

# State of Rural Canada 2021

## Opportunities, Recovery & Resiliency in Changing Times

# MANITOBA

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In this chapter, we explore rural resilience in the province of Manitoba. We highlight some current demographic realities and showcase challenges that exist in the province. The first case study examines digital realities in Manitoba's rural schools. We identify the challenges of the digital divide in rural education and share stories of innovation and resilience from divisions, schools, teachers, and parents to overcome that divide. The second case study

documents the economic and business relief response to COVID-19. Here, we showcase how one of Manitoba's largest Community Futures organizations supported businesses in the region, enabling them to adapt to the unprecedented impacts of the pandemic. The final section highlights lessons learned and proposes policies and practices needed to foster further resilience for rural Manitoba.

## Rural Manitoba Defined

Defining "rural" in the Manitoban context is a nuanced endeavour. Provincial lands range from grasslands and parklands in the south, to the Canadian Shield, boreal forest, and Arctic tundra of the north. Rural populations exist across all of these landscapes and contexts, and they face distinct opportunities and challenges. Rural, remote, and Indigenous communities are not a homogenous population. They are unique, varied and cannot be defined solely based on their non-urbanicity. In a 2012 keynote address from the International Invited Symposium on Age-Friendly Rural and Remote Communities and Places, Bill Ashton, Director of the Rural Development Institute at Brandon University, explained that definitions of rural change with individual perceptions and perspectives; they change across time and space; and they change with different generations and cultures.

Given the above, attempts to define rural Manitoba typically focus on relational factors such as rural demographics, physical context, and government services and programs (i.e., population density, population size, distance to an urban center, or distance to essential services). In the context of this chapter, which focuses on the resilience of rural people and places, rural Manitoba is defined using Statistics Canada's "rural and small town" definition, which is recommended as a starting point for understanding Canada's rural populations. Like rural regions across Canada, part of what defines rural Manitoba is its varied interactions with urban populations, places, and services. The rural municipality of Dauphin, for example, is a large town that is far from a metropolitan center. Although the population density is higher, the employment opportunities are more rural and situated within the municipality. The unincorporated community of Sanford has a rural population density, but the proximity to Winnipeg creates heavily metropolitan influenced labour markets.<sup>1</sup> Both communities are rural but the proximity to metropolitan areas and the population density varies creating unique opportunities and socioeconomic contexts.

## Rural Populations and Dynamics

According to Statistics Canada reports from the 2016 census, 38% (or 485,779) of Manitoba's total population (1,278,365) lives outside of urban centers, a level greater than the national average of 29.4%.<sup>2</sup> The Manitoba Bureau of Statistics predicted that the rural population would continue to grow at a rate of 1.3% a year between 2018 and 2038, making it the only province in Canada where net growth is projected to remain positive over that period.<sup>3</sup> This growth is not uniform across the province and is taking place primarily in locations adjacent to Winnipeg and Brandon, while the Parklands and several municipalities in the southwest are experiencing decline.

Growth in certain regions can be attributed to the large number of Indigenous peoples who live in the region now referred to as Manitoba (i.e., 223,310 as of 2016 or 18% of the total provincial population).<sup>4</sup> This is because the Indigenous population is increasing at a rate four times greater than the non-Indigenous population. Of those who reported a single Indigenous identity in 2016, 58.4% were First Nations, 40.0% were Metis, 0.3% were Inuit, and 0.3% reported multiple Indigenous identities, or an Indigenous identity not included elsewhere. Almost half (43.9% or 98,033) of this population lives outside of Census Metropolitan Areas<sup>5</sup> and is classified as rural by Statistics Canada. Indigenous peoples therefore comprise approximately 20% of the total rural population in Manitoba.

Immigration is another important driver of change in rural populations. Immigration to rural areas is incentivized by the provincial government via Provincial Nominee Programs. Over 20% of new arrivals to the province settle in rural non-metropolitan areas.<sup>67</sup>

## Rural Communities and Regional Integration

In addition to sharing some common physical and locational attributes, rural communities share economic, social and indeed political linkages that make them part of functional regions.<sup>8</sup> Manitoba's rural population can be considered as falling into *rural metro-adjacent regions*, *non-metro-adjacent regions*, and *rural northern regions*.<sup>9</sup> A zoned approach to assessing degrees of metropolitan influence (strong, moderate, weak or no influence) highlights economic and socio-cultural realities that different populations encounter, which are also associated with three basic types of rural existence: 1) communities adjacent to cities, 2) extraction-based communities, and 3) communities and regions struggling with limited capacity and resources.<sup>10</sup> Of those Manitobans living in rural and small towns (about 32% of the total provincial population), more people (222,005) are found in zones that have weak to no metropolitan influence than those (163,657) in zones that have strong or moderate metropolitan influence.<sup>11</sup> Generally speaking, rural regions nearer to cities grow faster than those further away due to influences such as

employment opportunities and commuting behaviour. Alternately, growth in northern regions trends with Indigenous birth rates, and economic development growth and decline in the natural resource energy, mining, and forestry sectors.<sup>12</sup>

The economic landscape of rural Manitoba continues to evolve, which will shape future government service and program delivery. Primary economic activity is no longer the dominant sector for employment and more people are employed in the service sector.<sup>13</sup> Food processing and agricultural manufacturing, technology sectors, as well as healthcare and social assistance are emerging as the dominant drivers of the rural economy.<sup>14</sup> Access to healthcare facilities has long been an issue in rural areas but the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the unequal access for many in the province. There are 250 service providers (i.e., independent primary care clinics, personal care homes, and hospitals) across the province but most of the specialized services are offered in Winnipeg. Closures, recruitment challenges, and location of services together limit access for rural and northern populations.<sup>15</sup>

## Rural Realities in Manitoba

Two major themes capture the top trends for rural Manitoba, the digital divide and increasing diversity. Both themes are often experienced or viewed as challenges in the

provinces. However, understanding these themes or changing perspectives can turn these themes into opportunities for improving wellbeing in rural Manitoba.

### The Digital Divide in Manitoba

The digital divide is the difference in access to, and the ability to use digital technologies such as the Internet and cellular phones; this gap can occur both within and between communities, including urban and rural locations.<sup>16,17</sup> The digital divide is real in rural Manitoba and Internet access in rural Manitoba lags most of Canada. According to the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) in 2019, only 40% of Canadians living outside of urban centres had access to the minimum standard of Internet recommended (50 Mbps download, 10 Mbps upload and unlimited data), while in Manitoba only 10% of rural people had access to that minimum standard.<sup>18,19</sup>

The digital divide limits the ability of rural residents, businesses, and governments to participate in the current economy and society. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted just how critical access to digital technologies

are in contemporary society while also emphasizing the uneven realities of digital access in rural regions.<sup>20</sup> Rural businesses in Manitoba are trying to evolve and adapt to the new digital realities, especially in the face of COVID-19. Unfortunately, the lack of connectivity and digital capacity in rural regions creates substantial barriers to adapt and enter the new digital market space. The case studies in this chapter highlight how the digital divide in rural Manitoba is impacting education and business development and success.

Infrastructure Canada's Economic Development Strategy for Rural Canada identifies broadband as the top priority for rural development across Canada, essential for all aspects of today's society.<sup>21</sup> Ensuring that rural communities have equitable Internet access is even more critical in a province like Manitoba, which suffers from a larger digital divide between urban and rural communities than most provinces.

## Indigenous Strengths and Newcomer Growth in Rural Manitoba

As the first section described, rural Manitoba has a vibrant Indigenous population, which is young and rapidly growing. In addition, rural places have launched successful rural immigration initiatives, also resulting in younger demographics and a strong workforce. As a result of both trends, rural Manitoba is poised for growth over the next 20 years, a unique situation amongst Canada's provinces. These demographic changes through immigration are addressing labour demands and driving new business development in many communities, and recent reports on the Indigenous Economy highlight the \$9 billion contribution that the growing Indigenous population provides to the provincial economy.<sup>22</sup> While Indigenous people are an integral part of the economy, Indigenous businesses too often struggle to secure financing and more than 1/3 (36%) of Indigenous businesses recently surveyed did not have a lending relationship with banks, credit unions, or government.<sup>23</sup> During COVID-19, difficulty accessing funding has created significant challenges for Indigenous businesses on top of the difficulties the pandemic already created and Indigenous businesses struggled to remain open with 25% of surveyed businesses shutting their doors temporarily or permanently during the pandemic.<sup>24</sup>

Currently, many rural communities in Manitoba are wrestling with creating a welcoming environment for newcomers and improving relationships with their Indigenous neighbours. In many rural areas, issues such as increasing distance to healthcare, lack of internet or cell access, or lack of available educational options are similar across Indigenous and settler communities. However, development and effective collaboration in rural Manitoba with Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities

is a mixed reality. For Indigenous communities, COVID-19 highlighted once again the effect of over-crowding, chronic health conditions, and poverty on the rates of disease spread. Further exacerbating the challenges of collaboration is research showing that racism is still persistent and systemic in rural Manitoba, with 84% of rural Manitobans saying that racism is a problem in their area.<sup>25</sup> Rural Manitoba, like all of Canada, needs to increase efforts and activities to achieve Truth and Reconciliation with Indigenous peoples.

Indigenous communities in Manitoba have demonstrated their resilience time after time in the face of forced systemic attacks on culture, family and community. The pandemic highlighted how the future of rural can look in Manitoba on the health front. Indigenous communities acted proactively in the face of the pandemic to address healthcare by implementing regulations as well as arranging quarantine housing, transportation, food delivery, and immunization clinics. In addition, while there are noted barriers to working together to address these issues, Indigenous communities in Manitoba also demonstrated during the pandemic that Indigenous and non-Indigenous rural partnerships can work together successfully as several First Nations shared vaccines with their non-Indigenous neighbours to address regional COVID-19 rates.<sup>26,27</sup>

# Case Study 1: Exploring the Digital Divide in Rural School Divisions

Digital challenges in rural Manitoba were here long before COVID-19, but the pandemic brought them to light in new ways. Low connectivity speeds are notable in rural areas and First Nations communities.<sup>28</sup> According to Terry Godwaldt, Director of Programming, The Center for Global Education, Canada, from an education perspective, “a lack of digital access is a lack of access to education, period.”<sup>29</sup> This has never been more clearly highlighted than during the pandemic, when in-person education was not possible and many rural classrooms, schools, and divisions had to shift to online formats, requiring multiple devices in homes accessing the internet.

Over the past year, a research team<sup>30</sup> at Brandon University Cares Research Centre<sup>31</sup> undertook a project to further explore the educational realities of digital technology in rural and remote school divisions in the province. While this project highlighted stark contrasts in locations, infrastructure, policies, and social media use, it also brought forth stories of rural resilience, creativity, and innovation. This project showed that schools and divisions across Manitoba have been responding to this digital divide in unique ways, demonstrating resilience, strength, and creativity. They also demonstrated strategic responses designed to meet the contextual needs of their community.

## Innovation and Creativity in Responding to Digital Challenges in Manitoba’s Rural Education

The Digital Policy in School Divisions project engaged thirteen different rural and northern school divisions across Manitoba, by analyzing policy documents and social media accounts, as well as interviewing technology coordinators for further information about how these policies were enacted before and during the pandemic.

Recognizing that many communities did not have Internet access, some divisions put up external wireless routers on their school buildings, so community members could drive to the school and connect to the school WiFi from the parking lot. One technology coordinator said, “It’s not that their Internet is poor – it’s that they don’t have *any* Internet... so what we did is just change the access of our WiFi access points and move them to the outside of the building.”<sup>32</sup>

Many divisions also instituted a device loaning program, recognizing that there were many families who did not have devices at home, or that had more children than devices in their homes, so that each child could access online learning simultaneously.

It wasn’t only school administrators who demonstrated this flexibility and innovation. Teachers rapidly learned new software, new ways of connecting, new ways of conducting assessment, and many other shifts in teaching philosophy, instruction, and curriculum, all with the aim of providing quality education to their students. One technology coordinator in rural Manitoba said, “I’m watching teachers really establish themselves with the skills... they’re taking the training and they’re establishing it and making it a daily practice... and it’s teachers teaching each other.”

Students themselves demonstrated creativity in leaping over contextual challenges, such as lack of local internet or cellular access. For example, one technology coordinator shared an example of innovative thinking and leveraging relationships in a rural community without cellular or internet access. In this community, a child would type a message into her phone, then close it and give it to her father, who often travelled out of town on business. He would go into a neighbouring community, open the phone, and the message would send, and any incoming messages would be received. When he returned, his daughter would read her replies and start the process again. While this may seem a tedious way to communicate, it leverages relationships and creativity to get around barriers that many would have simply accepted as the status quo. This story illustrates both current barriers around equity and access to technology, as well as the innovation and creativity of rural youth in Manitoba.

By examining the case of educational realities of digital technology in rural and remote Manitoba school divisions, the researchers concluded that unique contexts demand specialized responses. There is a dynamic tension between the administrative desire to amalgamate, streamline, and systematize and the need for local knowledge, tailored solutions, and programs and policies that include deep knowledge of rurality in their design.

## *What does this mean for rural schools?*

COVID-19 has shown that a multiplicity of approaches worked and was indeed necessary to embrace rapid change. As the study above demonstrated, educators responded to the pandemic in different ways. Knowing the contexts meant that local decision-makers were informed and able to respond with agility when needs arose. For example, when they needed to select software platforms for learning, they could turn to teachers, parents, and students to hear what would work best because those relational pathways were already in place. And in those cases when different software could provide different learning experiences, or when teacher preferences and comfort levels needed to be honoured, they could provide support, training, and a personal approach rather than demanding that everyone conform to a single system.

Some schools knew that their communities struggled with technology access, and they responded to these needs by leveraging the innovation and creativity present within their schools. They shared school resources to benefit the community. Whether it was parking lot WiFi or loaned laptops or other devices that could be used for online learning, they demonstrated trust, relationality, and a

personal approach that built on the knowledge of existing barriers in the community. When these barriers made it impossible to learn online, they opted for paper-based learning packages or pre-loaded software on their devices. These pandemic responses empowered local leaders and teachers, built on the unique contextual knowledge about communities, childcare availability, access to reliable internet and devices, and rural relationships. The suite of responses developed also underscores the resilience, creativity, and innovation present in rural communities.

Our current context is one of amalgamating school divisions and centralizing leadership decisions. However, this research across western and northern Manitoba has shown that there are clear themes about the importance of local, contextual knowledge and the ability of these leaders to serve the people in their care. In places where divisions have remained small, leaders are able to respond with agility. They can pivot quickly and institute new and innovative ways of delivering education. Rural places are unique and deserve education that meets those needs. Empowering local leadership means acknowledging these contextual realities and building on the strengths of rural communities.

## **Case Study 2: Cultivating resilience in Westman's businesses**

### **Community Futures Westman**

Community Futures (CF) are federally funded, not-for profit organizations that provide services and support to rural businesses, communities, and entrepreneurs across Canada. In Manitoba, funding for the Community Futures program is provided through Western Diversification. There are currently 267 Community Futures across the country, and 16 of those are in rural Manitoba. Community Futures Westman (CFW) is in south-western Manitoba and headquartered in Brandon. The Westman region is a rural and primarily agricultural region containing approximately 125,000 residents and 40,000 km<sup>2</sup>. The region reaches from the US/Canada border in the south, 200 km north to Riding Mountain National Park. The CFW area starts in the west at the Saskatchewan/Manitoba border and covers

approximately 200 km east. CFW delivers a variety of services to businesses, communities, and residents within the Westman region, ranging from financial assistance and training for businesses to fostering innovation through workshops, award shows, and competitions. The CFW also engages in community development activities and research, working with local champions and organizations along with rural research centres such as the Rural Development Institute to explore and build community development capacity in the region. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020, CFW shifted to focus on helping businesses and organizations in Westman adapt and survive in the face of this crisis.

## Community Futures Westman COVID-19 Response

The pandemic had substantial impacts on the CFW organization and region. Specifically, Manitoba had three lockdowns between March 2020 and June 2021, and each of these lockdowns resulted in businesses being forced to close or drastically alter their operations. With the main course of operations being financing entrepreneurs in many ways, CFW had to strengthen relationships with clients to help them adapt and survive. Amongst other responses, CFW utilized three specific initiatives to help sustain and support businesses in Westman: launching Business Response Plans, delivering the Regional Relief and Recovery Fund, and developing the E-Commerce Support program.

The Business Response Plan initiative was launched by CFW to help entrepreneurs address the questions that they had about various government assistance programs, and options for businesses operating amidst the multitude of restrictions imposed due to COVID-19.<sup>33</sup> Specifically, the Business Response Plan initiative assisted clients in developing 'roadmaps' to ensure that they were able to generate revenue (sometimes in new ways) during the pandemic so that their business was able to survive. The business response plan initiative had several existing clients take advantage of this opportunity. Participating businesses included trades, retailers, and service providers. Each of these businesses worked with CFW to identify the best way to adapt and develop an approach that suited their business, assisting those businesses in making decisions about funding, staffing, and operating options in the face of COVID-19 restrictions.

The Federal Government allocated Regional Relief and Recovery Funds (RRRF)<sup>34</sup> to CFs across Canada as part of the government's COVID-19 Economic Response plan. CFW was able to quickly step in and successfully deliver the RRRF to hundreds of entrepreneurs in the Westman region. A lot of businesses in the Westman region were directed to this program to help keep their employees on amidst the pandemic, accessing funds that provided crucial business support for ongoing debt responsibilities and maintaining staff. As of April 15, 2021, the province of Manitoba had approved 873 applications to the program, supporting businesses with approximately 26.9 million dollars. The Westman region specifically had 108 of these applications, accounting for more than 3 million dollars in support to rural businesses.

Working with Westman's businesses to identify opportunities in their businesses through the Business Response Plan, in addition to delivering financial support through the RRRF allowed CFW to serve both new and existing business clients. CFW helped them review government support programs like the RRRF and make decisions about how to proceed with business activities during the pandemic. Based on this experience and identified need, CFW also developed a digital adoption program, the E-Commerce Support Program, to help some of the rural businesses in the region.

The E-Commerce Support program provided entrepreneurs help to get their businesses (and products and services) online in a time when selling in person was a major obstacle. Online sales technology, is new and rapidly changing, creating a steep learning curve for businesses. To address this challenge, CFW wanted to provide this program to help businesses address COVID-19 impacts seen in their business. The organization partnered with a local print and digital media company to help these businesses set up an online store, market their products and collect revenue from online sales. The initial rollout of the program during the pandemic resulted in numerous businesses participating as they tried to adapt to new online reality. The impact of this program can be best understood through the experience of a participating business. In the first stages of the pandemic, one of the participating entrepreneurs had not previously considered a website for his business as he was confident that he would still be able to maintain sales levels, either over the phone or social media channels. However, due to the ongoing nature of the pandemic and its impact on the economy, he engaged in the E-Commerce Support Program. With his new online platform, he is now able to allocate more of his time to other aspects of his business by simply directing consumers to his new website. The website is alleviating his worries in invoicing and processing payments, as this is now an automated process. CFW was able to work with this entrepreneur and other applicants to identify which products they wanted to sell online, and the print company trained them on setting up of the online store, as well as how to add/delete/track inventory and accept and manage all payments.

As the pandemic continues, the response to COVID-19 has continued to evolve as well. The CFW have seen the impacts on revenues to all types of businesses, and CFW has been working closely with businesses in the region to help mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 and to provide supports in recovery and adaptation. The delivery of federal funding

support along with the development of two programs to help rural businesses adapt and survive, have been

important contributions to the resilience of businesses in the Westman region.

## The Future of Rural in Manitoba

Resilience is the ability to adapt and thrive in the face of change and crisis.<sup>35</sup> The rural Manitoba case studies presented above highlighted the adaptability and resilience of rural Manitoba in the context of both COVID-19 as well as other changing realities in the province and Canada. The case study of rural school divisions showcased their ability to problem solve and shift both resources and focus to deal with the pandemic. The case study of CFW showed how rural businesses sought to improve their online presence and emphasized how rural service organizations such as CFW play an integral role in providing support and resources to help rural Manitoba shift to changing economies and respond to crises, including COVID-19. The background on rural Manitoba combined with insights from the case studies also identified that Manitoba has many types of rural, and while rural regions face common problems, solutions or realities are often localized or place-based. Whether it is in the context of immigration being concentrated in specific regions or if the specific policies and responses of school divisions, these local contexts and challenges require rural communities and regions to build on their strengths and local knowledge in planning a way forward.<sup>36</sup>

Secondary migration is still higher in rural areas, as newcomers come and stay for several years, and then leave for the cities due to numerous employment and quality of life factors. If immigration is to be pursued as a solution to shrinking local labour, communities need to continue to work to become places that are characterized by openness, humility, hospitality, and opportunity. Solutions to immigration and other rural challenges must integrate provincial and federal resources with community-based solutions, with communities working together to advocate for their own needs and approaches. This chapter identified that education and business service supports are effectively implemented using locally focused, place-based approach and provides evidence that other rural challenges including solutions for broadband and demographic changes should also incorporate a community and regional perspective in rural as well.

Provincial leaders and rural communities need to approach integration for newcomers and partnerships with Indigenous communities in rural Manitoba, in the same way that they approached COVID-19, with a willingness to change, quickly embrace new realities, and work together towards a

common goal. **Rather than resisting collaboration, embracing it by creating welcoming communities and intentionally and consistently working on Truth and Reconciliation is an essential part of rural Manitoba achieving long-term resilience.**

The barriers for rural schools and businesses to participate in our digital society was made especially clear during the pandemic. Ensuring that those schools, businesses, and the rest of rural Manitoba have access to high-speed Internet is going to be crucial to the future success of rural regions in the province. Whether it be selling or buying, doing so online will be a trend to follow for years to come. The pandemic helped to emphasize that if schools are not able to access digital technologies and businesses are not able to sell to and engage customers online, then their future is full of difficulty and uncertainty. COVID-19 clearly demonstrated that the current level of rural broadband is not acceptable for Manitoba. Currently, Manitoba has one of the worst levels of rural broadband in Canada and if the province wants to improve both education and business in rural Manitoba, it needs to change that reality by investing in digital infrastructure in partnership with both federal and municipal governments and support rural broadband now. Manitoba's rural schools, businesses and communities have demonstrated that they are eager for digital technology and are doing the best they can with a lack of quality Internet and digital support. **Addressing the digital divide is critical to support long-term rural resilience in the province.**

The cases and contexts presented in this chapter illustrate the importance of recognizing some of the main internal drivers of change but also the important system-wide linkages that mutually shape the economies, cultures, and governance of rural and urban Manitoba. As part of a dynamic and multi-scaled interconnected system, rural Manitoba is at once a source and a recipient of change. This chapter shows that, in 2021, Manitoba's rural populations and institutions are innovative, adaptable, and able to offer appropriate solutions--in place--to address program and service challenges in key sectors such as education, and business. However, regional governance, infrastructure, and socio-cultural sub-systems for rural regions must be further developed and resourced to realize the full potential of rural Manitoba's contributions to the province's wellbeing.

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