



Report Summary:
**IMPROVING
DIVERSITY IN THE
CONSTRUCTION
TRADES IN NL**
A FOCUS ON
RECRUITMENT & RETENTION
OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

Lynn Gambin

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Department of Economics,
Memorial University of Newfoundland

In collaboration with
Stanley Oliver
Trades NL Indigenous Skilled Trades Office

May 2025

To receive a copy of the full report, please email: lynn.gambin@mun.ca

SUMMARY:

IMPROVING DIVERSITY IN THE CONSTRUCTION TRADES IN NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We acknowledge that the lands on which Memorial University's campuses are situated are in the traditional territories of diverse Indigenous groups, and we acknowledge with respect the diverse histories and cultures of the Beothuk, Mi'kmaq, Innu, and Inuit of this province.

Before this study was commissioned and granted funding, the team at the Trades NL Indigenous Skilled Trades Office (ISTO) were working on improving recruitment and retention of Indigenous people in the building trades in Newfoundland and Labrador. This research project was their idea and was overseen by Stanley Oliver, ISTO. Colleagues at the Harris Centre were instrumental in connecting me, as principal investigator, with ISTO and provided essential guidance about the research funding opportunity. At the funding proposal stage, the ISTO was vital in shaping the study and ultimately in it becoming a reality. This project has been funded through the generosity of the West White Rose Employment Diversity Research Fund, administered by the Memorial University Harris Centre.

During the project, two students in the Department of Economics have provided support in carrying out literature searches and document screening. Many thanks to Frederick Kwaku Amoakohene (graduate student) and Juairya Taskin Abdullah (undergraduate student) for all their help in diving into the existing literature.

In carrying out fieldwork, the relationship with the ISTO has been invaluable. The ISTO team has welcomed me into their office and they have openly shared their understanding and experiences of the issues under investigation in this project. On a practical level, the ISTO has facilitated the meetings with study participants and, in the case of in person interviews, provided a space and privacy needed for fruitful conversations to occur. Without the ISTO welcoming me into their environment, none of this would have happened.

I cannot adequately express my gratitude to the people who participated in interviews in this study. Thank you for your time and for sharing your experiences. This includes the team in the ISTO who helped guide me through the landscape of engagement with members of Indigenous communities and the construction industry in NL.



Lynn Gambin, Principal Investigator

BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATION

This study was initiated by the Trades NL Indigenous Skilled Trades Office (ISTO) in the summer of 2023. The ISTO has the mission “... to create new employment opportunities for Indigenous apprentices and journeypersons, increase apprenticeship completion rates, and foster greater commitment and participation of employers and unions to create employment opportunities, overcome barriers and enhance supports in the workplace” (Trades NL, n.d.). In their letter of support for this project, the Trades NL ISTO outlined its commitment to “develop and fully implement the proposed research project, as integrating different perspectives will be key to understanding this complex issue.” (Trades NL ISTO, 2023). From the perspective of the ISTO, this study has potential positive impacts on the development of diversity and inclusion corporate policy on Indigenous retention. Given the potential impact of this research on their own mission, the ISTO has played a key role in this research study, acting as an external partner and key knowledge user and provider. Stanley Oliver and the ISTO team have participated, contributed and informed the study with specific knowledge and experience associated with the skilled trades construction industry as it relates to Indigenous retention challenges.

Industry experts and other commentators highlight that there are significant opportunities for Indigenous people in the construction sector, including in skilled trade occupations. Given that the Indigenous population in Canada continues to grow and is, on average, relatively young, this group of potential workers may represent additional supply to meet some of the demands for labour and skills in the construction sector. There are numerous factors driving demand for workers in construction that are expected to continue into the future. These include the retirement of older workers, the need for (and government support of) building and renovation of housing to meet high demand in the country, including in NL. In this province, in particular, there are potential future resource developments, including mining, wind energy, renewables, and offshore oil and gas. These developments will continue to require significant numbers of construction workers with a variety of skills and trades. Industrial development is expected to increase in Labrador especially, over the coming years and given the proximity of such developments to many Indigenous communities, members of these communities could reasonably be anticipated to be ideally placed to obtain resulting employment opportunities.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The overall purpose of the study is to **understand and improve the recruitment, retention, and long-term success of Indigenous people in the construction trades in Newfoundland and Labrador (NL)**, with a focus on identifying barriers and proposing actionable recommendations. It aimed to inform policy and practice to improve Indigenous participation and outcomes.

This study aims to understand issues related to members of Indigenous communities in NL regarding: 1) access to training and employment in skilled trades occupations in construction; 2) successful completion of apprenticeship and other routes in the sector; and, 3) career prospects and longer-term outcomes (e.g. progression, skill development, employment, earnings).

The **intended outcomes** of this study include the following:

- 1) To gain a better understanding of the representation of Indigenous people in construction and skilled trades;

- 2) To identify barriers facing Indigenous persons, from entering and completing apprenticeships and from obtaining valuable and secure employment in the construction sector (as well as longer term outcomes);
- 3) To gain understanding of barriers and solutions to improving representation in construction and skilled trades from the perspectives of:
 - Underrepresented individuals who have experience of construction and skilled trades and those who are considering this as a possible pathway;
 - The wider Indigenous community;
 - Employers;
 - Labour organizations;
 - Education and training providers;
- 4) To share research findings with interested parties and to have the findings support requests for further policy and funding developments; and,
- 5) To generate policy and practice recommendations.

METHODOLOGY

This study has involved two main elements:

- **Literature Review:** Analysis of national and international research on Indigenous labour market participation, especially in construction. Recent Canadian data was also analyzed to provide an overview of demographic characteristics and a summary of educational and employment outcomes, highlighting recent trends and disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada and NL.
- **Qualitative Interviews:** Conducted with Indigenous workers, employers, unions, and stakeholders to gather lived experiences and insights. The qualitative data provided in the interviews was thoroughly reviewed using thematic and narrative analysis.

KEY FINDINGS

The findings from the literature review and the interviews undertaken in this study reveal a number of common challenges that are pertinent to recruitment and retention of Indigenous workers and apprentices in construction.

Barriers to participation:

- **Financial constraints:** High costs of training, tools, travel, and lost income during training periods.
- **Cultural and social factors:** Racism, discrimination, lack of cultural understanding in workplaces, isolation in workplace settings, and intergenerational trauma.
- **Information gaps:** Limited awareness of training pathways, job opportunities, worker rights, and workplace expectations.
- **Institutional challenges:** Inconsistent enforcement of Indigenous hiring policies, lack of or limited local training options, and inadequate support services.
- **Workplace conditions:** Seasonal work, remote job sites, and lack of mentorship.
- **Personal circumstances:** Mental health, family responsibilities, and criminal records.

Opportunities:

- Indigenous people are well-positioned to meet growing labour demands in construction, especially in Labrador.
- Employers benefit from Indigenous hiring through improved competitiveness and fulfillment of procurement requirements.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings in this study, a number of recommendations are presented which may be considered for further exploration and development by Trades NL ISTO and others.

For Employers and Unions:

- Provide **cultural competency training**.
- Hire Indigenous workers in **cohorts** to reduce isolation.
- Offer **local or mobile training** options.
- Establish **Indigenous mentorship** programs.
- Build **long-term relationships** with Indigenous communities.

For Governments and Institutions:

- Increase **funding** for wraparound supports (e.g., mental health, childcare).
- Improve **data collection** and monitoring of Indigenous employment outcomes.
- Strengthen and enforce **Impact and Benefit Agreements (IBAs)**.
- Enhance **vocational education** in schools and access to training in Indigenous communities.
- Provide **longer-term and more equitable funding** for Indigenous support organizations.

WHY IT MATTERS / CONCLUSION

Improving Indigenous participation in the construction trades is essential for economic development, reconciliation, and social equity in NL. This study has aimed to identify potential collaborative action among employers, governments, unions, and Indigenous communities to create a more inclusive and sustainable construction workforce.

Why this research matters:

- **For Indigenous Communities:** Better employment outcomes, economic independence, and community development.
- **For Employers:** Access to a younger, growing labour force and fulfillment of social and procurement obligations.
- **For NL's Economy:** A more inclusive, skilled workforce to support upcoming industrial and infrastructure projects.