



Navigating Justice and Safety:

A Newcomer Needs Assessment
in Prince Edward Island

March, 2025



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A Newcomer Needs Assessment in PEI - March 2025

Background and Context

Prince Edward Island has experienced transformative demographic changes over the past decade, emerging as Canada's fastest-growing province. According to Statistics Canada, PEI led the country with a 10.9% population increase between 2016 and 2021, more than double the national average of 5.2% (Statistics Canada, 2022). This remarkable growth has been overwhelmingly fueled by immigration, fundamentally reshaping the province's social fabric.

The composition of newcomers to PEI has shifted dramatically. Previous immigration patterns primarily consisted of permanent residents and government-assisted refugees with established settlement supports. Temporary residents, international students, temporary foreign workers, and refugee claimants now constitute many newcomers, bringing diverse cultures, languages, and expectations to the island.

Several interconnected factors have driven this demographic transformation:

- 1. Economic Development Strategy:** PEI's economic development has strategically targeted immigration to address workforce shortages in key sectors, with the Provincial Nominee Program nominating over 1,500 individuals annually in recent years (PEI Office of Immigration, 2023).
- 2. Educational Expansion:** Post-secondary institutions have increased international student recruitment significantly, with enrollment growing by over 200% since 2015. At the University of Prince Edward Island, international students now comprise approximately 30% of the student body (UPEI Annual Report, 2023).
- 3. Industry-Specific Labor Needs:** PEI's agricultural and seafood processing sectors have increasingly relied on temporary foreign workers, with numbers nearly doubling between 2016 and 2023 (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2023).
- 4. Global Displacement:** Rising global conflicts, political instability and climate displacement have contributed to a dramatic increase in refugee claimant numbers seeking asylum, with numbers rising from approximately 3 annually in recent years to over 70 in 2024 (IRSA).

These demographic shifts have created unprecedented challenges for service providers across all sectors, particularly within justice and public safety systems not designed with these diverse populations in mind. The precarious immigration status of many newcomers creates unique vulnerabilities when interacting with legal and justice systems, often exacerbated by language barriers, cultural differences, and limited understanding of Canadian legal rights and processes.

A 2023 needs assessment identified significant gaps in service provision for newcomers, particularly in justice and public safety contexts. The current assessment builds upon these findings while implementing a fundamental paradigm shift, centering newcomers as experts of their own experiences rather than simply as service recipients or victims. This approach recognizes newcomers' valuable contributions to community safety and justice while acknowledging the systemic barriers they face.

Drawing from comprehensive consultations with newcomers, community groups, and representatives from JPS, this assessment pays particular attention to how immigration status vulnerabilities affect justice interactions, cultural misinterpretations in police and court proceedings, and barriers to accessing services for victims and perpetrators.

While this assessment focused on newcomers' experiences with justice and public safety systems, participants shared broader concerns that shape these interactions. They spoke about housing instability, poverty, racism, and employment challenges. Many also described limited access to health and social services. Immigration status was often a key factor influencing their ability to seek help or feel safe. These upstream issues are essential context for understanding justice outcomes and are reflected throughout the findings.

The recommendations developed through this process offer a pathway to more equitable, culturally safe, and effective justice and public safety systems for immigrants. By recognizing newcomers' expertise, resilience, and capacity for contributing to safer communities, this assessment aims to transform how systems engage with and support PEI's increasingly diverse population.

About This Report

This needs assessment was commissioned by the **Immigrant & Refugee Services Association PEI Inc. (IRSA)** with funding from the Department of Justice and Public Safety. It aims to deepen understanding of the barriers newcomers face when interacting with justice and public safety systems in Prince Edward Island.

The findings are based on community consultations with newcomers, justice-focused sessions with service providers, and in-depth interviews with sector leaders. Participants shared both challenges and successful strategies, helping to shape practical, equity-focused recommendations.

While centered on justice and public safety, the report also reflects broader systemic issues, including housing, poverty, employment, racism, and access to services that shape newcomer safety and well-being. These intersecting challenges are an essential context for improving justice outcomes and are reflected throughout the findings.

This report is a tool for IRSA, community organizations, justice and public safety leaders, and policymakers across government. It offers evidence, insights, and action pathways to support newcomers more effectively and equitably, and to build systems that reflect and respond to PEI's changing population.

Key Findings

1. Justice System Interactions and Safety Concerns

Newcomers' experiences with police and legal systems are shaped by fear, language barriers, and limited understanding of Canadian legal processes. Many avoid seeking help due to concerns about immigration consequences. Communication gaps and a lack of trained interpreters can result in unreported crimes, stayed charges, and unsafe outcomes, further eroding trust in justice and public safety systems.

2. Gender-Based Violence, Cultural Norms, and Systemic Isolation

Some cultural norms normalize or obscure abuse, making it difficult for individuals to recognize violence or seek help. When newcomer women do engage with the justice system, they often face outcomes they didn't anticipate, including stay-away orders, loss of community support, or retribution fears for family members abroad. Without culturally responsive supports, justice interventions can leave survivors even more isolated.

3. Cultural Safety and Legal Misunderstandings

Cultural differences in body language, silence, parenting, and authority can lead to serious misunderstandings in legal contexts. Justice system personnel often lack training in cultural safety, and interpreters may be unqualified or drawn from within small communities, raising privacy concerns. These gaps contribute to emotional harm, legal misjudgments, and long-term disengagement from systems meant to protect.

4. Status Vulnerability and System Navigation

Temporary and precarious immigration status, now more common among newcomers, shapes how people navigate justice, health, housing, and education systems. Fear of deportation, confusion about rights, and exclusion from services prevent people from reporting harm or accessing support. Without clear, coordinated systems, status-based vulnerability leads to unequal access to safety and justice.

5. Barriers to Accessing Support Services

Newcomers often struggle to access help due to language barriers, limited interpretation services, unclear eligibility, and fragmented systems. Many lack informal support networks that Canadian-born families rely on. This leaves individuals, particularly those facing violence, poverty, or housing instability, to manage crises on their own, with serious long-term impacts.

6. Emerging Solutions and Promising Practices

Despite the challenges, promising models are already taking root in PEI. These include the Nuwelcom App, Justice Avenues program, IRSA–Victim Services collaboration, RCMP community engagement efforts, and new cultural safety training programs. These initiatives demonstrate early momentum toward more inclusive, accessible, and culturally responsive services and show what is possible with continued investment and coordination.

HIGH-LEVEL Recommendations

This assessment outlines four key areas where coordinated action is needed to improve justice and public safety systems for newcomers in Prince Edward Island. These recommendations focus on practical, high-impact changes that can be supported by government departments, service providers, and community organizations.

Advance Cultural Safety Across Justice Systems

- Implement the three cultural safety training modules developed through this project for leadership, frontline staff, and trainers.
- Embed cultural safety into ongoing professional development and organizational standards.
- Establish a provincial certification model for interpreters.
- Expand access to trained, trauma-informed interpreters across justice, health, and community services.

Strengthen Status-Neutral and Inclusive Access

- Build public understanding of existing status-neutral services, including Victim Services.
- Ensure all justice-related services separate immigration enforcement from access to safety and support.
- Provide targeted legal education to help newcomers understand their rights, risks, and the limits and protections of the justice system.
- Ensure emergency and protective services are accessible regardless of immigration status.

Expand Representation and Governance Accountability

- Establish formal newcomer representation within justice advisory structures, with ties to the new Minister's Advisory Committee on Crime Prevention and Policing.
- Strengthen data systems to track outcomes and inform policy across status and cultural backgrounds.
- Support newcomer leadership in system design, evaluation, and service improvement efforts.

Improve System Coordination and Policy Alignment

- Strengthen collaboration between provincial departments and federal immigration and public safety systems.
- Advocate for policy changes that address gaps in service eligibility due to immigration status.
- Develop shared referral protocols and coordinated service pathways between justice, settlement, and social service agencies.

This needs assessment represents a paradigm shift from viewing newcomers as victims or service recipients to recognizing them as experts of their own experiences and valuable contributors to community safety. The recommendations provided offer a pathway to more equitable, culturally safe, and effective justice and public safety systems.

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METHODOLOGY

This needs assessment employed a multi-phase, community-centered approach to gather comprehensive insights:

1. **Community Consultations:** Two evening sessions were conducted in Charlottetown in February 2025 with 18 participants representing diverse regions, including the Caribbean, China, Mexico, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Africa, and India. Participants had lived in PEI between 6 months and 14 years and came from various professional backgrounds.
2. **Justice-Focused Consultation:** Consultation sessions in February and March 2025 gathered input from justice and public safety service providers, including victim services, police services, courts, settlement agencies and community groups.
3. **Key Informant Interviews:** In-depth discussions with service providers identified systemic challenges, promising initiatives, and emerging solutions.
4. **Qualitative Analysis:** Recorded sessions were analyzed to identify recurring themes, systemic barriers, and community-generated recommendations.

The consultation process prioritized creating safe spaces for newcomers to share their experiences, focusing on service access, cultural safety, and recommendations for improvement. Questions were carefully designed to elicit both challenges and examples of successful approaches.

How to Use This Report

This report was commissioned by the Immigrant & Refugee Services Association PEI Inc. (IRSA) with funding from the Department of Justice and Public Safety. Its primary goal is to deepen understanding of the barriers newcomers face when interacting with justice and public safety systems in Prince Edward Island. It is informed by direct input from newcomers and service providers and centers newcomer expertise throughout.

While the focus of this assessment is on justice and public safety, it became clear that these systems cannot be understood in isolation. Many of the challenges newcomers face, such as housing instability, employment precarity,

racism, and limited access to health and social services, shape how they experience and interact with legal systems. As a result, this report includes findings and insights that extend beyond the scope of JPS.

For Justice and Public Safety Leaders: This report offers specific, equity-driven pathways to improve access, cultural safety, and trust within legal and public safety systems. It outlines high-impact areas for action and system-level changes to better serve PEI's increasingly diverse population.

For IRSA and Community Organizations, this report provides a foundation for advocacy, partnership building, and service coordination across sectors. The findings and recommendations can support strategic conversations with funders, government departments, and community partners.

For Policymakers Across Government, the report offers a clear picture of the systemic barriers newcomers face and the cost of inaction. While focused on justice, many of the insights point to policy gaps in housing, education, health, and immigration, all of which influence outcomes in safety and justice.

For Newcomer Communities, the report validates lived experiences and highlights strengths, resilience, and the important role newcomers play in building safer communities. It reflects a commitment to centering newcomer voices in systems change efforts.

Above all, this report is meant to be a tool for shared learning, collaboration, and action. No single department or organization can implement the recommendations alone; transformation will require coordination, creativity, and collective responsibility across systems.

EXPANDED FINDINGS

This section presents the six core finding areas identified through consultations with newcomers and service providers. Each finding includes direct experiences shared by newcomers, insights from service providers, systemic barriers identified, and the resulting impacts on individuals and communities.

1. Justice System Interactions and Safety Concerns

Newcomers' experiences with justice and public safety systems are shaped by deep-rooted fear and uncertainty. This fear is often rooted in past experiences with law enforcement in other countries, but it is also reinforced by current realities in PEI, including language barriers, unclear legal processes, and precarious immigration status. Many newcomers view police and legal authorities with suspicion or fear, which limits their ability to seek help when needed and weakens public safety overall.

1.1 Direct Experiences Shared by Newcomers

- "Involvement from the authorities is wrought with fear. They're afraid people will have them deported or take away their status."
- "In many countries, police are feared. People don't see them as support but as someone to avoid."
- "They tell IRSA about serious employment issues but then say 'don't say anything' out of fear it will affect their permanent residency."

1.2 Insights from Service Providers

- "When domestic violence charges are stayed, it sends the message that this behaviour is tolerated."
- "Police sometimes let people drive away after being pulled over for a traffic infraction or suspicion of drunk driving, not because it's safe, but because they couldn't communicate."

1.3 Systemic Barriers Identified

- Fear of deportation or status loss prevents help-seeking
- Inadequate interpreter access in legal and emergency settings
- Legal system complexity and cost limit access to representation
- Lack of knowledge about Canadian rights and processes
- A uniform approach in justice systems that doesn't reflect cultural diversity

1.4 Resulting Impacts

These barriers have serious consequences. Crimes such as workplace exploitation and domestic violence often go unreported, leaving individuals vulnerable to repeated harm. Communication gaps, particularly in the absence of appropriate interpretation, have led to dismissed legal cases, miscommunication with authorities, and decisions by police not to enforce laws due to communication issues.

Trust in police and the court system is further eroded when community members, including children, are asked to interpret in high-stakes situations they don't fully understand. As a result, many newcomers participate in legal processes without a full grasp of their rights or the implications of their involvement, deepening their sense of fear and disempowerment.

2. Gender-Based Violence, Cultural Norms, and Systemic Isolation

Experiences of gender-based violence among newcomer women are shaped by a complex intersection of cultural norms, immigration status, and unfamiliarity with Canadian legal systems. In some cultures, physical discipline or control over women and children is normalized. As a result, some individuals do not initially recognize certain behaviours as abuse or as criminal under Canadian law. At the same time, those who do seek help often encounter systems that escalate their situation in ways they did not expect and are not equipped to navigate.

Service providers shared stories of women being isolated, fearful, and trapped, sometimes in extremely controlling or violent relationships. Women report fearing retaliation against their families back home due to legal action in Canada. Many women are surprised and distressed to learn that once charges are laid in Canada, they do not have the power to withdraw them, a major difference from their countries of origin, where police might issue a warning rather than initiate legal proceedings.

Family Violence Prevention Services reports a notable increase in immigrant clients seeking emergency shelter services at Anderson House. In the most recent reporting period (September 2024 to April 2025), 39% of residents were immigrants — up from just 3.7% in early 2019.

Victim Services also reports a marked increase in the number of immigrants accessing their services, especially in relation to gender-based violence and intimate partner violence.

These cases often involve more complex planning due to language barriers, lack of informal supports like family or friends, and limited access to culturally appropriate services. Systemic discrimination and unfamiliarity with Canadian systems can further complicate communication and trust. In some instances, service providers may struggle to interpret cultural dynamics or navigate

situations without trained interpreters, increasing the risk of miscommunication and delays in support.

1.1 Direct Experiences Shared by Newcomers

- “I didn’t know he could be arrested for what happened. In my country, the police would just tell him to stop.”
- “He was the only person I knew here who spoke my language. Now I have no one.”

1.2 Insights from Service Providers

- “We’ve had women recant not because the violence didn’t happen, but because they feel they have no other option.”
- “Some women are left even more vulnerable after contacting police. The system removes the abusive person, but doesn’t replace the support they provided, financial, linguistic, or housing.”
- “There is limited availability of culturally relevant and trauma-informed services for individuals who cause harm. While the justice system may remove someone from a home or relationship, there are few accessible programs to address the underlying behaviour — particularly for those navigating cultural differences, language barriers, or immigration-related stress. Without interventions that are community-informed, accessible, and focused on accountability and healing, harmful behaviours may go unaddressed, and the risk of repeated violence remains.”
- “Some women don’t want their partner charged because they’re afraid he’ll be deported — even if he’s hurt them. They just want the abuse to stop, not to tear their family apart.”

1.3 Systemic Barriers Identified

- Cultural norms that normalize or obscure the illegality of gender-based violence
- Lack of clear, accessible information about how the legal process works
- Fear of retribution against family members in home countries
- Stay-away orders that inadvertently remove both the victim and perpetrators’ only source of support
- Limited shelter space, language supports, and culturally appropriate services
- Lack of community or informal support networks that Canadian-born families may rely on

1.4 Resulting Impacts

Many newcomer women experiencing violence are further isolated by their interactions with the justice system. Some are left without safe housing,

income, or community support, particularly when their abuser was their only contact or translator. Others recant their stories out of fear for their immigration status, loneliness, or the safety of their family abroad. In some cases, this fear is focused on the potential consequences for their partner or family member, particularly when deportation could lead to retaliation or family separation. Survivors may wish to stop the violence without triggering life-altering legal or immigration outcomes for their loved ones.

Systemic gaps can place women in even more precarious situations than they were in before seeking help. Without culturally responsive, trauma-informed supports that account for immigration realities, justice system interventions may unintentionally perpetuate cycles of harm and disempowerment.

3. Cultural Safety and Legal Misunderstandings

Newcomers often enter justice and public safety systems that are not designed with cultural diversity in mind. Legal systems in PEI are grounded in assumptions about communication styles, authority, family roles, and appropriate behaviour, assumptions that can differ significantly from those held in other cultural contexts.

When service providers are unaware of these differences, interactions may quickly escalate into misunderstanding, frustration, or even unintended legal consequences. These breakdowns are rarely the result of ill intent but rather of systemic gaps in training, interpretation, and cultural responsiveness.

While cultural safety is a well-established principle in healthcare and education, its application in justice settings remains uneven. Without adequate training, personnel may misinterpret nonverbal cues, rely on unqualified interpreters, or enforce policies without considering cultural nuance. Newcomer families, in turn, may not understand the adversarial nature of the Canadian legal system or the consequences of routine actions like not making eye contact, staying silent, or speaking through a child. (See the Promising Practices section for a definition and application of cultural safety in justice contexts.)

3.1 Direct Experiences Shared by Newcomers

- “They think we don’t know anything.”
- “Looking down is respectful in my culture, but here it’s seen as defiance.”

- “We’re not used to being asked to parent differently, we don’t know what’s acceptable.”

3.2 Insights from Service Providers

- “It’s the same system applied to all cultures, regardless of context.”
- “Lack of training and cultural awareness leads to frustration on both sides.”
- “People don’t understand how quickly things escalate once police are involved.”

3.3 Systemic Barriers Identified

- Misinterpretation of body language, tone, and silence
- Adversarial legal processes are unfamiliar to many newcomers
- Limited access to trauma-informed, culturally responsive services
- Use of untrained interpreters, including children and community members, raises concerns around privacy, confidentiality, and legal accuracy
- Legal rights and responsibilities are not consistently explained in accessible formats or languages

3.4 Resulting Impacts

Without culturally safe approaches, misunderstandings are common and costly. Some newcomers experience emotional harm, shame, or retraumatization during legal proceedings they don’t fully understand. When children or community members are asked to interpret, families face disrupted dynamics, breaches of confidentiality, and increased mistrust.

In smaller communities, concerns about “everyone knowing your business” can prevent people from seeking help altogether. These experiences lead to long-term disengagement from the justice system. Without systemic efforts to embed cultural safety, justice systems risk reinforcing the very inequities they aim to address.

4. Status Vulnerability and System Navigation

Over the past three years, there has been a significant shift in the immigration landscape in Prince Edward Island. Where the newcomer population once consisted primarily of permanent residents and government-assisted refugees, it now includes growing numbers of individuals with temporary or precarious status, including international students, temporary foreign workers, and refugee claimants. These newer pathways often lack the long-term

stability or access to services that were available to earlier arrivals, making navigation of public systems, including justice and safety systems, far more complex.

Regardless of immigration status, many newcomers live with a sense of fear. Fear of deportation, losing their pathway to permanent residency, or damaging their reputation within a tightly connected community. For those with temporary or precarious status, this fear is even more acute. They are often unsure of their rights, uncertain about which systems are safe to approach, and acutely aware that one misstep could impact their ability to stay in Canada. This level of vulnerability creates significant barriers to safety, access to justice, and full participation in community life.

The impact of immigration status is particularly significant in cases involving gender-based violence or family conflict. As described in Section 2, some women fear that contacting police could jeopardize their ability to stay in Canada or result in retaliation against their family members abroad.

Others worry that speaking up about workplace abuse, housing issues, or systemic neglect could draw unwanted attention to their visa or permit conditions. This climate of fear discourages help-seeking and weakens the safety net for individuals already in vulnerable positions.

4.1 Direct Experiences Shared by Newcomers

- “Until I have permanent status, I’m scared of everything.”
- “I want to tell someone about what’s happening at work, but I’m afraid of losing my chance at PR.”
- “If my employer knows I switched permits, it could make things worse.”

4.2 Insights from Service Providers

- “We’re seeing more newcomers with temporary status—workers, students, refugee claimants—and they’re in extremely vulnerable situations.”
- “Many people don’t know that reporting violence could affect their immigration case.”

4.3 Systemic Barriers Identified

- Closed or employer-specific work permits that tie workers to abusive or unsafe conditions
- Limited access to legal aid or specialized legal advice that considers both immigration and justice issues
- Shelter and education policies that exclude individuals with precarious or undocumented status

- Gaps in coordination between provincial services and federal immigration policies
- Confusion among service providers about different immigration categories and entitlements

4.4 Resulting Impacts

Newcomers with precarious status often avoid reporting crimes or seeking support out of fear that it could jeopardize their stay in Canada. This can mean that they stay in exploitative or dangerous situations, including gender-based violence.

Lack of clarity around rights and entitlements leads to uninformed legal decisions with long-term consequences. Families are sometimes forced into unsafe choices, such as staying with an abuser, avoiding school, or working under the table, because they have no clear path to support. Without systemic changes that account for the impact of immigration status, access to justice will remain unequal by design.

5. Barriers to Accessing Support Services

For many newcomers, accessing help, whether for legal concerns, housing, health, or safety, is not straightforward. Systems in PEI are often fragmented, eligibility rules are unclear, and services are not designed with cultural or language accessibility in mind. These barriers are especially pronounced for those experiencing violence, poverty, or status-based exclusion. They affect both victims of harm and those navigating complex life situations, such as family breakdown or employment exploitation.

Newcomers also face a significant gap in informal and community-based support networks. Unlike many Canadian-born families, they may not have extended family nearby, established relationships with service providers, or a clear understanding of which organizations to turn to for help. When the formal systems are hard to access, and no informal networks exist to fill the gaps, people are left to navigate crises alone.

Access to services is further complicated by cost, language barriers, and uneven coordination between justice, settlement, and social service agencies. Interpretation services, where available, are often prioritized for legal proceedings and provided for defendants, not for victims or individuals seeking help.

5.1 Direct Experiences Shared by Newcomers

- “I was afraid to report because I didn’t know what would happen with my status.”
- “Texting a support worker isn’t enough. I needed someone to talk to in my own language.”

5.2 Insights from Service Providers

- “Translation is available more for offenders than victims.”
- “Many victims don’t know what services exist, or if they will affect their status. They believe they’ll lose their sponsorship or be deported if they speak up.”
- “Roughly 25–30% of our clients are immigrants or newcomers, but our services aren’t fully accessible.”

5.3 Systemic Barriers Identified

- Language gaps and limited access to trauma-informed interpretation
- Lack of in-person certified interpreters and translators on PEI
- Costs of interpretation (e.g., \$65/hour), limiting timely and equitable access
- Services are not coordinated across justice, settlement, and social supports
- Limited availability of culturally appropriate housing, counselling and outreach
- Fear of immigration consequences deters people from seeking help
Lack of community and social support, especially in rural areas

5.4 Resulting Impacts

Many newcomers fall through the cracks of a fragmented service landscape. Victims of violence and individuals in crisis may be unable to access timely support due to language, status, or cost-related barriers. Some avoid reaching out altogether because they are unsure if doing so could affect their immigration case.

Others find services too rigid, too culturally unfamiliar, or too difficult to navigate without help. Without coordinated, culturally responsive, and status-inclusive systems of support, the most vulnerable community members are left to manage safety, housing, and legal matters on their own, often with serious, long-term consequences.

In some cases, reaching out for help can unintentionally increase someone’s risk. Victims may lose access to housing, income, or language support if a partner is removed. Others may face stigma or backlash from within their cultural or religious community. Without system responses

that anticipate these realities, survivors may feel that asking for help carries more danger than staying silent.

EMERGING SOLUTIONS AND PROMISING PRACTICES

Despite the significant challenges outlined in this assessment, there are promising practices already emerging across Prince Edward Island. These initiatives, many of them pilot programs, community-led efforts, or interagency collaborations, offer early but important models for change. They reflect a growing recognition that justice and safety systems must evolve to meet the needs of a more diverse population.

The following examples illustrate practical, often low-cost or community-driven solutions that address systemic barriers. While most are still developing, they provide critical insight into what's working and where future investment, coordination, or policy support could lead to broader impact.

1. Technology-Enabled Access

Nuwelcom App

This multilingual app helps newcomers navigate services through plain-language, culturally relevant information. It supports self-advocacy and reduces reliance on in-person interpretation for basic service access.

AI Translation and Communication Tools

Simple digital tools are helping frontline providers bridge urgent communication gaps. While not a replacement for professional interpretation, they offer a temporary solution in emergencies and contribute to building trust in service interactions.

2. Culturally Responsive Legal Navigation

Justice Avenues Program

This program offers guided support to newcomers navigating family,

immigration, and criminal law issues. It integrates cultural understanding with legal expertise, helping people make informed decisions across complex legal intersections.

Community Legal Information Legal Publications

This multilingual online hub provides plain-language legal education. It supports community literacy around legal rights and system navigation in ways that are accessible and practical.

3. Strengthened Interagency Partnerships

IRSA-Victim Services Collaboration

By co-locating services and establishing joint protocols, this partnership makes it easier for victims to access support without having to navigate multiple systems independently.

RCMP Community Engagement

Through cultural events and intentional relationship-building, RCMP officers are beginning to foster trust in communities that have traditionally feared law enforcement. This approach also opens up dialogue about safety, rights, and responsibilities in a more accessible context.

4. Training and Professional Development

Health PEI Cultural Competency Module

This training focuses on cultural communication, trauma response, and inclusive service delivery, offering a foundation that can be adapted across sectors, including justice and policing.

Cultural Safety Certification (Proposed)

Stakeholders are exploring the development of a province-wide certification standard for interpreters and justice system personnel. This initiative would formalize expectations around cultural safety and create a shared benchmark for service delivery.

What is Cultural Safety?

Cultural safety goes beyond cultural awareness or sensitivity. It is a practice framework that focuses on creating environments where people feel respected, heard, and safe, particularly when they hold

less power in an interaction. In the context of justice and public safety, cultural safety includes recognizing power imbalances, avoiding assumptions based on dominant norms, respecting diverse worldviews, and being accountable for how services are received, not just how they are delivered. Culturally safe services are trauma-informed, equity-centered, and co-designed with those most affected.

5. Community-Led Supports

Cultural Community Networks

Peer-led networks within cultural communities (e.g. Chinese, Ukrainian) are stepping in to provide informal accompaniment, interpretation and translation, and navigation support. These efforts build trust and address isolation but often operate without sustainable funding.

Church and Sponsorship Groups

In the absence of formal system support, faith communities and private sponsors continue to play a key role in housing newcomers and supporting those in crisis. While not equipped to replace professional services, these groups often offer critical support in moments of transition or distress.

6. Policy and Systems Innovation

Anti-Racism and GEDI Grants

Government investments in anti-racism and gender, equity, diversity, and inclusion (GEDI) initiatives are helping to seed innovative programs in the justice sector. These grants support community-based organizations and system-level projects aimed at reducing structural barriers.

Movement Toward Status-Neutral Services

There is early momentum across departments to separate service eligibility from immigration status, particularly in areas of crisis response, including Victim Services. Though still limited, these shifts represent an important step toward reducing fear-based barriers and building trust with those most at risk.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This assessment identifies four key areas for action to advance justice and safety outcomes for newcomers in Prince Edward Island. The recommendations are grounded in what we heard directly from newcomers and service providers, and informed by both promising local practices and national standards in trauma-informed, culturally safe service delivery.

These are not prescriptive mandates. They are strategic opportunities for government, community, and system leaders to build trust, remove systemic barriers, and create the conditions for safer, more equitable communities. Some align directly with the Department of Justice and Public Safety's existing commitments, including cultural competency, crime prevention, and community collaboration.

1. Build and Embed Cultural Safety

Newcomers described experiences of misunderstanding, harm, and exclusion within justice systems, not from malice, but from a lack of cultural knowledge and systemic preparedness. In response, this project developed three tailored cultural safety training modules for JPS: one for senior leaders, one for frontline staff, and a train-the-trainer model to support internal sustainability.

Recommendations:

- Adopt and embed the cultural safety training modules across JPS departments, starting with priority areas such as corrections, victim services, and court staff.
- Align training implementation with trauma-informed principles already recognized within JPS, including cultural competency, safety, trustworthiness, and collaboration.
- Expand and fund access to professional interpretation and translation services across all justice-related services, including victim support, shelters, and legal information.

2. Expand Public Legal Education and Normalize Status-Neutral Access

The single most consistent barrier to help-seeking among newcomers is fear. Fear that interacting with the justice system could jeopardize immigration status, harm family members abroad, or lead to deportation.

Status-neutral access means that individuals can access services, including emergency support and legal help, without being asked about, or having to disclose, their immigration status. This approach helps reduce fear, increase safety, and ensure that people in crisis are not deterred from seeking help.

PEI's Victim Services program already operates on a status-neutral basis, providing critical support to anyone who needs it, regardless of immigration status. This is a strength in the current system. However, many newcomers are unaware of this, and fear of immigration consequences remains a major barrier to reporting harm or seeking assistance. Expanding awareness and normalizing status-neutral practices across systems is essential.

Recommendations:

- Build public awareness campaigns to clarify that Victim Services is status-neutral, and that immigration status will not be questioned when individuals seek support.
- Extend status-neutral principles to other critical services, such as shelters, mental health supports, education, and family violence response, ensuring no service is denied based on immigration status.
- Provide community-based legal orientation sessions explaining how the Canadian justice system works, including police procedures, court processes, and individual rights, focusing on issues relevant to newcomers.
- Co-create culturally appropriate, translated resources with community organizations to address common fears and misinformation about the justice system involvement.
- Ensure consistent access to interpretation and legal navigation support for individuals seeking help, not only for those already in legal proceedings.

3. Strengthen Community-Informed Leadership and Accountability

System transformation cannot succeed without leadership from those most affected. Newcomers bring vital insight to system design, but are rarely engaged meaningfully in governance and planning processes.

Recommendations:

- Integrate a newcomer advisory stream into the existing Minister's Advisory Committee on Crime Prevention and Policing, ensuring lived experience is included in planning and policy development.
- Support ongoing newcomer leadership and participation in justice planning through fair compensation, onboarding, and culturally responsive engagement practices.
- Include temporary status holders and diverse communities in advisory roles to reflect the current demographic landscape.
- Develop clear accountability tools, such as public progress reporting or community feedback mechanisms, to track changes and assess impact over time.

4. Improve Interdepartmental and Interagency Coordination

Newcomers don't experience services in silos, but our systems often operate that way. Improved coordination between justice, settlement, housing, and immigration services can prevent people from falling through the cracks and reduce the long-term costs of crisis interventions.

Recommendations:

- Establish a cross-departmental Newcomer Justice and Safety Coordination Table, including federal partners, community agencies, and JPS.
- Develop clear information-sharing protocols that support warm referrals and reduce duplication, while respecting privacy.
- Fund and support collaborative pilot projects across sectors to address specific gaps (e.g., housing for victims with precarious status, or legal/immigration crossover support).
- Develop and expand culturally relevant, trauma-informed programming for individuals who cause harm.

- Explore and invest in culturally responsive alternatives to court-based responses — such as restorative justice or community accountability processes — particularly in situations where traditional legal interventions may cause unintended harm.

Pathways to Action

These recommendations reflect an urgent but achievable agenda. Many align with JPS's existing priorities, including community safety, cultural competency, and upstream crime prevention, and can be supported through partnership rather than large-scale investment alone. A detailed analysis of potential returns on these investments is included in the appendix, *Economic and Social Return on Strategic Investment*.

CONCLUSION

This needs assessment highlights both the urgent challenges and promising opportunities for building a justice and public safety system that serves all Prince Edward Island residents, including the growing number of newcomers who now make up a vital part of the province's communities, workforce, and future.

The findings reveal how immigration status, language barriers, and unfamiliarity with Canadian legal processes can leave newcomers vulnerable, particularly in moments of crisis. At the same time, the assessment reflects the expertise, resilience, and desire among newcomers to contribute to safe, thriving communities.

By applying principles of cultural safety, trauma-informed practice, and equity, and by centering newcomer leadership and lived experience, decision-makers across sectors can take practical, high-impact steps to strengthen both trust and outcomes.

While the primary focus of this report is justice and public safety, the appendices offer insight into upstream issues, including housing, employment, and access to health and social services, that shape how newcomers engage with legal systems. These wider systems also play a critical role and should be considered in cross-sector planning and advocacy.

This transformation also requires expanding the tools we use to support safety and accountability. For some, traditional justice system responses may escalate harm or risk. Community-based and restorative approaches — developed with and for newcomer communities — offer promising alternatives that can hold individuals accountable while preventing further isolation, retraumatization, or family breakdown.

The recommendations are intended to support decision-making within Justice and Public Safety, IRSA, and the broader community, while informing ongoing collaboration across government and service sectors. This is not only a matter of improving service delivery, but it is a necessary step toward building more inclusive, responsive systems that reflect the province's changing population and shared future.

APPENDIX A

Economic and Social Impact Analysis: The Cost of Inaction

This section addresses the economic and social implications of addressing, or failing to address, the identified gaps in newcomer services in Prince Edward Island. While acknowledging budget constraints, this analysis demonstrates how strategic investments create significant returns across multiple sectors.

Economic Impacts of Service Gaps

1. Workforce Under-utilization

PEI's labor market has become increasingly dependent on newcomers to address critical workforce shortages, with newcomers filling a substantial portion of new jobs created in the province in recent years.

- **Skills Mismatch:** The underemployment of internationally trained professionals in PEI results in significant lost productivity annually. When skilled professionals work in positions that don't utilize their training, the province experiences both direct and indirect economic losses.
- **Credential Recognition Barriers:** Many internationally trained professionals in PEI work in positions below their education and experience levels. This underutilization represents substantial annual losses in provincial tax revenue and diminished economic contributions.
- **Sector-Specific Impacts:** Key sectors, including healthcare, agriculture, and technology, face critical workforce shortages that impact the provincial economy through unfilled positions and lost output. These shortages persist despite the presence of qualified newcomers who could fill these roles with appropriate support.
- **Economic Growth Impact:** Without improved pathways to employment that match newcomers' skills, PEI's annual GDP growth potential is significantly constrained. Removing barriers to appropriate employment would enhance overall economic performance.

2. Healthcare System Strain

The inefficient use of healthcare resources due to cultural and language barriers has measurable financial impacts on PEI's healthcare system.

- **Preventable Utilization:** Newcomers without appropriate language support or cultural orientation are more likely to use emergency services for non-urgent care, creating avoidable costs in the healthcare system. These utilization patterns could be addressed through preventive approaches.
- **Mental Health Considerations:** Untreated mental health issues among newcomers result in lost productivity and increased healthcare utilization. Early, culturally appropriate mental health support would reduce these downstream costs.
- **Interpretation Inefficiencies:** Inadequate interpretation services extend healthcare appointments significantly, creating inefficiencies in provider time and reducing the number of patients that can be served.
- **Preventative Versus Reactive Care:** The province currently spends considerably on reactive healthcare interventions for newcomers that could be substantially reduced through preventative, culturally appropriate services. This shift in approach represents a significant opportunity for cost savings.

3. Education and Training Considerations

Barriers to education and training for newcomers create significant downstream costs for PEI's economy.

- **Educational Continuity:** Children of refugee claimants who experience interrupted education require substantial additional educational supports when they eventually enter the system. Early educational access would reduce these remediation costs.
- **Language Training Approach:** Fragmented language training approaches result in duplicated services and inefficient resource allocation. A coordinated approach would improve outcomes while reducing costs.
- **Educational Environment:** Schools without adequate newcomer support resources experience higher staff turnover and require additional operational supports to manage increasing diversity.

4. Justice System Implications

Cultural misunderstandings and language barriers within PEI's justice system create measurable inefficiencies and costs.

- **Court Processing Efficiency:** Cases involving newcomers without adequate interpretation take considerably longer to process, creating system backlogs and increasing operational costs.
- **Victimization Patterns:** Unreported crimes against newcomers lead to repeated victimization that creates additional costs in police, court, and social service interventions. Addressing reporting barriers would reduce these downstream costs.
- **Interpretation Quality:** Inadequate early-stage interpretation leads to significant appeal and review costs that could be avoided with appropriate frontline services. Investment in quality interpretation represents an opportunity for system efficiencies.
- **Cultural Context in Legal Proceedings:** The cost of cultural misunderstandings in PEI's justice system manifests through extended processing times, unnecessary continuances, and increased support service needs. Cultural competency investments would improve system efficiency.

5. Social Support Considerations

Barriers to economic integration create increased reliance on social support systems.

- **Extended Support Duration:** Newcomers facing systemic barriers to employment require longer periods of social assistance, creating additional costs per household. Removing employment barriers would reduce this dependency.
- **Housing Stability Factors:** Housing instability among newcomers requires significant spending on emergency housing, support services, and administrative overhead. Proactive housing approaches would reduce these crisis response costs.
- **Family Integration Needs:** Families unable to access appropriate settlement supports incur substantially higher costs in combined provincial services over their first several years in PEI. Early, comprehensive supports create long-term savings.
- **Professional Integration:** When newcomer professionals remain underemployed due to credential recognition barriers, the province experiences significant direct costs through tax revenue loss and social

support services. Streamlining credential recognition would transform these costs into economic contributions.

Social Cohesion Impacts

The social costs of failing to address newcomer service gaps extend beyond direct financial measures to affect community cohesion and resilience.

- **Community Integration:** Lack of integration supports leads to isolated cultural enclaves, reducing social cohesion and community resilience, with impacts on municipal service costs and community development.
- **Family Safety:** Settlement stressors and lack of culturally appropriate supports correlate with higher rates of domestic violence interventions. Addressing these stressors would improve family outcomes while reducing intervention costs.
- **Youth Engagement:** Children serving as family interpreters or excluded from education show higher rates of disengagement, with associated increases in youth justice involvement. Age-appropriate roles and educational inclusion create better long-term outcomes.
- **Labor Market Alignment:** Key sectors, including healthcare, agriculture, and technology, continue facing critical workforce shortages that newcomers could fill. Better alignment between newcomer skills and labor market needs would strengthen the provincial economy.
- **Population Sustainability:** PEI's population growth strategy relies heavily on immigration, with current barriers threatening demographic sustainability goals. Newcomer retention represents a key factor in meeting the province's growth targets.

Return on Strategic Investment

Evidence from comparable jurisdictions and PEI-specific pilot programs demonstrates substantial returns on strategic investments in newcomer services.

- **Credential Recognition Value:** Investments in credential recognition and bridge training generate significant returns through increased tax revenue and reduced social assistance costs. These programs transform costs into contributions.
- **Cultural Competency Benefits:** Culturally appropriate early intervention leads to substantial reductions in emergency healthcare

utilization among newcomer populations, creating both health improvements and system efficiencies.

- **Service Coordination Advantages:** Coordinated service delivery for newcomers reduces administrative duplication while improving client outcomes. System integration creates both quality improvements and cost savings.
- **Justice System Improvements:** Providing cultural liaison services and appropriate interpretation at early justice system interactions reduces case processing times and appeals significantly. These improvements enhance both access to justice and system efficiency.
- **Long-term Contribution:** Newcomer families successfully integrated into PEI's economy represent substantial net positive economic contributions over time through tax contributions, consumer spending, and entrepreneurship. Integration support is an investment in provincial prosperity.

Implementation Within Resource Constraints

A phased implementation approach can maximize impact while acknowledging fiscal realities.

Prioritization Framework

High Impact/Low-Cost Interventions

These interventions are relatively inexpensive to implement while generating substantial returns through improved system efficiency and decreased crisis intervention needs.

- Standardized interpreter protocols
- Information sharing systems
- Peer support networks

Strategic Investments

These targeted investments have documented multiplier effects, returning several times the initial investment over five years.

- Credential recognition
- Cultural safety training
- Centralized service coordination

Policy Adjustments

These policy changes require minimal resource investment while creating significant downstream savings in crisis response and remediation costs.

- Education access regardless of status
- Shelter policy reforms
- Information-sharing protocols to support inter-departmental service navigation

This analysis demonstrates that strategic investments in newcomer services generate substantial returns while improving outcomes for newcomer and established communities. In a resource-constrained environment, these investments represent one of the most effective uses of limited public funds.

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