SETTLEMENT SERVICE USE AMONG SYRIAN REFUGEES IN CANADA

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With the resettlement of nearly 46,000 Syrian refugees in 2015-2016, there is a need to examine some of their initial experiences with settlement services. In spite of successfully resettling these many Syrians, there was a mismatch between the resources available and the knowledge of accessing those resources among refugees. This paper examines the employment service use and language class enrolment among newly arrived Syrian refugees in western Canada. Through a survey of 624 refugees to Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba which represented 18% of all arrivals to the region, we were able to collect information about wait lists for language training and plans for future employment. Results indicate that the initial language and employment services should be integrated through a comprehensive approach for making resettlement a success.

Con el reasentamiento de casi 46,000 refugiados sirios en 2015-2016 se abre la necesidad de examinar algunas de sus experiencias iniciales con los servicios de ayuda al proceso de establecerse. A pesar del exitoso asentamiento de tantos sirios, hubo una discordancia entre los recursos disponibles y el conocimiento para acceder a dichos recursos entre los refugiados. Este trabajo examina el uso del servicio de colocación laboral, así como la inscripción a las clases de lengua entre los refugiados sirios recién llegados al oeste de Canadá. Gracias a una encuesta de 624 refugiados en Alberta, Saskatchewan y Manitoba, que representaban el 18% de todas las personas que llegaron a la región, pudimos recabar información sobre las listas de espera para la capacitación en lengua y planes de empleo futuro. Los resultados indican que los servicios iniciales de lengua y empleo debían constituirse mediante un enfoque integral, para que la reubicación resulte exitosa.

Avec la réinstallation de près de 46 000 réfugiés syriens en 2015-2016, il est nécessaire d'examiner certaines de leurs premières expériences avec les services d'établissement. Malgré la réinstallation réussie de ces nombreux Syriens, il y avait un décalage entre les ressources disponibles et la connaissance de l'accès à ces ressources parmi les réfugiés. Cet article examine l'utilisation des services d'emploi et l'inscription à des cours de langue chez les réfugiés syriens nouvellement arrivés dans l'Ouest canadien. Grâce à une enquête menée auprès de 624 réfugiés en Alberta, en Saskatchewan et au Manitoba, représentant 18 % de tous les arrivants dans la région, nous avons pu recueillir des informations sur les listes d'attente pour la formation linguistique et les projets d'emploi futur. Les résultats indiquent que les services linguistiques et d'emploi initiaux devraient être intégrés au moyen d'une approche globale pour que la réinstallation soit un succès.

INTRODUCTION

Canada's humanitarian traditions and legal obligations towards refugees have mobilized the government, local communities, service providers, researchers and academics to seek out and collaborate on best practices that can reinforce the successful integration of over 40,000 Syrian refugees arriving in just over one year (IRCC 2017). This group represents the largest number of resettled refugees since the arrival of over 60,000 Vietnamese, Laotian and Cambodians in 1979/80. Large numbers of people all arriving at the same time pose challenges for successful integration and resettlement and much of that work is done by settlement service providers. This paper examines the initial resettlement difficulties faced by Syrian refugees in Canada and plausible solutions for overcoming those challenges. It is based on a survey of 624 former Syrian refugees living in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba, who arrived as government assisted refugees and who have been in Canada for approximately two years or less.

Specific to the Syrian refugee resettlement is the enormous pressure created on the settlement service providers and volunteers in resettling hundreds of Syrians within a very short time (Friscolanti 2016, McMurdo 2016). Part of the challenge is helping the Syrians access the correct services as they are needed. Accessing these services has been noted as especially challenging for the government-assisted refugees (GARs) because they lack the social connections that privately sponsored refugees enjoy (McMurdo 2016). They are also among the most vulnerable. A recently released government report finds that GARs are less likely to have completed secondary or post-secondary education and are far less likely to have any knowledge of English or French prior to their arrival. This means additional challenges to accessing services compared with their privately sponsored refugee (PSR) counterparts.

Research shows that newcomers who receive access to employment, housing, education and language training upon arrival tend to settle and integrate at a faster rate than those who have to wait for services (Valenta and Bunar 2010). All these factors are not mutually exclusive but influence one another, such as a lack of language ability restraining newcomers from accessing employment opportunities. Language ability is significant as it makes accessing many services in the larger society, such as navigating housing options, medical and health related services, and so forth, much more challenging (Myles and Hou 2003, Wilkinson, et al. 2018).

Our structured interviews were conducted by the Refugee Assistance Program (RAP) service providers for 13 days in March 2017.[1,2] As the refugees were contacted through the RAP service providers, the vast majority of the participants are GARs and only 8% are PSRs. The survey instrument was designed to examine the barriers and service needs based on temporary and permanent housing situations, use of settlement services, language training and employment experiences of Syrian newcomers.

MAJOR INITIAL DIFFICULTIES IN SYRIAN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT

We asked newly arrived Syrians to list the most difficult aspects of resettling in Canada. The top six challenges included lack of training to get a job, difficulty finding work, credential and experience recognition, orientation to the Canadian economy, lack of links to employers and challenges learning English or French which are congruent with our previous studies (Wilkinson et al. 2017; Wilkinson et al. 2013). Examined together these challenges are mostly economic. The other service related challenges included both primary and secondary barriers such as lack of child-care facilities,

1 Our thanks to the following service provider organizations who conducted the interviews: Brooks and County Immigration Services, Calgary Catholic Immigration Society, Catholic Social Services (Edmonton), Catholic Social Services (Red Deer), Lethbridge Family Services-Immigrant Services, Moose Jaw Multicultural Council, Regina Open Door Society, Saskatoon Open Door Society, YWCA Prince Albert, La Société franco-manitobaine/Accueil francophone (Saint-Boniface), Manitoba Interfaith Immigration Council Inc. (Winnipeg), Westman Immigrant Services (Brandon).

2 Funding from Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada-Integration Branch is gratefully acknowledged.

financial difficulties, and transportation which prevent many refugees from accessing housing, language, employment and general resettlement related services (See Table 1 below). We examine each challenge more deeply below.

TABLE 1: DIFFICULTIES RESETTLING BY PROVINCE, SYRIAN REFUGEES, 2017

Reasons given	Alberta (AB)	Saskatchewan (SK)	Manitoba (MB)
Language classes	16%	66%	73%
Lack of information about services	-	15%	20%
Lack of childcare	-	61%	13%
Transportation	-	19%	15%
Financial Difficulties	-	2%	24%
Lack of services in your community	-	14%	6%
Skills/training to get a job	15%	-	-
Foreign credential recognition	14%	-	-
Orientation to Canadian economy	13%	-	-
Other	28%	3%	9%
Nothing, I was prepared	16%	-	-

LANGUAGE NEEDS AND CHALLENGES

Almost all of the refugees (97%) we interviewed indicated their mother tongue as Arabic and only 7% could speak some English prior to their arrival to Canada. Within the first three months in Canada, 60% are already enrolled in an English class but most did not attend until 7 and 9 months after arrival.

Those who were not currently in an English language class were asked to explain the reasons why. They told us that they planned to attend classes but were still not on a wait list (4%), or were currently on a wait list (3%), and 2% indicated they did not plan to attend an English language class. Respondents who chose not to attend the language classes indicated that they needed more advanced training in English than what is offered. Basic English funded classes are not high enough to allow professionally trained refugees gain higher employment.

Syrians who could not attend the classes indicated reasons such as class time conflicts with work schedule, long waiting lists especially in larger urban centres, unavailability of language classes in rural areas, and child minding not being appropriate for some refugee women and children who have been traumatized. Although the numbers of people not attending English language classes were small, some differences between the sexes were evident. As Table 2 reveals, females (SK 6%, MB 4%) were more likely than males (SK 1%, MB 0%) to be on a waitlist. Of these, females were also more likely to plan to attend English language classes (AB 10%, SK 8%, MB 9%) than males (AB 1%, SK 0%, MB 4%). Survey data indicates that females (76%) were slightly less likely to attend free language classes than their male counterparts (83%) in all provinces. The main reasons being the presence of small children or inadequate access to child care, increasing their numbers in the wait list or intending to enroll in English classes in the future when compared with men.

TABLE 2: REASONS FOR NOT ATTENDING ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASS BY PROVINCE AND SEX, SYRIAN REFUGEES, 2017

Reasons given	Alberta (AB)		Saskatchewan (SK)		Manitoba (MB)	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Currently on wait list	5%	4%	1%	6%	1%	6%
Plan to attend	1%	10%	0%	8%	0%	8%
No plans to attend	11%	11%	2%	3%	2%	3%
Attending	83%	75%	97%	83%	97%	83%

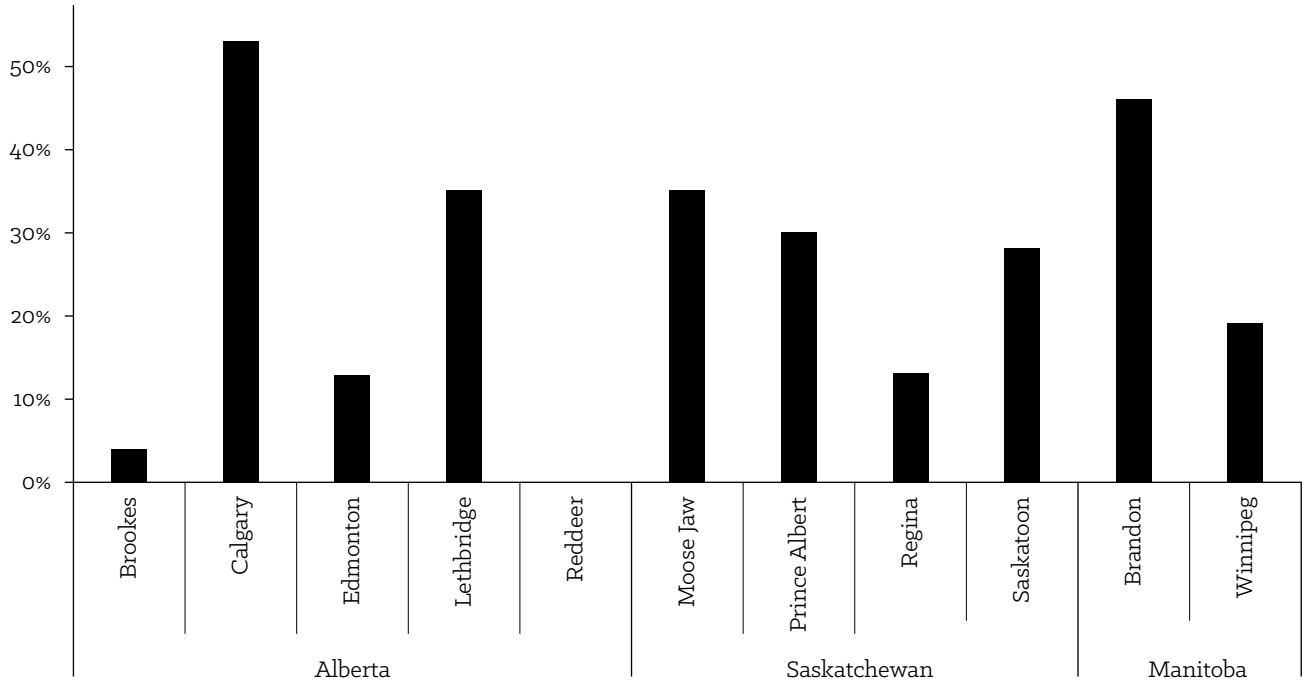
Women are usually assigned to take up the responsibility of the household and childrearing and this negatively influences their ability to access English language classes. When women have delayed or difficult access to language classes, their integration into the larger society is slower and they have difficulty when raising their children who are more likely to become fluent in the language much faster. This may lead to additional family discord and disfunction.

EMPLOYMENT NEEDS AND CHALLENGES

Low proficiency in official languages is the greatest hindrance to finding employment among newcomers (Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants 2012). Long-term joblessness rusts skills, saps motivation and deters prospective employers. High levels of unemployment and insecure employment experienced by refugee populations deter integration among newcomers, which in turn might cause higher rates of morbidity and mortality (Nobleman 2014). Joblessness affects mental health and long-term wellbeing. Thus, employment acts as a major indicator for achieving refugee integration within host societies.

Males are more likely than females to report challenges finding work but this is because more males than females were looking for work at the time of the survey. Table 3 shows the differences by city of residence in use of employment search services. Over half of those interviewed in Alberta indicated they had not sought services to help them find jobs. In Saskatchewan, fewer participants in Regina and Saskatoon had used employment services than those living in Moose Jaw or Prince Albert. In Manitoba, 25% of the refugees interviewed indicated they had used an employment service of some sort. Whereas, 45% of refugees of Brandon indicated that they have accessed such services, only 18% of their counterparts in Winnipeg did so. These low figures are understandable as the vast majority of our participants were still in English language training at the time of the interview.

Table 3: Employment Service Use by city, Syrian Refugees 2017



Source: UN, World Population Prospects, 2017 revision

The main difficulties accessing employment services are language problems, transportation to the job, and lack of foreign credential recognition. Some indicated that employers would not hire them because they did not have "Canadian" experience. A few of the participants were bewildered about how to apply for jobs online because they had very little experience using computers before. Other challenges include gaps in their employment record, being less likely to speak English, no previous job references and lack of Canadian education. Over all, there are very few refugee specific employment initiatives within the present resettlement process.

CONCLUSION: LANGUAGE AND EMPLOYMENT SERVICE RELATED RECOMMENDATIONS

Language and employment are related to one another as it is nearly impossible to find good stable work without speaking the local language. Bleakley and Chin (2004) suggest that the causal effects of poor language learning on employment earnings are large and very real. Official language fluency is the second most important determinant of immigrant occupational success after possession of a relevant university degree (Sheilds 2003). Ability to understand spoken English is more important to labour market integration than speaking, writing and reading it (Skuderud 2012). For every month waiting for language training, unemployment increases by four months challenging the overall integration within the host society. English language for professionnels should be introduced within the language training programs, giving more emphasis on the spoken English skills to assist those with professional skills to retrain and regain work in their field. Refugees having difficulty attending classes should be provided with options of online English language training which would be helpful for those located outside of large urban centres. All places offering language training should provide more child-caring services as there is strong evidence that this would assist more women in attending classes.

On the employment front, getting any job quickly raises self-worth, self-esteem and fitting in, provides secure income, brings people off welfare, and reduces mental health problems (Legrain, 2017). In addition to speeding up refugees' full participation in society, employment helps raise self-esteem and speed integration. Quick access to English language training (at all levels), on-site-on-the-job language training, access to any work quickly by matching skilled refugees with potential employers, providing higher level language training to assist in gaining better employment and increasing mentoring programs can together hasten the process of refugee integration.

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