SYRIAN REFUGEE LIVED EXPERIENCE PROJECT: OVERVIEW REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

Canada has a distinctive history and identity as a country mostly made up of people arriving from elsewhere – and, today more than ever, relies on immigration to build its population and keep communities thriving. This means the stakes are high in ensuring that newcomers can count on a welcoming home, and a successful path to resettlement and full citizenship. Refugees make up a tiny proportion of the immigrants who come to Canada each year, but they face unique challenges because of the circumstances they are fleeing, which include unsustainable and often life- threatening situations in their home countries.

Canada has typically welcomed a small number of refugees per year, in the range of 11,000 to 13,000 people. This changed dramatically in 2015 in response to the ongoing conflict in Syria, one of the worst humanitarian disasters in recent history. Since the conflict erupted in 2011, 5.6 million Syrians fled their country for refuge in neighbouring states, and another 6.6 million have been internally displaced. In 2014, the United Nations Refugee Agency appealed to the international community to help address this humanitarian crisis by accepting Syrian refugees who could no longer be safe in their own country.

Canada answered this call by significantly expanding the intake of Syrian refugees through the Syrian Refugee Resettlement Initiative, an unprecedented national mobilization involving all levels of government, non-governmental organizations, the private sector and Canadian citizens. With uncharacteristic speed and coordination, the effort succeeded in resettling close to 40,000 Syrian refugees by the end of 2016. This was largest single group of refugees accepted into Canada since the Vietnamese sponsorship program in the late 1970s. How have these refugees fared in their new country, and what can be learned from their experience that might benefit future refugees? These questions were addressed through a national research study with Syrian refugees who arrived in the 2015-16 period, conducted by the non-profit Environics Institute for Survey Research.

SYRIAN REFUGEE LIVED EXPERIENCE PROJECT

The purpose of this study is to document the experience of Syrian refugees several years into their resettlement in Canada to better understand their lives during this crucial period of resettlement. This research is designed to yield valuable insight to guide government policies and programs,

as well as support the ongoing work of settlement agencies, private sponsor groups, refugee groups, and academic researchers across the country who carry much of the load in supporting refugee resettlement. The study is also intended to create a template for further research in collaboration with refugee communities, as well as provide all Canadians with a more accurate portrait of what refugees experience as they create new lives for themselves in this country.

The research consisted of in-depth interviews with a representative sample of 305 Syrian refugees, conducted between September 2020 and March 2021 (see Table 1). The survey sample was national in scope, and designed to reflect this population by admission category, region, age and gender. Interviews were conducted by telephone or webchat, in participants' preferred language (with most choosing Arabic).[1]

The interviews were extensive (averaging 75 minutes in length) and covered many aspects of refugees' experiences in Canada, spanning their pre-arrival circumstances, their initial settlement period, their current lives, and their outlook towards the future. Many of the questions were open-ended so that participants could speak about their experiences in their own words. The project was funded through Contribution Agreements provided by the federal department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). The findings and conclusions are the Environics Institute's, and do not represent the position of the Government of Canada. A detailed final report on this study is publicly available.[2]

STUDY CONCLUSIONS

The research reveals that this group of Syrian refugees, as a whole, has successfully resettled in Canada in just a few years, following their arrival in the country. Many encountered early challenges – as any group of refugees would – in terms of navigating a foreign language, finding employment, dealing with the practicalities of finding a place to live, arranging schools for children, and making sense of an unfamiliar culture. Most overcame or made significant progress in meeting these and other difficulties, and the overall picture is one of people who have established new lives in a country they now consider their home. They have acquired what is called "social capital," a term used to describe the vibrancy of social networks, personal connections and social trust. These refugees exhibited levels of community connections, friendships, and a sense of belonging to the country that in many respects are comparable to other Canadians.

This does not mean that everything went well for these refugees as they resettled in Canada, as some have continued to face struggles in such areas as housing, financial security, and underemployment. Creating new lives in an unfamiliar place has taken its toll on their mental health, with three in ten refugees experiencing a considerable amount of daily stress, in some cases due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

What lessons can be gleaned from this research? The positive outcomes reported by refugees notwithstanding, not all

TABLE 1.

Refugee Sample Profile	Number of interviews	% of Sample	% of refugee Population
Region			
Atlantic Canada	29	10%	7%
Quebec/Ontario	168	55%	67%
Manitoba/SK/Alberta	57	19%	18%
British Columbia	51	17%	8%
Admission category			
Gov't assisted Refugees (GAR)	168	55%	54%
Privately-sponsored refugees (PSR)	101	33%	38%
Blended Visa Office Referrals (BVOR)	34	11%	8%
TOTAL	**305**	**100%**	**100%**

1 The original plan was for interviews to be conducted in-person, but was changed due to restrictions on in-person meetings resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

2 Environics Institute for Survey Research. 2022. Syrian Refugee Lived Experience Project - Final Report. Toronto: Environics Institute for Survey Research. www.environicsinstitute.org/docs/default-source/project-documents/syrian-refugee-lived-experience-project/syrian-refugee-lived-experience-project---final-report.pdf?sfvrsn=fa2b421d_2

have thrived and many ongoing challenges remain, especially when it comes to under-employment and financial insecurity. The evidence demonstrates that government agencies and settlement organizations need to pay more attention to such areas as employment supports, pre-arrival information, and management of migrant expectations. This positive story of refugee resettlement must also be considered in the context of the unprecedented circumstances in which this particular cohort came to Canada. The timing of the global migration crisis and the political context in 2015 led to the mobilization of political, government and civic leadership that was unprecedented in terms of the number of refugees, the speed with which they were moved, and the scale of resources dedicated to their resettlement. This was a defining factor in the experience of these refugees, which was beyond what was available to refugees in previous times, and other refugees, both during and following this period. This demonstrates what can be accomplished with a concentrated effort, and, perhaps, what is required to ensure effective refugee resettlement and integration on a sustained basis.

MAIN FINDINGS

ARRIVAL IN CANADA

Some of the refugees received pre-arrival information about Canada, but this was far from comprehensive or sufficient to prepare them. Some aspects of what they found once they landed were anticipated (notably the friendly welcome provided by other Canadians), but they were more likely to experience something unexpected - notably difficulties in finding employment, the cold weather and culture shock.

Refugees identified various challenges during their early years of resettlement; in particular, having to navigate in an unfamiliar language, as very few arrived with a functional fluency in English or French (see Table 2).

FROM THE DATA COLLECTED

In what ways was your experience different from what you expected, once you arrived in Canada?

"No jobs available for my skills and experience in the area they put us in. Also, there is racism with employing Arabs."

"The weather mostly. The culture was very different than what we thought. I didn't expect that cities won't have a lot of people hanging around in the streets. The streets are so empty."

"I was expecting to be put in camps when we arrive to Canada but we were treated nicely and put in hotels."

TABLE 2. SINGLE BIGGEST CHALLENGE WHEN FIRST ARRIVED IN CANADA

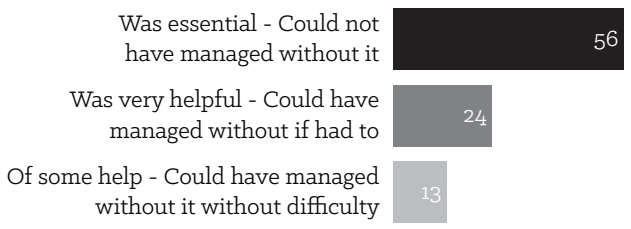
	%
Language barrier	61
Practical Necessities	
Finding employment	15
Finding housing/Accommodation	14
Lack of transportation/vehicle	6
Learning about public transit	5
Arranging for continuing education	4
Dealing with government bureaucracy	3
Communication with private sponsor	3
Adjustment to the Unfamiliar	
Culture shock	11
Challenges with integration	10
Isolation/loneliness	9
Harsh weather	8
Other challenges	9
None/No response	5

Q.13 Thinking back to when you first arrived in Canada, what was your single biggest challenge at that time?

SETTLEMENT SUPPORTS

Looking back over their early years in Canada, refugees recalled receiving helpful supports of various kinds, the most prominent being financial assistance, language training, help with accommodation, access to needed health care and emotional support (see Figure 1). For those sponsored privately, most found the support they received to be essential to getting settled, and the relationship with sponsors proved enduring, with three-quarters of this group remaining in touch with their sponsors several years later. The types of government assistance most widely considered to be helpful included language training, health and dental care, and financial support.

FIGURE 1. IMPORTANCE OF SUPPORT PROVIDED BY PRIVATE SPONSOR



Q.23b Which one of the following statements best describes the importance of the support provided by your private sponsor?

Thinking about the services the government provided, what did you find to be most helpful?

"It's a chain: everything was important to get us settled. Everything from financial support all the way to small things to opening a bank account helped significantly."

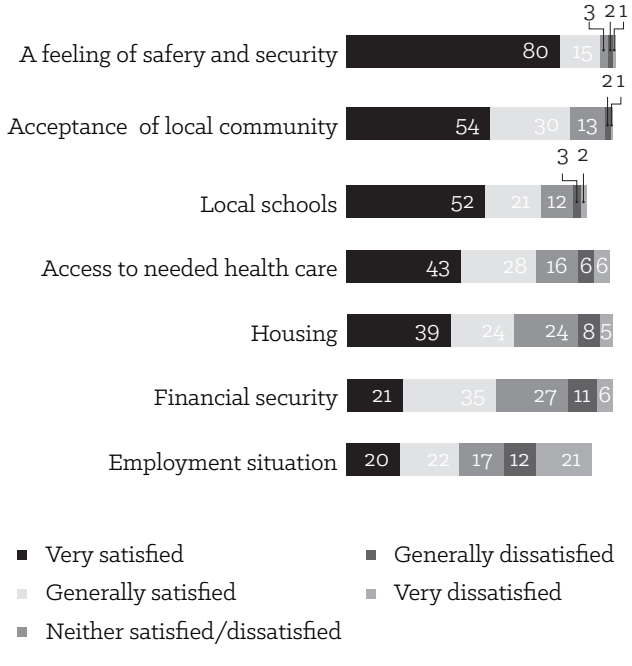
"The warm welcome at the airport when we first arrived. They gave us permanent residency on the spot and said this country is your country now."

CURRENT LIFE IN CANADA

With the benefit of several years of resettlement and adjustment, most Syrian refugees feel good about their current life in Canada, with almost nine in ten describing it to be "very" or "generally" positive (see Figure 2). Across specific aspects of their lives, refugees were most widely satisfied in feeling safe and secure, being accepted by their local community, and with local schools. By comparison, refugees were much less apt to be satisfied with their financial security and employment situation.

What refugees appreciate the most about life in Canada is the safety and security it provides, along with the human rights protections in the areas of equality and freedom. What they like the least is the Canadian climate, as well as its unfamiliar culture and lifestyle, and being separated from family and friends living abroad. All things considered, almost all the interviewed refugees said they were glad to be in Canada.

FIGURE 2. SATISFACTION WITH ASPECTS OF LIFE TODAY



Q.29a-g How satisfied are you with each of the following aspects of your life today?

FROM THE DATA COLLECTED

What do you like most about living in Canada?

"Everyone is subject to the law. Sometimes the issue is with the law itself, but at least everyone is subject to it. People are friendly."

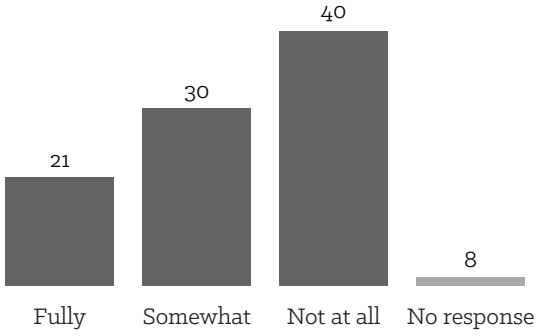
"Social and economic stability. Anyone who works faithfully can find good results. There is fairness in the distribution of wealth and opportunities."

"Education: it's a huge difference between here and Syria. Parents graduated from University in Syria and couldn't work in their field. Whereas here there are no restrictions on where to work."

EMPLOYMENT AND OCCUPATION

About half of the refugees interviewed were employed in full- or part-time jobs (including those self-employed), which is below the national average (see Figure 3). Most of those employed were working in sectors that typically provide entry-level opportunities, such as transportation or warehousing, retail, construction and accommodation or food services. Notably, only one in five of those employed reported being in a job or occupation that matched his or her education, skills and experience. Close to half said that the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted their employment situation, in most cases by reducing their hours of employment or eliminating their job altogether.

FIGURE 3. HOW WELL DOES YOUR CURRENT OCCUPATION MATCH YOUR EDUCATION, SKILLS, AND EXPERIENCE



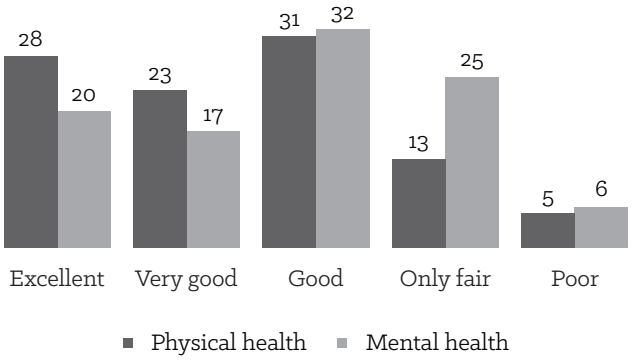
Q.37 Would you say your current or most recent occupation matches your education, skills and experience fully, somewhhat, or not at all?

HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Most refugees rated themselves to have generally good physical health, at levels slightly below, but generally comparable to, the Canadian population-at-large. But they were not

doing as well in terms of their mental health, with fewer than half describing it in positive terms, and almost as many indicating it to be only fair or poor (see Figure 4). Three in ten said they experienced a considerable amount of stress in their daily lives, with this most commonly being reported by men, Government-Assisted Refugees (GAR) and those in financial hardship. Among those experiencing daily stress, most attributed it at least in part to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

FIGURE 4. PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH STATUS



Q.40 In general, would you say your physical health is excellent, very good, good, faire or poor?

Q.41 In general, would you say your mental health is excellent, very good, good, fair or poor?

SENSE OF BELONGING AND ACCEPTANCE

Most refugees expressed a strong sense of belonging to Canada, and for some this was now stronger than the attachment to their ethnic or cultural background. Almost everyone interviewed reported they had either became a Canadian citizen, were in the process of becoming one, or intended to do so when eligible.

Almost everyone interviewed said they felt welcomed by others in their local community and believed that other Canadians, as a whole, held generally positive opinions of Syrian refugees (see Figure 5). At the same time, many spoke about feeling the pressure of their host country's expectations of them to fit in and become productive citizens. About half of those interviewed reported experiencing discrimination by other Canadians at some point since arriving in the country, although few reported this to be happening regularly. Refugees were most likely to attribute this mistreatment to their ethnicity or culture, and less so because of their religion, language or gender. Few women linked experiences of discrimination to their gender, but they were more likely than men to attribute it to their religion (likely due to wearing a hijab).

FROM THE DATA COLLECTED

Is there one thing you wish Canadians understood about refugees from Syria who now live in this country?

"There is a lot of expectations. Most of us need time to heal from the war. Our people are scared to deal with strangers because of the war; you can't force people to heal fast."

"I didn't come for money or benefits, Syrians don't want money or anything, they just want peace. In Syria, my parents worked and we had a lot of things. But towards the end, there was no security, which I think comes first. This is what Canada gave us."

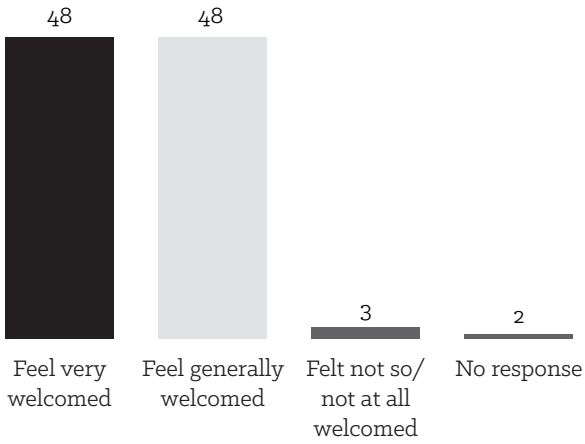
"We are not like you see in the news. Not terrorists and we're peaceful and want to live in peace. Left our country because of war that was out of our control."

FAMILY AND CHILDREN

Most parents felt that their children had done very well in adapting to life in Canada, including being accepted by others in school. They were most likely to credit the school system in supporting their children's adjustment, while pointing to language acquisition as the most notable barrier their children had to overcome.

Half of those interviewed said they experienced changing roles within their family since moving to Canada, which has been most frequently reported by women and refugees between the ages of 18 and 24. Such changes were most likely to entail increased responsibilities in such areas as parenting and household finances, while others mentioned changes in how children were disciplined, and who in the home was employed. One in ten said they experienced greater independence in their lives, while a comparable proportion reported the opposite.

FIGURE 5. RECEPTION BY YOUR LOCAL COMMUNITY



Q.46 To what extent do you feel you and your family have been made to feel welcome by other people in your local community?

LOOKING AHEAD

Syrian refugees identified a range of personal goals they hoped to achieve in their lifetime, the most prominent being home ownership, completing their education, and realizing employment or career aspirations. Parents' wishes for their children's futures most commonly focused on them getting a good education and having a good or happy life. Most refugees expressed optimism about achieving at least some of their life goals, basing this confidence on their own capacity to work hard and maintain a positive outlook, but also through the support of government and Canadian society. The most significant challenges to achieving life goals were seen to be financial and employment-related, as well as language fluency (see Figure 6)

FROM THE DATA COLLECTED

What do you most hope for your children in their lives as they grow up?

"I wish my children to grow up to be good "Syrian Canadian" citizens. I don't want them to forget their heritage and culture and want them to be successful."

"To finish their school and go to higher education. Serve the society; be active contributors to society."

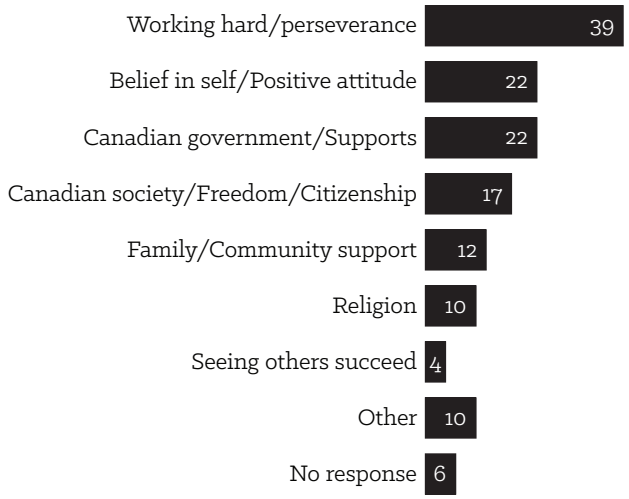
"My daughter loves to study about space and astronomy, while my other kids love hockey. I hope they follow what they like."

GROUP PROFILES

Syrian refugees arriving in Canada in 2015-16 are a diverse group, in terms of their backgrounds, demographic profile, and life circumstances at the time of being interviewed for this study. This diversity notwithstanding, the main findings and conclusions from the research largely apply to everyone interviewed, regardless of age, gender, region of residence, or whether they are government or privately sponsored refugees. Those in this group who experienced the greatest challenges in the beginning – notably refugees who were young, with the least education and relying on government assistance – also made the most significant progress over the ensuing years.

Household income stood out as making an important difference in how successful refugees have been in creating new lives for themselves in Canada. While only a quarter of this group experienced clear financial hardship at the time they were interviewed, they fared less well than others in many ways, including not receiving the settlement supports they needed, under-employment, experiencing lower levels of physical and mental health, not feeling fully welcomed in their community, and being less optimistic about the future.

FIGURE 6. BASIS OF CONFIDENCE TO ACHIEVE LIFE GOALS



Q.46 To what extent do you feel you and your family have been made to feel welcome by other people in your local community?