

Intelligence MEMOS



From: Parisa Mahboubi
To: Immigration Observers
Date: July 8, 2025
Re: **WHY SET IMMIGRATION TARGETS CANADA CAN'T MEET?**

The federal government announced last year that it would reduce the portion of the country's temporary residents to 5 percent of Canada's total population by the end of 2026. Framing it as a necessary correction to years of unsustainable immigration growth, Ottawa introduced a series of [measures](#) to slow this rise, namely for [international students](#) and temporary foreign workers.

And yet, Canada's [temporary resident population](#) has continued to climb, more than doubling since 2021. After peaking at 7.35 percent of the total population in late 2024, the share declined only modestly to [7.12 percent](#) by April, 2025 – still well above the 5-percent goal.

The total temporary resident population grew to nearly three million by mid-2025, even after the target was announced, from 2.73 million in early 2024. At this rate of decline, the 5-percent mark likely won't be reached until around 2029 or later.

However, that goal was never realistic on the proposed timeline. Achieving it would require not just tighter admission rules, but a co-ordinated strategy across education, labour, immigration and enforcement systems. It would also require functioning [data](#) infrastructure to track TR movements – something Canada currently lacks.

We should therefore revisit that target and its timeline, and focus on building the systems needed to manage temporary flows sustainably.

Growth in temporary immigration has persisted across most major categories. Work permit holders (excluding asylum-linked permits) alone have increased by more than 600,000 in two years, reaching 1.45 million. The number of combined work-and-study permit holders has also surged, hitting 325,000 in the most recent quarter.

Only international students have seen a sustained decline: Between Q2 2024 and Q2 2025, the number of individuals holding study permits only (including a small number of asylum claimants and protected persons) declined by more than 100,000 to 557,000. This mainly reflects the impact of the study permit [caps](#) and new [eligibility requirements](#).

While the cap has [hurt](#) Canada's postsecondary institutions, many of which rely on international tuition, it has not led to a meaningful overall reduction in temporary resident numbers. Instead, many individuals are staying longer, switching to work permits after study, or entering through adjacent pathways. Permit categories may be shifting, but the population total remains stubbornly high.

At the same time, asylum-linked temporary residents – who are largely outside the scope of recent reforms – have nearly tripled since 2021. By Q2 2025, the number of asylum claimants, protected persons and related groups reached 470,000, up from 168,000 four years earlier. Most of these individuals hold work permits, a category that now includes more than 313,000 people.

The asylum system is under [strain](#), with long delays and [backlogs](#) at the Immigration and Refugee Board and limited capacity to remove those deemed ineligible. To address this, the federal government has introduced [Bill C-2](#), the *Strong Borders Act*, which would deny full refugee hearings at the IRB to certain claimants, expand removal and detention powers and make some asylum seekers ineligible if they delay filing a claim.

If passed, the bill may help address some inefficiencies, but it applies only to asylum claimants and protected persons – a group that, despite growing rapidly, still represents only about 16 percent of all temporary residents. Even significant reductions within this category would not meaningfully lower the overall temporary resident population.

Without broader reforms – including targeted improvements to the asylum system, greater enforcement capacity, and better co-ordination across permit streams – the overall temporary resident population will remain well above the government's stated target.

But any reductions should not come at any cost. Asylum reform must ensure that the system serves those in genuine need of protection, rather than as an alternative pathway to permanent residency or prolonged stay.

Likewise, while the student permit cap has curbed numbers, it has hurt the entire postsecondary sector. A larger cap is not the answer; what's needed is a shift in focus toward attracting high-quality applicants and supporting sectors that benefit most from temporary residents. The goal should not be just about quantity, but also about the quality of entrants and their alignment with long-term national objectives.

What's needed now is a more credible and co-ordinated approach – one that combines realistic targets, reliable data systems, effective enforcement and reforms to the asylum system in a way that balances efficiency with fairness. It also means being honest about what can reasonably be achieved in the short term, and recognizing that Canada's growing reliance on temporary residents is not just a numbers problem, but a structural one.

Until then, pressures associated with Canada's large temporary population will continue to build, and the 5-percent target will remain more aspirational than achievable.

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A version of this Memo first [appeared](#) in The Globe and Mail.