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In the 1970s, the Canadian government developed the [Temporary Foreign Worker Program](#) (TFWP) to address national labour market needs. A program that initially targeted highly skilled individuals such as academics, engineers and business executives, the TFWP has evolved, over the last decades, towards staffing positions in seemingly less skilled employment areas such as the agricultural and fish processing fields.

Although slower than other Canadian regions in adopting this hiring scheme, the Maritime provinces have recently enthusiastically embraced the TFWP to facilitate the regional fisheries' [transition](#) from family-based businesses to larger corporate enterprises, relying on cheap labour to compete in international markets. For example, in 2003, approximately [875](#) temporary foreign workers entered Prince Edward Island to harvest its farms and work in seafood processing plants. By 2020 these numbers increased to a record [1725](#) entries.

Scholars from the larger Canadian provinces such as Ontario, British Columbia and Québec have documented the [unsafe occupational practices](#) and [substandard living conditions](#) of temporary foreign workers. These [include](#) lack of adequate access to healthcare, job insecurity, abusive work practices, including ineligibility for overtime pay, low pay, long hours, and even dismissal and repatriation. Similar research has been sparse and only sporadically conducted in Maritime Canada.

[Safe at Work, Unsafe at home: COVID-19 and Temporary Foreign Workers in Prince Edward Island](#), a community report published in June 2021, documents migrant workers' occupational and living conditions and investigates how the COVID-pandemic has affected the workers in the region. The report was [jointly authored](#) by researchers from Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia; St Thomas University, Fredericton, New Brunswick; and Cooper Institute in Prince Edward Island. Our team interviewed [15 workers](#) from Mexico, the Philippines and Guatemala, who entered Canada for work after the start of the COVID pandemic in 2020. Interviews were carried out by phone, in both Spanish and English.

making social distancing impossible? Safety of housing and safety of the workplace go hand in hand for migrant workers who have little control over their accommodations as their contracts and housing provisions are tied to their employers.

COVID also exacerbated national differences. Migrants reported being physically separated at work from Canadians, during lunches and break times. Migrants also spoke of employer imposed pandemic limits on their privacy, including the installation of close circuit cameras inside their homes, stay-at-home restrictions, and a limitation on outside visitors. Canadian counterparts, by contrast, were not subject to the same stringent restrictions.

As employers and the state impose precarious occupational and living conditions on temporary migrant workers in Canada, xenophobic ways of understanding difference along national lines are exposed. While Canadian workers have rights to good working conditions and adequate pay, the material prerequisites for securing dignified housing on the private market, the fates of those symbolically outside the nation, devoid of citizenship rights, are highly dependent on private employers and landlords. As employers physically and symbolically separate temporary foreign workers from Canadian ones, subjecting the migrants to stricter regulations, they produce them as health liabilities and vectors of disease.

Under this regime, it is national bodies, truly Canadian ones, that need state and employer protections from foreign migrants, whose main purpose is to serve as a money-making vessel for agri-food businesses. Their bodies are instrumental, continuing to feed the nation so that the national subjects can continue their lives inside the nation, with as little disruption as possible.

As the lives of migrants become risks to be managed, we lose sight of these workers, ignoring their own service and sacrifices to the pandemic and more importantly their own need for adequate protections and rights.

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