FOCUSING ON REFUGEE CHILDREN AND YOUTH WILL MAKE A DIFFERENCE

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Canada made a commitment to offering refuge to over 25,000 Syrians between November 2016 and the end of March 2017. It placed priority on admitting families, those from minority religious groups, and people fleeing persecution because of their sexual orientation. This has meant that the majority of those admitted are children and youth. It also means that for Canada to truly profit from its investment in this cohort refugees, that is to successfully integrate them, it also needs to invest in research on language and learning, social and cultural integration and wellbeing. Without it, evidence-based interventions that contribute to successful integration could be missed.

Canada has had a mixed record when it comes to welcoming those in need of refuge. During the Second World War it refused thousands of Jewish Refugee escaping the Holocaust (Abella and Troper 2012). After the war Canada acceded to the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. Since then the country has committed to receiving cohorts of refugees from around the world with significant cohorts coming from Eastern Europe and South East Asia, mostly Vietnam, fleeing communism in the 60s and 70s as well as Somalia and Sri Lanka in the 90s and the turn of the millennium.

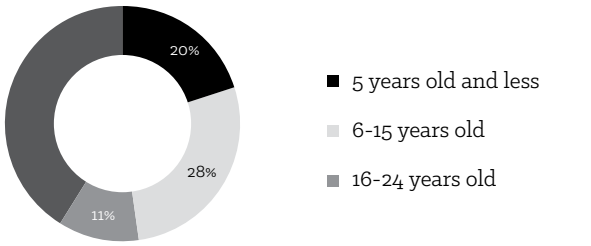
In the fall of 2015, during the heat of a federal election, the country was deeply moved by images of refugees fleeing the Syrian conflict. No image influenced Canada's commitment more that the picture of three year-old Alan Kurdi's lifeless body washed up on a Turkish shore.

During the election the opposition Liberal Party, under Justin Trudeau, made a commitment to offering refuge to 25,000 Syrians by the end of the year if elected. In November, with the Liberal's enjoying a majority government, Immigration Minister John McCallum set out to honour that commitment. Logistical challenges, and the need to mobilize unprecedented resources, however, meant that an overly optimistic timeframe had to be extended to the end of February, 2016. Despite the delay, Canadians responded to the challenge of resettling so many families quickly with local communities committing their time, money, and resources to support refugees. Thousands of local groups took on the responsibility of privately sponsoring families themselves.

Though the political landscape shifted, the new government kept the previous regime's framework for prioritizing families,

those from minority religious groups, and people fleeing persecution because of their sexual orientation. This meant that by March 1st, the country had accepted just over 26,000 refugees, with 58% of the Syrian cohort being under the age of 25 (48% were 15 years old and younger) (IRCC 2016). An additional 10,000 refugees are expected to arrive before the end of 2016.

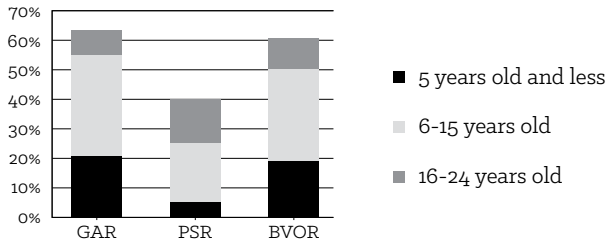
FIGURE 1: PERCENT OF SYRIAN REFUGEES BY AGE GROUP



Source: IRCC Permanent Residents as of March 2016.
Date request tracking number: CR-16-0095

The Syrian refugee cohort is largely made-up of those who are Government Assisted (GAR) and who will receive federal benefits for one year after arriving, those that are Privately Sponsored (BSR), who receive support from citizens and communities for one year after arriving, and those who are Blended Visa Office Referred (BVOR), those who get a mix of government and private support. When you look at the proportion of children and youth in these groups, we see that 66% of GAR, 44% of PSR and 64% of BVOR fall into these age groups.

FIGURE 2: PERCENT OF SYRIAN REFUGEE CHILDREN AND YOUTH BY AGE GROUP AND CATEGORY



Source: IRCC Permanent Residents as of March 2016.
Date request tracking number: CR-16-0095

When we talk about Syrian refugees, we are largely talking about children and youth who have lived in refugee camps and have had limited or interrupted education. Despite such obstacles, we can expect many to do well based on the experiences of other refugee cohorts that arrived in Canada (Wilkinson 2002). In fact refugee children have higher rates of post-secondary education than their Canadian-born peers, with approximately 30% attending university (Hou and Bonikowska 2016).

It is unclear, however, whether we can assume that such past successes will also be seen for the Syrian cohort of refugee children and youth. Refugee children and their families are at particular risk for social and psychological problems as a result of the challenges they experience during resettlement in the destination country (Denov, 2014). Previous research has shown that refugee children and youth are likely to experience changes in family dynamics (Lewig, Arney, & Salveron, 2010), introduction to a new education system and language (Cranitch, 2010), racial discrimination and bullying, and mental health challenges pre- and post-settlement (Montgomery, 2008). Fortunately, these are all interrelated problems that are preventable with appropriate intervention.

Among Canada's priorities must be support for second language learning. Empirical evidence shows that children's fluency in either English or French and literacy skills take years to develop to the level of their monolingual peers (Paradis, in press). For this reason it is important to create refugee and Syrian focused language learning.

Social integration and family stability will also be challenging for Syrian refugees as it is for all migrants (Creese, Dyck, & McLaren, 2006). Child-rearing techniques common in Syria — such as leaving children with their siblings — will pose challenges to refugee families (Lewig *et al.*, 2010). Child refugees also frequently become "cultural brokers" for their parents, shifting power dynamics (Cottrell & VanderPlaat, 2011) or introducing new understandings of children's rights. Despite the many advantages of settling in a new country, the associated changes to the structure and power balance of the family may negatively impact refugee children.

Beyond these problems which are shared by many different groups of refugees, there are also fears of radicalization of adolescent refugees from Syria, especially if their educational, mental, physical and social needs are not addressed immediately after resettlement (Sageman 2008). The good news is that we have the evidence-informed interventions to prevent these problems before they occur through social interventions in schools and communities and better public policies.

Hand in hand with these interventions, there is a need for investment in research and program evaluation. If we can identify the protective factors that ensure the successful resettlement of children and youth over time, we will be much more able as a country to reach out to other cohorts of forcibly displaced people. We will also be able to ensure that the immense potential of young people is tapped for the benefit of their own communities and Canada as a whole. It's for these reasons that a national coalition of researchers, service providers and federal and provincial departments of government has formed to address this challenge.