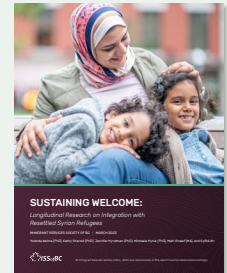


## OVERVIEW

New multi-year research calls for increased long-term mental health support for refugees and integration programs that develop their social networks.

The research report, *Sustaining Welcome*<sup>1</sup>, was produced by ISSofBC<sup>2</sup> in partnership with York University's [Syrian Refugee Integration and Long-term Health Outcomes \(SyRIA.th\) project](https://syrialth.apps01.yorku.ca)<sup>3</sup>, funded by the [Canadian Institutes of Health Research \(CIHR\)](https://cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/193.html).<sup>4</sup>

Although the research participants were exclusively resettled Syrian refugees, the report's findings have key lessons for ongoing and future refugee integration efforts in BC and Canada.



## THE CHALLENGE



6.6M

Syrians have become refugees since 2011



47,000+

Syrian Refugees welcomed to Canada through *Operation Syrian Refugee* (2015-2017)

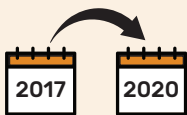


4,000

Came to British Columbia

## CHAMPIONING SYRIAN REFUGEE VOICES

This new report, *Sustaining Welcome*, aimed to:



1. Present the lived experiences of Syrian resettled refugees over time.



2. Assess how Canadian resettlement policies and social dynamics influence the long-term well-being of refugees.



3. Inform best practices to improve service delivery for refugees.

### Ground-Breaking Approach

The research brought together 22 academic experts, front-line workers and practitioners including psychologists, social scientists, geographers and epidemiologists.

### Over 200 Resettled Syrian Refugee Interviewed

The report interviewed Syrian refugees in BC each year from 2017-2020, tracking changes in their social, economic, mental and physical well-being.

### Integration in Action

Ultimately, the report is a study of 'integration in action' and the two-way exchanges that occur between refugees and Canadians during refugee settlement journeys.

# THE FINDINGS

## THE MENTAL HEALTH OF REFUGEES

The report showed that Syrian refugees face a variety of **mental health stresses** during their early years in Canada, such as guilt or concern for friends and family overseas.

Although **rates of depression were higher among Syrian refugees** compared to the national average, not every participant suffered from depression. In fact, many refugees had better functional mental health than the average US citizen.

**Risk factors correlated with the rate of depression among participants included:**



**Unemployment** and financial insecurity



**Being a woman, divorced, widowed or separated**



**Having fewer friends**



**Low education and language skills**

## THE VALUE OF FRIENDSHIPS AND BELONGING



All interviews highlighted the **importance of friendships**, but in BC, the **number of friends** refugees had **declined over time**.



**Women faced added barriers** in making friends, due to caregiving responsibilities.



**“Bridges”**—relationships outside one’s own ethnic group—between Syrian refugees and Canadians provided valuable **cultural exchange** opportunities that helped to overcome prejudices.

The participants’ **sense of belonging increased** over the four years of study. By Year 4 (2020):

**95%**

of participants had a **positive sense of belonging** in Canada.

**94%**

had a **positive sense of belonging** to their city.

**80%**

felt they **belonged** in their neighbourhood.

## CELEBRATING REFUGEE SUCCESSES

Despite a variety of challenges, the *Sustaining Welcome* report highlights the **successes of Syrian refugees**.

**Key achievements the participants identified included:**



**Learning English**



The **safety** of their family



Obtaining a **driving license and employment**

# RECOMMENDATIONS AND CALLS TO ACTION

*“ You’re coming to a new culture, and everything is new, even the air you’re breathing is new. You need time to adapt psychologically and physically...” –FOCUS GROUP A, 2018*

The *Sustaining Welcome* report argues for a **longer-term view** on refugee integration, and the support services offered to them, beyond the initial welcome.

**Despite gradual improvements, more needs to be done in the following areas:**

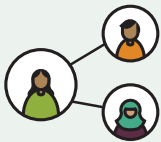


## MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

The **mental health** of participants **declined** the longer they lived in Canada, suggesting ‘well-being is shaped not only by pre-migration traumas but equally by post-migration stressors.’

### Recommendations:

- **Fund national refugee mental health programs** and ‘**culturally competent counselling services**’ adapted to refugee needs.
- Support **early identification** and **intervention** via trauma-informed training for immigrant-serving agencies.
- The **Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC)** should **expand** their **family-based resettlement model**.



## SOCIAL INTEGRATION AND CONNECTIONS

**Friendships are key** for refugee well-being but declined over time, with women facing greater social isolation than men.

### Recommendations:

- **Creative programming** for the most isolated newcomers including home visits and online support.
- **New programming to build bridges** between ethnic and language groups and encourage friendships.



## LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION

**Gendered barriers** exist for language learning among women with **knock-on effects** including fewer job opportunities and increased social isolation.

### Recommendations:

- **Expanded English-language classes** for parents and caregivers with a greater focus on workplace-related language.
- **Additional childcare** for language learners.
- **Trauma-informed approaches** to accommodate those with mental health challenges.



## EMPLOYMENT AND INCOME

Employment increased over time among refugee participants, but **systemic challenges remained**, especially among women.

### Recommendations:

- Advocate for a provincial **living wage increase**.
- **Support refugee entrepreneurs** and self-employment initiatives.
- Develop **community bridge-building** to expand economic opportunities for refugees.