REFUGEE RETENTION IN NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR

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Our study examines settlement experiences of refugees that have settled in Newfoundland and Labrador and analyzes factors that influence refugee integration and retention in the province. Atlantic provinces tend to struggle more than the rest of Canada to attract and retain newcomers. Canada's regionalized refugee resettlement program offers an opportunity for the Atlantic provinces to increase their immigrant population but this is hindered by the unwillingness of refugees to remain in their first destination. Our research found that while many respondents enjoyed living in St. John's and had positive experiences with local people and service providers, they shared concerns about their employment prospects, which was a major factor in their consideration or intention of relocating.

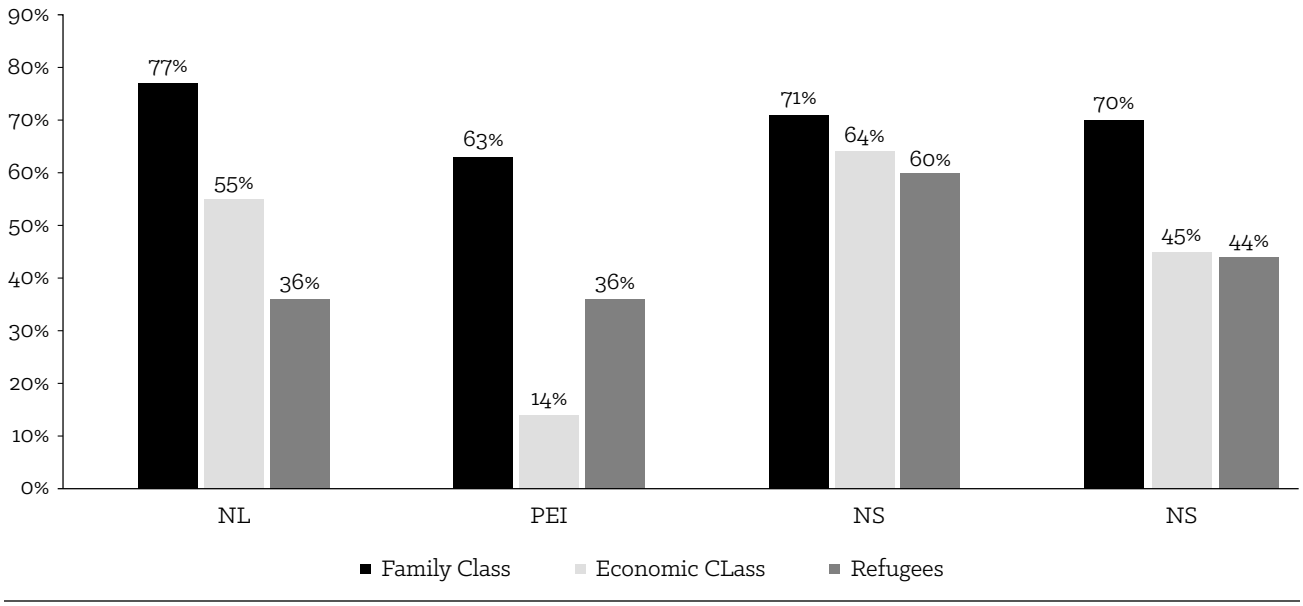
Notre étude examine les expériences d'établissement des réfugiés qui se sont installés à Terre-Neuve-et-Labrador, et analyse les facteurs qui influencent l'intégration et le maintien des réfugiés dans la province. Les provinces de l'Atlantique ont plus de difficultés que le reste du Canada à attirer et à garder les nouveaux arrivants. Le programme de réinstallation des réfugiés régionalisé du Canada offre aux provinces de l'Atlantique une occasion d'accroître leur population immigrante, mais ceci est entravé par le fait que les réfugiés ne veulent pas rester dans leur première destination. Notre étude a révélé que si de nombreux répondants vivaient bien à St. John's et vivaient des expériences positives avec la population locale et avec les fournisseurs de services, ils partageaient des inquiétudes quant à leurs perspectives d'emploi, ce qui était un facteur important dans leur considération ou leur intention de déménager.

Like many countries in the Global North, Canada has an aging population and relies heavily on immigration for labour force and economic growth. In 2018, immigrants accounted for 71 percent of the country's annual population growth. The Conference Board of Canada forecast that by 2034, this will rise to 100 percent. Permanent residents have tended to settle in three larger cities - Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver – owing to the greater economic opportunities and cultural diversity of their populations.

In Atlantic provinces, the impact of aging population on the economy is further exacerbated by youth outmigration. This demographic decline has caught the attention of all four provinces, as well as the federal government, which have all adopted strategies aimed at growing Atlantic Canada's population through immigration.

Compared to other provinces, Atlantic Provinces have struggled more to attract and retain newcomers. Their five year retention rates for newcomers who arrived from 2001 to 2007 have ranged from 40 percent to 65 percent, while the rest of Canada maintained 85 percent retention rates on average (Haan and Prokopenko 2016). As Figure 1 shows, rates are higher for family class immigrants and lower for refugees.

FIGURE 1: 5 YEAR RETENTION RATE OF IMMIGRANTS IN ATLANTIC CANADA



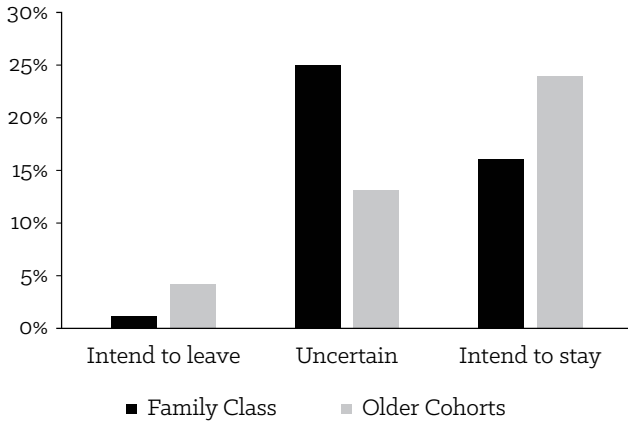
Source: Greenwood and McDonald 2018

While the five year retention rate in NL improved, from 40 percent among the 2003 cohort to 65 percent among the 2007 cohort, the retention rate of refugees has remained low. In 2015, the newly elected Trudeau government initiated an ambitious policy to resettle 25,000 Syrian refugees by the end of that year. While it took a few more months to achieve their goal, more than 40,000 Syrian refugees had arrived by January 2017. Canada's regionalized refugee resettlement program offers an opportunity for the Atlantic provinces to increase their immigrant population but, as implied in the data shown above, this is hindered by the unwillingness of refugees to remain in their first destination.

Our research team interviewed 114 refugees residing in St. John's, NL, using an in-depth, semi-structured guide and divided them into two sets. The first set comprised of 64 Syrian refugees who arrived in 2016, including 42 adults and 22 minors. The second set of older cohorts comprised of 50 non-Syrian refugees, who had lived in St. John's for 2 to 15 years, and included 41 adults and 9 minors from varying source countries, including Sudan, Eritrea, Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Palestine, Nigeria, Liberia and Sierra Leone. We also interviewed 16 stakeholders from various community groups, private organisations and government agencies involved in the settlement and integration of refugees.

Our research found that overwhelmingly, newly arrived refugees were uncertain of their future and undecided whether they would stay in St. John's or move elsewhere in Canada. Older cohorts, in contrast, were more likely to report that they intended to stay, although some were similarly uncertain about their future and several stated their intention to leave (Figure 2). The greater desire of the older cohort to stay may be due to so-called "survival bias" given that those who were initially most dissatisfied with their settlement may have already left the province.

FIGURE 2: MIGRATION INTENTIONS OF NEW ARRIVALS (N=40) AND OLDER COHORTS (N=41)



For those who intended to remain in the province, Figure 3 shows that their decision was primarily based on the feeling of safety, friendliness of the people, and the educational opportunities offered in St. John's. Respondents felt that this made St. John's an attractive place to raise their children, whose well-being was often the priority.

However, the feeling of safety and the friendly welcome were not enough to encourage everyone to stay. Figure 4 shows that while many respondents indicated that they enjoyed living in St. John's, they shared concerns about their employment prospects, which was a major factor in their consideration or intention of relocating.

New arrivals and older cohorts shared a perception of greater economic opportunities in cities like Toronto and Montreal, and more generally, in Alberta. This knowledge was imparted from cross-country networks that relayed information about job prospects in other regions.

To learn about the experiences of those who had already left, our interview included questions about whether respondents knew any refugees who had moved away and the reasons why. Responses emphasized the greater economic opportunities on the "mainland" or continental Canada, but also included cultural and social isolation, and discrimination that had pushed them out of the province.

In conclusion, migration is a complex phenomenon as individuals consider many different factors when making the decision to move or stay. Economic opportunities are important, but not always the only determining factor. Positive experiences with local people and service providers made newcomers feel welcome in their new homes. However, for those who had been living in St. John's longer, lack of employment opportunities, social isolation and discrimination had been major factors in their decision to move out. Whether this suggests that St. John's is becoming more welcoming of diversity or that new arrivals had yet to face these interactions is uncertain but points to the importance of community support in the migration decision.

While Syrian refugees were largely uncertain about their intention to move, the arrival of a comparatively large group of people from the same region has potential to improve retention rates. As one stakeholder noted, the Syrian refugees had built a strong ethnic community and were eager to help each other. This was in contrast to previous years where a smaller

FIGURE 3: POSITIVE IMPRESSION OF NL, NEW ARRIVALS (N=40) AND OLDER COHORTS (N=33) (SOME RESPONDENTS HAD MORE THAN ONE ANSWER)

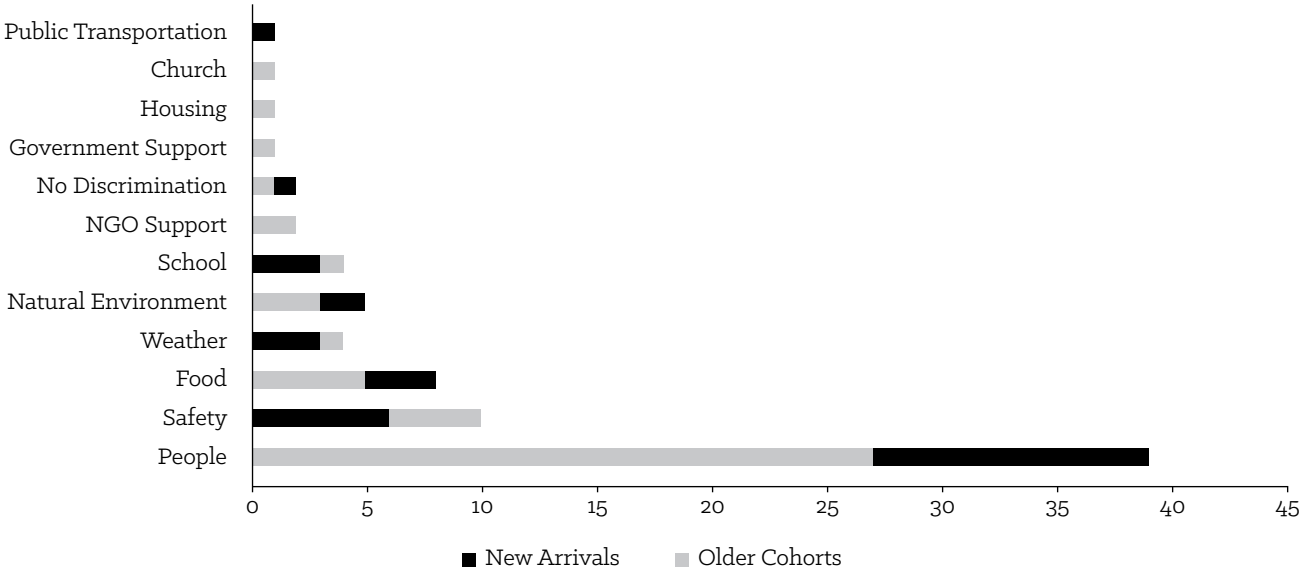
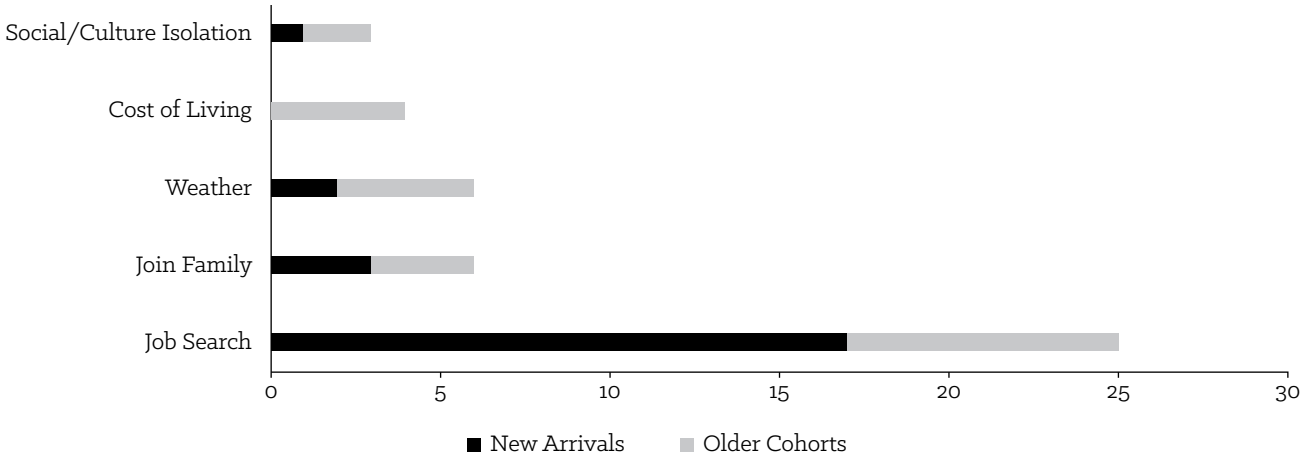


FIGURE 4: REASONS FOR WHY THEY WOULD OR SOMEONE THEY KNOW HAS LEFT NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR, NEW ARRIVALS (N=25) AND OLDER COHORTS (N=30) (SOME RESPONDENTS HAD MORE THAN ONE ANSWER)T



number of refugees arrived from a greater number of countries and were less able to build a community based on shared language and culture. While stakeholders also suggested the sudden influx of refugees put a strain on settlement services, particularly in terms of finding affordable housing and short of stable funding, the benefits of building that community could offset the costs. Still, more research following up on this cohort will be necessary to determine whether the Syrian refugees would stay in the long run.

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