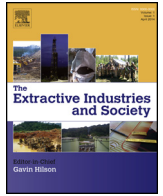




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Original article

## Our practice has had to change because of this: Professional perceptions of long distance commuting in Atlantic Canada

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### ABSTRACT

The Canadian resource boom of the early 21st century has led to an increased demand for mobile labour, particularly in the oil and gas sector. While there has recently been research regarding long distance commuting and how it is experienced by workers who leave for employment and family members who are left behind, there has been less attention paid to the community impacts of labour migration. To gain an increased understanding regarding how long distance commuting has impacted various community sectors, key informant interviews were conducted with professionals in two labour source regions in Atlantic Canada. These professionals included: spiritual advisors, teachers, mental health/addictions workers, health care providers, family therapists, community business owners, airline workers, and government officials. These interviews provided valuable insights regarding how various professions perceive long distance commuting to have impacted families and rural communities across PEI and Cape Breton. We conclude that while professional practices in source communities need to adjust to the persistent but volatile phenomenon of long distance commuting, those professionals need to be supported by wider community-level planning and support.

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### 1. Introduction

From 2003 to 2014 Canada experienced a resource boom, led by the Alberta oil sands. The rapid expansion of oil projects in that region resulted in a corresponding surge in mobile labour or long distance commuting (Storey, 2016; Morissette and Hanqing, 2015) as local labour supplies were inadequate for constructing and, to a lesser extent, operating the numerous megaprojects. The source of that labour often came from communities suffering from high unemployment in former resource extraction regions in, among other places, Atlantic Canada (Lionais et al., 2016). Concentrations of mobile workers in particular source communities suggest that the impacts of long distance commuting, positive and negative, will be felt by the whole community as well as on workers and their families. In this paper we explore the impact of mobile work on source communities, the regions where mobile workers and their families reside (Vodden and Hall, 2016). In particular, we examine how the growth of long distance commute work impacts the

practice of professional service providers in labour source communities. Professional service providers offer an important window into community impacts of long distance commuting as they are positioned to see the changing nature of the community through their professions. For professionals, the hidden world of mobile labour in source communities is made visible via the changing nature of their practice.

Canada's resource boom followed a global rise in commodity prices through the first decade and a half of the 21st century. Oil sands development expanded in this period due to high oil prices and an incentivizing policy adopted in the mid-1990s. The industrial policy shift was the result of the oil sands industry arguing for a *new energy vision* for Canada based oil sands expansion. Both federal and provincial governments signed on to the industry-led recommendations which included favourable taxation and royalty schemes. As a result, \$201 billion was invested in the oil sands between 1999 and 2013 (Alberta Energy, 2017) increasing production from 570,000 barrels per day in 1999 to 2.37 million barrels per day by 2015 (Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers, 2016). Since 2014 the price of oil has declined and many oil sands operators have trimmed costs, cut jobs and ceased new developments.

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Extractive industries operating in remote locations often use mobile labour to meet the demand for labour (Aroca and Atienza, 2008; Saxinger et al., 2016; Storey 2010, 2016; Vodden and Hall, 2016). While mobile workers may represent an important source of economic activity for source communities via remittance payments, particularly in areas of high unemployment (Lionais et al., 2016; Saxinger et al., 2016), this form of labour arrangement can have negative impacts on workers and their families including physical health (Muller et al., 2008; Peetz and Murray, 2011; Peetz et al., 2012), mental health (Barclay et al., 2013; Carter and Kaczmarek, 2009; Torkington et al., 2011), and increased personal and relationship stress (Murray, 2017; Torkington et al., 2011; Sandow, 2013; Sibbel et al., 2006; Wray, 2012). Impacts on source communities, rather than workers and their families, are less understood (though see Hall, 2016; Markey et al., 2015; Newhook et al., 2011; Vodden and Hall, 2016). In this paper we investigate the community level impacts of commute work via the changing practices and experiences of service providers who interact with mobile workers and their families.

This paper begins by exploring the phenomenon of long distance commuting in Atlantic Canada. It then provides an overview of our research study, with specific attention on the key informant professional interviews that were conducted on Cape Breton and Prince Edward Island (PEI). Six predominant themes emerged from the analysis of the 22 conversational interviews that represented 11 diverse sectors. Embedded within these themes were the overarching phenomenon of transition and adaptation. This theme was then critically examined in light of professional practice experiences, and key informant perceptions regarding family and community life. Following a discussion of our results, we offer future recommendations for practice and research for professionals who are working directly with families impacted by long distance commuting. This paper complements and extends the literature on employment-related geographical mobility and long-distance commuting by uncovering its impact on professional services in source communities.

## 2. Mobile labour and Atlantic Canada

For generations Atlantic Canadians have travelled to find employment opportunities to supplement local seasonal work or replace livelihoods lost to de-industrialization. Between the turn of the 20th century and World War I, numerous workers sought employment in Boston and the New England states. From World War II and into the 1960s many left to find work in Ontario, and since the late 1970s to early 1980s, the draw to Alberta has been the strongest (Burrill, 1992). For many generations the quest to find employment has resulted in the need to leave home communities permanently or for long periods of time. However, since the 1970s, many Atlantic Canadian workers have engaged in a specific form of employment-related geographical mobility known as long distance commuting (Vodden and Hall, 2016), commute work (Storey, 2016) or circular labour migration (Newland, 2009). The key for us in this research is that this form of labour migration allows workers to remain rooted in their home or source communities while still capitalizing on work opportunities in distant labour markets.

Storey (2016) defines commute work in the resource industries as involving four specific components. First, it involves a rotational work schedule with a specified number of days at work followed by a specified number of days at home. Second, it involves an extended workday beyond the typical 8 h shift when on the job; shifts are often 10 to 12 h long. Third, it involves accommodation of the workers at or near the worksite, often in specifically designed work-camps. Finally, it involves transportation from home to the

work location. This transportation may be provided by the company or not.

The shift towards employment that supports commuting work is relatively recent in Canada. This shift in labour practices demonstrates a national transition from a “new town” to a “no town” resource development strategy (Storey, 2016). Rather than create permanent infrastructure and complete communities in locations of capital accumulation, once common practice throughout Canada, firms have moved towards a model where locations of resource development are designed only to support resource extraction and labour is brought in as needed. The most prominent current Canadian example of long distance commuting is found in Northern Alberta, where mobile labour is often used to supply labour for the oil and gas sectors. This is similar to global trends where oil and gas and mining sectors have used long distance commuting to a higher degree than other sectors to meet their labour demands (Vodden and Hall, 2016). Since 2000, Northern Alberta has experienced an increase in the number of workers from across the country, and in particular, from the Atlantic region, to meet increased labour demand in the oil sands. As oil sands mega-projects received increasing investments in the early 2000s, labour shortages were filled with workers from across the country. The *Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (2015)* (RMWB), which contains the oil sands operations, reports that its shadow population, the number of non-permanent residents living in the municipality (mostly in project accommodations), rose from 6347 in 2000 to peak at 51,101 in 2014. Workers from across the country were pulled to Alberta by the promise of economic gains that could be made within this resource-rich context.

Challenging economic and employment realities in depleted regions in Canada have also pushed residents to seek employment opportunities outside of their home communities. Uneven development within Canada has resulted in regions with high unemployment (Atlantic Canada) being located far from places of abundant investment and job creation (Central and Western Canada). Atlantic workers have filled labour demand in the west because employment prospects and economic opportunities in their home communities have paled in comparison to what can be gained Westward. For instance the unemployment rates in Cape Breton and PEI, respectively, for 2014, were 15.5% and 10.6%, both well above the national level of 6.9%. By contrast the unemployment rate in Alberta was 4.7% (Statistics Canada, 2017b). Labour mobility provides workers the ability to match their skills with employment opportunities, career advancement and wage expectations that may not be possible in their home communities (Storey, 2001, 2010). In short, labour both is pushed and pulled into

There are, however, variations in participation rates with certain provincial and sub-provincial regions in Atlantic Canada having more residents engaged in long distance commuting to Northern Alberta than others. This results in a phenomenon whereby whole communities become increasingly dependent on this form of employment and the income that is earned in Northern Alberta. For example, in 2008, Newfoundland and Labrador and Cape Breton saw almost 7% of their labour force engaged in this form of employment, PEI saw 3.2%, and mainland Nova Scotia and New Brunswick both had less than 2% of their labour force participating (Lionais et al., 2016). To put these figures in context, the total number of employees participating in long distance commuting from Cape Breton to Alberta in 2008 stood at comparable levels to the total numbers of people employed in coal mining in Cape Breton in the mid- to late-1980s. In Newfoundland and Labrador those employed in Northern Alberta in 2008 was equivalent to half of the total workforce employed in the cod fishery prior to the moratorium in 1992 (approximately 30,000) (Lionais et al., 2016).

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