

Chunmin Su and Tim Fadgen

Rethinking Parent Reunification Policy in New Zealand and Lessons from Canada welcoming the skilled, restricting their family?

Abstract

Family reunification remains a socially vital yet politically contested element of immigration policy. This article presents a comparative analysis of Canada and New Zealand's approaches to parent reunification, highlighting Canada's sustained institutional commitment amid neoliberal reforms and contrasting it with New Zealand's episodic suspensions and reactive policy shifts. Applying a lesson-drawing framework, the article examines how Canada's incremental adjustments – such as integrating economic logic without dismantling core family programmes – can inform more coherent and principled policy design in New Zealand. It argues that economic sustainability and family unity need not be mutually exclusive, and that older migrants contribute significant social capital through childcare, cultural continuity and migrant retention. The analysis concludes with practical recommendations for strengthening New Zealand's parent reunification framework, including targeted eligibility criteria.

Keywords parent resident visa, family reunification, immigration policy, skilled migrants, social capital, migration governance

Immigration policy often serves as a barometer of a nation's social values and political priorities. Nowhere is this more evident than in New Zealand's parent reunification framework, which has been characterised by prolonged suspensions, shifting eligibility thresholds and abrupt policy reversals. These fluctuations have not only disrupted pathways for migrant families but also undermined long-term settlement outcomes, and, in some cases, contributed to the departure of skilled immigrants. The resulting policy uncertainty underscores the need for a more coherent and sustainable framework.

Recent demographic data adds urgency to this discussion. In addition to declining population growth (Statistics New Zealand, 2025b), New Zealand is experiencing record levels of outward migration: the number of New Zealanders leaving the country rose by 16% in the past year, while migrant departures increased by 13% (Statistics New Zealand, 2025a). Commentators have warned of a workforce 'hollowing out', particularly among mid-career professionals who 'do the bulk of the work', describing the situation as 'the jaws of death closing' on the labour market (Duff, 2025). In this context of intensifying

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skill loss and demographic pressure, immigration policy plays a critical role in shaping long-term retention.

The most recent development in this evolving landscape is the government's 2025 announcement of the parent boost visitor visa (Immigration New Zealand, n.d.a). This new category provides a multi-entry visa valid for up to five years, with the option of one renewal for another five, allowing a stay of up to ten years in total. Applicants must meet health, income and insurance requirements. Holders remain temporary visitors with no rights to residence, work or public healthcare. They must leave New Zealand between the third and fourth year for a health reassessment and remain outside the country for three months before they can apply for a second term, conditions intended to reinforce its temporary nature.

While this initiative offers greater flexibility and temporary relief, it does not provide a pathway to permanent residence. It operates in addition to, rather than in replacement of, the existing parent resident visa, which remains the only route to permanent parent reunification in New Zealand. As the parent boost scheme is implemented and migrant families continue to navigate a shifting policy environment, there is a timely opportunity to reassess the foundations of parent reunification in New Zealand. This article responds to that opportunity by tracing the historical evolution of the parent resident visa, examining the design choices that have shaped its development, and exploring options for reform.

The parent resident visa has been subject to the most frequent and substantial reforms among New Zealand's family migration categories. Scholarship has linked these shifts to broader policy priorities that have increasingly centred on economic utility, demographic risk and fiscal constraint (Liu and Ran, 2022; Rasheed, 2023). Yet there remains limited research that offers concrete, policy-relevant solutions for strengthening parent reunification frameworks. This article addresses that gap by providing a targeted, comparative analysis with practical implications for decision makers.

The article employs Richard Rose's lesson-drawing framework to evaluate

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whether and how policy insights from Canada's more stable and inclusive approach to parent reunification might be adapted to the New Zealand context (Rose, 1993). Rose's approach emphasises transferring feasible, evidence-informed elements from one jurisdiction to another, without advocating wholesale replication. According to Rose, lesson drawing begins with determining the transferability of a programme; to explore this, we apply the 'most similar' method of programme selection to compare the Canadian and New Zealand contexts. By comparing the institutional architecture of parent migration policy in New Zealand and Canada, this analysis identifies factors contributing to policy durability and social legitimacy.

This analysis is presented in seven main parts. First, we consider the importance of family reunification – both as a human rights matter and as something critical to the long-term success of New Zealand's immigration policy settings. We then briefly present the analytical approach using Rose's lesson-drawing framework. Following this overview are the case studies of New Zealand and Canada. We then consider three lessons from Canada's

relatively steady and supportive immigration approach to family reunification, before analysing these with insights from the research literature. We conclude by offering insights for New Zealand's family reunification policy aim to enhance family reunification rights and improve policy stability in New Zealand, and create a mutually beneficial situation that serves both government interests and immigrant aspirations.

Why family reunification matters

The ability to live with one's family is more than a private preference; it is a foundational principle embedded in international legal and moral frameworks. The right to family life is affirmed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966). For many migrants, reunification with parents is not a discretionary benefit but a precondition for long-term integration, emotional stability and community participation in their adopted country.

However, migration research shows that 'family' extends beyond the nuclear model often assumed in policy, encompassing intergenerational networks of care that include parents and grandparents (Andrikopoulos, 2020). Recognising these broader realities is crucial, as they shape how migrants experience belonging and support across generations.

There is a rich and growing scholarly literature underscoring the centrality of family in immigrant adaptation. Assimilation remains a key concept, but recent work has challenged the centrality of this approach. For example, Drouhot (2024) surveyed segmented and neo-assimilation theories, noting intergenerational progress as the dominant trend, while highlighting race and cultural difference as persistent challenges. Yet acculturation frameworks have also become more dynamic. Titzmann and Jugert (2024), for example, argued that acculturation is best understood as a process of change across the life cycle.

Mental health and wellbeing continue to be central in family immigrant adaptation research. Andronic and Constantin (2024) synthesised findings on

acculturation and wellbeing, identifying family cohesion as a critical moderator of mental health outcomes. Allen et al. (2024) further demonstrated that acculturative stress negatively affects self-esteem and depression but positively correlates with family cohesion and familism among first-generation migrants.

Family processes also shape behavioural trajectories. Kang (2025) applied an integrative developmental model, revealing that family structure and racial socialisation explain disparities in immigrant children's adjustment. Social capital remains vital: Park (2025) highlighted barriers to immigrant parental engagement, emphasising the role of networks in educational outcomes. Taken together, these studies affirm, across national, cultural and linguistic contexts, that family operates as a cultural anchor, resource provider and buffer against stress, while also mediating adaptation through complex intergenerational dynamics.

Recent scholarship has also emphasised the complexity of family reunification and caregiving for ageing parents in immigrant contexts. Opanubi and Ade-Oshifogun (2025) identified stress and coping strategies among adult children caring for ageing parents, while Xiao et al. (2024) highlighted the centrality of cultural values in caregiving obligations. Some studies have even considered transnational care, showing how emotional solidarity persists despite geographic distance (Zhang, 2024). As with the broader immigrant adaptation research, systematic reviews of reunification of families with ageing parents underscore the mental health implications of reunification and intergenerational support (Bhatia, McLaren and Huang, 2024), and Cao (2021) provided a theoretical lens on intergenerational negotiations in ageing immigrant families. This scholarship underscores the importance of policies that encourage family reunification for improved migrant outcomes.

In New Zealand, the parent resident visa is the primary pathway for such reunification. It aims to balance social and economic objectives by supporting labour markets, demographic stability and community cohesion. Yet successive reforms have struggled to sustain this

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balance. From a policy standpoint, parent reunification promotes family unity, cultural continuity and emotional wellbeing, while enabling labour force participation through informal caregiving. These benefits extend beyond individual households to strengthen migrant retention and intercultural understanding (Chen and Buckingham, 2025; Separa, 2024). Despite this, the caregiving and emotional work parents provide remain undervalued in economic terms.

Family reunification as a policy problem

Despite these demonstrated benefits, family reunification, particularly for parents, has been problematised within New Zealand's immigration system. Over the past two decades, policymakers have increasingly framed the parent resident visa as a fiscal liability, focusing narrowly on health and dependency costs while overlooking parents' social and economic contributions.

Such framing overlooks growing evidence to the contrary. A Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment Cabinet paper (2019) found that the ability of skilled migrants to sponsor their parents enhances both attraction and retention, with sponsoring migrants 15–20% more likely to remain in New Zealand, staying on average three years longer than those

without sponsored parents. Similarly, the New Zealand Productivity Commission, using the Treasury's CBAX model, showed that while fiscal costs fall on government, the parent category delivers broader social benefits such as unpaid childcare and emotional support that strengthen productivity and wellbeing, with net social gains increasing under larger visa quotas (Chen, 2021).

Recent political discourse reflects a growing awareness of this intersection. The minister of immigration, Erica Stanford, has described the parent category as a key factor in where skilled migrants choose to settle. At the same time, Prime Minister Christopher Luxon has underscored the need to 'incentivise' global talent through more family-friendly immigration settings, noting that it is imperative for New Zealand to 'attract the right people with the skills' to 'deliver significant economic and social benefits for all New Zealanders' (New Zealand Herald, 2025). These remarks suggest that family reunification may function as a social right and a strategic lever in global talent competition. However, the extent to which policy mechanisms reflect this logic remains limited.

Demographic pressures and the case for intergenerational care

New Zealand is not exempt from the demographic pressures affecting other high-income countries. With the country experiencing an ageing population and a declining birth rate, younger migrants are now more reliant than in the past on informal caregiving networks, particularly support from parents and grandparents. Recent evidence shows that grandmothers in Auckland are increasingly providing regular childcare to enable parents to sustain full-time employment (Day, 2021).

From a policy design perspective, recognising these patterns of intergenerational reciprocity offers a strong rationale for more inclusive parent reunification policies. Parents' presence facilitates workforce engagement, particularly for women, and contributes to migrant retention and settlement stability (Chen, 2021; Separa, 2024). Conversely, restrictive parent policies can fracture family networks, increase stress, and drive skilled migrants towards countries with

more supportive family migration frameworks (Nedelcu, 2023; Weiss and Jafari, 2024). Ran and Liu (2020) showed that such restrictions often create ‘forced’ transnational households, depriving families of essential care.

In this context, treating parent reunification as a marginal or discretionary policy stream may be socially and economically shortsighted. We contend that policy settings have been stubbornly myopic, and, as a point of contrast, we offer Canada’s more forward-thinking approach.

Analytical approach

This article applies Rose’s (1993) lesson-drawing framework to guide a comparative analysis of Canadian and New Zealand parent reunification policies. This approach supports policymakers in learning from the experiences of other jurisdictions to improve local policy outcomes. The motivation for exploring the Canadian model stems from growing concern about the instability, restrictiveness and socioeconomic bias characterising New Zealand’s Parent Resident Visa.

The analysis followed three main steps within Rose’s framework. First, the transferability of lessons was considered by conducting a comprehensive programme scan and selecting Canada based on similar institutional, demographic and policy contexts. Second, a comparative case study examined each country’s programme features and implementation outcomes, highlighting the structural and philosophical differences driving divergent policy results. Finally, we drew lessons from Canada’s experience that New Zealand might draw on to enhance the fairness, stability and long-term viability of its parent reunification regime, which will, we maintain, better balance New Zealand’s long-term economic growth goals with maintaining its position as an active proponent of human rights on a global scale.

A comparison of New Zealand and Canada’s family reunification immigration policies: restricting families, or governing with family?

We begin this comparative review of family reunification policy in New Zealand and Canada by establishing the historical context of parent migration frameworks

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in each country. The section then draws on academic literature to examine how these policies have evolved in regard to sovereign rights, legal obligations and social objectives. In the case of New Zealand, the parent resident visa has undergone a significant transformation over the past three decades. Initially grounded in an inclusive, socially liberal ethos, the policy has shifted towards a neoliberal model emphasising economic self-sufficiency and fiscal restraint. This transition has had far-reaching implications for policy stability, equitable access, and the governance of family reunification more broadly.

The making and unmaking of New Zealand’s parent visa: a case study in policy drift

Economic selectivity in immigration is not unique to New Zealand. Across many OECD countries, neoliberal governance has pushed immigration systems towards market-based criteria, prioritising labour market contribution over social rights. This inclination is particularly evident in family categories, which are often seen as discretionary and high cost. New Zealand’s parental policy reflects this

logic. Income thresholds, randomised ballots and strict eligibility rules exemplify a mode of governance focused on individual responsibility, fiscal control and demographic management. As Foucault (2003) argued, this ‘biopolitical’ approach sorts populations by productivity and utility. Parents, especially those seen as dependent, are increasingly excluded from residence pathways, creating a two-tiered system which admits skilled workers but denies the family structures needed for lasting settlement.

In the late 20th century, New Zealand’s immigration policy adopted a notably family-centred ethos. The 1987 reforms introduced a points-based system favouring human capital indicators such as age and qualifications, as well as community and family sponsorship (Rasheed, 2023; Trlin, 1992). This orientation culminated in the Immigration Amendment Act 1991, which formally established the family category, encompassing spouses, de facto and same-sex partners, dependent children, adult children, siblings and, crucially, parents of New Zealand residents and citizens (Liu and Ran, 2022; Surtees, 2011).

At its core, this model reflected a citizenship ethos centred on social rights, with parents of migrants not only admitted but also granted access to public services and entitlements. As Humpage (2011) noted, this era represented a socially liberal period in immigration governance, in which state recognition of familial bonds took precedence over strict economic filtering. Bedford and Spoonley (2014) further argued that the policy environment during this period prioritised long-term migrant settlement outcomes over short-term fiscal assessments.

The 2001 rebalancing: economic priorities take hold

By the late 1990s, public and political concern over the volume of family-sponsored migrants prompted a recalibration. In 2001 the government introduced a managed-entry framework, allocating 60% of residence approvals to the skilled/business stream, 30% to family sponsorship, and 10% to the humanitarian stream (Ran and Liu, 2020). This move signalled a decisive shift towards an

immigration regime dominated by economic priorities. Bedford, Ho and Lidgard (2005) interpreted this reallocation as part of New Zealand's broader adoption of neoliberal governance, in which the state increasingly sought to maximise fiscal returns on immigration policy.

2012: the rise of income as a gatekeeper

The parent resident visa, established in 2012, closed the sibling and adult child categories and restructured the parent stream into a two-tier system requiring an expression of interest, further limiting sponsorship (Liu and Ran, 2022). This restructuring introduced income and wealth as primary criteria, marking a turning point in assessing familial value and a break from the earlier social-liberal model that prioritised family bonds and settlement outcomes. The 2012 parent resident visa reframed reunification through an economic lens, placing greater weight on financial capacity in determining eligibility.

While the policy still nominally allowed family reunification, emphasising the sponsor's financial capacity significantly narrowed access. Bedford and Liu (2013) highlighted that this move was closely aligned with the skilled migrant model introduced in 2003, reinforcing a cost-benefit rationale that privileged economically self-sufficient households (Liu and Ran, 2022; Merwood, 2006).

2016–22: a dark period of administrative retreat and human consequence

On 11 October 2016, Immigration New Zealand abruptly suspended the parent category, citing fiscal risk and long-term welfare concerns (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, 2019; Woodhouse, 2016). The quota for parent visa approvals dropped from 5,500 to just 2,000 annually, with unallocated spaces quietly redirected to other residence streams. The parent retirement resident visa, with its \$1 million investment requirement, was accessible only to the wealthy. The cap, in turn, determined how many expressions of interest would be selected. Because the system uses a ballot rather than a queue, wait times remain unpredictable, and the number of expressions of interest continues to grow.

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Meanwhile, the parent and grandparent visitor visa allowed visits of up to 18 months over three years, offering no path to residency (Immigration New Zealand, n.d.b, 2024). The fallout was deeply personal. Families spoke of parents dying while waiting or becoming too frail to travel or meet health criteria. Health professionals and families with young children – who relied on grandparents for childcare – shared accounts of returning to their country of origin out of frustration (Fleming, 2023; Bonnett, 2025). In 2019, when the policy briefly reopened before being suspended again due to Covid-19, 85% of expressions of interest were deemed ineligible, primarily because children did not meet the \$104,000 annual income requirement. This exclusionary design further entrenched a model of economic filtering under the guise of fiscal sustainability.

2022–present: reopening without reform

The parent category reopened in October 2022 with a raised annual quota of 2,500. However, key barriers persist. Sponsors must now earn at least 1.5 times the

median wage, with the threshold increasing for each additional parent. Expressions of interest are drawn randomly from a growing pool, and the selection odds hover around 2% (Fleming, 2023). Once selected, applicants have only four months to submit their documentation.

Despite modest improvements in processing, the programme's architecture remains deeply restrictive. As Fleming observed, the process has become a game of chance rather than a predictable, rights-based system. Applicants must navigate stringent financial rules and administrative uncertainty, raising concerns about procedural fairness, equity and institutional accountability.

Overall, New Zealand's experience illustrates a clear drift from socially oriented inclusion to fiscal selectivity. Repeated suspensions and restrictive criteria have turned parent reunification from a social right into a conditional privilege, weakening policy coherence and public trust. To place this trajectory in perspective, the following section turns to Canada, another liberal democracy facing similar demographic and fiscal pressures, but one which has maintained family reunification as a stable, rights-based pillar of its immigration system.

Canada's Parents and Grandparents Program: balancing family reunification and economic priorities

Immigration has long been central to Canada's nation-building. Since the 1970s, multiculturalism has anchored family reunification as a legal principle, elevating it to a durable policy objective rather than an optional stream. This institutionalisation meant that even when governments restructured immigration systems, the right to sponsor parents and grandparents was never treated as expendable. By contrast, in New Zealand, family categories have repeatedly been subordinated to fiscal and demographic concerns, with suspensions signalling that reunification is not guaranteed.

Neoliberal shifts and the reframing of immigration value

In the 1990s, Canadian immigration policy began to reflect global trends towards neoliberalism, emphasising labour

Table 1: Comparative overview of parent reunification policy in New Zealand and Canada

Theme/concept	New Zealand—Parent Resident Visa	Canada—Parents and Grandparents Program
Policy stability	Programme suspensions (2016–2022)	Continuous operation since 1970s
Underlying philosophy	Neoliberal framing – family reunification treated as a conditional privilege, tied to fiscal control.	Rights-based framing – family reunification as enduring principle of multicultural citizenship.
Social outcomes	Reduced migrant retention and intergenerational support; weakened social cohesion.	Enhanced migrant retention and labour participation through unpaid childcare and cultural continuity.
Policy signal	Suspension – family reunification not guaranteed; creates mistrust and policy drift.	Continuity – institutional commitment to family unity; reinforces public trust and cohesion.

market needs and economic contribution. Although the Immigration Act 1976 had initially balanced family and economic objectives, subsequent reforms redefined value primarily financially. Parents and grandparents, excluded from the points-based system, were increasingly portrayed as fiscally costly and lacking economic utility (McLaren and Black, 2005).

Despite these shifts, Canada retained the category for parents and grandparents, adjusting eligibility and sponsorship rules rather than dismantling the programme entirely. This incremental approach contrasts with New Zealand’s suspension of its parent resident visa between 2016 and 2022, which prioritised short-term fiscal prudence over policy stability. The Canadian experience demonstrates that fiscal discipline can be achieved without abandoning the principle of family reunification.

Economic logic within family reunification

By 2006, over 60% of Canadian permanent residents were selected through economic pathways, yet the family class remained intact (Cheatham and Roy, 2024). The 2013 reforms formally embedded an economic rationale, requiring sponsors to absorb healthcare and welfare risks (Chen and Thorpe, 2015). In the latest update, according to the 2025–27 Immigration Levels Plan, released alongside the federal budget’s quota reduction, the government aims to increase the intake of economic immigrants while reducing temporary resident admissions, particularly among international students (Government of Canada, 2025). Although these

adjustments reflect fiscal caution, they do not remove the fundamental right to family reunification.

The Parents and Grandparents Program has experienced temporary freezes to manage application backlogs, most recently in January 2025. During these freezes, new applications are not accepted, but those already in the system continue to be processed. This approach contrasts with New Zealand’s, where the parent category has been fully suspended at times, halting all processing and new intakes. Beginning in July 2025, Canada will resume issuing invitations to apply under the Parents and Grandparents Program, reaffirming its enduring commitment to family reunification as a core immigration principle. For New Zealand, this highlights a critical policy option. Economic sustainability can be addressed within family programmes through calibrated design, rather than wholesale exclusion. In other words, cost control and family unity are not mutually exclusive.

Social capital and intergenerational contributions

Canadian research shows that older migrants make vital contributions that go far beyond economic measures. Parents and grandparents strengthen family life through childcare, cultural continuity and civic engagement (Liu and Ran, 2022). More than 80% of sponsored parents and grandparents provide regular childcare or household support, which reduces pressure on working-age migrants and makes full participation in the labour force possible (Côté-Boucher and

Braedley, 2024). This unpaid care, often provided by grandmothers, helps sustain dual-income households and supports long-term settlement (Atique et al., 2025). These contributions improve wellbeing and increase the likelihood that skilled migrants remain in Canada, a lesson that is highly relevant for New Zealand’s efforts to attract and retain talent.

Data further highlights the cultural and social benefits of intergenerational presence. In the context of the Parents and Grandparents Program, the primary motivation for family reunification in Canada is the desire for more frequent contact with sponsors and family members. A significant portion of surveyed migrants under the programme (91%) reported providing emotional support to their sponsor or other family members often or sometimes (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2024). Between 2006 and 2011, Canada saw a notable increase in non-English language communities, including Tagalog, Mandarin and Arabic (Statistics Canada, 2018). Recent reports have emphasised the role of family reunification in knowledge transfer of cultural traditions and the maintenance of languages other than English and French, further enriching Canada’s multicultural fabric (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2024). Grandparents often play a central role in language retention, supporting culturally specific childcare that strengthens multicultural societies, while also juggling care responsibilities across borders, a process described as ‘care circulation’ (Atique et al., 2025). As a bicultural and increasingly multicultural society, New Zealand can benefit from similar outcomes if its policy settings support extended family integration.

While economic migration continues to dominate Canadian immigration planning, family reunification remains a publicly supported objective. In 2023, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada reaffirmed this commitment as part of its post-pandemic strategy (Government of Canada, 2023a). Even in periods of high demand and administrative strain, the programme has remained operational, with adjustments to processing times and intake caps. This contrasts with

New Zealand's more reactive approach, where programme suspension signals uncertainty and diminished public trust. Canada's experience reinforces the importance of institutional commitment and explicit policy signalling in maintaining the credibility of family migration categories.

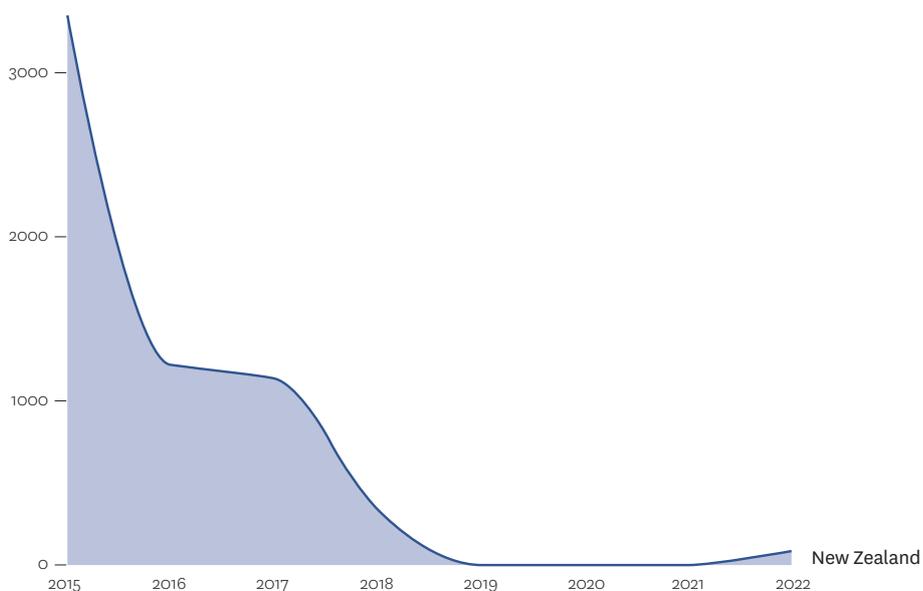
Discussion

A comparison of family reunification outcomes in Canada and New Zealand reveals several notable differences. Canada's sponsorship requirements for parents and grandparents are generally more attainable, with a lower financial threshold despite higher average incomes. In contrast, New Zealand's parent resident visa programme experienced a six-year suspension from 2015 to 2022 (Liu and Ran, 2022), significantly disrupting reunification opportunities. This prolonged halt left thousands of families separated, creating uncertainty, distress and, according to Bonnett (2022), a loss of confidence in the immigration system. Some affected migrants returned to their home countries or relocated elsewhere for more favourable conditions.

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the trends in final admissions for the two countries' respective parent visa programmes between 2014 and 2022. The data is drawn from Canada's immigration intake report and New Zealand's 'resident decisions by financial year' statistics. The figures exclude application targets (demand) and total applications received, as New Zealand typically sets a much lower intake target than Canada. To account for differences in population size, the analysis focuses on changes in annual admission trends rather than the total number of individuals. This approach allows for a clearer assessment of how each country's policy direction towards parent reunification has evolved over time.

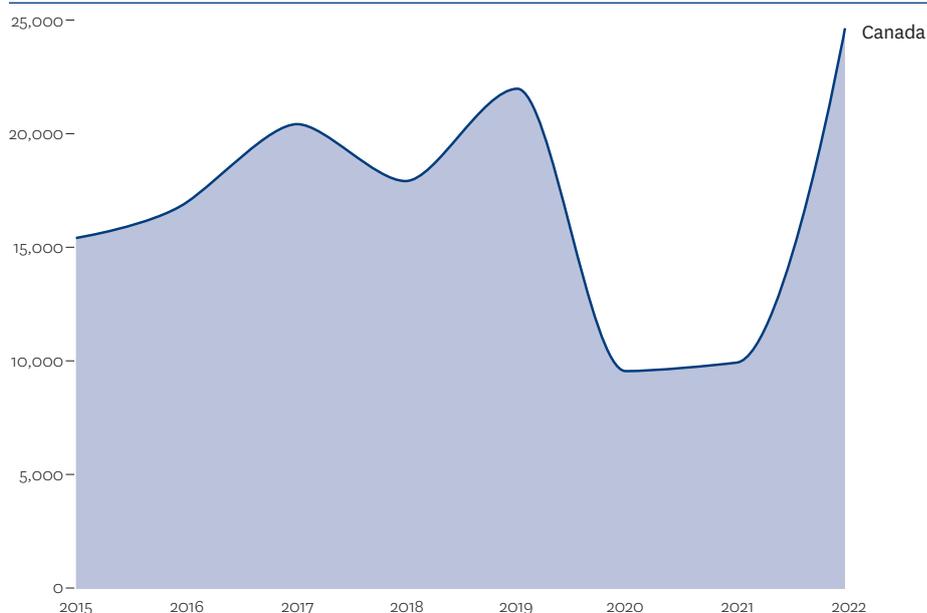
While Canada's Parents and Grandparents Program shows a generally steady upward trajectory, New Zealand's admissions declined sharply after 2016, corresponding with the programme's closure. In New Zealand, restrictions were partly intended to limit the arrival of older parents of skilled migrants and to reduce future pressures on the healthcare, welfare and superannuation systems (Ran and Liu,

Figure 1: Final admissions for New Zealand's parent resident visa



Source: Immigration New Zealand, 2024

Figure 2: Final admissions for Canada's Parents and Grandparents Visa Program (excluding Quebec)



Source: Government of Canada, 2023b

2020). Canada's admission numbers dipped between 2019 and 2021, mainly due to pandemic-related delays, as the 2020 intake was postponed and processed in early 2021 (Government of Canada, 2023b). Nonetheless, the overall stability of Canada's programme contrasts sharply with New Zealand's interruptions. Canada's broader eligibility criteria, which include extended family members, further strengthen migrant support networks and assist integration.

Canada's approach has yielded more stable and inclusive outcomes for family reunification. By maintaining steady programme operation and accommodating a broader definition of eligible family,

Canada has supported stronger family bonds, enhanced social networks, and eased settlement for newcomers. The contrast with New Zealand highlights the importance of policy design in fostering migrant wellbeing and community cohesion. The following section examines how lessons from Canada's experience might inform future developments in New Zealand's parent reunification policies.

Towards a more inclusive and stable family reunification model

There are three key lessons to be drawn from Canada's approach to family reunification. Each offers valuable insights

for New Zealand's immigration policy, particularly in recognising the multifaceted contributions of sponsored parents and grandparents. Canadian scholarship has challenged the narrow economic framing of immigration, highlighting instead the social, cultural and caregiving roles of older migrants. In response, Canadian policymakers have integrated these perspectives into programme evaluations and legislative frameworks, affirming family reunification as a legal right and extending eligibility to grandparents. These reforms not only enhance migrant wellbeing and integration but also counter public misconceptions about economic burden. New Zealand can draw on these lessons to develop a more holistic, rights-based model that reflects the lived realities of migrant families and strengthens the legitimacy of its immigration system.

Lesson 1: Integrate social contributions into impact assessments

A central lesson from Canada's approach is the importance of recognising the full spectrum of parental contributions – not only financial but also social, cultural and caregiving. Canadian scholarship has pushed back against the narrow economic lens imposed by neoliberal immigration regimes. As Bhuyan, Yoon and Valmadrid (2020) argued, policies that ignore the social value of older migrants ultimately undermine both migrant wellbeing and long-term integration outcomes.

Canadian policymakers have responded to this critique. A 2015 government evaluation of the family reunification programme found that parents' presence increased household income, directly or indirectly, by supporting childcare, enabling sponsors to work more or pursue education. These findings provide a strong rationale for including social and intergenerational benefits in New Zealand's social impact assessments. Prior research, including government data, has shown similar benefits in the New Zealand context, yet policy settings have failed to reflect this.

To move forward, New Zealand should develop a more holistic assessment model which values informal caregiving, emotional support and cultural stability as legitimate contributions. This shift would challenge public misconceptions that sponsored

... lessons from Canada suggest a path forward for New Zealand's parent resident visa, one which centres on family wellbeing, institutional stability and long-term integration.

parents are economically burdensome, a narrative that Sholola (2022) recommended countering through transparent public communication campaigns.

Lesson 2: Establish legal foundations for family reunification

A second key lesson is the importance of embedding family reunification rights in law. In Canada, the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act 2001 enshrines family reunification as a core objective. In contrast, New Zealand's immigration legislation offers no such protection; family reunification appears only in policy documents, leaving it vulnerable to ministerial discretion and policy reversals.

Barnes (2018) noted that without legal foundations, family reunification policies are subject to inconsistent implementation and arbitrary changes. For New Zealand, codifying family reunification within the Immigration Act would provide greater policy stability, protect applicants' rights, and strengthen the legitimacy of the family stream. This legislative reform should be accompanied by clear eligibility criteria and agency responsibilities, and appeals processes that prioritise procedural fairness. As van Hulst and Yanow (2014) argued, shaping the discourse around social policies helps define the public's perception of legitimacy and feasibility. In tandem with stronger legal frameworks, a public consultation process would help align family reunification reforms with community values.

Lesson 3: Extend eligibility to grandparents
Finally, New Zealand should consider extending eligibility under the parent resident visa to include grandparents, as Canada has done. Such a change would reflect a deeper understanding of intergenerational care and family dynamics. Under the current framework, grandparents can only qualify for residence if their grandchild's parents passed away before the child turned 18. This restriction excludes most grandparents, even though they play a vital role in many migrant households. It is worth noting that the parent and grandparent visitor visa – and the more recent parent boost visa – already allow sponsorship by a grandchild. This inconsistency raises an important question: if grandchildren can sponsor grandparents for temporary entry, why not for residence?

Extending eligibility to grandparents would also enhance New Zealand's attractiveness as a destination for skilled migrants, many of whom factor family considerations into their long-term settlement decisions. As Yeoh, Graham and Boyle (2002) argued, migration policy is best understood through families' lived experiences and everyday choices as well as national statistics or economic indicators. Incorporating grandparents would acknowledge this complexity and affirm New Zealand's commitment to an inclusive, humane immigration policy.

In sum, the comparison of Canada's and New Zealand's approaches to family reunification policies provides important insights. These practical policy lessons are also well supported by the research scholarship. For example, that Canada's inclusive reunification policies strengthen family bonds and social networks, thereby easing settlement, is consistent with previous research that emphasises family cohesion as a buffer against stress and a contributor to mental health (Allen et al., 2024; Andronic and Constantin, 2024). Our recommendation that programme eligibility be extended to grandparents, acknowledging their caregiving and cultural roles, aligns with Opanubi and Ade-Oshifogun (2025) and Xiao et al.'s (2024) scholarship on intergenerational care and cultural continuity.

We also join critiques of narrow economic framings in immigration policy (Bhuyan Yoon and Valmadrid, 2020) in the

call for New Zealand to integrate social contributions into impact assessments, which underscores the scholarly literature's broader view of family as both a resource provider and cultural anchor, integral to migrant wellbeing and stability.

Conclusion

These lessons from Canada suggest a path forward for New Zealand's parent

resident visa, one which centres on family wellbeing, institutional stability and long-term integration. Reforming family reunification policy is not simply a technical task but a moral and governance challenge. While the 2025 parent boost visa signals a willingness to accommodate family visits, its temporary nature underscores the need for more profound structural change. By integrating non-

economic contributions, legislating core family rights, and expanding eligibility to reflect intergenerational realities, New Zealand can build a more equitable and durable immigration system that reflects the values it claims to uphold.

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