



# Syrian Refugee Lived Experience Project

Executive Summary

The study was conducted by the Environics Institute for Survey Research.

**ENVIRONICS INSTITUTE FOR SURVEY RESEARCH**

The Environics Institute for Survey Research sponsors relevant and original public opinion and social research related to issues of public policy and social change. It is through such research that organizations and individuals can better understand Canada today, how it's been changing, and where it may be heading.

**For more information about this study, contact:**

**Keith Neuman, Ph.D.**

The Environics Institute for Survey Research

[keith.neuman@environics.ca](mailto:keith.neuman@environics.ca)



# Executive Summary

Canada is a place populated mostly of people who have been arriving from elsewhere for almost 400 years, coming for economic opportunity, to join family or as refugees. In 2015, through an unprecedented national mobilization of government, the settlement sector and Canadian citizens, the country opened its doors to accept refugees fleeing the humanitarian crisis in Syria, resettling close to 40,000 refugees within the space of a year. How have these refugees fared in their new country and lives, and what can be learned from their experience that might benefit future refugees? These questions were addressed through a national research study conducted in 2020-21, consisting of in-depth interviews with a representative sample of 305 Syrian refugees who arrived in the 2015-16 period.

The research reveals that this cohort of Syrian refugees, as a whole, has successfully resettled in Canada in just a few years following their arrival in the country. Many encountered early challenges – as any such group of refugees would – in terms of navigating a foreign language, finding employment, dealing with the practicalities of finding a place to live and setting up a household, finding schools for children, and making sense of an unfamiliar culture. Most overcame or made significant progress in meeting these and other challenges, and – the diversity of this cohort in terms of background and circumstances notwithstanding – the predominant picture is one of people who have established new lives in a country they now consider their home. These findings largely confirm and expand upon previous research conducted in the initial years of this cohort's time in Canada.

## Key findings

The following summarizes key findings across the dimensions of refugee experience covered in the study.

**ARRIVAL IN CANADA.** Some of the refugees received pre-arrival information about Canada, but this was far from comprehensive or sufficient to prepare them for what was to come. Some aspects of what they found once they landed were anticipated (notably the friendly welcome provided by Canadians), but they were more likely to

experience something unexpected, notably difficulties in finding employment, the cold weather and culture shock. Refugees identified various challenges during their early years of resettlement, in particular having to navigate in an unfamiliar language, as very few arrived with functional fluency in English or French.

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

**CURRENT LIFE IN CANADA.** With the benefit of several years of resettlement and adjustment, most Syrian refugees feel good about their current life in Canada, with almost nine in ten describing it to be very or generally positive. Across specific aspects of their lives, refugees were most widely satisfied in feeling safe and secure, being accepted by their local community, and with local schools. By comparison, refugees were much less apt to be satisfied with their financial security and employment situation. What refugees liked best about life in Canada was the safety and security it provides, along with the human rights protections in such areas as equality and freedom. What they liked least was the Canadian climate, as well as its unfamiliar culture and lifestyle, and being separated from family and friends living abroad. All things considered, in retrospect, almost all of the refugees interviewed said they were glad they came to Canada.

**LANGUAGE ACQUISITION.** Very few of the Syrian refugees arrived in Canada with a functional fluency in English or French, in terms of listening, speaking, reading or writing. With the benefit of immersion and the help of language classes, most made dramatic progress over the

subsequent few years – to the point where they rated their fluency in all four areas to be excellent or good. Moreover, those arriving with the least fluency (e.g., the youngest in the cohort, ages 18 to 24 when interviewed) demonstrated the greatest gains over time.

**EMPLOYMENT AND OCCUPATION.** About half of the refugees interviewed were employed full- or part-time (including those self-employed), which is below the level for the Canadian population-at-large. Most of those employed were working in sectors that typically provide entry-level opportunities, and only one in five reported being in a job or occupation that matched their education, skills and experience. Close to four in ten indicated the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted their employment situation, in most cases by reducing their hours of employment or eliminating their job altogether.

**HEALTH AND WELL-BEING.** Most refugees rated themselves to have generally good physical health, at levels slightly below, but generally comparable to, the Canadian population-at-large. This cohort was not doing as well in terms of mental health, with fewer than half describing it in positive terms, and almost as many indicating it to be only fair or poor. Three in ten said they experienced a considerable amount of stress in their daily lives, notably higher than the population-at-large. High levels of daily stress were most commonly reported by men, Government-Assisted Refugees (GAR) and those in financial hardship, and least evident among those ages 18 to 24.

**SENSE OF BELONGING AND ACCEPTANCE.** Most refugees expressed a strong sense of belonging to Canada, and for some this was a closer attachment than to their ethnic or cultural background. Indicative of this sentiment, almost everyone interviewed reported they had either become a Canadian citizen, were in the process of becoming one, or intended to do so when eligible. In almost all cases, refugees said they felt welcomed by others in their local community. They believed that Canadians as a whole are generally positive in their opinion of Syrian refugees, but at the same time feel the pressure of their host country's expectations of them to fit in and become productive citizens.

**EXPERIENCES WITH DISCRIMINATION.** About half of those interviewed reported experiencing discrimination at some point since arriving in Canada, although few reported this to be happening regularly. Refugees were most likely

to attribute this mistreatment to their ethnicity or culture, and less so because of their religion, language or gender. Few women linked experiences of discrimination to their gender, but they were more likely than men to attribute it to their religion (likely due to wearing a hijab). The likelihood of ongoing discrimination did not vary noticeably across the refugee population except by age, with younger people much more likely than their older counterparts to report such experiences, a pattern that is reflected in other racialized populations in Canada.

**LOCAL COMMUNITY.** Almost all refugees interviewed were generally, if not very, satisfied with their local community as a place to live. Most expressed no hopes or plans to relocate in the foreseeable future, whether to somewhere else in Canada or to another country. Those contemplating a move were most likely to do so to improve their employment prospects. Many refugees became involved with local organizations in their community, including mosques or churches, community centres and schools, as well as groups whose members were other refugees from Syria. Most refugees said they knew at least some, if not many, of their neighbours, and reported having close friends in Canada (other than family) they could count on when needed, many of whom were also Syrian.

**EXTENDED FAMILY CONNECTIONS.** Two-thirds of these refugees reported having family members living in their community or elsewhere in Canada. Almost everyone had extended family living outside the country, primarily in Syria, but also in other countries in the Middle East, Europe and elsewhere. Most refugees maintained regular weekly or daily contact with family abroad, primarily through social media networking platforms like WhatsApp. One in four said they had taken steps to sponsor family members to come to Canada, with about half of the remainder having given it consideration.

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

Half of those interviewed said they experienced changing roles within their family since moving to Canada. This was most likely to entail increased responsibilities in such

areas as parenting and household finances, while others mentioned changes in how children were disciplined, and who in the home was employed. One in ten said they experienced greater independence in their lives, while a comparable proportion reported the opposite.

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

## Group profiles

Syrian refugees arriving in Canada in 2015-16 are a diverse group, in terms of their background prior to arriving in Canada, demographic profile and life circumstances at the time of being interviewed for this study. The following section summarizes how this group's experience resettling in Canada compares across the most relevant dimensions to emerge from the research.<sup>1</sup>

**ADMISSION STREAM.** Overall, the experiences and resettlement outcomes of the refugees interviewed were notably similar regardless of the admission stream through which they were granted acceptance by Canada.<sup>2</sup> Some differences emerged, but in most cases these were not robust enough to indicate a substantively different life experience. The most notable distinctions are as follows:

- **Government-Assisted Refugees (GAR)** were among the youngest adults (18 to 24) in this cohort, and as such had less education and employment experience (although they were no more likely to report financial hardship). These refugees rated their life satisfaction the same

as those who were privately sponsored, except for being less positive about their housing. This group also reported lower levels of physical and mental health, and higher levels of daily stress. They were somewhat less likely to have other family members living nearby or in Canada, and maintained more frequent contact with family living abroad.

- **Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSR)** tended to be older, have post-secondary education and be living in Quebec; this group was also less likely to identify as Muslim or as being religious. They arrived in Canada with the strongest fluency in English or French, but at the same time were the most likely to report early challenges with employment. They had the most positive physical and mental health outcomes, and were most apt to have extended family in Canada. This group was no more likely than others to report experiences of discrimination, but those who did were more likely to say they were bothered by it.
- **Blended Visa Office Refugees (BVOR)** is the smallest group, and included those in the middle age range (25 to 29) and with a high school education. In comparison with PSR, they were especially positive about their private sponsor support, and also stood out in feeling welcomed by their local community and by Canadians generally. Their level of overall life satisfaction in Canada was the same as GAR and PSR, but they were more likely to express strong satisfaction with specific aspects (e.g., safety and security, local schools).

**AGE.** Age also played a role in refugees' experience, with notable differences between the youngest cohort (18 to 24) and those ages 45 and older.

- **18 to 24.** The youngest age cohort was typically female and religious, with a high school education and admitted through the GAR stream. This group reported more positive early experiences in terms of their expectations about Canada, while at the same time being most likely to mention challenges with language fluency and culture shock. They were somewhat less apt than older

---

1 It should be noted that the number of refugees interviewed (N=305) limits the extent to which subgroup comparisons can be made. The distinctions drawn were not based on statistical significance and, in many cases, should be considered directional in nature.

2 These outcomes were measured at the time of the interview, which took place five to six years after arriving in Canada. It is most likely there would have been much greater differences in the needs and experiences of refugees across these different admission streams in the first few years of resettlement.

refugees to be satisfied with their current lives, especially in terms housing, local schools and acceptance by the local community. They were the most likely to report experiencing discrimination, although no more apt than others to feel bothered by it.

These younger refugees reported the most positive levels of physical and mental health, but at the same time indicated higher levels of daily stress. They were also most likely to report changes in their role in the family since moving to Canada, mostly in terms of increased responsibilities. This group arrived in Canada with the least amount of fluency in English or French, but made the most significant progress over the subsequent few years, to the point where they were more advanced than older members of this cohort. For this group, education was the most common life aspiration, and they were more optimistic than older refugees about achieving their life goals.

- **45 plus.** This cohort was more apt to be male, have the most education and be in the PSR stream. Compared with younger refugees, they were more apt to experience negative surprises upon arrival in Canada, and to mention employment and housing as their biggest challenges in the early resettlement period. They were among the most satisfied with their current lives in Canada, especially in terms of health care, acceptance in the community, housing and where they are currently living. They were the most likely to feel a strong sense of belonging to Canada, and least apt to report experiences of discrimination. While this group reported notable progress in learning English or French over the past few years, their fluency in all areas now lagged behind that of younger refugees.

**GENDER.** Some differences also appear between men and women.

- **Women.** As reported earlier, women were younger on average than men, and less apt to have post-secondary education or to be employed. They were more likely than men to find unexpected positive surprises upon arrival in Canada. They arrived with less fluency in English or French, and were more apt to say that language presented a major challenge – but, over time, their fluency levels caught up to those of men. Their satisfaction with life in Canada was similar to men, except

being somewhat lower in terms of financial security, and safety and security. They were no more likely to report experiencing discrimination, but those who did were more apt than men to attribute this to their religion. Women were more likely to say their role in the family changed upon moving to Canada, which took various forms. For them, the top life aspirations were completing their education, finding employment in their field, and improving language proficiency. They were most likely to base their confidence in achieving life goals on family support, religion and hope.

- **Men.** Men in this cohort tended to be older than women, with more education and income. They were more apt to be working and to express satisfaction with their financial security, but at the same time reported higher levels of daily stress. Compared with women, men had larger networks of friends and neighbours, although they were no more likely to express satisfaction with the quality of their friendships. Men's life aspirations were more likely to centre around employment and financial security; and their confidence in achieving those goals was based on working hard and government support.

**REGION.** The sample size is not sufficient to provide an in-depth comparison across all regions, so the following conclusions should be considered directional rather than conclusive. The most notable distinction was between refugees living in Quebec and British Columbia.

- **Quebec.** Syrian refugees in Quebec were more likely to be in the PSR stream, and with smaller households and higher levels of post-secondary education. Compared with those in other regions, this group was more likely to be Armenian and Christian. For these refugees, language fluency was highlighted as a significant challenge, but they also emphasized the support they received in the form of language training. This group was more likely than those in other regions to be satisfied with housing, and safety and security. They expressed less satisfaction with access to health care, but at the same time reported the most positive levels of physical and mental health. Quebec refugees were also the most positive in their assessment of public opinion toward Syrian refugees, and least apt to report experiencing discrimination. They also stood out in terms of having extended family members living in Canada, and being optimistic about achieving their life goals.

- **British Columbia.** This province had a high proportion of GAR from Syria, and those with lower incomes and living in public housing. This group has not fared as well as refugees living elsewhere in Canada, with lower levels of satisfaction in several areas, less positive physical and mental health, and more daily stress. They were least likely to report having extended family living nearby or somewhere in Canada, and expressed less optimism in achieving life goals.
- **Prairies.** Refugees living in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba tended to have lower than average incomes, and to report early challenges related to employment and the cold climate. They were among the most likely to express satisfaction with housing, health care access and local schools, as well as acceptance by the local community. At the same time, they were also more likely to be considering relocation to somewhere else in Canada.
- **Ontario.** Refugees settling in Ontario made up the largest group and, as a result, tend to define the average experience. They stood out in being among the most likely to report early challenges with employment and housing. In their current lives, they were the most positive in their satisfaction with safety and security, while least so when it came to financial security and the cost of living. Ontario refugees expressed the strongest sense of belonging to Canada.
- **Atlantic Canada.** Refugees in this region were also largely in the GAR stream, with large families, low incomes and less education. For them, the biggest early challenge was finding suitable housing. They were among the most satisfied in terms of financial security and local schools; and were doing well in terms of feeling welcomed by other Canadians, knowing many of their neighbours, having extended family nearby, reporting high levels of mental health, and optimistic about achieving life goals. At the same time, refugees in this region were less apt to be satisfied in terms of safety and security, and more likely to experience discrimination because of their ethnicity/culture or religion, and to be bothered by it.

**HOUSEHOLD INCOME.** Apart from other dimensions outlined previously, household income makes an important difference in how successfully refugees have been able to resettle in Canada, especially among the quarter of those interviewed whose household income was not enough to

live on (so that they were stretched or having a hard time). This group was most likely to include refugees who were women, living in Western Canada, single, with a university degree, and in the 34 to 44 year age group.

This low-income group fared less well than others across a range of areas, such as being more likely to experience negative surprises upon arrival, not getting the support they needed from private sponsors, being less satisfied with life in Canada (generally and across specific aspects), being less likely to be working in a job that matched their skills and experience, reporting lower levels of physical and mental health, being less apt to feel welcomed by their local community, and to feel Syrian refugees are viewed positively by Canadians as a whole. Refugees with inadequate incomes were also more apt to be bothered by experiences with discrimination, be less satisfied with their local community, more likely to consider relocation, and less apt to be glad about coming to Canada. Finally, this group was significantly less optimistic about achieving life goals, in comparison with refugees with more sustainable incomes.

## Conclusions

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

This study demonstrates that the Syrian refugees who arrived in 2015-16 have, for the most part, been successful in resettling in Canada, and creating new lives for themselves and their families. They have acquired what is called “social capital”, a term used to describe the vibrancy of social networks, personal connections and social trust. These refugees exhibited levels of community connections, friendships and a sense of belonging to the country that in many respects are comparable to other Canadians.

Yet this positive story of refugee resettlement must be considered in the context of the unique circumstances in

which this particular cohort came to Canada. The timing of the global migration crisis and a federal election in the fall of 2015 led to the mobilization of political, government and civic leadership that was remarkable in terms of the number of refugees, the speed with which they were moved, and the scale of resources dedicated to their resettlement. This was a defining factor in the experience of these refugees, and well beyond what was available to refugees in previous times, other refugees during this period, and those who have come after. This demonstrates what can be accomplished with a concentrated effort, and perhaps what is required to ensure effective refugee resettlement and integration on a sustained basis.

What lessons can be gleaned from this research? The positive outcomes reported by refugees notwithstanding, their experiences have been uneven, and ongoing challenges remain. The evidence demonstrates that government agencies and settlement organizations need to give more attention to such areas as employment supports, pre-arrival information and managing expectations. This research is intended to document the lived experience and amplify the voices of these refugees, but does not extend to providing specific recommendations. Rather, the goal of this work is to inform those directly responsible for policy, program development and refugee support. The third and final

phase of the study focuses on knowledge dissemination and community outreach to promote awareness of, and engagement with, the research findings and their implications among government agencies, settlement organizations, refugee communities, the media and the Canadian public.

This study provides the most comprehensive picture to date of the lived experience of Syrian refugees in Canada. It builds upon earlier research by providing a national picture, covering a comprehensive range of areas and topics, and incorporating a qualitative component to provide refugees with an opportunity to speak about their lives in their own words. At the same time, the picture provided through this study is by no means conclusive or complete. The sample of participants was not large enough to support conclusive findings on subgroup comparisons, and included only a portion of the children and youth under 18 years of age (who made up 50% of this refugee cohort upon arrival). The research left out some relevant topics, such as the role and effects of trauma – a topic that could not effectively be addressed in a study of this type. Finally, this study covered a particular refugee population that arrived under exceptional circumstances, and tells us much less about the experiences of other refugees who are equally in need of our attention.

