has also found his prospects in Calgary diminishing.

He immigrated from Pakistan in 2018 in search of greener pastures.

"I could see a bright future, not only for myself but also for my wife, for my kids. And also, you know, making enough money not just to support my immigrant family, but also [to] take care of friends and family members who need help, who need support," he said.

Riaz became a successful IT consultant but was laid off last July.

His new job isn't what he had hoped for.



Robert Falconer, an immigration researcher at the University of Calgary, says immigrants

Riaz has taken a big pay cut and is required to commute regularly to Vancouver for work.

"In all honesty, I'm finding it very hard now," he said.

"Most of my money is going into the rent, then to my groceries."

He is now considering leaving Canada in a bid to find a more affordable place to live.

Potential solution involves immigration

There is a solution to the high cost of living that does not involve shutting the door to immigrants, says Alicia Planincic, economist with the Business Council of Alberta and herself an immigrant to Canada from the United States.

The key is to invite more immigrants who can help build houses and fill other gaps in the labour market.

A [recent CIBC report](#) shows only 11 per cent of foreign workers in Canada are in construction.

Planincic is certain the answer lies in making a few tweaks to the immigration system.

account for 98 per cent of Canada's population growth, so of course they are adding to the stress on the housing supply. (Submitted by Erin Shepley)



Faisal Riaz, an IT consultant who moved to Canada from Pakistan in 2018, believes his prospects in Calgary are diminishing on account of high living expenses. (Submitted by Faisal Riaz)

In a [report](#) released in November, she argued the immigration system needs a revamp to better match skills with available jobs that need to be filled.

"We need to evolve our point system as needed to make sure that there is that direct connection between labour market needs and the point system. It really just isn't there right now," she said.

Planincic says the province has made gains addressing the labour shortage; bringing down job vacancies from a high of 100,000 a year ago to 80,000.

Further refining the immigration system will help ease that.

LISTEN | How immigrants can help tackle the housing crisis:

Calgary Eyeopener 9:28

Unsettling Part 2: Immigration and housing



Recent polling shows that Canadians believe higher levels of immigration are partly responsible for the housing crunch. We now know that the government was warned two years ago that large increases to immigration could affect housing affordability. CBC's Judy Aldous explores how immigrants are also part of the solution.

For companies like Integrity, they couldn't find people to fill their vacancies, so they turned to the TFW program.

That program itself was cumbersome and labour-intensive.

They were required to complete what's known as a positive Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA) to prove no Albertans were available to do the work.

It took a year of processing before they could hire their first temporary foreign worker.

Back at the Integrity shop south of Okotoks, workers continue to produce the components for a new house that will eventually be shipped to a build site.

- **Worker shortage in Calgary construction industry threatens delays, price increases**

Prefabricating the components in this factory, instead of on the build site, is more efficient, said the company's chief operations officer.

"So you take a house from framing and let's say it was six to eight weeks previously. We're trying to trim that down as much as we can, three to four weeks ... or even a multi-family application often shaving months off of [the] build cycle," Myer said.

The calculation is that even with additional Integrity workers required to do the building, in the end, they are producing more housing than is needed by their new workers.