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## A Systematic Review of Refugee Integration in Canada



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### ABSTRACT

This systematic review of refugee integration and resettlement experiences in Canada is based on a review of 81 articles published from 2008 to 2017. The goal of the systematic review was to closely examine the experiences of refugees newly settled in Canada. Examination of the current literature revealed that refugees face barriers in economic, educational, social, and political integration. Implications for service providers are discussed.



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## INTRODUCTION

In November 2015 the Trudeau governed renamed its department of immigration from ‘Citizenship and Immigration Canada’ (CIC) to ‘Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada’ (IRCC). The inclusion of the word ‘refugees’ emphasizes the Canadian liberal government’s commitment to refugees and its pledge to resettle 25,000 Syrian refugees’ (1). In the same year, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that there were approximately 21.3 million refugees worldwide (2) and over 19 000 refugees were admitted into Canada on various types of sponsorship (3). See table 1.

**Table 1. Refugees Admitted into Canada in 2015 by Sponsorship Type**

Sponsorship Type	Number of Refugees Admitted
Government-Assisted	9 411
Private Sponsorship	9 350
Blended Visa-Office Referred	810

Refugees receive help from the government or their sponsor in resettlement issues including social, emotional, and financial needs upon their arrival in Canada. With an increasing number of refugees coming to Canada, there are many resettlement issues. Sponsorship periods typically last only a year, and newcomers are required to support themselves after this sponsorship period ends (4). Within their sponsorship year, most families are not able to support themselves financially (5). As jobs are difficult for refugees to secure due to lacking language skills, limited formal education, and failure from employers to accept foreign credentials and work experience, refugees often turn to welfare to support themselves (5). Therefore, refugees earn less income than when they were supported by a sponsor (5). However, problems with resettlement do not end with financial problems. There are inadequate social services related to language training and helping refugee children resettle in Canada (6). Additionally, service provision to refugees suffers as a result of lack of collaboration between service providers, the government, and the refugees; the system is very disconnected and as a result, refugees are left to seek out help on their own (7). The issue of refugee resettlement becomes more complicated when considering that refugees come to Canada on different types of sponsorships; differences between sponsorship groups put some refugees at a disadvantage, with private sponsored refugees having better resettlement outcomes compared to those sponsored by the government (8). Furthermore, the problem of

adequately aiding refugees in the resettlement process is a problem that may continue to grow if other host countries, such as the United States of America, continue to enact restrictions on the types and numbers of refugees to enter, resulting in an increase in refugees seeking refuge in Canada (9).

It is important to understand refugees' resettlement experiences in order to provide assistance that allows for an easier transition and quicker rates of establishment. As the number of refugees into Canada continues to grow, learning about resettlement experiences and making changes to policies, sponsorships, and available supports is needed more than ever.

## **METHODS**

This article is based on a systematic review of English-language, peer-reviewed, online accessible academic papers, published between 2008 and July of 2017. Western University's database was explored for all articles. Articles that were not relevant to economics, education, public health, social sciences, social welfare, social work or women's studies were eliminated. The following keywords were used when searching for relevant articles: refugee integration AND visible minorities OR visible minority, NOT indigenous. The geographical location of the search was limited to Canada only. The total number of papers reviewed was 175.

To select the final articles, the evaluation criteria of Westhues et al.'s was adapted (10). The author used a Likert type scale to rate articles based on its relevance to the topic. Articles were ranked using a 5-point scale, ranging from not relevant to highly relevant in providing information on refugee integration in Canada. A rank of one or two points meant that the article was not relevant, and was excluded immediately. A rank of three meant that the article was read again and if it contained relevant information, it was included. A rank of four or five was automatically included. The final selection included 81 journal articles that provided information about refugee integration in the areas of health, economics, education, housing, social support and politics in Canada.

A systematic analysis of 81 papers revealed the following themes: economic, education, health, social and political integration. In addition, the review identified the role of service providers in refugee resettlement. Due to space requirements, this paper focuses on economic, education, social and political integration.

## RESULTS

### Economic integration

Economic integration was often cited as the most important measure of integration within the literature (11-14). It is clear that within the literature economic integration is solely measured by having employment. This is perhaps a fair measure, as being employed may allow a refugee to be able to afford housing (15, 16) support their families, pay for childcare, and save for further education, in theory (17). However, upon further investigation, this means of measurement becomes vastly unfair when it becomes clear that being employed does not guarantee the ability to afford basic needs. When examining the economic integration of refugees, one must look deeper than simply if the individual is employed or unemployed. First, it is important to evaluate the many barriers refugees must surpass just to gain initial employment.

One of the largest and most cited barriers to refugees finding employment in Canada is the lack of foreign credential recognition by employers (14, 18-24). This issue is even greater for refugees compared to immigrants, as events such as wars or changes of power in their home countries may have destroyed documents, or whole institutions, leaving refugees without official paperwork (25). If refugees do come to Canada with high levels of education or certification from their home country, Canada employers do not recognize these credentials as valid. Guo argues that possessing foreign credentials is not automatically a bad thing to all employers, but rather only a problem when the refugee is non-white; rather than being an issue of questioning the validity of these credentials, it is a matter of discrimination (12). Wilkinson et al. support this notion as well, noting that employers are aware that getting an education in another country does not make it automatically invalid, but rather that they choose to not recognize these credentials due to their own racism and discrimination towards refugees (26).

Although research is lacking regarding racism and discrimination as the reason foreign credentials are not recognized (26), racism was often cited in the literature as a reason why migrants believed that they were not hired for jobs (18, 27-30) or why they were not able to advance in their current jobs (19, 31). In a study conducted by Frank, findings supported these beliefs, as evidence of racism was found to be present in the hiring process; in this

study, non-visible minorities found jobs matching their education levels faster than visible minority migrants (32).

Upon realizing that their credentials do not allow them to obtain employment in Canada, some migrants will choose to upgrade or redo their education in order to secure work (21). Although education is often cited as a gateway for migrants to obtain better employment opportunities (14, 15, 33-35) many other researchers have found the contrary; after getting an education for the first time or updating credentials, migrants were, at times, still unable to secure employment (20, 26, 36).

Despite having foreign credentials, and additional Canadian schooling, refugees still face further barriers to employment; employers stress the importance of Canadian work experience (20, 26, 36), while simultaneously failing to recognize any work experience from another country (14). Once again, a seemingly unbreakable cycle presents itself; in order to gain Canadian work experience, a refugee must be employed in Canada, but cannot gain employment without Canadian work experience.

To gain Canadian experience, newcomers turn to volunteer to supplement their lack of Canadian work experience. Unfortunately, the benefit of volunteering seems to have mixed findings. It was found that volunteering did not help migrants to find employment, although it was not a useless experience because it helped them to socially integrate into their communities (37). Interestingly, Lauer et al. found that even within their study, there were mixed findings on benefits of volunteering, with some participants claiming it did help them to find a job, and others stating that it did not help at all (28). These findings may indicate that volunteering may only be beneficial in aiding in obtaining employment under certain circumstances.

Unfortunately, in addition to the barriers already stated regarding finding employment, multiple demographic factors often prove to be barriers as well, with language being the biggest demographic barrier by far (14, 15, 31-33, 38). Some refugees even acknowledged that this barrier was a fair one, as they stated that they would not be able to perform their previous jobs now that they are in Canada due to their inability to speak English or French fluently (30).

Interestingly, Fuller and Martin found that limited language ability only affected some migrants-both women and university-educated men-but, not men who were looking for lower

level jobs (38). Fuller and Martin explained that the reason for this is likely that lower level jobs often do not require workers to have proficient language skills (38). This finding is troublesome because, while having income is necessary for survival, being trapped in a low-income job due to lacking language skills will not allow one to move up or ever increase their earnings.

Wilkinson et al. also investigated how language proficiency affects employment outcomes for migrants, but derived different conclusions from their findings (26). Although Wilkinson et al. found language skills and employment to be correlated, they believed that language is not, in fact, the problem, but that, once again, it is discrimination that is the real reason refugees who lack English or French language skills are not being hired (26). However, it was also noted that this belief needs to be researched further (26).

In addition to language, another demographic that appears to be a barrier to employment is gender (18, 21, 31) with women getting hired at slower rates than their male counterparts (33). Interestingly, Grenier and Xue note that females have improved chances of getting a job when they have a strong friend network, although the researchers are not sure why this occurs (33). When examining other studies, this finding is less surprising as this correlation has been found in other research as well; newcomers often report that they found jobs only because of help from their friends or family (28, 30). Contrary to these findings, Fuller and Martin found that friends did not, in fact, help refugees to secure employment, clearly showcasing that every situation is different, and friends and family may only be helpful in finding a job in certain circumstances (38).

Although friends were a more important resource as compared to agencies, some migrants did report using agencies to help secure employment. However, it was found that refugees only found agencies to be helpful with finding low paying or entry-level positions (28). While examining the use of agencies to aid in finding employment, a problem presents itself; although refugees often report not using agencies, they also report having a lack of knowledge surrounding the process of getting a job (14) as well as how to update credentials (30), communicate with employers (28, 39) and overall, have a lack of knowledge regarding the job market (28), all of which is information provided by organizations designed to help newcomers integrate into the Canadian workforce. Furthermore, they stated that getting a job was the one thing they needed the most help with regarding resettlement (12) with some migrants reporting that they were unable to obtain employment even after 3 years (15). This

leads to questions regarding the need, efficacy, and availability of service organizations and providers in helping refugees with their resettlement needs in a beneficial manner, which will be discussed in detail later in this review.

As showcased, the barriers to employment for refugees are cumbersome and difficult to overcome; with so many barriers present, large numbers of refugees face the problem of unemployment (14, 19, 21, 40) which ultimately delays integration as a whole. Unfortunately, even if a refugee is able to secure employment, many barriers to economic integration still exist, namely underemployment (18, 19, 21, 41). While some refugees may be able to secure a job that is equivalent to the type of job they held in their home country or better, it was found that it was far more likely that they would obtain employment that was lower quality than their previous employment (12). As noted in an article by Baffoe, there is something important to remember when examining the problem of underemployment for refugees (36). A look at this issue on a larger scale is needed; the problem it is not that refugees cannot get jobs in their previous fields at all, but rather that they are not getting jobs in their previous fields at a rate that they should be (36).

Without obtaining work in their previous field, refugees have few other options than lowering job position expectations, and the literature showed that after doing so, refugees were able to secure employment (21, 33). Unfortunately, by lowering their expectations, their skills become underutilized (26) and they are often working low paying jobs (21, 40), where satisfaction levels are very low, as refugees recognize that they have no chance to advance in their career (15, 28). In addition to low satisfaction, low paying jobs do not provide refugees with the amount of money they need to afford basic needs. Instead, newcomers are forced to take out bank loans to afford rent (15, 16). Consequently, due to their low paying jobs, they are often unable to pay back these loans, and their debt begins to increase faster than their income (15).

Being in dire financial situations is a serious reality for refugees; Guo conducted a study that found that over one-third of the refugees had a poverty level income (12). Carter and Osborne had similar findings, stating that most refugees in their study lived below poverty line (15). Additionally, on average Li and Li found that Canadian born people earn more than migrants, even though migrants often have better credentials (23) and, finally, Reitz et al. had similar findings; migrants were paid less than Canadian born even when they had more qualifications, and further found that this was true even when they were working the same

positions as Canadian born (41). As previously stated, economic integration is an important, if not the most important, link in integration as a whole, as so many other forms of integration stem from it. Being weighed down by debt or living on a poverty level wage does not allow a refugee to thrive in the way that they may if they did not have financial worries.

It is important to note that the job market was mentioned as a possible reason for refugees having trouble finding work (23). In anticipation of conclusions such as this, Wilkinson et al. noted that while it is true the job market is poor for Canadians as a whole at this time, the issue of obtaining employment is about 3 times greater for refugees in comparison to their Canadian born counterparts (26). With the number of barriers shown to inhibit obtaining employment, this finding is certainly not shocking.

### **Educational integration**

Education was an additional theme found within the literature regarding refugee integration; however, at times it was closely linked to economic integration. Education was cited as a barrier by multiple studies (15, 17, 27, 42), and it was clear that this barrier was more difficult to overcome for refugees compared to immigrants, especially if refugees came from refugee camps. When coming from refugee camps, barriers may be even greater, as basic education, such as knowing how to read, may be lacking (15, 25).

Evidence indicates that the amount of schooling a parent had could affect their child's academic performance in school (25). If a parent lacks any sort of formal education, they may not have the ability to help their child with things like homework or school projects. Furthermore, they may not understand the school system as a whole. As Walsh et al. revealed, the refugees in their study did not find education to be important for their children; they felt that the quality of education their children received in Romania, their home country, far exceeded any schooling that they would get in Canada (43). Whether or not this fact is true is unimportant. The problem in this situation is that in Canada you need the proof of schooling-a diploma-in order to be able to secure jobs later in life. By only focusing on the knowledge that they would be receiving from school, and not the bureaucratic importance of it, these refugee parents were putting their child at a disadvantage later in their lives simply due to a lack of understanding regarding how the Canadian education system works.

Another important issue to consider is that refugees have the lowest school grades, compared to other children, when they first enter Canada (25). Fortunately, Wilkinson et al. also found



that their grades can vastly increase within two years (25). Often these children will need to enter a school with an ESL program, but these programs are at times under-funded and taught by teachers who are not qualified (44). Refugee children were also found to have higher dropout rates (44) than not only Canadian born students, but also all other types of immigrants (45).

While there are multiple reasons for high dropout rates among refugee youth, surprisingly, financial issues could be one of them. If a youth refugee enters Canada without a basic education, they are very much behind in the eyes of the public education system. Some provinces have what is called a 'cap age' regarding public education; after an individual reaches this cap age, often the age of 18, they are unable to receive public education any longer. If a refugee youth does not finish his or her education by the age of 18, they may never do so because of the inability to afford to pay for schooling (25).

Like previously stated, educational integration and economic integration are closely linked, and in addition to being unable to complete high school, economic integration also affects refugee's decisions to invest in post-secondary education. Girard found that, since refugees are less likely to have the financial means to attend post-secondary schooling, they are more likely to begin working right away (20). In addition to financial barriers to further education, Fuller and Martin found that a lack of English skills could prevent refugees from upgrading their schooling (38). Of course, there still is the question of whether or not education is beneficial when hoping to find employment, which was discussed previously.

### **Social integration**

Social integration was arguably the broadest theme found within the literature. This theme encompassed many different social factors such as relationships to friends and family, relationships with the greater community, and relationships with organizations or services. Although social support encompassed many different subcategories, there were multiple articles that agreed that, in general, having a lack of social support was a barrier to integration (12, 19, 46, 47). Unfortunately, many studies also reported that their participants acknowledged that they felt socially excluded (35, 36, 48) or lonely (17). It is also important to recognize that social support is not classified in the same way throughout all cultures, and therefore being socially integrated may look different to each individual (14). Furthermore,

the histories of refugees may make it difficult to trust new people and therefore may complicate how they are able to socially integrate (22).

It is also important to note that Canada may operate under different social norms than refugees are accustomed to, and these changes can be difficult to navigate. One social norm that was mentioned throughout the literature was that of gender roles (17, 22). In Canada, women are expected to not only care for children and the house but also to bring in income for the family. Additionally, men in Canada are now expected to help with the children and household duties more than in the past. In one study, women reported mixed results when trying to navigate these new roles, with some feeling overwhelmed because they had a lot on their plates, as their husbands refused to help with the more traditional female tasks, and others reporting that their husbands embraced their new roles in helping with the children and household tasks (17).

In addition to having to navigate new social norms, having to integrate culturally was a large challenge. One of the biggest themes that were found in the literature regarding social integration was difficulty for refugees to culturally integrate to Canada, while also maintaining their own culture (12, 13, 17, 49). This was especially important when talking about youth refugees. Parents reported that they were very fearful that they would not be able to transmit their culture to their children (17, 22, 30, 36). These fears were justified, as one study found that children often had different values than their parents and they reported feeling closer to 'white culture' than the culture of their parents (29). The reason for this great divide may be for a number of reasons, but Samuel reports that it is likely due to the schooling system (29). In school children are taught 'white culture', and may wish to adapt to it in order to fit in with their Canadian peers (29). Parents do not necessarily receive a Canadian education, and therefore are not in a situation where they are being taught these underlying themes of white culture. In addition, children likely care about fitting in with schoolmates and are more willing to sacrifice something like cultural norms in order to be accepted. Brabant et al.'s study illustrates this point, as the children within this study quickly adapted to being teased in school due to their poor English skills by working to improve their English so they could socially integrate in a better manner (50).

Interestingly, youth were worried about their parents as they felt that they were not adapting to Canadian social norms fast enough (13). This divide between parent and child culture was so strong that it was especially worse for children of refugees who were born in Canada.

These second-generation refugee youth reported feeling a great divide between Canadian culture and the culture of their families, noting that they did not feel they belonged to either group (49).

Due to these clear instances of the divide between parents and their children, it is not surprising that intergenerational conflicts were often cited in the literature (13, 14, 22, 29). Intergenerational conflicts are a problem when related to social integration because family is one of the most important relationships in a migrant's life.

In addition to the above barriers, language was also found to be a large barrier in relation to social integration (12-14, 40, 47). It was noted that people who had prior English training had trouble integrating socially due to lack of language proficiency (14, 29). Without the ability to communicate with other members of the community, it is very difficult to grow social ties. In addition to lacking language skills, lacking childcare was a barrier to social integration (14, 47, 51). Without childcare, mothers and sometimes fathers are unable to leave the house as frequently, creating feelings of isolation. Interestingly, Morantz et al. found that childcare could, in fact, benefit a mother's language development, as well as her social integration (51).

Although language and childcare issues are possible to overcome, unfortunately, there is an experience that may inhibit a migrant's social integration process that they have no control over: experiencing racism and discrimination (14, 22, 47, 49, 50, 52, 53). Experiencing discrimination can possibly make a migrant feel socially excluded, and less likely to want to engage with new people, as well as further strengthening any fears of trusting others.

It is important to note that not all refugees reported that they felt excluded; some refugees stated that they had a strong sense of belonging in Canada (49). The reasons why newcomers feel a sense of belonging may vary between individuals, however, it was reported by multiple articles that religion helped to make refugees feel that they had a sense of place in Canada (27, 49).

Lastly, a big question within the literature is whether it is more beneficial for migrants to have social bonds with people from the same ethnic background as them or from different ethnic backgrounds. From reviewing the literature, it appears that both types of bonds are beneficial for different reasons. It is important to have bonded with people of the same ethnicity because doing so makes refugees feel that they have a sense of belonging and are able to feel understood (52). Additionally, by having social bonds with people of the same

ethnicity, refugees are alleviated of fears of being discriminated against (50). In contrast, researchers found that having social bonds with people of different ethnicities helps newcomers to socially integrate better as a whole (54). In the end, the social bonds a refugee has is their individual decision, and what may benefit one person may not benefit another. For example, migrants in a study done by Jurkova used both types of social bonds to help their social integration (55).

### **Political Integration**

Finally, one of the smallest components of integration discussed was political integration. There appeared to be mixed results regarding political participation in migrants, with one studying finding that newcomers to Canada are very engaged in Canadian politics (56), another study finding that migrants are only actively involved in certain political events, like voting (57), and finally, another study reporting that there are low voting rates in specific groups of migrants (49). Two studies agreed that changes could be made so that civic participation could be improved (39, 42). Due to limited amounts of studies on the topic that were reviewed for this paper, it is difficult to come to any conclusions regarding the political participation of refugees.

Overall, political participation may be difficult or provoke fear in some migrants because of the political environment they came from. Aside from this reasoning, a refugee may have limited knowledge of Canadian politics or lack of awareness of the political issue of their community (42). Interestingly, one study found that when a community of minorities shifted their perspective from themselves as an individual group to being part of a collective group of ethnic minorities, they were able to deal with political issues together (42).

### **IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS**

It was clear from the review that the way in which researchers study refugees is flawed; refugees, despite their unique needs and circumstances, are often grouped together and studied with immigrants and therefore it is hard to tease apart the different settlement experiences and barriers these two completely different groups face. Some studies in this review did acknowledge this problem, (38, 58, 59), however. It is important to note that this does not even put into consideration that refugees are further divided into groups based on their sponsorship and may face different resettlement issues based on their type of sponsorship. In the future, it is recommended, that in order to get a clearer picture of the

integration needs of refugees and other types of immigrants, studies should select participants more specifically.

Additionally, the review provides implication for service providers. Services were recognized as being an important component of aiding in the integration process of refugees (14). When services were used and accessed, there were many criticisms about them. Services are in place in order to help newly settled refugees, but one thing that was mentioned consistently in the literature was that these services could have been more beneficial if they had better knowledge regarding the help that was available to refugees (14, 22, 58). It was also frequently noted that services would be more helpful if they collaborated better with other service providers (7, 14, 60, 61). By creating a more interconnected network of services, all of which communicate with one another and work together to help refugees in a more cohesive manner, newcomers could be greatly benefited. This becomes especially true when considering that new migrants often reported that they do not know where to get information about many things (7, 14, 60), or how to navigate the system (46). A network of services could not only provide support in the areas refugees need help in, but also help guide them to other services when they require further kinds of aid. This also would allow refugees to gain help without having to seek it out themselves, which was an additional problem noted (7).

Other complaints surrounding services included things already discussed in all other areas of integration: a lack of cultural competence (17, 43, 44, 46), the presence of discrimination (14, 17), and language as a barrier (7, 14, 17, 43, 46). Training for cultural competency, anti-discrimination campaigns, and sufficient interpretation services could therefore greatly affect the services received by refugees.

In conclusion, the barriers to refugee integration varied little across the different aspects (economic, education, social, and integration), with language, lack of cultural competency, discrimination and racism, and financial problems being cited repeatedly in all the spheres. Instead of treating each integration (economic, education, social, and political) separately, we must acknowledge that these issues are interconnected. While we applaud the Canadian Government for prioritizing refugee resettlement, it is integral for fostering refugee resettlement that the government takes an active role in consulting and working in collaboration with the service providers and refugee families to eliminate barriers to refugee resettlement.

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