



# SUSTAINING WELCOME:

*Longitudinal Research on Integration with Resettled Syrian Refugees*

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# Executive Summary

From November 2015 to December 2016, over 39,000 Syrian refugees resettled in Canada through Operation Syrian Refugees. Among them, 4,400 refugees arrived in 65 communities across British Columbia. This was the largest group resettlement in Canada in over 40 years, and it provided a unique opportunity to learn about resettlement outcomes. In response to this opportunity, the Syrian Refugee Integration and Long-term Health Outcomes (SyRIA.lth) project was launched. It brought together a Canada-wide team of expert researchers to study refugee integration and well-being longitudinally, with four separate years of data collection on the same group of newcomers. Immigrant Services Society of British Columbia (ISSofBC) was a key partner in the project, leading the BC research.

From 2017 to 2020, SyRIA.lth conducted one-on-one surveys with 1,665 resettled Syrian former refugees, including 267 participants in BC. Metro Vancouver and Thompson-Okanagan were selected as research sites, as the study aimed to include both large metropolitan areas and smaller urban centres. Four focus groups were conducted with a subset of participants in BC in 2018. In 2020, the final year of data collection, the survey was adapted to include several questions specifically addressing challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The SyRIA.lth research is premised on a holistic integration model that broadly considers integration as a two-way endeavour between newcomers and society. Integration is thus shaped by

both the welcome and adaptations of Canadians and institutions, as well as the backgrounds and social identities of refugees. It includes diverse factors such as language training opportunities, employment experience, social connections, and sense of belonging. The SyRIA.lth project analyzes these factors of integration in relation to refugees' long-term physical and mental well-being.

Canadian refugee resettlement occurs in three streams, or pathways, each with differing supports and selection criteria, which may shape integration and well-being outcomes:

- **Government-assisted refugees (GARs)** are defined as being in urgent need of protection based on humanitarian evaluation of their vulnerability. They are supported by the federal government through service provider organizations such as ISSofBC for their first year of settlement.
- **Privately sponsored refugees (PSRs)** are selected by private groups that commit to providing financial and practical support for the first year of resettlement. Notably, as PSRs are not selected based on vulnerability, they often have a higher average level of education and ability in Canada's official languages than do GARs.

- **Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR)** refugees are selected on the same vulnerability criteria as GARs, but they receive social supports from sponsorship groups. Financial supports are shared between government and sponsorship groups with each providing six months of support.

SyRIA.lth aims to understand how these three different pathways affect integration outcomes.

This report provides an overview of the research findings over four years, including some of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim is to contribute to understanding and supporting the settlement, integration, and long-term well-being of resettled refugees. The findings emphasize the need for sustained welcome and community support for resettled refugees, beyond the initial excitement, generosity, and outpouring of large humanitarian programs such as Operation Syrian Refugees. The findings also emphasize the importance of applying a holistic approach to integration and well-being, demonstrating the intertwined nature of factors such as language, employment, and social connections, and their effects on mental health and well-being outcomes.

### ***Syrian Refugees' Integration and Well-being over Four Years in BC: Key Findings and Recommendations***

#### **LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION**

**Official language ability (in English or French) is one of the biggest initial challenges for Syrian newcomers, and language progress was their most noted success each year.**

- 34% of participants always required interpretation to access services in the first year of the study; 19.4% of participants still always required interpretation by year 4.
- GARs required interpretation more than PSRs in both the first and final year.
- Women face more language barriers than men: 26.28% of women always required interpretation in year 4.
- Providing childcare is a barrier to women's participation in language classes.

**Recommendations:** *Expand the approaches of Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) in format and scheduling to accommodate diverse learner needs and reach isolated learners (e.g., online classes, evening classes, home tutors); Expand childcare options for learners to reduce systemic barriers to women's participation.*

#### **EMPLOYMENT AND INCOME**

**Refugees face systemic challenges in accessing work, but more gained employment each year.**

- 29.4% reported working in year 1; 42.2% were working in year 4.
  - ▶ 38% of employed participants worked in essential services during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Social networks matter: family and friends helped the most in finding employment.
- Location matters: Thompson-Okanagan had higher rates of employment than Metro Vancouver.

- Gender barriers shape employment access: 15% of women reported working in year 4.
- Starting from scratch: prior experience and credentials are not widely recognized.

**Poverty remains prevalent among resettled refugees in year 4 of the study.**

- 41.4% of participants reported social assistance as a source of household income.
- 28.7% of participants reported that their household income had included access to disability benefits.
- 47% of participants reported that their household relies on food assistance.

**Recommendations:** Increase programs to support community bridge building and monitor employment-related indicators; Support provincial advocacy for a living wage for all residents; Support refugee entrepreneurship and self-employment initiatives.

## HOUSING

**Affordability is a widespread concern.**

- Of those who moved, affordability was the primary reason.
- While more BC participants live in social housing than participants in other provinces (23%), affordability remains a concern for half of them.

**Recommendations:** Emphasize long-term affordability in initial housing; support provincial efforts toward affordable housing policies

## SOCIAL INTEGRATION AND CONNECTIONS

**Friendships with Syrians and people of other ethnicities are valued by participants.**

- Initially, PSRs and BVOR refugees reported more friendships in their city than did GARs.
- Men reported more friendships in their city than women.
- The percentage of people with four or more friends in their city declined from 69% in year 1 to 54% in year 4.

**Eleven percent of participants experienced discrimination at least once in the first year of the study.**

- Race (5%), religion (9%), and language (8%) were reported as the primary reasons for discrimination.

**Participants' subjective sense of belonging to their neighbourhood, city, and country increased over the four years of the study.**

**Recommendations:** Service-providing organizations and community-based organizations should consider longitudinal programs continue to build bridges, encourage friendships, and reduce isolation beyond newcomers' first year in Canada, along with creative programs to meaningfully reach the most isolated newcomers (such as those with full-time caregiver roles or needs).

## HEALTH CARE ACCESS AND MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

**Health care access improved, but the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted access challenges.**

- 91% of participants had a family physician by year 4 of the study.
- Nearly half of participants who tried to access health care during the pandemic faced difficulties, primarily due to technology and digital literacy needs.

**Mental health and well-being declined as participants spent more time in Canada, and rates of depression are higher than in the general Canadian population.**

- 18.5% of participants had “clinical” levels of depression symptoms in year 2 (Ahmad et al., 2021) compared with approximately 6.7% of the general adult Canadian population (Shields et al., 2021)

Factors correlated with increased risk of depression include:

- Poverty: being unemployed or financially insecure
- Being a woman
- Being a GAR
- Having fewer friends and lower social support
- Having lower education and needing interpretation
- Living longer in Canada

**Early intervention matters: Depression-level symptoms in the second year were predicted by depression-level symptoms in the first year of the study**

**Recommendations:** *The government should fund a Canada-wide settlement-informed refugee mental health program, specifically adapted to meet refugee newcomer needs, for up to five years; service-providing organizations and private sponsors should be trained in providing information on how to refer newcomers to appropriate mental health supports.*