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# THE ECONOMIC INTEGRATION OF REFUGEES IN CANADA: A MIXED RECORD?

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By Lori Wilkinson and Joseph Garcea

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April 2017

## Acknowledgments

The authors gratefully acknowledge the comments provided by Maria Vincenza Desiderio, Kate Hooper, and Susan Fratzke of the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) that made this a much stronger report. The editorial assistance of Lauren Shaw is also gratefully acknowledged. The authors also thank colleagues who assisted on various aspects of the Western Canadian Settlement Survey, including Li Zong at the University of Saskatchewan, Leah Hamilton at Mount Royal University, and Victoria Esses at Western University. Thanks also go to the Social Science Research Laboratory at the University of Saskatchewan and the Population Research Laboratory at the University of Alberta. Finally, thanks go to the officials at Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) and researchers at MPI for their invaluable observations and suggestions, and to Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) Western Region for their funding support of the Western Canadian Settlement Survey.

This research was commissioned by the Transatlantic Council on Migration, an MPI initiative, for its sixteenth plenary meeting, held in Toronto in June 2016. The meeting's theme was "The Other Side of the Asylum and Resettlement Coin: Investing in Refugees' Success along the Migration Continuum," and this report was among those that informed the Council's discussions.

The Council is a unique deliberative body that examines vital policy issues and informs migration policymaking processes in North America and Europe. The Council's work is generously supported by the following foundations and governments: Open Society Foundations, Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Barrow Cadbury Trust, the Luso-American Development Foundation, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, and the governments of Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden.

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Cover Design: Danielle Tinker, MPI  
Typesetting: Liz Heimann, MPI

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Suggested citation: Wilkinson, Lori and Joseph Garcea. 2017. *The Economic Integration of Refugees in Canada: A Mixed Record?* Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.



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## Executive Summary

During the last decade, Canada has resettled more than 10,000 refugees per year, a significant share of the country's overall annual intake of 20,000 to 35,000 refugees through both asylum and resettlement channels. Since the fall of 2015, resettlement has risen dramatically as the new government committed itself to admitting at least 25,000 Syrian refugees to Canada—a goal accomplished by the end of February 2016. As Canada expands its resettlement efforts, ensuring the labor-market integration and self-sufficiency of these new arrivals will be one of the major challenges.

Refugees in Canada have experienced mixed success when it comes to economic outcomes. While their employment status and income levels do, on average, catch up to those of native-born Canadians over time, with most eventually achieving a middle-class lifestyle, full integration can still take more than a decade. In the interim, refugees tend to experience higher rates of unemployment than other immigrant groups as well as the native born. Moreover, refugees tend to have lower incomes, are more likely to rely on social assistance, and more frequently find work in jobs for which they are overqualified.

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Although the factors that shape refugees' labor-market integration and outcomes are complex and multifaceted, two key factors tend to limit their success:

- **Language.** Refugees with knowledge of English or French are more likely to find employment or to be employed at a skill level commensurate with their experience.
- **Education.** Higher education, particularly if completed in Canada, generally improves the prospects of refugees for finding jobs and increasing their income.

Tailored services are available to newcomers in order to help them overcome some of these barriers. Refugees receive income support and targeted orientation and training programs during their first year in Canada. These services are designed to help them settle in to their communities, connect with mainstream services, and access needed language education or workforce preparation (such as credential recognition).

Nevertheless, barriers persist that make it difficult for refugees to take advantage of the full range of supports and benefits these programs provide. These obstacles include a lack of capacity on the part of service providers that prevents them from enrolling all who need support; insufficient, outdated, or inaccurate information refugees may receive from unofficial sources regarding available services; a lack of convenient and affordable transportation, particularly in rural areas; and financial constraints that make it difficult for refugees to take time away from work, forgoing needed income, in order to invest in training and personal development.

Eliminating, or at least minimizing, these barriers will help improve the effectiveness of settlement services for refugees. To do so, authorities should (1) ensure that all resettled refugees are aware of and have accurate information about the services available to them; (2) provide translation services at all settlement service agencies; (3) and provide settlement agencies with funding to cover the transportation costs refugees incur in accessing services, particularly in rural areas. Policymakers should also consider how economic integration programs can be improved to better match refugees with employment opportunities.



Improving foreign credential recognition processes with an eye to the unique challenges refugees face in documenting their qualifications is another way to facilitate this goal. Such steps can further strengthen and reinforce the Canadian refugee settlement service infrastructure that has developed over decades, making sure it adapts to the changing demographics and needs of new arrivals.

## I. Introduction

Despite its relative geographic isolation from the conflicts in the Middle East and Africa that currently produce most of the world's refugees, Canada has not been untouched by the global displacement crisis. While fewer refugees have made their own way to Canadian shores than to Europe or the United States, Canada has for years been a generous host to refugees brought in through a set of resettlement and asylum programs that admit between 20,000 and 35,000 individuals each year.<sup>1</sup>

In the fall of 2015, the Canadian government expanded its commitment to resettlement, pledging to resettle an additional 25,000 Syrian refugees—a goal it met by the end of February 2016. As these newcomers begin to settle into their new communities and homes, ensuring that they are included in the Canadian labor market and able to support themselves and their families with a sustainable wage will be critical.

This report is intended to serve two interrelated purposes. First, it provides an overview of the scope and determinants of the labor-market integration outcomes of refugees who arrived in Canada in the recent past. The second purpose is to highlight lessons that can be drawn from the Canadian experience and that may prove useful to national and local policymakers and service providers, in Canada and elsewhere, as they seek to better understand factors that foster positive labor-market outcomes for refugees and other immigrants. The analysis is based largely on two major surveys of refugees and immigrants conducted during the last decade that focused on various aspects of integration, including economic and labor-market integration.<sup>2</sup>

After providing an overview of the key components and features of the Canadian refugee resettlement system, this report identifies the primary characteristics of recent refugee arrivals to Canada. It then examines available data on the labor-market integration and outcomes of refugees, and the factors that may explain these outcomes. The report concludes by offering recommendations on ways policymakers could improve Canada's integration efforts.

## II. Types and Number of Refugees Resettled in Canada

As the second largest resettlement country globally, Canada has an extremely diverse resettlement program, offering a range of pathways through which refugees arrive in the country. This section provides an introduction to the types of refugee programs that operate in Canada and an overview of the key characteristics of the refugees who have been resettled in recent years.

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1 Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), "Facts and Figures 2014—Immigration Overview: Permanent Residents," updated August 1, 2015, [www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/statistics/facts2014/](http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/statistics/facts2014/).

2 The two surveys used are the Pan Canadian Settlement Survey and the Western Canadian Resettlement Survey. Other data, including those from the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada (LSIC) and the Longitudinal Immigration Database (IMDB), are available but were not used due to the dated nature of this data (LSIC was last conducted in 2004) and the short timeframe of the present study (accessing IMDB data requires more time).



## A. Types of Refugee Programs

Canada has two major refugee programs.<sup>3</sup> The first is the In-Canada Asylum Program (ICAP), which is designed for persons seeking asylum after they have entered Canada (i.e., traditional asylum). ICAP provides refugee status to claimants in Canada who have a well-founded fear of persecution, torture, or cruel punishment should they return to their countries of origin or habitual residence. The second major program is the Refugee and Humanitarian Resettlement Program (RHRP), which is designed for persons seeking admission as refugees from outside Canada.<sup>4</sup> Persons within the RHRP may be resettled to Canada within one of two refugee classes. The first is the Convention Refugees Abroad Class, which includes people outside their country of origin who meet the internationally recognized definition of a refugee as someone with a well-founded fear of persecution.<sup>5</sup> The second is the Country of Asylum Class, which includes persons who are affected by armed conflict or massive violations of human rights and who are identified by the Canadian government as victims of persecution, but are not necessarily recognized by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as such.<sup>6</sup>

The RHRP is further divided into three major categories of sponsorship, which entail differing levels and types of assistance:<sup>7</sup>

- **Government Assisted Refugees (GARs).** GARs are largely members of the Convention Refugees Abroad Class, and in a few instances also members of the Country of Asylum Class who have been identified as refugees with special needs. The resettlement of GARs is entirely supported by the Government of Canada or Quebec, depending on where they are settled, for up to one year from the date of arrival in Canada or until the refugees are able to support themselves, whichever happens first.
- **Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSR)**<sup>8</sup> Within this program, private individuals and organizations are responsible for receiving, orienting, and supporting refugees at all stages of the resettlement process. Groups that perform such a sponsorship function are often faith-based, ethnic-based, or public organizations that have signed an agreement with either the federal or Quebec government, although any group of five adults who meet the minimum support requirements may also sponsor a refugee.<sup>9</sup> Refugees are identified for resettlement by sponsors rather than the federal government, though government authorities must approve refugees' application for settlement.
- **Shared sponsorship programs.** Canada has two shared government-private sponsorship programs: the Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) program and the Joint Assistance Sponsorship (JAS) program. BVOR refugees are identified by UNHCR and referred to private sponsors by federal government visa officers.<sup>10</sup> The JAS program is designed to facilitate collaborative assistance between the federal government and private sponsorship agreement

3 IRCC, "How Canada's Refugee System Works," updated April 3, 2017, [www.cic.gc.ca/english/refugees/canada.asp](http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/refugees/canada.asp).

4 IRCC, "Resettlement from Outside Canada," updated July 19, 2016, [www.cic.gc.ca/english/refugees/outside/](http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/refugees/outside/).

5 The internationally recognized definition of a refugee, and thus the Convention Refugees Abroad Class, describe persecution as based on race, religion, political opinion, nationality, or membership in a particular social group (e.g., women or persons with a particular sexual orientation). See IRCC, "Resettlement from Outside Canada."

6 Ibid.

7 Details on these programs can be found at IRCC, "Guide to the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program—3. Additional Sponsorship Opportunities," updated May 16, 2016, [www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/publications/ref-sponsor/section-3.asp](http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/publications/ref-sponsor/section-3.asp).

8 Canada's Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSR) program was the first of its kind to be established in any country, and one of the very few that exist today. See Judith Kumin, *Welcoming Engagement: How Private Sponsorship Can Strengthen Refugee Resettlement in the European Union* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2015), [www.migrationpolicy.org/research/welcoming-engagement-how-private-sponsorship-can-strengthen-refugee-resettlement-european](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/welcoming-engagement-how-private-sponsorship-can-strengthen-refugee-resettlement-european).

9 Quebec also has its own version of the PSR program, introduced in 1997, which is similar to the Canadian program.

10 IRCC, "Blended Visa Office-Referred Program—Sponsoring Refugees," updated August 30, 2016, [www.cic.gc.ca/english/refugees/sponsor/vor.asp](http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/refugees/sponsor/vor.asp).



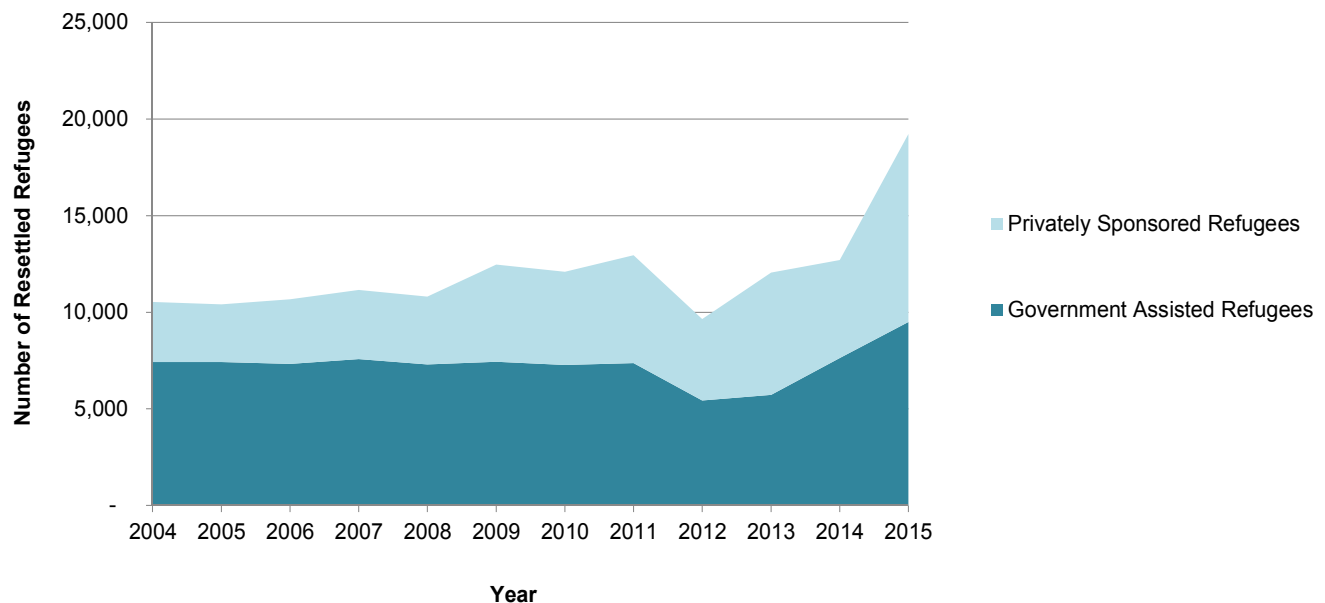
holders in providing settlement support to government-assisted refugees with special needs, such as trauma or medical disabilities. Responsibility for these cases is thus shared between the government and sponsors.

### B. Refugee Flows and Characteristics

Since 2005, Canada has resettled 163,644 refugees. As Figure 1 shows, both GAR and PSR admissions to Canada increased slowly between 2004 and 2015. Over the same period, the number of persons granted refugee status each year after arriving in Canada and applying for asylum varied considerably from a low of 9,700 in 2012 to a high of 19,000 in 2015.<sup>11</sup> Although Canada receives refugees from many regions of the world, Syrian refugees were prioritized for resettlement in 2016. Responding to mounting public pressure, the Canadian government pledged in late 2015 that it would quickly resettle 25,000 refugees from Syria, a goal it accomplished four months later.

More than 60 percent of all refugees admitted to Canada since 2005 have been GARs, who outnumber PSRs more than 2 to 1. Starting in 2009, however, the government attempted to increase the share of PSR admissions—a decision based largely on two major considerations. First, policymakers believed providing more resettlement places through private sponsorship would reduce costs to the government because private sponsors would shoulder more of the financial responsibilities. Second, some limited evidence suggests that PSRs may find work and become self-sufficient more quickly than GARs. This argument has been bolstered by a prevailing assumption that PSRs were likely to have a higher rate of success in economic integration because they have access, through their sponsors, to a broader network of people who will support their integration and help them find employment.

**Figure 1. Refugees Resettled to Canada, by Year and Resettlement Program, 2004–15**



*Notes:* Data for 2015 are preliminary estimates and are subject to change. For 2004–14, these are updated numbers and different from those published by Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) in *Facts and Figures 2015*. The number of total refugee claimants for 2015 is not yet available.

*Source:* Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), “Immigrant Landing File” (dataset provided to authors by special request, CR-16-0095, IRCC, Ottawa, March 2016).

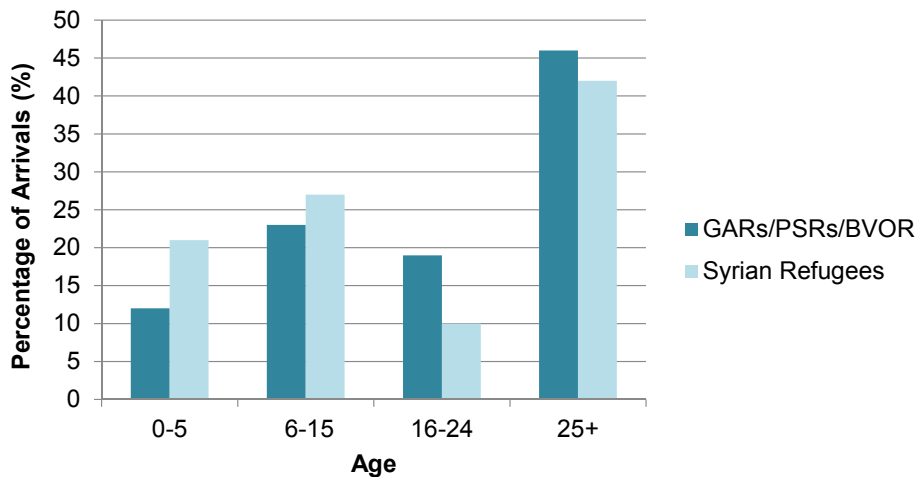
11 IRCC, “Immigrant Landing File” (dataset provided to authors by special request, CR-16-0095, IRCC, Ottawa, March 2016).





Refugees to Canada, as elsewhere, are on average young (see Figure 2). One-third of refugees arrive in Canada before their 16th birthday. Another 24 percent arrive between the ages of 16 and 24. Thus, less than half of arrivals (46 percent) are over the age of 25. Among the most recent arrivals, Syrian refugees are significantly younger than prior refugee cohorts. Those resettled through the GAR and BVOR classes in particular tend to be very young; approximately two-thirds of GARs and BVOR arrivals are under the age of 25.<sup>12</sup>

**Figure 2. Refugee Age at Arrival, Syrians and GARs/PSRs/BVORs, Various Years\***



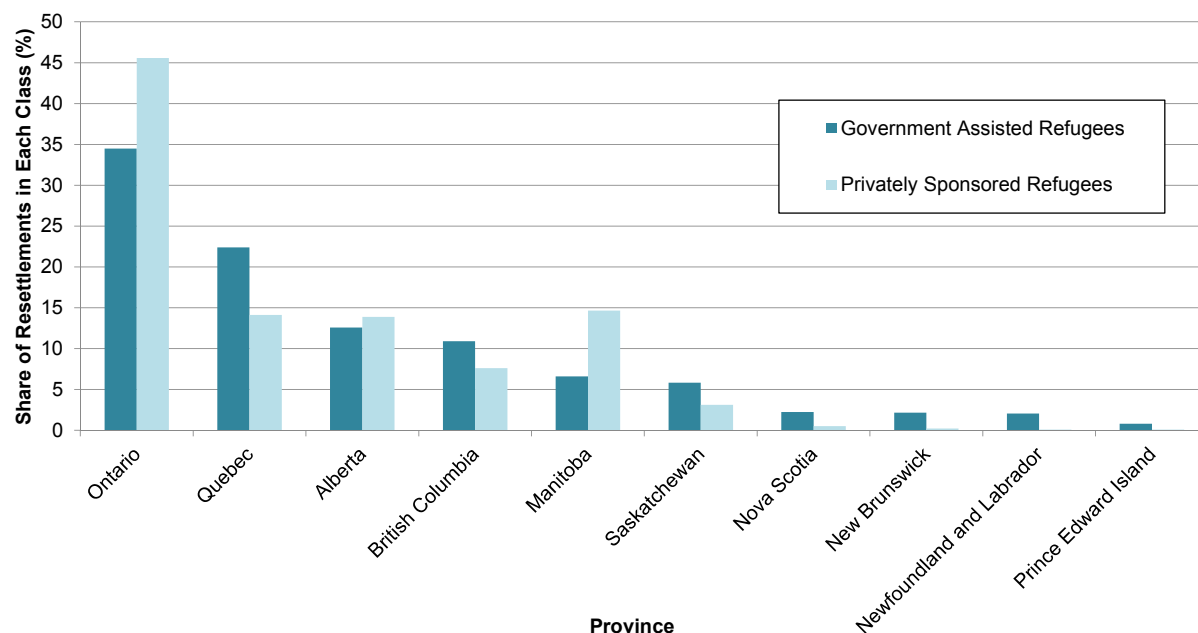
GARs = Government Assisted Refugees; PSR = Privately Sponsored Refugees; BVOR = Blended Visa Office-Referred.  
*Note:*\* Data for Syrian refugees represent the average ages for arrivals between November 4, 2015 and March 1, 2016. Data for GARs/PSRs/BVORs represent the average for arrivals between 2004 and 2015.  
*Source:* IRCC, “Immigrant Landing File.”

Figure 3 shows the distribution of GARs and PSRs across Canadian provinces. Ontario, the most populous province, receives the largest share of refugees in both classes, taking 34 percent of all GARs and 46 percent of PSRs resettled in Canada.<sup>13</sup>

Smaller provinces also play an important role in resettlement. Manitoba, a province of slightly more than 1 million inhabitants, hosts the second largest share of PSRs (15 percent), followed by the much more populous Alberta and Quebec. Manitoba’s status as a leading resettlement destination is due in large part to its well-established refugee resettlement sector; several communities in the province have longstanding legacies of receiving resettled refugees dating back to the early part of the 20th century. For example, the city of Winnipeg, which is home to more than half of the population of the entire province, has had a large and active private sponsorship community for the past two decades. To date, Ontario has received the largest proportion of Syrian refugees in the GAR (43 percent) and BVOR (54 percent) classes, while Quebec, the second most populous province in the country, has received the largest share of PSRs (43 percent).

<sup>12</sup> This difference is partly due to differences in how the dependents of refugees are counted. At first glance, Government Assisted Refugee (GAR) families appear to be larger and have younger children. This difference is largely a product of record-keeping: if the family is sponsored under either the PSR or the Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) programs, dependent children ages 18 or older are counted separately because they are considered adults.

<sup>13</sup> Quebec, the second most populous province in Canada, receives approximately 22 percent of GARs, as stipulated in its bilateral agreement with the federal government. See IRCC, “Immigrant Landing File.”

**Figure 3. Distribution of Refugees across Canadian Provinces, by Entrance Class, 2004–15**

Note: Data for 2015 are preliminary estimates and are subject to change.

Source: IRCC, "Immigrant Landing File."

### III. Settlement and Integration Services for Refugees

Refugees resettled to Canada are eligible for services provided within the scope of three major categories of support programs. While these programs are distinct, there can be some overlap at times in the functions they serve. Collectively, these three categories constitute what is referred to as the refugee programs and services network or web, which is designed to contribute to the successful resettlement, orientation, and integration of refugees in Canada.

#### A. Resettlement Assistance Programs

The first category consists of programs designed specifically for resettled refugees, at the heart of which are supports provided through the three refugee sponsorship channels, as well as the travel loans program and the interim health program. Most refugees are eligible for these programs for one year from the time of arrival; for some categories of refugees with special needs, the eligibility period can be extended for up to two or three years.

##### I. Government Assisted Refugees

GARs receive various supports through several programs, including:

- **The Immigrant Loans Program (ILP).** Under the ILP, GARs are eligible for travel loans, should they need them. The loans are designed to cover the costs of medical examination before



departing for Canada, acquisition of travel documents such as passports, and transportation to Canada. The loans must be repaid within six years of arrival.

- ***The Interim Federal Health Care Program (IFHCP)***. Through the IFHCP, GARs—as well as other categories of refugees and asylum recipients—are eligible for limited, temporary health care coverage, for which they may not otherwise be eligible under provincial or territorial public health insurance plans.
- ***The Refugee Assistance Program (RAP)***. Within the scope of RAP, refugees are eligible for basic services and income support. These include reception upon arrival at the airport or port of entry; temporary accommodation; help in finding permanent accommodation; acquiring basic household items; and general orientation to life in Canada. Refugees are also provided with assistance in finding employment and meeting other special needs, such as prenatal care or accommodations for a disability. GARs receive income support for up to one year after they arrive in Canada or until they become self-supporting, whichever happens first. If they have not been able to reach self-sufficiency after one year, they become eligible for social assistance provided by provincial and territorial governments.

## 2. Privately Sponsored Refugees

PSRs may access some of the same services and supports as GARs from the federal government (e.g., transportation loans and interim federal health care services), but not others (e.g., federal income support). They do not qualify for the specialized services and supports available to GARs within the scope of the federal RAP program or the comparable program in Quebec. Consequently, PSRs are highly dependent on their sponsors for similar types of support. Sponsors are expected to provide support at the same level as refugees would receive from social services. However, there is no mandated minimum level, and the extent to which privately sponsored refugees receive such services and supports from their sponsors varies; in other words, sponsors can do as much or as little in addition to what is required under the PSR agreement. Frequently, sponsors will contribute significant extra time and financial resources to settling their families. The notable exception is the minimum level of income support that must be provided by private sponsors, which is expected to be at least equal to the social assistance rates in the province where the refugee lives.

## 3. Shared Sponsorship Programs

Settlement support for refugees who enter under the Blended Visa Office-Referred program is shared between the federal government and private sponsors. The federal government provides the first six months of income support, after which the refugee's private sponsor provides up to six months of additional income support and various reception, orientation, and settlement services, as well as any social and emotional support required.

JAS program refugees receive the same forms and levels of assistance from the federal government as GARs. However, unlike GARs, they are eligible to receive such support for up to 24 months, and possibly as long as 36 months, depending on their circumstances. Private sponsors provide reception and settlement assistance, as well as orientation and additional support as refugees adjust to life in Canada, but the federal government provides income support.

## B. Settlement and Integration Programs

The second category of supports consists of general settlement and integration programs that are available to all categories of immigrants and are intended to facilitate social and economic integration.



Such programs include information and referral programs<sup>14</sup>; orientation to Canada and the local community; language training for social, educational, and employment purposes; and employment-related programs that focus on, among other things, orientation to Canadian workplaces, job searches, work-related skill development, and job mentorship preparation and placement. Information and orientation programs are the most frequently used, and almost one-quarter of all clients to access these programs are refugees.<sup>15</sup>

Eligible refugees can, at least in theory, access most of those programs from the time they become permanent residents until they become Canadian citizens. In practice, high demand for services, the need for childcare, and clashes between work schedules and service hours likely limit the ability of some permanent residents to access services.

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In all provinces and territories, the principal responsibility for funding settlement and integration programs rests with the federal government. However, in some instances, as in Quebec, provincial governments provide supplemental funding for particular programs.<sup>16</sup> Settlement and integration services funded by the federal government are monitored and periodically evaluated. Usually, the evaluations consist of interviews with staff and clients, and in some instances they also include surveys of clients. Agencies that provide services backed by federal funding must also submit extensive quarterly reports to Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC).

### C. Mainstream Public Services

The third category of supports consists of the various mainstream public services for which refugees and their family members are eligible. This includes programs that are available to the general public that are either completely free or subsidized to some extent by one or more orders of government. The most notable of these are the various public education programs and health care programs that serve a broad cross-section of the Canadian public. For instance, programs that are available for children with autism are also available to refugees who need similar assistance. This category also encompasses income support programs, including the employment insurance program, social assistance programs, and various pension programs.<sup>17</sup> In summary, once the first year of federally funded services ends, most refugees become eligible for the services available to other residents of Canada.

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14 Referral programs offer, for example, referrals to educational specialists, mental health specialists, and physicians or other health care specialists.

15 Author phone interview with an IRCC policy officer, July 28, 2016.

16 In Quebec, the funding arrangements for such programs are unique; rather than contracting agencies to provide such services, the federal government transfers the funds to the provincial government because, as stipulated by the *Canada-Quebec Accord Relating to Immigration and the Temporary Admission of Aliens*, the latter is responsible for the actual procurement or provision of the settlement and integration services. See Government of Canada and Government of Québec, “Canada-Quebec Accord Relating to Immigration and Temporary Admission of Aliens,” February 5, 1991, [www.cic.gc.ca/ENGLISH/department/laws-policy/agreements/quebec/can-que.asp](http://www.cic.gc.ca/ENGLISH/department/laws-policy/agreements/quebec/can-que.asp).

17 These pension programs include the employment-based Canada Pension Plan (CPP) and Quebec Pension Plan (QPP) as well as the age-based Old Age Security (OAS) and Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS).



## IV. Understanding Refugee Labor-Market Integration

Data on refugee labor-market integration and outcomes tend to be limited in scope and are often dated.<sup>18</sup> Much of the focus among researchers has been on issues such as language acquisition and service needs due to mental health, trauma, and social integration. What is known is based largely on surveys conducted by academics or IRCC-backed program evaluations.<sup>19</sup> Further complicating matters, data collected on immigration and released for research purposes often do not differentiate between refugees and other immigrants. And even when datasets do identify refugees, they are unlikely to differentiate GARs from PSRs and BVORs. Another challenge stems from the highly restrictive confidentiality policies that make the scant data that are available very difficult for researchers and service providers to obtain.

Two recent studies have produced data that allows some comparison of the differences between refugees and other newcomers—the Pan Canadian Settlement Survey and the Western Canadian Settlement Survey (see Box 1).<sup>20</sup> The findings of these studies suggest that refugees have very different lives in Canada and that there are noticeable differences within the refugee population, particularly between GARs and PSRs. This section draws on these studies and other available data, where relevant, to examine refugees' economic integration and outcomes.

### Box 1. The Pan Canadian Settlement Survey and the Western Canadian Settlement Survey

The Pan Canadian Settlement Survey was conducted in 2012 and was a simple random sample of more than 20,000 refugees and other immigrants who arrived in Canada between 2007 and 2012. It provides rich detail on various aspects related to integration and access to settlement services. The Western Canadian Settlement Survey, in which the authors of this report were involved, is a simple random sample of 3,000 newcomers who arrived between 2008 and 2013 from the most prominent countries of origin for immigrants and refugees at that time (including Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iraq, Somalia, and Sudan). It was limited to newcomers who arrived in the four westernmost provinces (Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan), as well as a small number residing in the three northern territories. Together, these four provinces receive approximately 41 percent of all newcomers to Canada and about 28 percent of all refugees.

Sources: Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), "Facts and Figures 2014—Immigration Overview: Permanent Residents," updated August 1, 2015, [www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/statistics/facts2014/](http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/statistics/facts2014/); Lori Wilkinson et al., *Triangulation Study Final Report* (Ottawa: Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2015); Province of British Columbia, *Pan Canadian Settlement Survey* (Victoria: Province of British Columbia, 2012).

### A. Employment Rates

Existing evidence suggests that entering the labor market is a difficult task for most refugees. Overall, their unemployment rate remains higher than that of other immigrant groups in Canada even five years after arrival.<sup>21</sup> While refugees do eventually experience, on average, employment rates and incomes that are

18 As noted previously, IMDB is perhaps the best source of data on the labor-market and economic conditions of refugees, but the short timeframe of this study did not allow for a full analysis of this data, though this report cites many examples that use IMDB data. The LSIC is another valuable dataset, but because data collection ended in 2004, the survey does not give an adequately up-to-date picture of conditions for refugees in the Canadian labor market today.

19 IRCC, "Evaluation of Government Assisted Refugees (GAR) and Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP)," updated October 7, 2011, [www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/evaluation/gar-rap/index.asp](http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/evaluation/gar-rap/index.asp); IRCC, "2015–16 Reports on Plans and Priorities (RPP) – Supplementary Information Tables," updated March 30, 2013, [www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/publications/rpp/2015-2016/supplementary-tables.asp](http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/publications/rpp/2015-2016/supplementary-tables.asp).

20 Neither of these datasets has been made public; they were provided to the authors for research purposes.

21 Lori Wilkinson et al., *Triangulation Study Final Report* (Ottawa: Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2015).

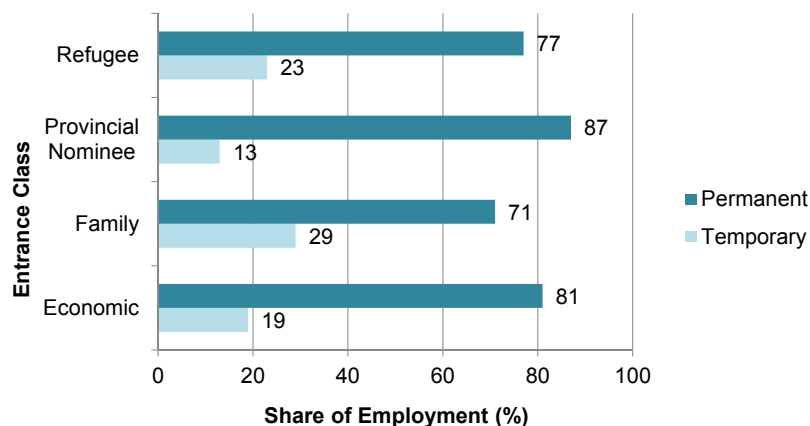


equivalent to the Canadian average (both for other newcomers and for persons born in Canada),<sup>22</sup> it can take years or even decades to reach this point. On average, it takes between 12 and 15 years for refugees to fully integrate into the Canadian labor market.<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, a study of youth employment among refugees ages 20 to 29 found that refugee youth are less likely to be employed than both other immigrants from the same country and youth born in Canada.<sup>24</sup> Among young females, only 46 percent of refugees were employed compared with 88 percent of immigrants and 72 percent of Canadian-born youth. And among young males, 67 percent of refugees were employed compared to 80 percent of immigrants and 74 percent of native-born youth.

Results from the Western Canadian Settlement Survey confirm findings from other studies regarding the types of employment refugees and other immigrants find. As Figures 4 and 5 show, newcomers who enter Canada as refugees or as family-class immigrants are significantly more likely than other immigrants to work temporary jobs.<sup>25</sup> Among refugees, 25 percent of males and 23 percent of females held temporary jobs as of 2013.<sup>26</sup> Both temporary employment and part-time jobs, which are also disproportionately common among refugees, are less desirable than full-time positions because they tend to pay lower wages.

**Figure 4. Temporary versus Permanent Employment for Female Newcomers to Western Canada, by Entrance Class, 2013**



Note: Provincial nominees are immigrants who are nominated by a province for expedited admission to Canada. Immigrants in this category often have a job in place or a skillset that is in high demand.

Source: Lori Wilkinson, Joseph Garcea, and Jill Bucklaschuk, *2015 Western Canadian Settlement Survey Final Report* (Ottawa: Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2015).

22 Peter S. Li, "Initial Earnings and Catch-Up Capacity of Immigrants," *Canadian Public Policy* 29, no. 3 (2003): 319–37; Peter Li et al., *Short-Term, Medium-Term and Long-Term Economic Performance of Immigrants* (Alberta: Prairie Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Integration, 2005), [www.ualberta.ca/~pcerji/Virtual%20Library/FinalReports/Economic%20Domain.pdf](http://www.ualberta.ca/~pcerji/Virtual%20Library/FinalReports/Economic%20Domain.pdf).

23 Pieter Bevelander and Ravi Pendakur, "The Labour Market Integration of Refugee and Family Reunion Immigrants: A Comparison of Sweden and Canada" (discussion paper no. 6924, Institute for the Study of Labor, Bonn, Germany, 2012) <http://ftp.iza.org/dp6924.pdf>; Daniel Hiebert, "The Economic Integration of Immigrants in Metro Vancouver" (working paper no. 09-08, Metropolis British Columbia Center of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Diversity, Vancouver, September 2009), [www.mbc.metropolis.net/assets/uploads/files/wp/2009/WP09-08.pdf](http://www.mbc.metropolis.net/assets/uploads/files/wp/2009/WP09-08.pdf).

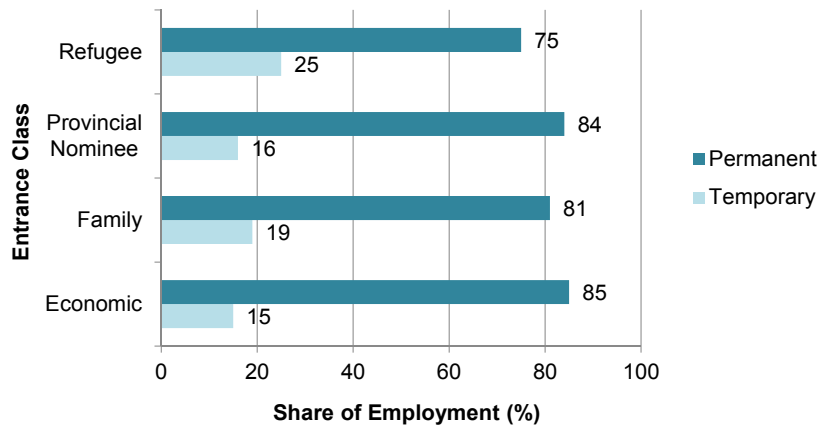
24 Lori Wilkinson, "The Labor Market Transitions of Immigrant-Born, Refugee-Born, and Canadian-Born Youth," *Canadian Review of Sociology* 45, no. 2 (2008): 151–76.

25 Temporary jobs have an ending point and are unstable sources of employment. Many of these jobs are seasonal or dependent on short-term contracts. Part-time jobs can be more stable although wages are usually low.

26 Wilkinson et al., *Triangulation Study Final Report*.



**Figure 5. Temporary versus Permanent Employment for Male Newcomers to Western Canada, by Entrance Class, 2013**



*Note:* Provincial nominees are immigrants who are nominated by a province for expedited admission to Canada. Immigrants in this category often have a job in place or a skillset that is in high demand.

*Source:* Wilkinson, Garcea, and Bucklaschuk, 2015 *Western Canadian Settlement Survey Final Report*.

According to the Western Canadian Settlement Survey, 82 percent of adult refugees found employment within their first five years in Canada, with males more likely than females to hold a job at some point during this time. Those from Africa, Asia, and Central America were more likely to be employed than those from Europe or the Middle East.<sup>27</sup> The overall unemployment rate for refugees in this study was 11 percent higher than for Canadians, while refugees from Middle Eastern countries had the highest rate of unemployment of all refugee groups. The Western Canadian Settlement Study, like other studies, also showed the unemployment rate of refugees to be higher than that of other immigrant groups in most provinces. Figure 6 shows that refugees in Saskatchewan had the highest unemployment rate five years after arrival (28 percent), followed by refugees in British Columbia (19 percent); those in Alberta had the lowest rate of all refugees in the study, at 6 percent. Interestingly, the unemployment rate for refugees in Manitoba (11 percent) was lower than that of skilled workers who were selected for their labor-market integration potential—likely due in part to the province’s extensive experience resettling refugees.

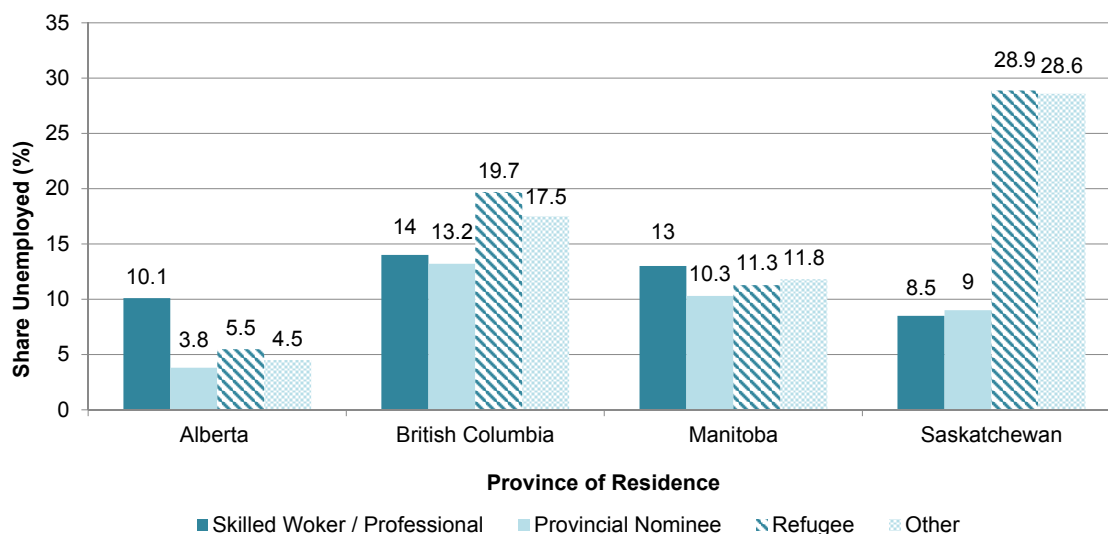
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*Refugee employment is influenced by factors that go beyond how well a particular provincial economy is performing.*

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While a correlation does exist between refugee unemployment rates and general economic conditions in these provinces, it is by no means a perfect correlation (as evidenced by the high unemployment rate of refugees in British Columbia). This suggests that refugee employment is influenced by factors that go beyond how well a particular provincial economy is performing or how many employment opportunities are available there.

<sup>27</sup> Harvey Krahn, Tracey Derwing, Marlene Mulder, and Lori Wilkinson, “Educated and Underemployed: Refugee Integration into the Canadian Labour Market,” *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 1, no. 1 (2000): 59–84.

**Figure 6. Unemployment Rate of Newcomers to Western Canada, by Province and Class of Entry, 2013**


Notes: Newcomers are defined in this dataset as immigrants who have resided in Canada for fewer than five years. Provincial nominees are immigrants who are nominated by a province for expedited admission to Canada. Immigrants in this category often have a job in place or a skillset that is in high demand.

Source: Wilkinson, Garcea, and Bucklaschuk, 2015 *Western Canadian Settlement Survey Final Report*.

## B. Income and Self-Sufficiency

Compared with other immigrant groups, the income of refugees is middling. They do not earn as much as immigrants who enter Canada through the economic class, such as self-employed persons, skilled workers, and entrepreneurs. A study using longitudinal data confirms these observations.<sup>28</sup> Of all immigrant classes, GARs had the lowest income levels at slightly more than CAD 18,000 per year five years after arrival; PSRs did slightly better, earning nearly CAD 24,000 per year after the same length of residence. Ten years after arrival, however, both groups were earning CAD 27,000 per year on average, a figure that is still CAD 14,000 below the average income of workers born in Canada.<sup>29</sup> However, refugees earn as much as, and sometimes even more than, family-class immigrants.<sup>30</sup> Researchers have suggested that one of the key factors that may account for the difference in income levels between refugees and family-class immigrants is that refugees are more likely to access language training and settlement services that help them find employment and advance in their careers.<sup>31</sup>

Refugees are also the most likely among immigrant group to collect some form of social assistance payments. For example, they are two times more likely to collect social welfare payments than family-class immigrants,<sup>32</sup> and they are more likely to collect employment insurance than other immigrant groups.<sup>33</sup> The rate at which refugees collect these social assistance payments peaks three years after arrival and declines thereafter.<sup>34</sup> According to IRCC, refugees make up a disproportionately large share

28 Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC), *Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada* (Ottawa: CIC, 2006).

29 Bevelander and Pendakur, "The Labour Market Integration of Refugee and Family Reunion Immigrants"; Hiebert, "The Economic Integration of Immigrants in Metro Vancouver."

30 Bevelander and Pendakur, "The Labour Market Integration of Refugee and Family Reunion Immigrants"; Abdurrahman Aydemir, "Immigrant Selection and Short-Term Labour Market Outcomes by Visa Category," *Journal of Population Economics* 24, no. 2 (2011): 451–75.

31 Bevelander and Pendakur, "The Labour Market Integration of Refugee and Family Reunion Immigrants"; Hiebert, "The Economic Integration of Immigrants in Metro Vancouver."

32 Don DeVoretz, Sergiy Pivnenko, and Morton Beiser, "The Economic Experiences of Refugees in Canada" (discussion paper no. 1088, Institute for the Study of Labor, Bonn, Germany, 2004), <http://repec.iza.org/dp1088.pdf>.

33 Ibid.

34 Bill Marr and Pierre L. Siklos, "Propensity of Canada's Foreign-Born to Claim Unemployment Insurance Benefits," *International Migration* 39, no. 1 (2001): 89–110.



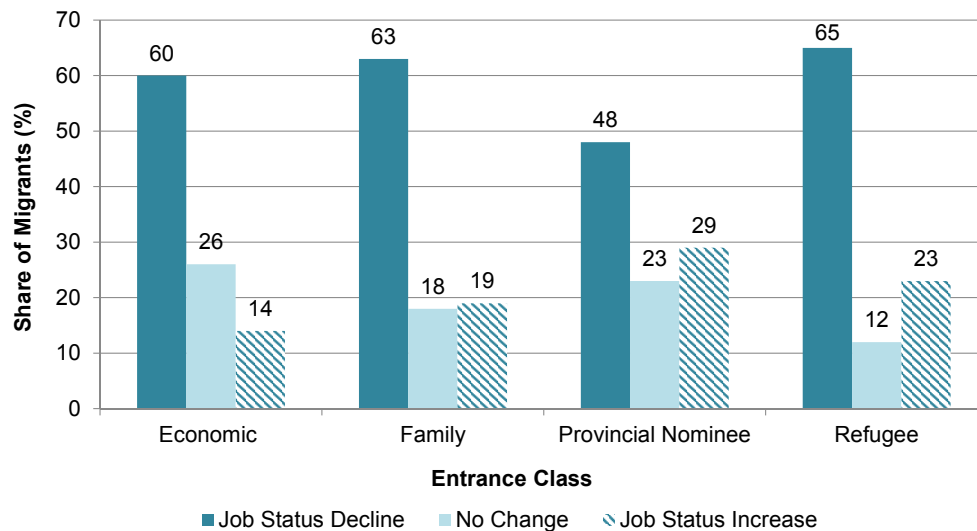


of settlement service users, representing 21.9 percent of users despite being only 10.9 percent of all newcomers.<sup>35</sup>

### C. Occupational Status and Underemployment

The majority of newcomers to Canada, at least within their first five years of residence, work at jobs for which they are overqualified. The Resettlement of Refugees to Alberta study reveals that of the 39 percent of refugees who had held a professional job before coming to Canada, only 7 percent found comparable work within five years of settling in the province.<sup>36</sup> Figures 7 and 8 show the degree to which this underemployment affected female and male newcomers in Western Canada during their first five years in the country. Overall, refugees experienced a greater degree of occupational status decline than other immigrant groups, with 65 percent of refugee females and 54 percent of refugee males working in jobs for which they are significantly overqualified. Interestingly, however, 23 percent of female refugees and 21 percent of male refugees were actually working at jobs significantly better in terms of occupational status and income than the ones they had left behind.<sup>37</sup>

**Figure 7. Job Status Declines among Female Newcomers, by Entrance Class, 2013**



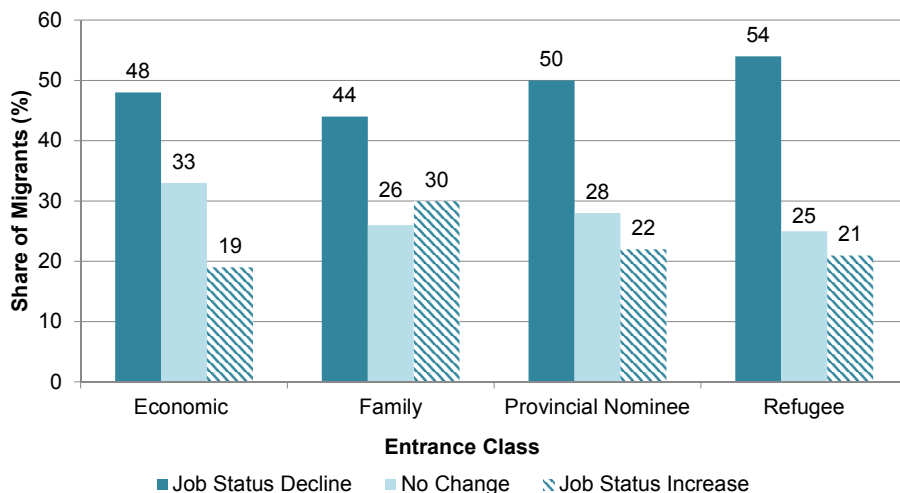
*Note:* Provincial nominees are immigrants who are nominated by a province for expedited admission to Canada. Immigrants in this category often have a job in place or a skillset that is in high demand.

*Source:* Wilkinson, Garcea, and Bucklaschuk, 2015 *Western Canadian Settlement Survey Final Report*.

<sup>35</sup> Author phone interview with an IRCC policy officer, July 28, 2016.

<sup>36</sup> Marr and Siklos, "Propensity of Canada's Foreign-Born to Claim Unemployment Insurance Benefits."

<sup>37</sup> Wilkinson et al., *Triangulation Study Final Report*.

**Figure 8. Job Status Declines among Male Newcomers, by Entrance Class, 2013**

*Note:* Provincial nominees are immigrants who are nominated by a province for expedited admission to Canada. Immigrants in this category often have a job in place or a skillset that is in high demand.

*Source:* Wilkinson, Garcea, and Bucklaschuk, 2015 *Western Canadian Settlement Survey Final Report*.

## V. Explaining Refugee Economic Integration and Outcomes

Differences in economic integration between refugees and other immigrants are shaped by a variety of influences. This section considers some of the possible explanatory factors that may contribute to refugees' labor-market outcomes.

### A. Language Knowledge and Education Levels

Language is one of the biggest predictors of labor-market success among refugees. Those who can speak English or French upon arrival or who quickly become proficient<sup>38</sup> are likely to enter the labor market sooner and with longer-term success. But unlike immigrants who enter the country through the economic class, about 80 percent of whom know one of Canada's official languages prior to arrival, only 30 percent of refugees speak either English or French and some are illiterate in their own language.<sup>39</sup> It takes time to master a new language, particularly when language classes conflict with work schedules. Refugees may also experience delays accessing the language classes needed to build proficiency as in some major Canadian cities waitlists can be more than 12 months long.<sup>40</sup>

Education also plays an important role in the economic integration of refugees. Findings from the Western Canadian Settlement Survey suggest that those refugees who successfully found work commensurate with their professional experience and qualifications tended to be university educated or have acquired additional training in Canada. They were also more likely to be able to speak English or French upon arrival. Among young newcomers, those who had acquired a postsecondary education in Canada, were

38 Jean Renaud and Jean-Francois Godin, "The Impact of Non-Governmental Organizations and Language Skills on the Employability of Refugee Claimants: Evidence from Quebec," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 34, no. 1 (2002): 112–31.

39 IRCC, "Facts and Figures 2014."

40 Nicholas Keung, "Honeymoon for Syrian Refugees Over as 'Month 13' Looms," *Toronto Star*, December 10, 2016, [www.thestar.com/news/immigration/2016/12/10/honeymoon-for-syrian-refugees-over-as-month-13-looms.html](http://www.thestar.com/news/immigration/2016/12/10/honeymoon-for-syrian-refugees-over-as-month-13-looms.html).



government assisted, or had some knowledge of English or French on arrival were the most likely to be employed.<sup>41</sup> Early evidence indicates that recent GARs from Syria are far less likely than previous refugee cohorts to hold any type of postsecondary education or know English or French prior to arrival in Canada.<sup>42</sup> These differences suggest that their economic integration may be more difficult and take more time than it has been for other groups of refugees.

IRCC data indicate that the level of education among recent Syrian child and teen arrivals is worrisome.<sup>43</sup> More than 40 percent of these youth (ages 15 and under) have never been to school. This group, like others before it, has had significant periods of disrupted schooling due to conflict, during transit, and while living in refugee camps. These gaps, and the resulting likelihood that they may be illiterate in their own language, will make learning a new language and catching up in school difficult for these young arrivals.

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*Refugees are more likely than any other newcomer group to arrive without job-ready skills suited to the Canadian labor market.*

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Among Syrian refugee adults, only 58 percent hold a high school diploma or higher degree.<sup>44</sup> In the Canadian knowledge-based economy, this will pose problems for some adults looking for work that pays a family-sustaining wage. Refugees are more likely than any other newcomer group to arrive without job-ready skills suited to the Canadian labor market. Together, these factors put them in a precarious situation and may prolong their successful economic integration. On a positive note, however, longitudinal research on 608 Southeast Asian refugees in Toronto has suggested that even the most illiterate and undereducated refugees can find work with decent pay within their first five years in Canada.<sup>45</sup>

## **B. Recognition of Credentials and Work Experience**

Researchers<sup>46</sup> have found that the economic outcomes of refugees, as well as of other newcomers, are affected by whether an individual's education or credentials were earned in Canada or elsewhere. Immigrants with foreign-earned qualifications may find it difficult to translate or have their credentials recognized by employers. Credential recognition programs can mitigate these challenges, though problems remain in how to effectively operate such initiatives at scale, particularly as professions in Canada are largely self-regulating. For example, each province has its own regulatory body for professional nurses, such as the College and Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta. This body, in partnership with universities in the province, helps foreign-trained nurses identify gaps in their training, fill them

41 Wilkinson, "The Labor Market Transitions of Immigrant-Born, Refugee-Born, and Canadian-Born Youth."

42 IRCC documents indicate that the majority of Syrian refugees cannot speak English or French prior to their resettlement. Their knowledge of French is particularly limited, with less than 3 percent of PSRs and less than 1 percent of GARs able to speak the language. More Syrians know English; 57 percent of those admitted as PSRs and 23 percent of GARs had some knowledge of the language prior to arrival. Children and teens are less likely to know either language than adult refugees, though research demonstrates that these younger arrivals more quickly acquire proficiency after arrival. See IRCC, *Syrian Refugee Profile: Addendum-January 2016* (Ottawa: IRCC, 2016), [www.immigratemanitoba.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Syrian-Refugee-Profile-Addendum-January-2016.pdf](http://www.immigratemanitoba.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Syrian-Refugee-Profile-Addendum-January-2016.pdf).

43 However, IRCC has also noted that education data, particularly on language, are based on self-assessment and/or observations made by selection officers, rather than language test scores or evaluations. See IRCC, *Syrian Refugee Profile*.

44 Data on degree completion share the same limitations as those on language proficiency, as they too are based on self-reporting rather than official evaluations or documentation of education completed.

45 Feng Hou and Morton Beiser, "Learning the Language of a New Country: A Ten-Year Study of English Acquisition by South-East Asian Refugees in Canada," *International Migration* 44, no. 1 (2006): 135–65.

46 Philip Kelly, Lualhati Marcelino, and Catherine Mulas, *Foreign Credential Recognition: Research Synthesis, 2009–2013* (Toronto: Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Settlement, 2014), <http://ceris.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/CERIS-Research-Synthesis-on-Foreign-Credential-Recognition.pdf>.



with appropriate education, and become certified to practice in Alberta. However, this recertification process—like those in other provinces and professions—can be long and expensive, and would-be nurses often express frustration at the barriers they face when seeking to reenter their profession.

Many refugees have also noted a preference among employers for Canadian work or educational experience, citing it as a significant barrier to employment.<sup>47</sup> A lack of Canadian experience has also been identified as an issue by other immigrant adults, and by immigrant and refugee youth making the school-to-work transitions; young refugees who have acquired at least some of their education in Canada tend to have better income and job outcomes compared those educated abroad.<sup>48</sup> On top of this, refugees face a unique set of barriers as they may not have documentation of their credentials, the educational institutions from which they were earned may no longer exist, and record of their training may have been lost or destroyed.

### C. Economic Conditions and Time of Arrival

Economic conditions within Canada at the time of arrival can also play a substantial role in shaping the economic integration and outcomes of refugees. Thus, for example, the most recent cohort of refugees may take even longer to integrate into the labor market than previous cohorts because of the relatively poor economic conditions in the years after the 2008 financial crisis. Understanding and preparing for the cyclical nature of the economy's performance will help the government and settlement service providers better assist refugees as they find their footing in the Canadian labor market.

In seeking to understand outcome differences between recent and earlier groups of refugees, some experts have pointed out that refugee populations' countries of origin and demographic composition are significantly different now than they were in previous decades. These differences are largely a product of shifting conditions in refugee-producing regions and the ebb and flow of conflicts. For example, in 1994 only 13 percent of refugees were from Africa and the Middle East, while 42 percent were from Asia and 37 percent from Europe.<sup>49</sup> By contrast, in 2014 refugees from Africa and the Middle East comprised 60 percent of those resettled to Canada and only 18 percent were from Asia.<sup>50</sup> Large flows of refugees from extremely impoverished regions and those experiencing protracted refugee-producing situations, such as Somalia and Eritrea, tend to result in increased health and integration needs; newcomers from such areas are less likely to have formal education, work experience, or job training—all factors that make their integration into the labor market more difficult.

The economic performance of refugees is not, however, simply a function of their places of origin or educational and employment backgrounds. A recent report by IRCC<sup>51</sup> suggests that the income of recently arrived cohorts of newcomers—both refugees and other immigrants—has declined relative to that of groups who arrived in previous decades. The report attributes this change to the decline in the strength of the Canadian economy rather than to the educational and employment backgrounds of newcomers. Broadly, newcomer incomes increase during times of economic growth and decline in periods of economic stagnation or recession.

47 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *UNHCR Mid-Year Trends 2015* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2015), [www.unhcr.org/56701b969.html](http://www.unhcr.org/56701b969.html); IRCC, "Facts and Figures 2014."

48 Sean Lauer et al., "Immigrant Youth and Employment: Lessons Learned from the Analysis of LSIC and 82 Lived Stories," *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 13, no. 1 (2012): 1–19; Peter Li, *Destination Canada: Immigration Debates and Issues* (Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2003); Gurchan S. Basran and Li Zong, "Devaluation of Foreign Credentials as Perceived by Visible Minority Professional Immigrants," *Canadian Ethnic Studies Journal* 30, no. 3 (1998): 7–23; Jeffrey Reitz, "Tapping Immigrants' Skills: New Directions for Canadian Immigration Policy in the Knowledge Economy," *Law and Business Review of the Americas* 11, no. 3/4 (2005): 409–32.

49 Calculations by the author using data from Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC), *Citizenship and Immigration Statistics 1994* (Ottawa: CIC, 1995).

50 IRCC, "Facts and Figures 2014."

51 Feng Hou and Garnett Picot, *Changing Immigrant Characteristics and Entry Earnings* (Ottawa: IRCC, 2016), [www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11f0019m/11f0019m2016374-eng.htm](http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11f0019m/11f0019m2016374-eng.htm).



#### D. *Type of Sponsorship: Government-Assisted versus Privately Sponsored Refugees*

Refugees may also experience different economic outcomes depending on whether they arrived as PSRs or GARs. A 2007 evaluation by Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) reveals<sup>52</sup> some differences in the time it takes refugees from each class to become economically independent. According to the evaluation, PSRs were more likely to have earnings from employment than GARs, and their earnings were higher, though this gap narrowed after three years (from CAD 6,000 a year more to CAD 1,000).<sup>53</sup> And the earnings of GARs and PSRs do tend to converge with the average income of persons born in Canada in the longer term; in the 2007 evaluation, this occurred after 15 years of residence<sup>54</sup>—a pattern largely supported by other studies.<sup>55</sup>

The CIC evaluation also finds that PSRs enter the labor market more quickly than GARs, though this is likely because PSRs more often have some level of proficiency in one or both of the official languages when compared to GARs,<sup>56</sup> and that the personalized assistance provided by their sponsors may make early entry into the labor market more feasible. Some studies have suggested that the income support given to GARs during the first year may further delay their labor-market entry. This is because under the RAP program, the level of financial support GARs receive is reduced once they obtain employment earnings equal to or greater than 50 percent of their RAP guaranteed income support.<sup>57</sup>

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*Employment rates among PSRs tend to be a bit higher than for GARs until they converge about 4 years after arrival.*

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This pattern of slightly quicker self-sufficiency among PSRs is reflected in other studies. For example, Don DeVoretz<sup>58</sup> and his colleagues found that PSRs out-earned GARs and other refugee groups seven years after arrival. Similarly, data from the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada, conducted between 2002 and 2004, suggest that PSRs are the most likely to be employed two years after arrival compared with GARs (69 percent versus 47 percent). Conversely, GARs were more likely to be receiving social assistance at the two-year point than their PSR counterparts (73 percent versus 33 percent).<sup>59</sup> And according to the 2007 CIC evaluation, employment rates among PSRs tend to be a bit higher than for GARs until they converge about 4 years after arrival. Analysis of tax records among refugees reveals that 71 percent of PSRs were employed within the first year of their arrival while only 45 percent of GARs had found employment in the same timeframe.<sup>60</sup>

The trend of PSR success over GARs in the labor market, however, does not hold for all refugee age groups. A study of refugee youth ages 20 to 29 reveals that young GARs are more likely to be employed than their PSR peers.<sup>61</sup> This may be due in part to the fact that GARs tend to hold fewer financial assets upon arrival than PSRs, making it all the more important for them to enter the labor market immediately upon arrival rather than pursuing training or educational opportunities.

52 CIC, *Summative Evaluation of the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program: Final Report* (Ottawa: CIC, 2007), [www.cic.gc.ca/ENGLISH/resources/evaluation/psrp/psrp-summary.asp](http://www.cic.gc.ca/ENGLISH/resources/evaluation/psrp/psrp-summary.asp).

53 Ibid.

54 Data acquired via an access to information request for IRCC, *Summary of Preliminary Findings: Iraqi Resettlement (2009-2014) Case Study, Ministerial Briefing* (Ottawa: IRCC, 2016).

55 Arnold DeSilva, "Earnings of Immigrant Classes in the Early 1980s in Canada: A Reexamination," *Canadian Public Policy* 23, no. 2 (1997): 179–202.

56 CIC, *Summative Evaluation of the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program*.

57 Data acquired via an access to information request for IRCC, *Summary of Preliminary Findings: Iraqi Resettlement*.

58 DeVoretz, Pivnenko, and Beiser, "The Economic Experience of Refugees in Canada."

59 Ibid.

60 CIC, *Summative Evaluation of the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program*.

61 Wilkinson, "The Labor Market Transitions of Immigrant-Born, Refugee-Born, and Canadian-Born Youth"; IRCC, "Immigrant Landing File."



## E. The Role of Settlement Services and Economic Integration Policies

Relatively few studies have examined the causal linkage between the type and extent of services accessed by refugees and their labor-market integration and economic outcomes. This dearth of research is due at least in part to the difficulty of measuring the relationship between settlement services and integration outcomes. Outcomes are highly influenced by the characteristics of the individuals who access support services, making it difficult to determine what is attributable to program inputs and what is not. Additionally, refugees may forget they accessed a particular service or what kind of help they received, leading to significant under-reporting of service use.<sup>62</sup>

Research to date has, however, pointed to a number of common difficulties that prevent refugees from accessing the full benefits of the services that are available. Several of these barriers are the result of the way programs have been designed or delivered.<sup>63</sup>

- **Insufficient information about rights and availability of services.** Refugee respondents to various surveys have stated that they were not aware of many of the settlement services available to them, a problem experienced more often by PSRs than GARs. This is despite the efforts of governmental and nonprofit agencies to provide all refugees with information about these programs.<sup>64</sup> Refugees, like many other immigrants, tend to get most of their information on such matters from family members and friends.<sup>65</sup> Recommendations received from these trusted personal sources—though usually provided in good faith and familiarity with the individual refugee’s needs—are often based on limited, inaccurate, or outdated information. As a result, many settlement service providers report that some refugees experience significant problems accessing appropriate services because they are provided inaccurate information by those close to them. In some cases, this can markedly delay the integration process.
- **Lack of transportation.** Without a driver’s license or access to a vehicle, many refugees rely on public transportation within the first year of their arrival. In cities where public transportation is affordable and accessible, this is not a problem. However, this can create significant challenges for refugees who settle in small municipalities, some of which lack public transportation and where services may be far away. In Saskatchewan, for example, services such as a language class can be up to 100 kilometers or an hour’s drive from where a refugee lives. Similarly, the lack of accessible and affordable transportation to places where employment opportunities are available can be a barrier for refugees seeking work.

62 Recently introduced IRCC requirements will make it much easier to measure immigrant and refugee use of services as, in order to receive funding, settlement service agencies must enter all clients into the iCARE administrative system. This change will make it possible to track the number and length of services accessed. That said, many examples of qualitative evaluations of settlement services already exist, and most organizations undertake their own evaluations as part of good practice and to include with annual reports to IRCC and other funding bodies.

63 Wilkinson et al., *Triangulation Study Final Report*; Western Region Working Group, *Pan Canadian Settlement Survey* (Toronto: Canadian Immigrant Settlement Sector Alliance-Alliance canadienne du secteur de l’établissement des immigrants, 2012); Lucia Lo et al., *Are Degrees/Diplomas from Inside and Outside of Canada Valued Differently in the Labour Market?* (Toronto: Toronto Immigrant Employment Data Initiative, 2010), [www.yorku.ca/tiedi/pubreports14.html](http://www.yorku.ca/tiedi/pubreports14.html); Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI), *Making Ontario Home 2012: A Study of Settlement and Integration Services for Immigrants and Refugees* (Toronto: OCASI, 2012), [www.ocasi.org/downloads/OCASI\\_MOH\\_ENGLISH.pdf](http://www.ocasi.org/downloads/OCASI_MOH_ENGLISH.pdf). The Western Canadian Settlement Outcomes Survey was the result of collaboration between the Western Consortium on Integration, Citizenship, and Social Cohesion (headed by Lori Wilkinson, Joseph Garcea, and Li Zong) and the Pathways to Prosperity Partnership (Victoria Esses and Leah Hamilton). Funding for the project was received from CIC Western Region, and contact data was obtained from CIC National Headquarters.

64 Wilkinson et al., *Triangulation Study Final Report*.

65 This is evident from the results of the Western Canadian Settlement Survey, in which the majority of respondents (57 percent) indicated they received their information from their family and friends; another (53 percent) received it from websites, blogs, or discussions (29 percent); and (28 percent) received it from community-based settlement service agencies. See Lori Wilkinson, Joseph Garcea, and Jill Bucklaschuk, *2015 Western Canadian Settlement Survey Final Report* (Ottawa: CIC, 2015).



- **Inability to take time off work.** Some refugees are unable to take time off work to access integration services as doing so would mean forgoing needed income.<sup>66</sup> Many are engaged in shift work with irregular hours and may thus find it difficult to access services during the day or even in the evening, depending on their schedule—a level of variability that makes it hard for service organizations to meet the needs of all potential refugee clients. This situation became amply evident in one study, where researchers interviewed some refugees at 2:00 AM in order to catch them between shifts or between jobs.<sup>67</sup>
- **Lack of capacity among service providers.** Long waiting lists and other constraints can also hinder refugee access to needed services. One-third of participants in the Western Canadian Settlement Survey and recently resettled Syrian refugees in large urban centers both reported encountering such barriers.<sup>68</sup> Many programmatic limitations were attributed to funding shortfalls that restricted the number of refugees who could access certain services or participate in programs, such as language courses.<sup>69</sup>
- **Language barriers.** According to the Western Canadian Settlement Survey, refugees who do not speak English or French were less likely to use available services, in part because they were not aware or did not believe that translation would be available.<sup>70</sup> Another one-third of survey respondents were unsure where to go to get help—a problem more often experienced by GARs than PSRs, who may benefit in this regard from guidance from their sponsors.

Refugees may also have personal reasons for choosing not to access settlement services. Foremost among these reasons are: (1) not all refugees need services, particularly if they are relatively self-sufficient; (2) refugees have different levels of understanding of the potential value different services may offer; (3) differences in how confident and comfortable individuals are with accessing services; and (4) different cultural values regarding the services (e.g., of women accessing certain types of services).

Refugees who do access integration services have generally indicated that they are relatively satisfied. Indeed, the Western Canadian Settlement Survey noted that refugees are both more likely to access services and to report being satisfied with them compared to all other newcomer groups in Canada,<sup>71</sup> findings that corroborate those of the Pan Canadian Settlement Survey conducted a year earlier. Three out of four refugee respondents to the Western Canadian Settlement Survey were extremely satisfied with the type, availability, and quality of the services available to them.<sup>72</sup> Another 21 percent felt moderately satisfied, with males more likely to express satisfaction (79 percent) than females (64 percent).

66 Krahn, Derwing, Mulder, and Wilkinson, “Educated and Underemployed.”

67 Lori Wilkinson, “The Integration of Refugee Youth in Canada” (dissertation, University of Alberta, Edmonton, 2001).

68 Waiting lists vary in length by region and by service. Those for language training services are some of the longest, and it is often the case that more people request direct employment assistance than can be served. Waiting lists also tend to be longer in larger cities and shorter in smaller municipalities, but that is not always the case. See Wilkinson, Garcea, and Bucklaschuk, *2015 Western Canadian Settlement Survey Final Report*.

69 Stephanie Levitz, “‘Our Hands Are Tied’: Funding Shortfall Means No English Classes for Syrian Refugees Over Summer,” CBC News, June 2, 2016, [www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/our-hands-are-tied-funding-shortfall-means-no-english-classes-for-syrian-refugees-over-summer-1.3613967](http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/our-hands-are-tied-funding-shortfall-means-no-english-classes-for-syrian-refugees-over-summer-1.3613967); Jackson Fojut, “Lost in Translation: Factors Influencing Newcomers’ Satisfaction with Language Learning Programs in Canada” (unpublished honors thesis, Department of Sociology, University of Manitoba, 2016).

70 Levitz, “Our Hands Are Tied.”

71 Western Region Working Group, *Pan Canadian Settlement Survey*.

72 Wilkinson et al., *Triangulation Study Final Report*.



## VI. Conclusions and Recommendations

Refugees in Canada face noticeable difficulties integrating into and succeeding in the Canadian labor market. On average, refugees tend to have lower employment rates and income levels than other categories of immigrants. They are also more likely to work in part-time or temporary jobs, or jobs for which they are overqualified. While many refugee settlement services and integration programs have improved over time, economic integration is still a relatively slow process, particularly when employment opportunities are constrained by economic stagnation or downturn.

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*The centrality of language and education underscores the importance of ensuring the availability and accessibility of settlement and integration services.*

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The personal characteristics of individual refugees, such as knowledge of a national language and level of education, play a key role in determining their labor-market outcomes. Individuals with language skills or postsecondary education—particularly if obtained in Canada—fare much better in terms of finding employment. The centrality of language and education underscores the importance of ensuring the availability and accessibility of settlement and integration services that help refugees become proficient in English or French, fill gaps in education, and better leverage foreign-earned credentials.

While existing services have many laudable features, Canadian policies and programs that support the economic integration of refugees still warrant some improvements. Particularly as group demographics shift and Canada welcomes substantial new flow of Syrian refugees, the number and types of services must be expanded and backed by adequate resources. At present, overextended settlement service organizations do not have the capacity to meet these additional demands, and refugees may be left to languish on waiting lists for essential services. Programs that are in particularly high demand, such as occupation-specific language courses, are often vastly oversubscribed. Expanding service offerings will require not only additional funding from the national government and, ideally, from provincial governments, but also an expansion of facilities and an increase in staffing levels.

Policymakers and service providers can also take several steps to eliminate, or at least minimize, the barriers that prevent refugees from accessing existing settlement and integration services:

- ***Make all refugees aware of services that are available.*** Refugees who rely heavily on well-meaning friends and family to obtain information about available services often fall victim to inaccurate or outdated advice. Program designers could consider how to provide settlement information directly to family, friends, and sponsors to ensure that refugees receive accurate and up-to-date information from sources they trust.
- ***Provide translation services at all settlement service agencies.*** The Canadian settlement sector works hard to provide services in as many languages as possible. However, research has shown that such services tend to be provided on a pro-bono or ad hoc basis, with a lack of funding to provide adequate linguistic services for all refugees. As refugees have identified language barriers as one of the main reasons for not accessing settlement services, more needs to be done on this front. Organizations may find value in creating partnerships so one translator, particularly if proficient in a lesser spoken language, can offer assistance to different programs or offices depending on current demand.





- **Reduce waiting lists for settlement services.** Because many settlement services are overstretched and oversubscribed, long waiting lists are a persistent problem. This is true of a number of services, but particularly of English and French language training programs. Increased funding is required to expand services and eliminate waiting lists.
- **Provide funding to cover transportation costs for refugees, particularly in rural areas.** Increasing financial support for community service providers to cover the costs of transportation (e.g., purchasing bulk bus and taxi passes), particularly where public transportation options are scarce, can enable more isolated refugees to access settlement services and employment opportunities.

In addition to improving the accessibility of existing services, policymakers should also consider how economic integration programs can be improved to better match refugees with employment opportunities. Such efforts may include:

- **Streamlining the process of recognizing foreign credentials.** For many refugees, a lack of Canadian work experience or education is a critical barrier to employment. While Canadian policymakers have made substantial investments in systems to recognize qualifications earned abroad, obstacles remain. In addition to challenges shared by other immigrants, many refugees find it difficult to access documents needed to prove their qualifications. In the near term, increased resources are needed by the organizations that assist newly arrived refugees in getting their credentials recognized. In the long term, Canadian and international policymakers could consider developing an international database through which individuals could register their degrees, certificates, and diplomas. This database could then be accessed by professional organizations and employers to verify educational records.
- **Increasing job training opportunities available to refugees within Canada.** On-the-job experience with a Canadian company or organization can be another way for refugees to prove their value to potential employers and learn about Canadian workplace norms. To this end, policymakers should consider expanding existing internship and mentorship programs. Existing opportunities vary by organization and province, and are usually oversubscribed and dependent on the willingness of individual employers to take part. Predicted labor shortages may make the idea of expanding such programs more appealing in some governmental agencies and industries. As part of this effort, policymakers should consider expanding the Federal Internship for Newcomers (FIN) program beyond the Ottawa-Gatineau region, the greater Toronto area, Vancouver, Victoria, and St. John's, and involving more governmental agencies and nongovernmental actors as partners.<sup>73</sup>
- **Improving services that match refugee jobseekers and potential employers.** Policymakers should consider taking a more active role in matching refugees with employers. Many employers have been vocal about their willingness to play their part in recent resettlement efforts, with several publicly announcing that they would like to hire newly arrived Syrian refugees. Providing job-matching support and increased funding to encourage more employers to hire newcomers, and particularly refugees, could prove a beneficial way to speed their labor-market integration.

Any effort to expand or diversify the integration services available to refugees must be undertaken carefully, however, as many other immigrant groups and citizens are also in need of labor-market support. Designing new services and expanding their accessibility in ways that benefits refugees, other

73 For information on the Federal Internship for Newcomers (FIN) program, see IRCC, "Apply for the Federal Internship for Newcomers Program," updated March 24, 2017, [www.cic.gc.ca/english/newcomers/work/fin.asp](http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/newcomers/work/fin.asp); CIC, "Private Partners Join Federal Internship for Newcomers Program" (press release, May 10, 2012, CIC, Ottawa), [www.canada.ca/en/news/archive/2012/05/private-partners-join-federal-internship-newcomers-program.html](http://www.canada.ca/en/news/archive/2012/05/private-partners-join-federal-internship-newcomers-program.html).



newcomers, and citizens alike is an important means of mitigating the tensions that tend to arise when refugees or other newcomers are perceived as receiving more support than other community members.

Finally, it is important to underscore that the success of the Canadian refugee resettlement system is largely due to the well-established and highly functional nature of the coordination between governmental and nongovernmental stakeholders, both within and beyond Canada. The long-term development of a robust web of policies and programs—which extend from the identification of refugees for resettlement and the certification of sponsors, to the supports available after arrival—has proven equally critical. Though room for improvement undoubtedly remains, this service infrastructure is the product of decades of diligent adjustments to the changing needs of refugee newcomers.



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