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CONSTRAINTS ON SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE FACING NEWCOMER COMMUNITIES IN HALIFAX

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the social infrastructure supporting Halifax's immigrant communities that is fostered by immigrant service organizations (ISOs) and immigrant social networks (ISNs). It explores 1) how newcomers engage with community spaces, 2) the challenges faced by organizations in developing and maintaining social infrastructure, and 3) the capacity of existing community gathering spaces for newcomers in Halifax.

Our research findings show that newcomers face barriers in accessing key social supports and services. ISOs must navigate the complex challenges of finding appropriate spaces, maintaining capacity, and securing consistent funding. We make recommendations pertaining to infrastructure planning for Halifax Regional Municipality to 1) create a centralized inventory of community gathering spaces, 2) dedicate resources to formally integrate the provision of social infrastructure such as libraries with immigration planning, and 3) coordinate community space planning with transit service planning to enhance inclusion and accessibility.

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INTRODUCTION

Due to low birth rates and an aging population, Canada relies heavily on immigration to address labour shortages and sustain population growth.[1] While federal and provincial governments shape immigration and settlement policies, municipalities play a crucial role in integrating immigrants into Canadian society. Upon arrival, immigrants need immediate access to physical infrastructure (e.g., transportation), social services (e.g., language training, recreational facilities), and other city resources. However, municipalities often lack a full understanding of immigrants' lived experiences – such as cultural preferences for housing, public safety, and transportation – and frequently struggle with limited financial resources to meet increasing demands.

Canada's largest cities have traditionally served as the primary gateways for newcomers, but mid-sized cities (those with populations between 250,000 and 1 million)[2] are increasingly attracting immigrants. Halifax, for example, is one of the fastest-growing urban centres in the country, with a population growth rate of between 4.0% and 4.5% annually. A significant portion of this growth is driven by international migration. Currently, 89% of Nova Scotia's immigrants reside in the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM), highlighting its importance to the province's growth.[3]

Growing the economy and creating jobs has been the focus of debate over immigration in Canada. However, the role of municipalities in responding to immigration growth pressures from the perspective of infrastructure and growth planning has not been central to this debate. Many small and mid-sized cities, which haven't seen such large numbers of migrants in over four decades, now face the challenge of incorporating newcomers' needs into municipal planning and decision-making.[4] The sharp increase in the rate of migrant intake necessitates expanding immigration programs and services to attract and retain newcomers – services that are already costly and difficult to maintain.[5] Halifax exemplifies the challenges faced by growing mid-sized Canadian cities – geographically dispersed services, high housing demand, and rising immigration – but with fewer resources and less organizational capacity than larger cities.[6]

[1] Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, "Notice—Supplementary Information."
[2] UN Habitat, "World Cities Report 2022."
[3] Halifax Regional Municipality, "Immigration Strategy 2022–2026."
[4] Preston et al., "Municipal Role in Immigration."
[5] Good, "Municipal Immigration Policymaking in Canadian Cities."
[6] Pham, Biggar, and Pottie-Sherman, "Revisiting Small and Mid-sized Cities in Canada."

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

The Atlantic provinces, including Nova Scotia, have experienced decades of stagnant population growth. While the current trend is positive, it is crucial to track retention rates to understand the sustainability of this growth. Immigrant retention rates, which measure the percentage of immigrant tax filers who remain in the area where they originally intended to live, are a key indicator of successful newcomer integration. Although Nova Scotia has improved its retention rate to 73.4%, it still trails other provinces like Ontario, British Columbia, Quebec, and Alberta.[7] Two of the major challenges affecting immigrant retention in Nova Scotia are employment barriers and the lack of strong social networks.[8]

International newcomers have long experienced exclusion from Atlantic Canada's labour market due to racial and linguistic discrimination, devalued professional credentials, and social barriers to integration. As a result, highly skilled and educated workers often leave for other cities.[9] Halifax has struggled to welcome international immigrants who are non-native English speakers due to a lack of supportive networks or access to culturally appropriate services.[10] These trends persist even as the province has experienced sudden and rapid population growth.

A recent provincial audit report found that most migrants leave the province due to insufficient access to settlement services.[11] The report urged Halifax and other municipalities to take immediate action to identify and provide the necessary services to support immigrant settlement and address growing demands for infrastructure in healthcare, education, and employment. Decision-makers lack a comprehensive understanding of general settlement needs, let alone those specific to ethno-cultural groups, as no thorough study or analysis on this issue has yet been conducted.

Social infrastructure, which refers to physical spaces like parks, community centres, and libraries, as well as supporting resources that foster connection and build social well-being, forms the backbone of local democracy, connecting people from diverse backgrounds to place.[12] Smaller and mid-sized cities face additional challenges as their built structures, amenities, and accessible transit options are often limited, hindering access to social infrastructure.[13] Third spaces, the informal social spaces that extend beyond homes and workplaces (e.g., cafés, public spaces, places of worship, pubs) are meant for conversation and socializing.[14] Such spaces are critical to both immigrant integration and democracy,

[7] Statistics Canada, "Provincial Variation in the Retention Rates of Immigrants, 2022."
[8] Thomas, "Should I Stay or Should I Go Home?"; Grant and Kronstal, "Old Boys Down Home."
[9] Ramos and Yoshida, "Why Do Recent Immigrants Leave Atlantic Canada?"
[10] Akbari, "Immigration in Nova Scotia."
[11] Adair, "Immigration and Population Growth."
[12] Klinenberg, *Palaces for the People*.
[13] Zhuang and Lok, "Exploring the Wellbeing of Migrants in Third Places."
[14] Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place*.

as they serve as vital gathering points to build networks and participate in civic life within a broader system of formal social infrastructure. Their importance, however, is often overlooked given the prevailing emphasis in Canada on the economic integration of immigrants and their labour market contributions.

Purpose

This paper draws on research investigating Halifax's social infrastructure system – a network of diverse spaces and activities, including cultural and community facilities, that underpin the social life of newcomers. The main objective of the research was to understand the role social infrastructure plays in improving immigrant retention and quality of life in Halifax. It explores how newcomers use and interact with community spaces, the challenges organizations face in developing and sustaining social infrastructure, and the capacity of existing community gathering spaces to meet the growing demand for services and space.

THE LANDSCAPE OF SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE FOR HALIFAX NEWCOMERS

Halifax's social infrastructure includes formalized services, third spaces, and informal networks that support newcomer integration. In terms of government oversight, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) and Nova Scotia's provincial Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration manage international immigration policy, while the Diversity and Inclusion Office in Halifax oversees local immigration planning. The Halifax Local Immigration Partnership (LIP), which is funded by the IRCC and facilitated by the HRM, plays a more direct role in connecting newcomers with social infrastructure, working closely with community organizations in Halifax.

Formalized services include a wide range of immigrant service organizations (ISOs) that offer structured support to facilitate newcomer integration, such as legal, educational, social, and employment services.[15] Key ISOs such as the Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia (ISANS) and the YMCA Centre for Immigrant Programs provide language classes, employment support, and community programs. The Halifax LIP, while not directly offering services, collaborates with ISOs to coordinate service delivery and facilitate events aimed at fostering connections between newcomers and the broader community.

Third spaces include Halifax libraries, HRM community centres, event halls, sports facilities, and places of worship. Immigrant social networks (ISNs) act as informal support systems that provide emotional support and bridge information gaps within communities.[16] ISNs in Halifax include many ethno-cultural groups, community choirs, and clubs, which frequently rely on third spaces as venues for their gatherings and events. Formal ISOs also use third spaces to extend their reach and engage more members of the community – for example, ISANS often collaborates with libraries to offer accessible programming. Together, ISOs and ISNs enhance the network of social resources in Halifax by maximizing the inclusive and welcoming potential of third spaces.

However, the landscape of social infrastructure in the city is constrained by the limited number of spaces for community gathering. In addition, ISOs and ISNs have trouble finding information about what spaces exist and at what cost, which locations newcomers can access, and whether they are culturally appropriate.

[15] Gibb, Hamdon, and Jamal, "Re/claiming Agency"; Joassart-Marcelli, "Ethnic Concentration and Nonprofit Organizations."
[16] Robinson, Somerville, and Walsworth, "Building, Negotiating and Sustaining Transnational Social Networks."

METHODOLOGY

Our approach to research consisted of the following steps:

1) To understand how ISOs and ISNs operate, we observed events oriented toward the newcomer community to gain first-hand experience.

2) To explore the provision of newcomer services and networks throughout Halifax, we conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with representatives of ISOs and ISNs, including grassroots and non-profit organizations focused on immigrant affairs as well as ethno-cultural groups based in Halifax.

3) To show where newcomer services and meetings take place in Halifax, we created a map of community gathering spaces in a part of the region with a large percentage of immigrants.

KEY FINDINGS

Our findings are summarized by theme below, followed by recommendations for the regional municipality to address the gaps and deficiencies in its social infrastructure system.

Promoting libraries as third spaces for newcomers

The literature on immigrant settlement and integration highlights the crucial role that third spaces and social infrastructure play in welcoming newcomers.[17] Facilities like recreation centres, parks, and libraries provide the essential connective tissue needed to link newcomers with services and to enable their social, economic, and political participation in Canadian society. Our findings reveal that libraries function as both social infrastructure and third spaces, playing a critical role in educating and socializing for newcomers in Halifax. This aligns with existing research showing that libraries are taking on an increasingly large role in delivering newcomer programs.[18]

Libraries provide critical opportunities for gathering, seeking, and sharing information.[19] For newcomers, they bridge the gap between informal community gathering spaces and formalized social infrastructure, acting as accessible, multifunctional spaces that accommodate both ISNs and ISOs. Participants consistently identified libraries as a vital resource and third space for newcomers, particularly valued for their community spaces and accessibility. They are often the preferred venues for ISOs and ISNs because of their reputation as safe, welcoming, and neutral environments. As one respondent stated, "Most newcomers when they arrive in Halifax at some point early on are taken or directed to the library. They know it is one of their service providers."[20]

The widespread use of libraries among newcomers stems from their commitment to accessibility and providing free services. Entry into the library requires no fees or identification. While users do need a library card for full access to the collections and programs, in situations where obtaining one has proved difficult, such as for refugees who lack the necessary identification, the library has revised its registration policy, reducing the requirement from two forms of identification to just one and expanding the criteria for acceptable forms of identification.

[17] Hewitt and Cook, "Bridging Infrastructure."
[18] Wang, Huang, Li, and Chen, "Towards Better Information Services"; Canadian Urban Institute, "Overdue: The Case for Canada's Public Libraries."
[19] Kranich, "Libraries and Democracy Revisited."
[20] Virtual communication with representative from Halifax Newcomer Choir, October 30, 2023.

Fourteen branches in the municipality provide affordable meeting spaces, and the Halifax Central Library offers an auditorium for larger-scale events and services. Following the opening of the Halifax Central location, total annual system visits increased by 22%.[21] HRM recognized this impact by increasing municipal funding by approximately 3.8% annually from 2015 to 2022, which has enabled renovations in several branches to improve accessibility and services. By collaborating with ISOs and ISNs, libraries extend their function as social infrastructure and maximize their accessibility, providing newcomers with spaces that serve as points of cultural orientation and sites of meaningful interaction with the broader community. Halifax Public Libraries have emerged as an inclusive and widely accessible resource for the community that newcomers depend on.

> *"Most newcomers when they arrive in Halifax at some point early on are taken or directed to the library.* ***They know it is one of their service providers."***

[21] Halifax Public Libraries, "Annual Report 2014–2015."

CONSTRAINTS ON COMMUNITY GATHERING SPACES

While libraries act as third spaces and foster support for newcomers, many other spaces have constrained accessibility and effectiveness. Financial barriers, cultural appropriateness, location, and the availability of suitable spaces significantly impact participation in newcomer programs and events offered by ISOs and ISNs in the Halifax region.

Financial constraints

Public spaces like the Halifax Waterfront are technically free to access, but our findings suggest that the cost of the amenities and upscale shops in the area can discourage newcomers from visiting. This financial barrier can limit both an organization's ability to host events and the willingness of newcomers to attend. Organizers reported that services must be free to ensure inclusivity, stressing that even a small fee can deter participation.

As non-profit organizations, ISOs are heavily dependent on grants in order to provide services without financial barriers to their clients. For example, the Halifax Immigration Partnership (HIP) undergoes an application process every five years to maintain its status as an LIP and secure funding from the IRCC. While provincial and federal agencies are their primary sources of funding, ISOs must also seek support from local institutions and donors to meet their financial needs.

Our findings suggest that a constant pursuit of funding creates a competitive environment among immigrant service providers, leading to inefficient resource distribution and duplication of services, which can confuse newcomers seeking support. Additionally, the focus on securing funds often overshadows the goal of delivering effective and comprehensive services. ISOs frequently find themselves caught in a cycle of seeking funding, which diverts attention from their core missions. This challenge is further compounded by the fact that the funding many ISOs receive does not adequately reflect the growing number of immigrants in need of their services. As one respondent put it, "So much of our time is spent applying for money. Rather than using our energy to help people, we're applying for grants."[22]

Demand for language classes and other newcomer services already exceeds the capacity of ISOs, and the need is growing. Waitlists for language programs highlight this strain on resources; getting accustomed to a new language takes time. Respondents commented on the need for organizations to balance serving newcomers at different stages of integration: "Our clients were not only newcomers

[22] Virtual communication with representative from Halifax Newcomer Choir, October 30, 2023.

who have just arrived a year ago. We served people throughout their whole journey. We have many clients that are eligible for our services that we won't say no to."[23]

Cultural appropriateness

Another factor is that some gathering spaces are not appropriate to the cultural context of many newcomers. One LIP encountered this challenge when, having organized a World Refugee Celebration at City Hall, the hosts found that the venue's formality intimidated potential attendees. Similarly, the turnout for a "Get to Know Your Municipality" event at a four-star hotel was low. Respondents found that the upscale setting in such "very formal spaces" did not create a welcoming atmosphere.[24]

Places of worship, while well designed as gathering spaces, can also convey conflicting messages to immigrant groups. The success of groups like the Halifax Newcomer Choir is largely due to their awareness of the diverse cultural backgrounds of the region's immigrants. Organizers continually emphasize to participants that the program is open to all and fully secular, even though one of the meeting spaces is in a church. To accommodate different preferences, the choir also arranged for a library meeting room as a secular option.

> *"Our findings suggest that **a constant pursuit of funding creates a competitive environment among immigrant service providers**, leading to inefficient resource distribution and duplication of services, which can confuse newcomers seeking support."*

[23] Virtual communication with representative from ISANS, November 2, 2023.
[24] Personal communication with representative from Halifax Immigration Partnership, October 26, 2023.

ACCESSIBILITY

Proximity of services to people's homes is a key aspect of accessibility. The location of services and events can be a barrier, especially for those living far from the city centre or in neighbourhoods with limited public transportation. Immigrant women, particularly mothers, face additional challenges in accessing programs due to limited time and mobility caused by caregiving responsibilities. To address this issue, organizations like the YMCA have made efforts to bring their programs closer to newcomer neighbourhoods.

The HRM Affordable Access Program aims to alleviate this challenge by allowing 2,000 qualified residents to purchase a monthly adult transit pass for 50% of the regular price for a year. The Welcomed in Halifax Program, which operates through ISANS, also provides to refugees a year of free HRM transit, as well as free access to recreation facilities.[25]

Availability and discoverability

Newcomer engagement with social infrastructure depends heavily on the availability of community spaces. Respondents highlighted difficulties in securing locations to host programs and events, noting increased demand for gathering spaces that meet the needs of newcomers.

Even finding relevant information about available spaces in the city can be a challenge. As a respondent from an Asian cultural market reported, "If you search online for rental spaces, it usually shows getting entire spaces in restaurants or hotel venues" – spaces that, for cost and other reasons discussed above, are not useful for most newcomer services.[26]

A Filipino Association of Nova Scotia representative noted that while they rely on community centres, they frequently learn about alternative or informal venues through word of mouth or by attending other ISN events. Gatherings may take place in apartment common rooms, parks and outdoor spaces, or local cafés and restaurants.

An inventory of social infrastructure

To further explore the findings from the interviews conducted with ISOs and ISNs and address policy and service gaps, we conducted a space inventory analysis of municipal points of interest in the Bedford Basin West area of Halifax. The interactive Community Gathering Spaces map based on our findings focuses on this area, where 27.9% of all newcomers to the municipality settle.[27]

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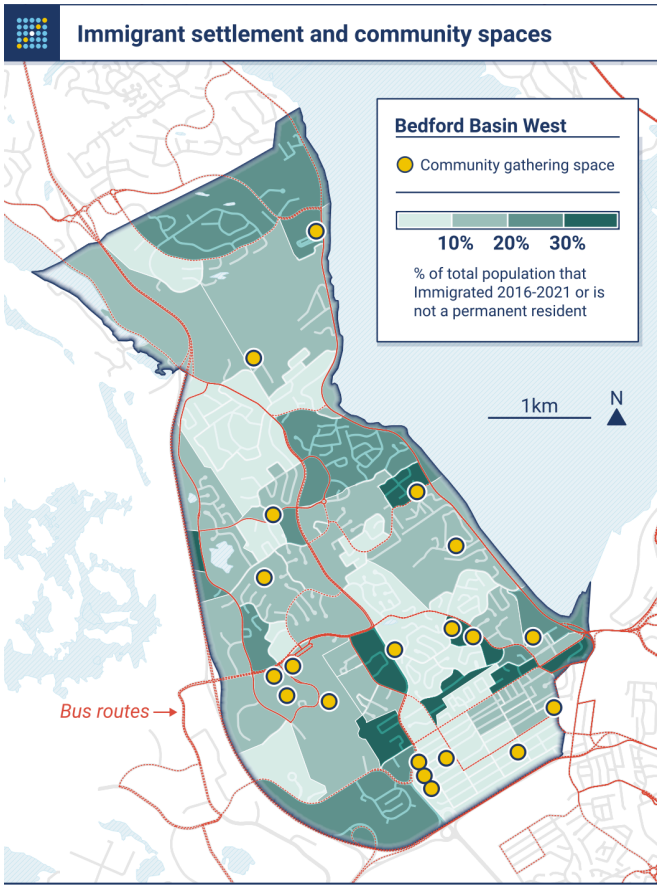
[25] Halifax Regional Municipality Office of Diversity and Inclusion, *Help for Refugees in Halifax*.
[26] Virtual communication with representative from Sakura Market, October 16, 2023.
[27] Statistics Canada, *Census Profile*.

Figure 1: Community gathering spaces and immigrant settlement patterns in the Bedford Basin West area of Halifax



Data Sources: J.A Veloso; Statistics Canada 2021 Census of Population

We found that of 41 potential gathering spaces, only 20 offer rental or service options, with varying costs. The Kenshin Goodman Library offers the most economical option at approximately $17.50 per hour. (The multipurpose rooms at HRM community centres have an even lower community rental rate of $13.05; however, there are no community centres within the study area.) The map highlights the barriers to accessing formalized social infrastructure, emphasizing not only the financial constraints but also the issues that make many spaces inappropriate for newcomer services, which align with the issues identified in our interviews.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our recommendations emphasize the need to analyze the services and infrastructure that immigrants require for social integration. They also highlight municipal data gaps in providing timely and accessible information about available services. Although these recommendations are aimed at HRM, they are also applicable to other mid-sized Canadian municipalities facing similar challenges in incorporating the needs of international migrants into their municipal decision-making processes.

- **Recommendation 1:** HRM, in collaboration with immigrant-serving groups, should allocate resources to create a centralized inventory of available gathering spaces to meet the needs of Halifax's diversifying population. This city-wide resource would be accessible to both organizations and the public. Our Community Gathering Spaces Information Tool provides an example: a web-based platform designed to centralize social infrastructure information for Immigrant-Serving Organizations (ISOs) and Immigrant Social Networks (ISNs). The platform provides essential details such as location, transit connections, available spaces, contact information, and program offerings, helping to bridge gaps in available data on cultural and recreational facilities and community spaces. A key feature of the tool is its crowdsourcing capability: ISOs, ISNs, and other users can add or update potential community gathering spaces, including third spaces like cafés and stores, which can enhance the visibility of these informal gathering spaces.

- **Recommendation 2:** While HRM's Immigration Strategy is a good start in promoting multi-level government and local community collaboration around immigrant services, there is an opportunity to better integrate the provision of social infrastructure directly into the strategy. To this end, HRM should dedicate resources to building or enhancing community gathering spaces such as libraries, and formally integrate them into HRM's Immigration Strategy, in coordination with the library, parks and recreation, and planning departments.

- **Recommendation 3:** The HRM Diversity and Inclusion Office should collaborate with Halifax Transit to coordinate community space planning with transit service planning. Insufficient access to community gathering spaces poses accessibility challenges for newcomers.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter we examined Halifax's social infrastructure and its role in supporting immigrant integration. We explored several challenges that ISOs and ISNs face in securing community spaces, managing service capacity, and obtaining funding. These challenges highlight the core limitations faced by smaller and mid-sized cities, which must address immigrants' diverse service and infrastructure needs with limited resources and capacity. Libraries emerged as essential resources, providing accessible and inclusive third spaces for newcomers.

Increased and sustained investment in social infrastructure is essential for cities like Halifax, which is seen as welcoming to newcomers but has historically struggled with poor retention and poor social cohesion. Determining the appropriate level of preparedness in a context of rapid growth is critical. If municipalities do not take steps to understand the demand for space and services, their policies are more likely to continue to treat all groups as the same, overlooking cultural differences among immigrant communities and worsening retention.

This research expands knowledge on immigration and its impact on communities, offering empirical insights into infrastructure planning practices that support immigrants' ability to work, live, and thrive in growing mid-sized Canadian cities. It lays the groundwork for policy development at the intersection of immigration, municipalities, and the provision of social infrastructure, offering a framework for policy-makers and local groups to consider in their respective jurisdictions.

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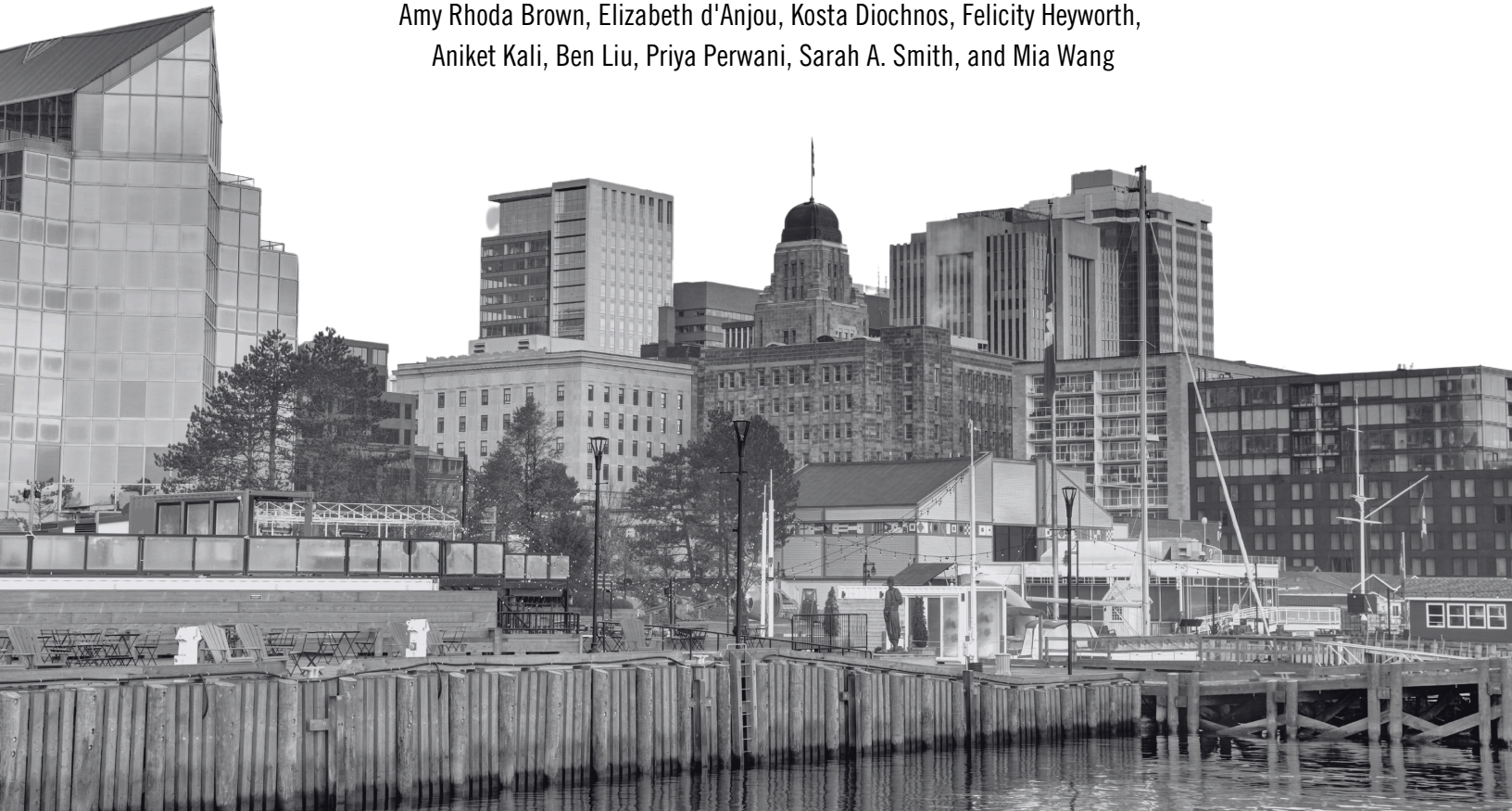
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