

Settlement experiences of Syrian refugees in Alberta, Canada

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Research Questions

- How do Syrian refugees navigate the settlement and integration process?
- Who do they turn to for information and services?
- What are the missing services that refugees need?
- Are there differences in settlement experience based on the type of sponsorship?
- Do the settlement experience vary between a large and a small urban area?

Types of refugee sponsorship

- **The government-assisted refugee program (GAR)** is for those no longer in their countries of origin and who, involuntarily, cannot return to their home country due to a fear of persecution. The Government of Canada or Quebec delivers this support through non-governmental agencies.
- **The privately-sponsored refugee program (PSR)** is where a private sponsor agrees to provide refugees with care, lodging, settlement assistance, and support. Nuanced variations exist, such as groups of individuals or church communities who collectively sponsor a refugee family.
- **The blended Visa Office-referral program (BVOR)** is a relatively new program (as of 2013) that matches refugees identified for resettlement by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee (UNHCR) with private sponsors in Canada.

Edmonton/Lethbridge

- Out of 27,000 refugees, 4,700 were resettled in Alberta.
- Lethbridge
 - Population is just under 100,000
 - a history of refugees - Bhutanese, Nepalese, Eritreans and now Syrians
 - has received 243 Syrian GARs, 24 PSRs and less than 5 BVORs.
- Edmonton
 - Population is about 1,000,000
 - Vietnamese, El Salvadorians, Bosnians, Armenians, Iraqis and now Syrians
 - has received 1,248 Syrian GARs, 607 PSRs and 138 BVORs.



Methods

- Qualitative approach
 - Semi-structured, face-to-face individual interviews, key informant interviews, and focus groups.
 - Interviews were conducted in Arabic by Syrian refugee students;
 - The analysis was done using Nvivo.
 - Refugees, sponsoring families and organizations, settlement agencies
 - In Lethbridge, we interviewed 17 refugees, 4 members of settlement agency and 2 private sponsors.
 - In Edmonton, we interviewed 84 refugees, 7 members of settlement agencies and 3 private sponsors

Background literature

- Private sponsorship works a lot better than the other two.
- Language ability is a key to successful settlement and integration.
- Employment opportunities are severely limited.
- Housing is another serious challenge to refugees.
- In Alberta, large municipalities were more attractive than the smaller ones.

General Findings

- Refugees deeply appreciated Canadians' generosity, love and acceptance.
- They particularly spoke about the acceptance of Muslims in Canada.
- *"We used to think that the hijab would be a problem, but when we got here I found that people here accepted everything and that they believe in religious freedom. They treat us very well. I have not faced any situation in which I felt uncomfortable, except for the language difficulties. For example, wherever I go now, the smile on their face is enough. They offer help even if they do not understand what you need, but they try to help as much as they can...they make you feel safe. I don't know how, in Lebanon, I used to be afraid of just walking in the street, but here I feel that I can go wherever by myself. In Lebanon, I did not dare to leave the house."*
- Their immediate needs including health were very well taken care of.
- Almost all of the refugees remain unemployed after one year.
- Learning English is the most challenging part of resettling.
- PSRs do slightly better than GARs but their experience vary considerably depending upon who their sponsors were.
- Municipal size matters in settlement service delivery.

Findings

- How do Syrian refugees navigate the settlement and integration process?
 - Depending upon who the sponsors were – government, private sponsors or both.
 - for GARs, their main point of contact was settlement workers, but they also benefitted from local faith-based agencies as well as local mosques and churches.
 - For PSRs, it was their sponsors. but they too benefited from other agencies in the city.
 - The role of **faith-based institutions** was a lot more pronounced in Edmonton.
 - Canadian resettlement process especially in the first year **dis-incentivizes** refugees to take up a job.

Findings

- Who do they turn to for information and services?
 - Mostly their sponsors or settlement workers
 - Their families and friends
 - Local mosques and faith-based agencies
 - *“Sometimes the Imam of the mosque gives a speech to raise awareness, and after that people talk about their problems. Sometimes we have engineers with us. They have been here for a long time, so they give advice to people about scams and how to avoid it. We stand together if someone has a problem or sickness and we help each other.”*
 - Sometimes received flawed information from their sponsors
 - Children of refugees learned English faster and could help their parents in translation etc.
 - PSRs had slightly more contacts with the Canadian-born than GARs had.

Findings

- What are the missing services that refugees need?
 - Not enough spots in LINC classes
 - Quality of English classes
 - Vocational training programs
 - *“We are Syrians. Our priority is our job. We like to work. I miss working more than anything else honestly, me and all the guys. I used to work, for example, for seven or eight hours. Now it has been a year [that] I am at home. Regardless of the financial situation, we just want to work. When we work, we help ourselves and at the same time we help the government.”*
 - Long waits in the health systems
 - A few health issues were not a part of health coverage
 - One year is too short for the families to become independent.

Findings

- Are there differences in settlement experience based on the type of sponsorship?
 - There were some noticeable differences.
 - PSRs experiences vary considerably depending upon who their sponsor was.
 - PSRs are chosen relatively more carefully by their sponsors
 - Those who are sponsored by **wealthy church groups**
 - Those who are sponsored by **families providing minimum** required by law
 - Those who are sponsored and then **abandoned** either my mutual consent or the sponsor did not have the means to support.
 - Slightly more educated and have higher expectations about attaining employment and language capability. Hence, slightly higher dissatisfaction.
 - GARs were chosen based on level of their vulnerability in their asylum countries
 - Slightly less educated and has trouble learning English.
 - Had health issues
 - Government assistance inadvertently lessens motivation to find employment
 - BVORs seemed a lot more resilient and satisfied with the services provided in Canada.

Findings

- Do the settlement experience vary between a large and a small urban area?
 - Canadians in both urban centres were generous and provided a significant volume of donations to help out refugees
 - Lethbridge was able to offer services more efficiently in comparison with Edmonton.
 - In Edmonton, some service gaps existed, especially, getting into English classes and attending to the individual needs of refugees. These gaps filled by local denominational and non-denominational organizations.
 - Lethbridge was exceptional in its medical service model, which created a one-stop medical clinic.
 - Refugees wanted to remain in the city where they were resettled (contrary to an earlier study)

Policy recommendations

- Enhance the quality of *Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada* (LINC) classes by making them more appropriate to diverse learning abilities. Connect LINC with other settlement classes or programs.
- Consider skills training models being used elsewhere, such as in Germany, to craft a country-wide apprenticeship and/or bridge training program.
- Acknowledge that PSRs also require settlement services; they cannot be left entirely to the resources (or lack thereof) of private sponsors, as the settlement experiences among PSRs is quite diverse.
- Consider the blended sponsorship program as the better way forward—with both government and private sponsors helping the refugee, each for a given period of time. This composite approach could offset the deficits inherent in each single approach.

Thank you!