

Syrian Refugee Operation to BC: Taking Stock Two Years After Arrival



May 2018

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This survey could not have been done without the participation of our valued participants who shared their knowledge and experience with us, as well as the research assistants and staff who conducted the survey. While confidentiality prohibits us from naming our clients, our sincere thanks to all our participants, as well as Nadine Kallas, Dania Kallas, Ahmed Fadhil, Ahmed Abdulrazak and Muna Zaidalkilani for undertaking the survey.

Chris Friesen — Director, Settlement Services

Kathy Sherrell — Associate Director, Settlement Services



“Thankful for coming to Canada and will work hard and pay taxes like any other Canadian.”



“Thank you for letting us live like actual human beings and protecting our children.”



“We are grateful for the government of Canada as they made us feel that we are here to be part of this country and not alienated like a refugee. We want to offer our full service to this country.”

A sampling of the many words of gratitude from Syrian families, two years after arrival in British Columbia.

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Executive Summary

With the unprecedented arrival of Syrian Government Assisted Refugees (GARs) to BC, ISSofBC undertook a follow up telephone survey to ascertain how Syrian refugees resettled to BC through Operation Syrian Refugee (OSR) between November 4, 2015 and February 28, 2016 are faring after two years in the province.

Two hundred and forty-one (241) adult Syrians who arrived as GARs participated in this survey; representing 80% of year 1 respondents. Interviews were conducted by phone by Arabic-speaking research assistants. Almost 80% of respondents arrived in January and February 2016, with the highest arrivals in February 2016. Although most respondents were head of households within family units, in some cases the individuals' spouse was asked to participate.

This report explores the findings of our first language telephone survey, identifies key themes, and provides recommendations intended to better facilitate the settlement and integration of refugees in BC, and Canada more broadly

Key findings from Syrian GARs after two years in British Columbia indicate:

Eighty-seven percent (87%) report their English has improved since coming to Canada to be somewhat or much better (55% 'somewhat better' and 32% 'much better').



Sixty-nine percent (69%) are attending free LINC classes, representing a decline from year 1 (76%). Three-quarters of those not attending LINC classes reported they are not on a waitlist. For those on a waitlist, times vary from 3 – 18 months with the majority having waited under 1 year (80%).

Barriers to participation in LINC classes included work and education (43%), health (23%), and lack of space in class (11%), as well as smaller numbers of responses for transportation, age, and lack of childcare

27% of all respondents are working on a full-time basis and 13% on a part-time basis, more than double the year 1 findings (17%).



56% of respondents regularly rely on the food bank (ie weekly)

30% of regular food bank users are employed on a full-time or part-time basis (18% and 12% respectively) suggesting while employment among Syrians is increasing, incomes may be insufficient to meet basic needs.

Two years after arrival, over 69% of Syrians continue to live in the same housing units they moved into from temporary housing.

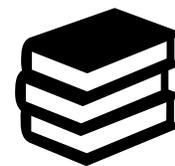


80% reported their current health to be good (32%), very good (39%) or excellent (9%). Further, 50% report their health has improved and 31% stayed the same over the last year.



11% feel their family is depressed. Of these, **62% reported their emotional health had worsened over the last year. Most respondents who identify physical health as poor and emotional health as being depressed indicate both measures have deteriorated over the last year. Approximately one-third report having no English language proficiency.**

97% of respondents with school-age children feel their children are doing well in school.



Two-thirds of respondents have made non-Syrian friends. Sixty-five percent (65%) know their immediate neighbours.

Ninety-six percent (96%) are glad they came to Canada and all but three intend to become a Canadian citizen in the future.

Introduction

In October 2015 Prime Minister Trudeau announced Canada would resettle 25,000 Syrian refugees, a commitment that has since been surpassed through the combined efforts of Operation Syrian Refugee (OSR) and ongoing resettlement efforts. The year 2016 marked the largest refugee resettlement movement in Canadian history, with over 46,700 refugees resettled in 2016 alone through Canada's humanitarian immigration stream. The response from Canadians towards Operation Syrian Refugees was extremely positive, unleashing a wave of compassion and humanity unseen in recent years.

As of February 28, 2018, close to 52,000 Syrian refugees have arrived in Canada. From November 4, 2015 to February 28, 2018 4,400 Syrian refugees have settled in over sixty-five (65) communities throughout BC. This figure includes 2,890 government assisted refugees, 590 blended visa office referred (BVOR) cases and 920 privately sponsored refugees

With the unprecedented arrival of Syrian GARs to BC, ISSofBC undertook a follow up telephone survey to ascertain how Syrian refugees resettled to BC through Operation Syrian Refugee (OSR) between November 4, 2015 and February 28, 2016 are faring after two years in the province.¹

This report explores the findings of our first language telephone survey, identifies key themes, and provides recommendations intended to better facilitate the settlement and integration of refugees in BC, and Canada more broadly.

Methodology

Phone surveys were conducted by Arabic-speaking research assistants to ensure language was not a barrier to participation. Interviewers faced several challenges in undertaking the survey owing to an inability to reach potential participants (e.g. phone numbers no longer in service, no answer), as well as clients who were unable (e.g. due

¹ This report builds upon a series of reports released in late 2016 and early 2017 exploring Settlement Outcomes after one year. These reports are available at: <https://issbc.org/our-resource/special-reports-publications-refugees>.

to illness or hospitalization) or unwilling to participate. While the number of individuals who clearly indicated they were not interested was low (e.g. <20) it cannot be known if people who did not answer the calls were actively choosing not to participate. Although the majority of respondents were head of households within family units, in some cases the individuals' spouse was asked to participate. Respondents were asked to provide verbal consent prior to beginning the survey; those who declined were thanked for their time and calls were ended.

Participant Profile and Findings

In total, 241 adult Head of Households participated in this survey; representing 80% of year 1 respondents. Almost 80% of respondents arrived in January and February 2016, with the highest arrivals in February 2016 (see Figure 1).

The top three areas of initial settlement for respondents was Surrey (54%), Vancouver / Richmond (12%) and Coquitlam / Port Coquitlam / Maple Ridge (12%). Respondents also included 2 individuals from the Okanagan Valley.²

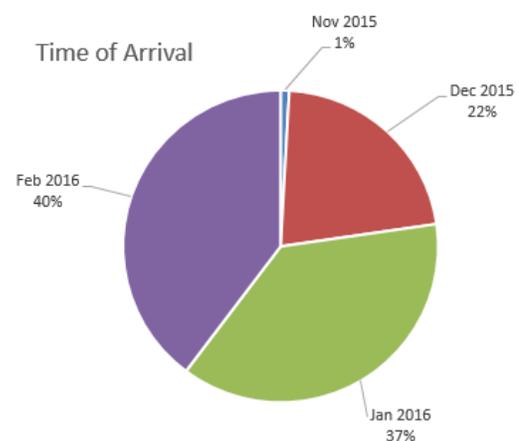


Figure 1: Time of Arrival

Syrian GAR respondents included a significant number of larger units.³ Two-thirds (67%) of respondents have unit sizes of 1 – 5, including 19% who arrived as an individual unit. Almost 20% arrived as part of a unit of 7 or more people. Respondents have an average unit size of 4.5, although single adult children may skew this finding owing to living within larger households.

² Note: cities have been combined where 1+ have <5 respondents to avoid identifying individual respondents.

³ Under the Government of Canada's overseas resettlement program, a 'unit' includes the head of household, spouse and dependent children. Single adults age 19 and older (including adult children) are considered a unit of one (1) by IRCC. As such, multiple units may form a family (e.g. a couple and their dependent children as one unit, their adult child as another) and a unit may be smaller than the family size. Further, with respect to this study, the tendency for adult children to live within a larger family unit means multiple respondents may have participated from one household.

English Language and Education / Training

Most Syrian GARs arrived in Canada with little or no English language proficiency, a finding supported by our year 1 results in which 81% self-identified as having no or beginner level English.

Two years after arrival, English language proficiency has continued to increase. When asked if their level of English has improved since coming to Canada, 87% reported their English to be somewhat or much better (55% and 32% respectively) – (see Figure 2). Five percent (5%) continue to self-identify as having no English. Respondents in Metro Vancouver were slightly more likely to report more significant language improvement than those in the Fraser Valley and Okanagan (33% and 20% respectively indicated ‘much better’), while those in Fraser Valley and Okanagan were more likely to see their language as ‘somewhat better’ (65% and 54% respectively).

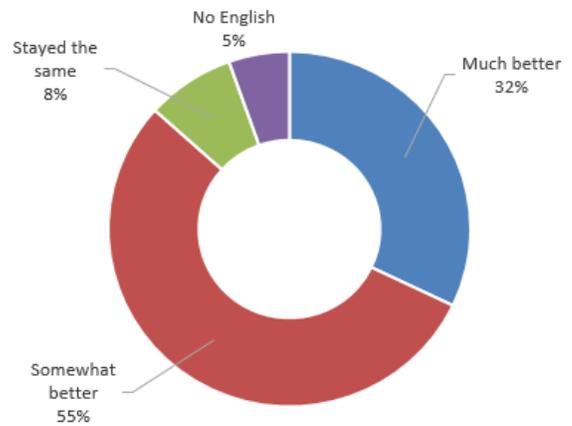


Figure 2: Language Proficiency

In year 2, 69% of respondents reported attending free LINC classes, representing a decline from year 1 (76%). Three-quarters of those not currently attending LINC classes similarly report they are not on a waitlist. Waitlists vary from 3 – 18 months, with the majority having waited under 1 year (80%). One respondent noted *“from the first month of 2016 until today my wife needs to go to school but the reason [is]*



Figure 3: Barriers to participation in LINC

there is no daycare for children.” Barriers to participation in LINC classes included work and education (43%), health (23%), and lack of space in class (11%), as well as smaller numbers of responses for transportation, age, and lack of childcare (see Figure 3).⁴ One respondent noted “My English level [is] higher than the level they put me in and they refuse to put me in a higher level that’s why I did not learn anything,” while two others noted LINC classes were “not helping.”

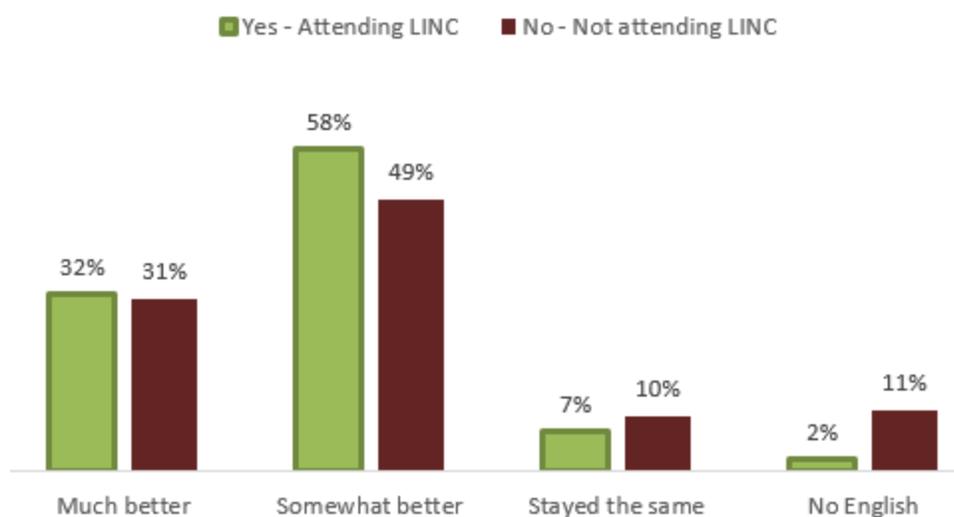


Figure 4: Language Improvement

Consideration of perceived language improvement by LINC attendance indicates that while 90% of respondents who attend LINC classes feel their language is ‘much’ or ‘somewhat’ better than last

year (32% and 58% respectively), 80% of respondents who are *not attending* LINC reported similar levels of improvement in their English language proficiency (31% and 49% respectively) – (see Figure 4). While it is not possible to link these findings to level of English language upon arrival (self-reported or test-based), the finding raises questions about the need for other forms of English language learning and practice, particularly in response to the ongoing challenges related to a lack of childcare spaces and/or the need to care for isolated family members dealing with health-related issues.

Approximately 18% of respondents have participated in additional training and/or educational programs other than English, including academic courses (e.g. high school, adult education, community college and university courses), employment related

⁴ Within the word cloud the size of individual words is indicative of the frequency of responses.

courses (e.g. work ethics, work search), Job-specific training (e.g. forklift, roofing, customer service), First Aid, and computer courses. Figure 5 represents trainings and further education taken by respondents. One respondent spoke of having participated in English in the Workplace classes.



Figure 5: Trainings and Further Education

Employment and Income Security

Forty-six percent (46%) of all respondents report having had paid employment since arriving in Canada. Although almost one in four (23%) of those with paid Canadian work experience were not employed at the time of the interview, the remainder

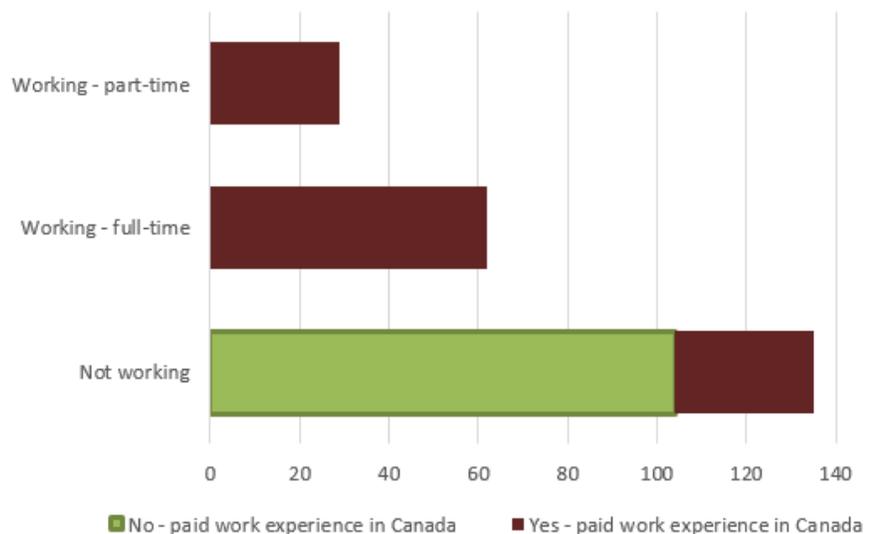


Figure 6: Work in Canada - since arrival and current

reported working on a full-time or part-time basis (46% and 21% respectively) – (see Figure 6). **When taken as a percentage of all respondents, 27% are working on a full-time basis and 13% on a part-time basis, more than double the year 1 findings (17%).** Almost half (47%) of all respondents indicate they are actively looking for work, including some individuals who are currently employed.

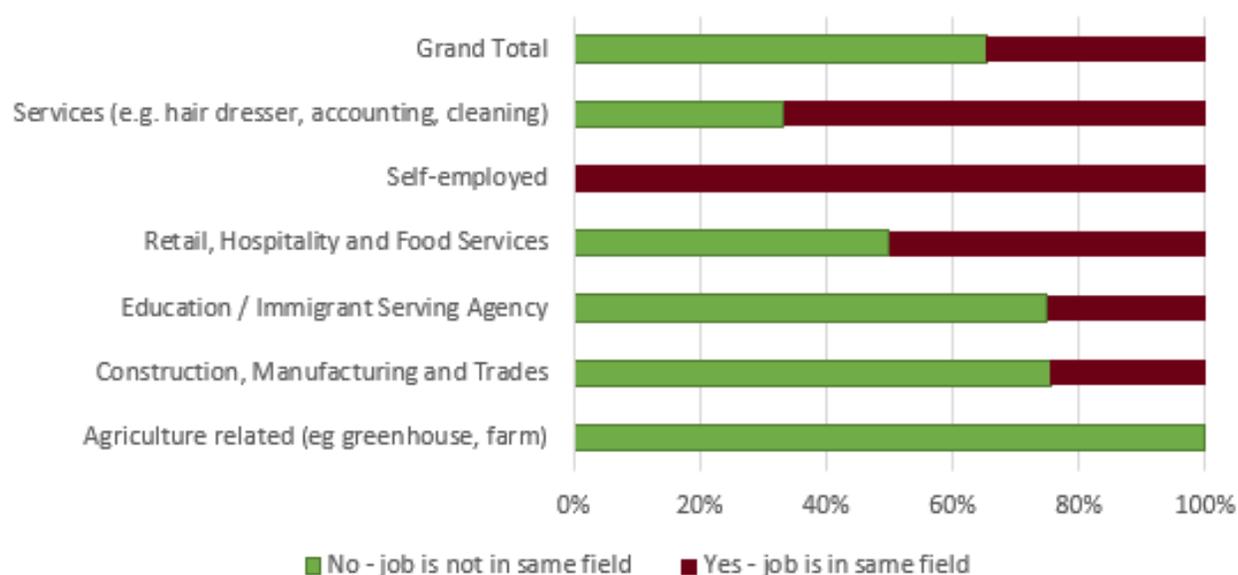


Figure 7: Of those who are working, is job in same field

Thirty-four percent (34%) of respondents who are working are in a job similar to the one they had before coming to Canada (see Figure 7). There was no significant variation between those working full- and part-time. Syrians are employed primarily in Construction, Manufacturing and Trades (63%), Retail, Hospitality and Food Services (19%), with a small number employed in Services such as hair dressing, accounting and cleaning (11%). As compared to year 1 findings, this represents an increase in Syrians employed within Manufacturing, Construction and Trades (up from 59% last year).

While this survey did not explicitly explore self-employment, two people reported having opened their own businesses over the last year. Anecdotal evidence, as well as early results from ongoing research with Syrian refugees across Canada, show the emergence of Syrian owned businesses, including in the catering, flooring and restaurant sectors. Self-employment represents an important way in which Syrian refugee newcomers can build upon previous experience and specialized skills to provide for their families, without facing barriers associated with ‘Canadian experience.’

As the percentage of respondents obtaining employment has increased there has been a notable reduction in the percentage of households reporting regular reliance on the food bank (i.e. weekly) from 66% in year 1 to 56% in year 2. Further analysis according to employment status shows 30% of food bank users are employed on a full-time or

part-time basis (18% and 12% respectively) suggesting that while employment among Syrians is increasing, incomes may be insufficient to meet basic needs.

Housing

Two years after arrival, over 69% of Syrians continue to live in the same housing units they moved into from temporary housing. Surprisingly, almost one quarter (24%) of those who have moved since arrival in Canada have been able to obtain BC Housing. Other reasons for moving included: obtained BC Housing (24%), less expensive housing and bigger housing (16% each), location (e.g. to work, schools, services and transit) (10%), and landlord issues (e.g. ended tenancy, sold house) and housing condition (e.g. pests, bugs) (9% each) – (see Figure 8). A small number of individuals reported having moved to another province. Another respondent noted their family had moved away from the Syrian community, so they could improve their English.

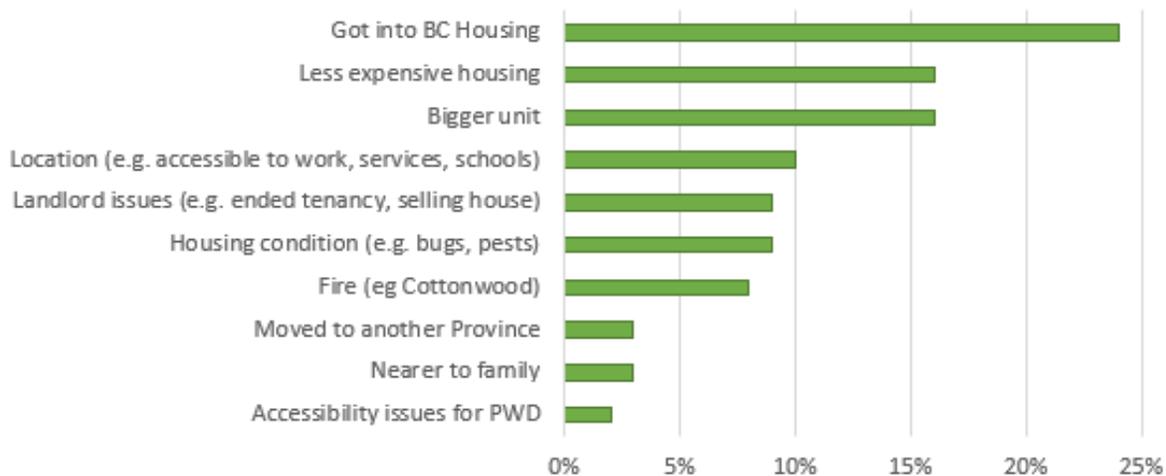


Figure 8: Reasons for Moving

Although half of respondents who are no longer living in their initial housing have moved one time, a small percentage have moved 3 or more times since arrival (9%). Over three-quarters (78%) of respondents who have moved report the condition of their housing is much or somewhat better (39% each) (see Figure 9). When consideration is given to housing condition in relation to the number of moves since arrival, most individuals moving 1-2 times continues to be positive with 80% and 87% respectfully indicating their housing is much or somewhat better. Those who have moved 3+ times

tended to be more equally distributed, though still positive (27% each stated much or somewhat better and/or stayed the same). One individual who has moved 3 or more times since arrival reported their housing situation to be much worse than it was a year ago.

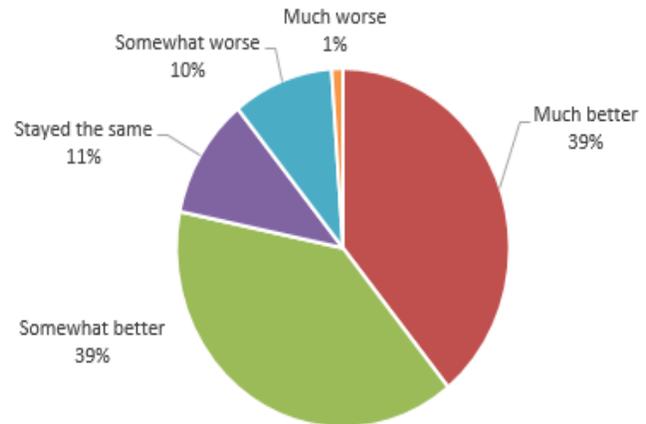


Figure 9: Housing Conditions for those who have moved

Health and Well-being

Overall, participants expressed they and their families are in good physical and emotional health, with many indicating health and well-being had improved over the last year.

Respondents were asked questions relating to their current family physical and emotional health, as well as to speak to whether these had improved or worsened over the last year. The vast majority of respondents reported their current health to be good (32%), very good (39%) or excellent (9%). Further, 50% report their health has improved and 31% stayed the same over the last year. Consideration of current health status by improvement over the last year for those who identified as having good, very good or excellent health, indicates over 60% have improved while 29% have stayed the same. For those in fair or poor health, the news is not as positive. Alarming, almost half (46%) of respondents who report they and their family are in fair or poor health similarly indicate their health has worsened over the last year.

Almost three quarters of respondents (72%) report their family to be very happy or happy. Eleven percent (11%) indicate their family is depressed, which is consistent with larger literatures which indicate 10-15% of refugees may require clinical counselling. When asked to compare their current emotional state to that of the previous year 63% of all respondents indicated the situation had improved. **Of concern, 62% of individuals**

who indicated their family is depressed indicated their emotional health had worsened over the last year.

While physical and mental health are largely positive, the situation facing the small number of individuals who report being in poor physical and/or mental health is concerning. Half of those indicating their family is in poor health rate their emotional health as depressed, while another 30% rate emotional health as sad. **The vast majority of respondents who identify physical health as poor and emotional health as being depressed indicate both measures have deteriorated over the last year. Approximately one-third report having no English language proficiency.**

Given concerns expressed by parents about their children's future integration, it is encouraging that most parents with school-aged children believe their children are doing well (97%) (see Figure 10). Further, the majority of clients who report their family being depressed indicate their children are doing well in school.

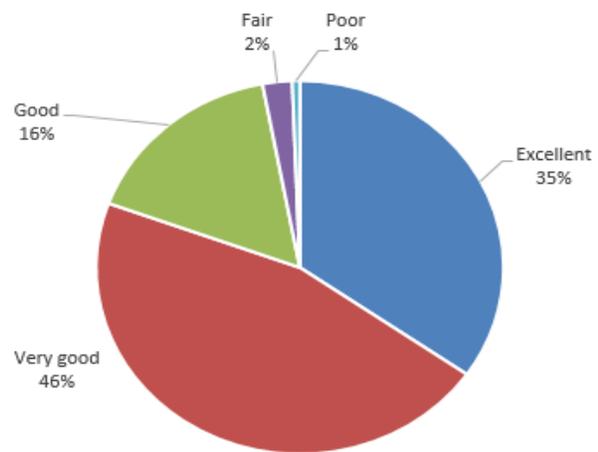


Figure 10: How are children faring in school?

Community involvement and early indicators of integration

Respondents were asked a series of questions relating to broader involvement with the community, as well as citizenship in order to obtain a sense of early integration (see Figure 11). Two-thirds of respondents report having made non-Syrian friends since their arrival in Canada. Sixty-five percent (65%) of respondents know their immediate neighbours. Approximately half report accessing their local library and 53% access their local community centre. Over one in four (26%) do not regularly attend mosque on a regular basis, the remainder attend mosque. **Ninety-six percent (96%) are glad they came to Canada**, and all but three intend to become a Canadian citizen in the future.

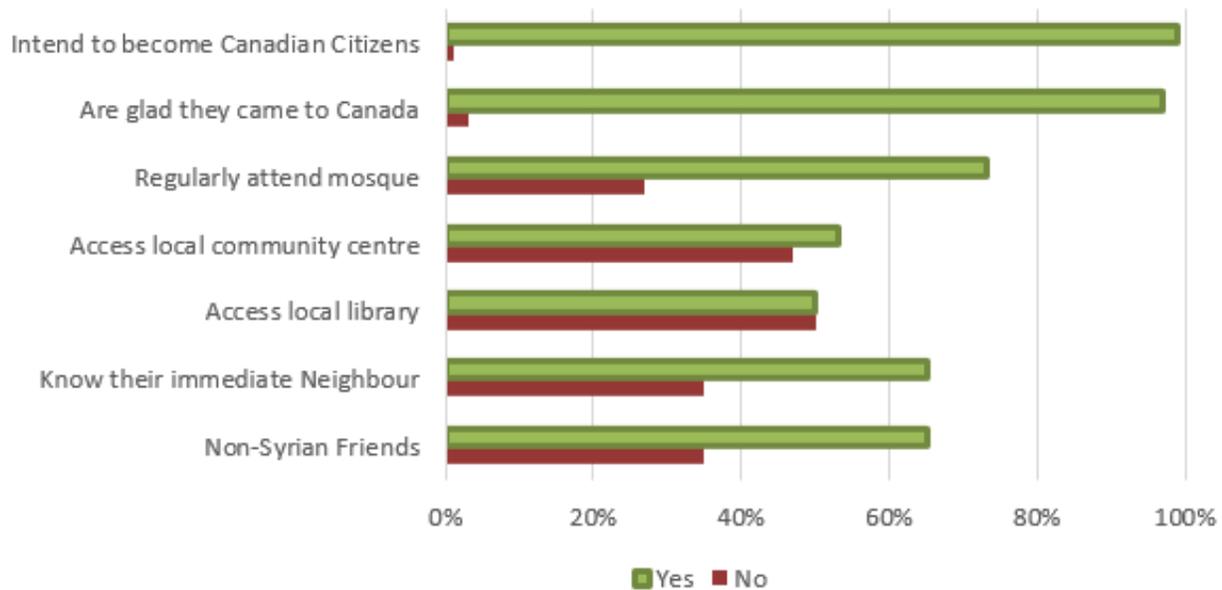


Figure 11: Early Integration Indicators

While integration is difficult to measure, responses indicate Syrians are making connections with others in the community, including their neighbours and making non-Syrian friends, as well as accessing supports and services in the local community.

Even as they do so, however, ties to family and friends in Syria and abroad remain strong. Remittances represent one way in which refugees can provide necessary supports to family and friends abroad. At the time of the research 34% are financially supporting family/friends in Syria or in neighbouring countries (see Figure 12).

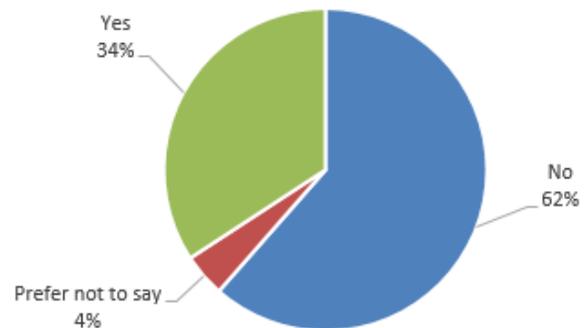


Figure 12: Financial Support to Friends/Family Abroad

Open-ended questions

To better gauge how Syrians are faring two years after arrival in Canada, respondents were asked a series of three open-ended questions:

- What information would be good to have received before coming to Canada
- What is their most pressing concern, and
- What message they would like to provide to ISSofBC or the Government of Canada.

Analysis of the responses to open-ended questions identified 7 major themes:

- Gratitude and Thanks,
- Learning English,
- Employment and Income Security,
- Housing,
- Health and Mental Health,
- Family Reunification, and
- Education.

Highlights of responses to the three open-ended questions are presented, followed by discussion of the main themes overall.

Where possible we have included participants words in order to honour their experiences.

Important information: pre-arrival

Participants were asked to reflect on what information would have been helpful to receive prior to arrival in Canada in order to ease their subsequent integration. Perhaps not surprisingly, the need to learn English, obtain information on housing, general information about Canada (e.g. lifestyle and culture), and employment were the most frequently cited areas for pre-arrival information (see Figure 13). A number of individuals identified a need for additional pre-arrival information about the nature of life and culture in Canada yet did not provide specific suggestions on what should be provided.⁵



Figure 13: Important Information: Pre-Arrival



Figure 14: Most Pressing Worry

Most Pressing Worry

When asked about their most pressing worry, Syrians provided insight into the daily challenges being faced in their new homes. Issues around health/mental health, housing, learning English, reuniting with family members abroad, finances and employment were the most frequently cited challenges (see Figure 14). Further, people spoke of multiple challenges within the family unit.

⁵ Please note: the decision to rapidly resettle Syrian refugees to Canada meant the majority did not receive any pre-arrival orientation services provided by the International Organization of Migration (IOM) Cultural Orientation Abroad Program.

Message for ISSofBC &/or Government of Canada

Resettled refugees may not often get an opportunity for their voice to be heard by those in Government and/or provide feedback to the organizations they access. In order to provide an opportunity to ‘speak’ to these groups, participants were asked if they had any message they would like to give to the Government and/or ISSofBC. While some responses focused upon the need for improvement and change, the overwhelming message from

Syrians 2 years after arrival was one of thanks (see Figure 15). Almost 70% of responses to this question explicitly thanked the Government of Canada and Canadians for welcoming them to Canada and expressed gratitude for the ability to begin a new life in safety.



Figure 15: Messages for ISSofBC and/or the Government of Canada

Major themes

Consideration of the responses to the open-ended questions identified a number of common themes that ran through all of the questions, including: gratitude and thanks, English, Employment and Income Security, Housing, Health and Mental Health, and Education. While presented separately, it is important to remember these issues are often interrelated.

Gratitude and Thanks

The predominant sentiment Syrians expressed throughout the open-ended responses was one of thanks and gratitude. Appreciation for being welcomed by Canada and Canadians to begin a new life was accompanied by a deep commitment to contribute to Canada, as well as to help others in need.



“Canada is making the world a better place by helping the people in need and bringing over refugees”

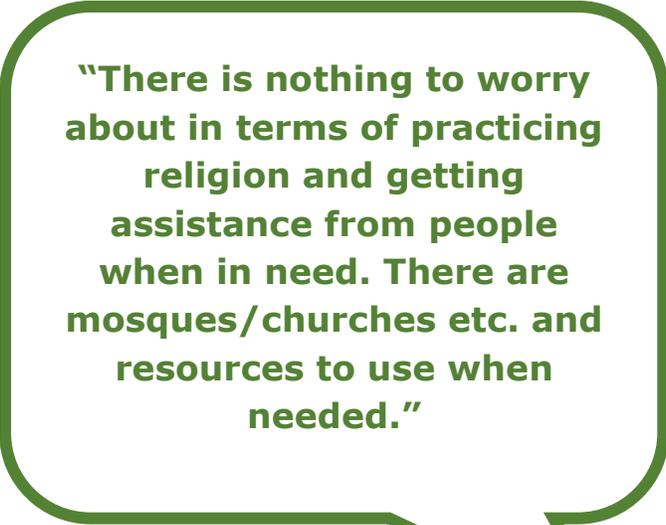


“Through the Canadian government assistance, we have been able to integrate into Canada very well. Our mental health has improved.”

Reflecting on their time in Canada, as well as what would have been good to know before their arrival in Canada, respondents suggested it would be helpful to provide information to refugees prior to arrival demonstrating that Canada is a welcoming and tolerant country.



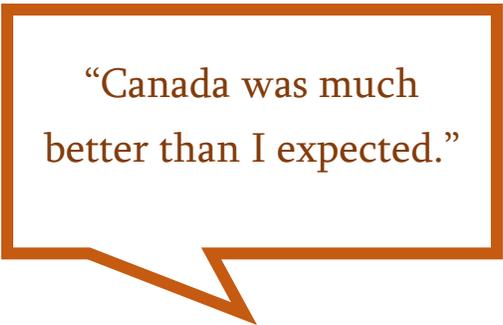
“Thankful to be in a country where all races are accepted and there is no discrimination against minority groups.”



“There is nothing to worry about in terms of practicing religion and getting assistance from people when in need. There are mosques/churches etc. and resources to use when needed.”



“All is good, we saw support more than our own country. At least we are respected in Canada.”



“Canada was much better than I expected.”

The portrayal of Canada by Syrian newcomers as a respectful and tolerant country is important given current global tensions, and reflects positively on their experiences during their first two years in Canada. One individual expressed a desire to see an emphasis on family reunification when selecting future arrivals.

“Thank you for helping us and bringing us to Canada, we are very happy. I would like to suggest that instead of bringing in new families to Canada to help the existing ones bring their stranded family members here first.”

Learning English

Respondents recognize learning English is a key aspect of both social and economic integration – increasing access to employment, enabling them to function more comfortably in Canadian society, and ultimately contributing to their success in obtaining Canadian citizenship. For many, increasing language skills was the most pressing concern, with respondents indicating their focus continues to be *“learning English and being comfortable communicating with others”* and *“improving my English so that I can apply for citizenship.”*

Linkages to the impact of English language skills on the ability to access better paying job opportunities and increase income security was evident in a number of responses.

“To learn English to be able to work and care for my daughter.”

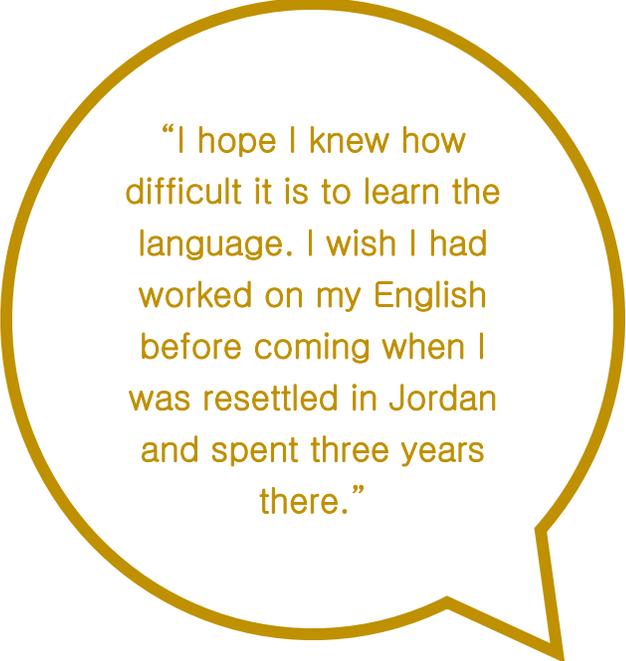
“Level 1 English. I hope to improve my English so that I can work here because the money is not enough.”

Although 87% of respondents reported their English skills to be much or somewhat better, English is one of the most difficult languages in the world to learn and progress may be slow.

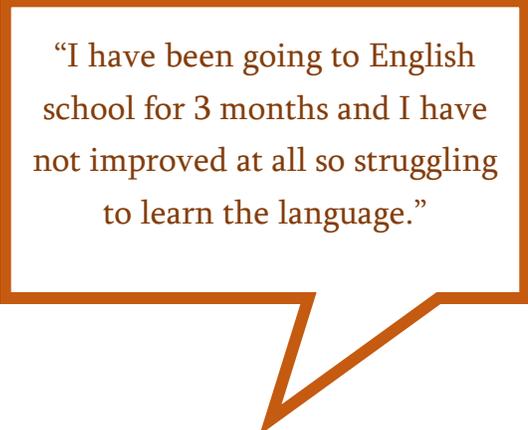
“Struggling with integrating in Canada because lack of language.”

“Learning English is taking time. We go five days a week and its hard to see some improvement. I wish there was a way to make things easier.”

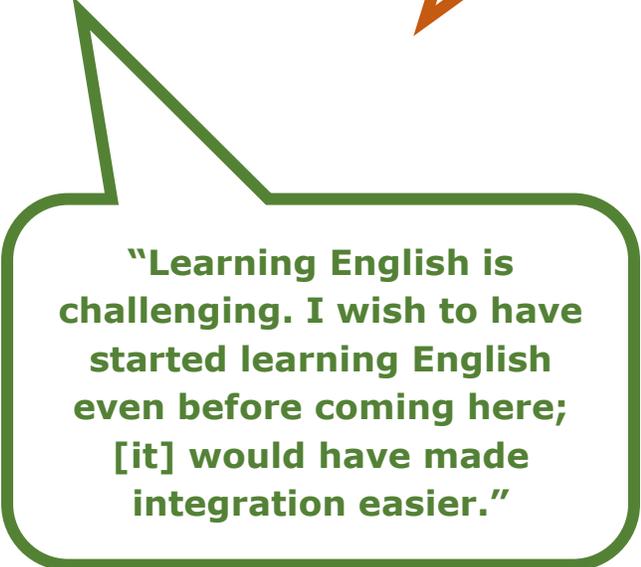
Given the challenges and time required to learn English, some respondents suggested it would be beneficial for refugees to begin learning English *prior* to arrival in Canada.



“I hope I knew how difficult it is to learn the language. I wish I had worked on my English before coming when I was resettled in Jordan and spent three years there.”



“I have been going to English school for 3 months and I have not improved at all so struggling to learn the language.”



“Learning English is challenging. I wish to have started learning English even before coming here; [it] would have made integration easier.”

Currently, years may pass between being told of selection for resettlement to Canada and actual travel to Canada, it would be good to consider implementation of English language training abroad for refugees destined to Canada.

The challenges of trying to balance learning English with other aspects of daily life, including work, education and family responsibilities make it difficult for some people to continue taking LINC classes in light of current program structure and availability. For large families with multiple young children, for example, it can be difficult to obtain sufficient childcare spaces and/or transport children to and from school, a burden most frequently placed upon female refugees.

“There should be more opportunities for women with children to learn English. For example, if I was guaranteed day care for my children I would have been able to go to school earlier and would have a better level of English at this point. I should have the right to also get my education like other women and my young kids should not be a burden.”

“I can't attend English classes now because I am working full-time and its hard to spare time to go daily to class at night after work. I am looking for a more convenient time to learn English on weekends and I cannot find a place.”

“I want to improve my English but I can't go to school because I am working full-time. Also my wife can't go because we have young kids.”

“Learning English has been a continuing struggle, as a result I am not able to work. I got a job previously, but it did not work out because I had poor English skills. Currently I have had difficulty to find the time to learn English because I am responsible for taking my kids to school and daycare.”

“Providing better ways to improve language other than evening classes for people who work full time.”

Reflecting on their struggles trying to balance work and learning English with their parental responsibilities, one parent lamented:

“My worry is I can’t see my own children because during the day I go to work and in the evening I go to learn English.”

A number of individuals who indicated they are unable to attend LINC classes and/or learn English owing to their primary health issues requested home-based English language learning.

“Because of my health and back injury, I stopped working and cannot go physically to school. This is a burden on my learning the English language. It would be helpful if someone came over to teach me English because my level is very poor.”

“My knee, I am currently injured and can't leave the house. Need an English teacher to come teach me.”

“My shoulder injury has prevented me from working so I am now at home until I recover. I also haven't been able to continue with my English classes. Would really appreciate it if there was a teacher that would come and teach us English at home as my wife recently given birth and I cannot go to classes.”

The structure and timing of LINC classes does not work for all newcomers. The profile of Syrians arriving in BC include a large percentage with multiple children under 6 years old, as well as a plethora of health issues (e.g. cancer, physical and mental impairments, heart and kidney disease). If we are to increase accessibility of language classes and improve learning it is necessary to rethink the traditional classroom-based approaches. The current HIPPY: Enhanced English Language Learning pilot program may provide important insights into alternative methods of English language learning service delivery for isolated women with small children. The integration of a language instruction component alongside HIPPY curriculum and programming provides opportunities for increased language learning through both instruction and practice.⁶ While other existing opportunities for informal language learning (e.g. conversation circles) may increase opportunities to improve English language proficiency, they are not recognized (e.g. CLB-tested).

Rethinking our approach – providing language classes on weekends, in non-traditional spaces (e.g. community rooms in apartment complexes) and through different means (e.g. computer and classroom-based learning geared towards low level learners) may facilitate better access to services and improved settlement outcomes.

The insights provided by Syrians on the need to learn English prior to coming to Canada, as well as the need for general information on life in Canada, offer possibilities for a new approach. Given individuals destined to Canada may remain in camps for years prior to arrival, the Government of Canada should consider providing these individuals with an adapted version of LINC in the camps. Building upon the current use of settlement themes to learn English in Canada, teachers abroad could use high level information on life in Canada (e.g. lifestyle, culture) to begin teaching English and increasing knowledge of life in Canada pre-arrival.

⁶ For more information on the Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY_ program, see <https://222.mothersmattercentre.ca/program/>.

Employment and Income Security

Employment continues to be a key concern among many respondents. For those who have obtained employment, wages may be insufficient to meet household needs.

“Income for husband and I is very little. Being financially unstable is stressing.”

“Employment payments does not match living standards. Everything is expensive. My son is paralyzed and only one son supports me financially and the rest of the family.”

“I am a single mom and I'm working full time. Half [of my] salary goes to daycare for my kids. I wish to bring my sister from Turkey so she can help me here to take care of the children.”

Beyond access to food and housing, financial insecurity places additional stress upon physical and mental health. As with other newcomer groups, Syrians seeking employment have encountered employer requirements that applicants have prior ‘Canadian experience’ in order to obtain employment. Frustration with the need for ‘Canadian experience’ prompted Syrians to call on Government to look at ways of mitigating this barrier.

“Government should be able to accommodate the expertise that the Syrian people have in the Canadian market. Having Canadian experience is very tough. Hard to sustain a family when these requirements are needed.”

“The government should look into how Syrian people can find employment in their field since they have the expertise but lack Canadian experience.”

Concerns about the lack of sufficient employment services and supports, as well as knowledge of Employment Standards emerged in some responses. While obtaining employment is one aspect, ensuring new workers understand workplace rights and responsibilities is another. *“There needs to be more support/resources for Syrians looking for work and currently employed. Myself and other Syrians have been taken advantage of in the workplace and as a result I've lost thousands.”*

As people have become more settled in Canada, concerns about obtaining employment and the challenges associated with the need for ‘Canadian experience’ have been accompanied by frustration around finding employment in a position like that held before coming to Canada. While many of the GARs arriving in BC had low levels of formal education, individuals who arrived with university education and/or other certifications face significant barriers in having previous experience and/or credentials recognized, as well as the need for ‘Canadian Experience.’ For those who are trying to

obtain “*work in the same field of study*” the experience can be frustrating and demoralizing.

“Not working in my field. Every job needs you to be licensed or have Canadian experience.”

“Currently volunteering in an engineering firm to gain experience. I am trying to get licensing to become an electrical technician. It’s very hard to update education and experience in Canada.”

“Trying to finish your education in pharmacy and engineering but have to start from scratch. Can't work in my field as I don't have the ‘Canadian experience.’”

Individuals with accessibility-related challenges (e.g. poor eye sight, persons with disabilities) face additional challenges in obtaining employment. One respondent identified their most pressing issue as:

“My kids and their integration into society in this country. [I] can’t work due to health issues, specifically cannot see well. Find a job that is not necessarily focussed on having good eye sight.”

Another spoke poignantly about how their life has changed since coming to Canada two years ago.

“My life has completely changed. I used to have a company and hire people in Syria/Jordan and now, I am working under people. I am 54 years old working in the field of construction: not fitting with my physical abilities and health situation. Very depressed. Welfare is not enough to cover my wife and I, so I am forced to work. Without the help of my son, I would be in the streets.”

Frustration with the pre-arrival information provided – or lack thereof – relating to employment, education and credential recognition was evident in several responses.

“We need Canadian experience in order to pursue the career we did in Syria.”

“That I will not be able to come and work in the same field as I previously did. That I have to start from scratch and gain experience. This goes for both work and education standards.”

“I wish I had known that I would not be able to pursue my career here. If you don't have experience or language in this country you start from ground zero, previous expertise is worth nothing.”

A refugee strength-based assessment tool conducted overseas in which key refugee assets (employment, education and other skills) are gathered prior to arrival and shared with service providers in Canada would help service providers to identify appropriate resources and supports and facilitate early interventions.

Further, given challenges of trying to balance work and language learning, it would be beneficial to explore Workplace innovations developed and implemented in Manitoba.

Housing

Perhaps not surprisingly the high cost of housing and desire to obtain BC Housing were the most frequently cited housing concern among respondents, including individuals living in Metro Vancouver, as well as smaller centres in the interior. Over half of housing-related concerns related the problem of affordability, particularly given the

combination of low incomes and large family sizes. For many, the dream of getting into BC Housing has met with the reality of long waitlists and insufficient stock.

“I've been waiting two years to get into BC Housing because my current living situation is very difficult due to the high rent. We are paying nearly \$2000/ month in our current house and we are barely surviving. Before anything - even learning English - I wish to move to BC housing.”

“I want to get into BC Housing because my family and I are not comfortable in the current housing we are in, especially the kids who are very restricted in movement.”

Themes of potential homelessness and dire income security were evident in a number of responses.

“We are struggling financially, some months we run out of money in the middle of the month.”

“We need a bigger living space and more help financially. Currently are borrowing money from other people.”

Overcrowded housing and a lack of financial security amplify the stresses of integration for low-income newcomers. Issues with landlords arose in a number of responses as both a reason for moving, as well as the basis for rent increases. Some spoke of having been asked to leave and/or had their agreements terminated by landlords owing to a desire to sell the housing, while others alluded to intercultural issues and/or personal disagreements. One respondent noted *“Ramadan was inconvenient for the landlord.”* Tenuous affordability has been undermined by rent increases in year 2, some of which appear well beyond levels outlined in the BC Tenancy Act.

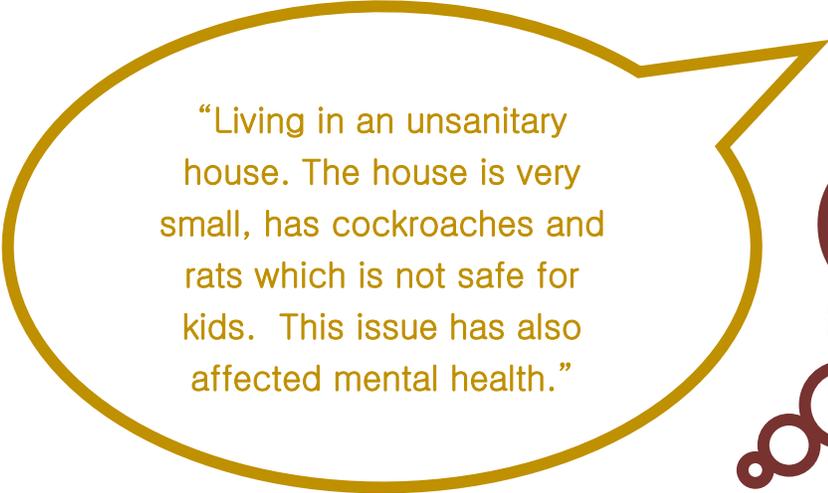
“Housing [is my most pressing concern]. I have had issues with my landlord and he has raised our rent and I cannot afford anymore.”

“The housing rent has gone up. We are currently struggling financially as a family because I [the father] don't have work. The rent for our house has increased from \$600 to \$900 and we are barely surviving.”

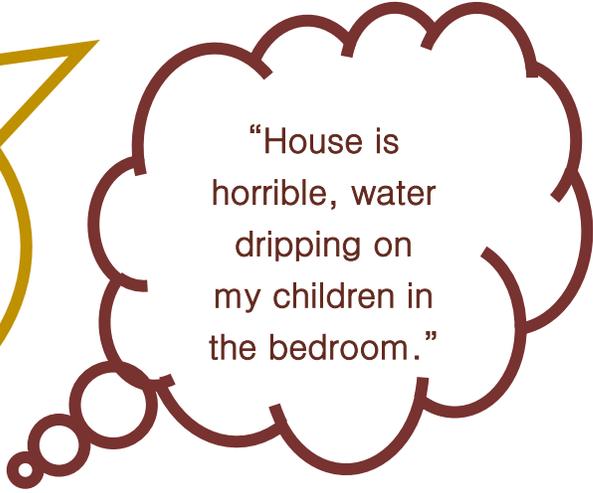
For singles, the challenges can be compounded by the need for roommate(s) to obtain housing.

“My housing and living space has been worrying me and I am not happy with it. I am currently living with 7 other people in the same home (people I don't know) and we all use the same bathroom and kitchen.”

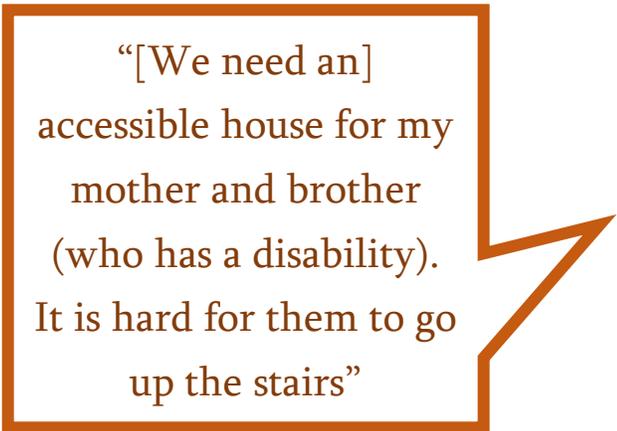
Respondents spoke of poor housing conditions, as well as units that are inadequate to meet their physical needs.



“Living in an unsanitary house. The house is very small, has cockroaches and rats which is not safe for kids. This issue has also affected mental health.”



“House is horrible, water dripping on my children in the bedroom.”



“[We need an] accessible house for my mother and brother (who has a disability). It is hard for them to go up the stairs”



“In a wheelchair, have to go to community center to shower because our washroom has not been renovated so that we can easily access.”

Financial insecurity and tenuous housing, lack of private space owing to crowded living conditions, and the presence of pests and vermin may negatively impact both physical and mental health.

Others expressed challenges related to the location of their housing, as opposed to its size or affordability. The ability to move into non-traditional settlement locations (e.g. west side of Vancouver, White Rock, West Vancouver) has provided some newcomers the opportunity to live in better accommodations, yet these units may be located

at a distance from services and/or language classes, thus imposing additional time constraints and financial barriers for low income newcomers.

“My wife can't access any local schools or English classes so she hasn't gone since we arrived in Canada. I travel after work daily to [another city to] ... attend English but the distance is not convenient. We hope to move to a more practical location.”

“A better housing that is close to school so that I can find work and have time to go to school.”

While issues of affordability and overcrowded housing tend to be associated with Metro Vancouver, it is important to bear in mind these issues emerged in smaller centres outside Metro Vancouver and the Fraser Valley in both year 1 and 2 surveys.

Looking to the future, one respondent indicated their most pressing need is a *“house. [I] wish to have my own house,”* expressing a desire for the Government of Canada to *“change mortgage rules to help Syrians with low incomes be able to own a house one day.”*

Health and Mental Health

Primary and mental health represent a significant concern for respondents, including disabilities, chronic diseases, injuries and mental health challenges such as depression and nightmares, as well as stress associated with separation from family abroad.

Syrians arriving in British Columbia included many individuals with physical disabilities and chronic health conditions, including cancer, long hospital stays, and transplants, while others are receiving surgery or treatment for current and past injuries.

“My daughters’ health [is my primary concern]: she had brain surgery and was hospitalized for seven months. This event has affected my wife emotionally and mentally. My other children are still in Turkey and Jordan. I am also worried about their well-being.”

I am having open heart surgery soon ...that is why I have stopped working. I am not doing well mental health wise.”

“My health is not that great (physically and mentally) as I had a recent surgery from a bullet and gone through depression. I want to move to BC housing as I can't afford living now. I feel like I will be homeless if no one helps me.”

Stresses associated with separation from family, as well as past and current acts of violence compound the challenges of integration, including learning English, continuing their education and obtaining employment. Concerns about the safety of parents, siblings, adult children and friends are amplified by news of current events, including bombings and other acts of war.

“My wife’s emotional/ mental health is terrible. She’s depressed and extremely worried about her family back home that are still stuck in the war.”

“I have nightmares about what happened with me in Syria. I am still traumatized and worried about my family back home.”

“Worried about Parents still in Syria and about [my] kids’ future and integration in society. My wife’s family and part of my family were all killed recently in an explosion in Syria.”

In some cases, undiagnosed, non-specific health concerns intersect with larger challenges associated with income security, housing, and concerns for family members abroad.

"My health is not well, my family doctor is not helping. I have pain all over body and I am taking care of my children. Both of my girls are on wheelchairs and my son is looking for a job."

"My health is very poor physical and mental. My health issue has not been diagnosed, doctors cannot find the appropriate therapy for me. Life in Canada is very expensive."

Health concerns were cited as reasons individuals cannot attend language classes or work, and – in one case – transport their young children to school.

"More support for health services, specifically access to dental health. Currently it is too expensive and I cannot afford to pay for dental services and hope to have access to this health service without the burden of such costs."

"Learning the language has been a challenge. [Participant identified they have cognitive memory issues]. Wife has cancer, medical procedures keep getting postponed. Wife unable to focus and enhance English."

"Taking care of myself and my girls (both are in wheelchairs). I need assistance taking them and bringing them from school because my health is not the best (also my husband) as we are getting old. I am worried to take them out of school because I cannot take them anymore."

Lack of satisfaction with a health and dental system that is seen to be too complicated and too expensive was expressed by a number of people. Physical and dental health concerns are accompanied by stress and – in some cases more serious mental health concerns such as depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) – arising from migration-related traumas, as well as the challenges of resettlement and ongoing family separation.

Family Reunification

Worries about the health and safety of family overseas, as well as a desire to bring family to Canada to help take care of individuals requiring support in Canada were widespread.

“To bring my mother from Jordan to come live with us. She is sick and living alone there and I would like to take care of her.”

“If the government can help bring my family to Canada to assist me, since I have medical issue with my eyes.”

“Bringing families altogether so that we could support each other and not feel lonely.”

Family members abroad represent an important source of social and emotional support. For respondents, family members abroad represent an important source of social and emotional support. Ongoing uncertainty, continued violence in Syria, and the mental and physical health consequences associated with family separation have resulted in frustration with being unable to arrange to have family join them in Canada.

“To bring my son to come live with us. He is still in Jordan. How can this be possible? We have applied several times but have not heard back from anyone.”

“Worried about my siblings in Turkey and how I’m supposed to get them here.”

Given the speed with which Syrians were identified and brought to Canada, the slow pace of family reunification (in some regions it can take 5-7 years) is both frustrating and maddening.

The desire for information on the sponsorship process was widespread among respondents.

“Bring my family members that are stranded in other countries. I would like to bring my mother to come live with us. I will pay for everything, but I wish to be able to bring her here.”

“I want to sponsor/bring my family here from Syria, how can I do so?”

“I wish to be able to bring my family here. Currently my parents are in Jordan and I have been sending them money. Is it possible to bring them here and how can I do so?”

For one respondent the expressed need extended beyond their own immediate family to other Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

“I would like to tell the Government to bring more Syrian refugees from Lebanon. They are really struggling there and are in desperate need. I have family there and would like to bring them too, but I would be happy if the government can bring any one from there because the people there need more help.”

Education

Education emerged as a theme both with respect to parental concerns about their children’s successful integration, as well as among young adults whose post-secondary education had been disrupted by the conflict in Syria.

Although 97% of parents with school aged children report their children are doing well in school, parents continued to worry about their future in Canada. One parent, for example, identified their most pressing worry was ensuring *“the future of my kids and for them to do well in school and be successful,”* while another expressed *“my son has been having problems in school because of other Syrian kids and I would like to move to another area so I can put him in a better school.”*

Further, given the large number of children who arrived with physical and/or mental health issues, including blindness, mobility constraints and other impairments, the public and post-secondary school systems may not be fully equipped to meet existing needs and/or individuals may not be aware of the process to access necessary supports.

For young adults the challenges of interrupted education and/or credentials that are not recognized are amplified by the high cost of post-secondary in Canada. Recognition of the need to upgrade credentials to obtain better paying jobs is offset by the immediate need to earn money to contribute to their family’s economic well-being and save for their education.

“Paying for school was difficult so I dropped out to work and make money so that I can continue going to university.”

“Wish there was effort in allowing Syrian's that have left their education midway to come here and continue without facing huge barriers. There are some that have a lot to offer to this country but are held back due to lack of educational counselling.”

“Since I already have a university degree from Syria, I hope it is easier than it is to transfer my credits and receive a recognized degree from a Canadian university. The problem that I have faced with this is that I cannot afford to pay for courses that I must take to update my degree.”

“How I will continue to higher education with respect to financially supporting my education.

University here is very expensive. I also hope we can move to a bigger house - there is five of us living in our current house and we are in a two-bedroom home so it feels very stuffy.”

Others spoke of the impact of family member’s health concerns on their own ability to pursue education and/or employment.

“My mom has no one to look after her and I need to go to school and work. [I am] unable to handle going to school work and taking care of my mother. It is only me and her living here, no support of other family. Wish my siblings could come from Jordan so they can help me as I concentrate on my future.”

“The balance between maintain my younger siblings’ awareness about their native Arabic language as well as religion, but at the same time to learn English and do well in school.”

“Take care of my mother who has severe health issues. I worked for a little bit but had to stop in order to take care of my mom. At the same time trying to continue my education. Doctors have not been able to diagnose my mom or help her in anyway. Has affected her health even more and everyone else’s mental health and worries.”

One aspect of access to education which is frequently overlooked, particularly in the first year, is information and supports related to understanding and/or accessing post-secondary education. While some young adults may require access to adult education to finish high school, others may be seeking information on access to post-secondary institutions.

“I'd like to say to the government and settlement to have better resources and support for the youth. Coming here many people don't know where to start, which schools to go to, and how to excel in Canadian society. This is very important for youth like me who want to improve English skills so that they can achieve higher education (college and university).”

“During the first year - I wish I had more support to get into University. I struggled to get in but found someone by luck to help me with my applications. It would be very helpful if the ISSofBC had someone to help getting Syrian youth into Universities here because I had no idea.”

Current RAP programming is focused upon adults age 19 and older, with an emphasis on providing orientation to life in Canada (e.g. banking, housing). While recognition of the differing needs of youth and young adults exists within the broader settlement programming, this is not the case for RAP. An IRCC-funded pilot to develop a national youth RAP curriculum being developed through an ISSofBC-led partnership with Calgary Catholic Immigration Services (CCIS), Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia (ISANS) and N.E.E.D.S. in Winnipeg may prove promising in this regard. Further, mitigating financial barriers to post-secondary education for low-income households – as has been done in several other provinces – would further enable refugee youth and young adults to thrive in their new homes.

General

Responses from a small number of individuals suggest their decision to come to Canada may have been different if they had been provided more complete information. One respondent, for example, responded they wish they had known she enjoyed a “*better*

lifestyle [over there] because life is stressful here. I have kids and school and work and appointments. It's very busy and I don't have time for myself."

Although themes have been presented separately, the interconnected nature of the themes cannot be understated. Rather, they form one part of an interconnected challenge of integration.

"Rent is expensive and I've been trying to support my whole family through my part-time job.

Cannot work full time because I have to take care of my elderly parents who have bad health issues. Father has a disability and cannot walk."

"Looking for a job so that I can make money for my family. I am struggling to find work without English language competency. I also need to change homes because the house is a terrible condition especially for my younger daughter who just had heart surgery - the condition in the house is not healthy for her."

"Struggling financially, rent has increased. I am unable to work due to health issues and disability. My son has PTSD, still hears the bombs and hides under his bed at night. This has been very worrisome."

Frequently the challenges of integration are focussed upon specific issues, such as health, employment, language proficiency. Sometimes overlooked in the analyses, however, are the broader challenges associated with learning a new culture and way of living. One respondent noted it is *“hard to come from a country with no policies to a country that is very organized and structured in everything”* while another expressed their desire to go back to their country.

A number of respondents expressed frustration with service providers, particularly with respect to assistance and supports participants felt should have been provided. In some cases, services requested are beyond the scope of both the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) and Settlement Services, while in others clients provided insights on services that would have helped. A stronger service continuum between RAP and settlement case management including more robust service referral systems have subsequently been put in place but waitlists for case management services exists in several IRCC-funded agencies.

Recommendations

The following recommendations speak to both Federal and Provincial jurisdictional responsibilities and are offered as possible solutions to address the main survey findings.

Pre-Arrival

IRCC is encouraged to invest in more enhanced in-person pre-arrival services for refugees destined to Canada, including:

1. *Implement an Asset-based Pre-arrival Assessment Tool* for all refugees destined to Canada in order to identify previous work experience, skills and abilities. Provision of this information to RAP workers prior to arrival would allow staff to ensure appropriate supports are in place and/or referrals made early after arrival.
2. *Introduce Pre-Arrival English Language Learning Classes* that utilize issues related to settlement in Canada to teach English to individuals destined to Canada. In addition to increased English language capacity this would enable individuals to obtain a deeper understanding of Canadian culture and lifestyles prior to arrival.
3. *Consider a Family-based Resettlement model.* When Canada selects refugees for resettlement, IRCC should consider resettling the entire extended family members, similar to what was conducted with the Bhutanese refugee resettlement operation out of Nepal. This policy change would go a long way in reducing some of the trauma related impact and stress resulting from ongoing family separation.

Post Arrival Services and Supports

IRCC is encouraged to consider the following recommendations:

4. *Explore New models of formal language learning*, such as introduction of video-based learning that would allow students to watch (and rewatch) lessons at times that are convenient to them. Utilization of skype or other technology would allow teachers to touch base with students at regular times and/or weekly as opposed to daily classroom-based sessions. Adapt online classes to include curriculum for low language learners. Explore other non-technology-based language learning

should as home-based language outreach models that could be used as an early intervention targeting socially isolated refugee families due to a lack of child care and/or health and trauma reasons. An expansion of workplace language classes offered currently in some regions of Canada should also be considered.

5. *Invest in a Pan-Canadian Settlement-Informed Refugee Trauma Program* that targets 4,000-5,000 refugees annually who cannot access a formal clinical intervention. Provision of free, first language, culturally appropriate clinical interventions provide important contributions toward mental health and settlement, yet access to services is largely absent. As part of this multi-pronged approach, ensure that every RAP Service Providing Organizations (SPO) has basic settlement crisis support worker staffing resources and follows a national standard, including development and delivery of a common RAP orientation for every GAR on 'coping with change-mental well being' during time in reception centre-temporary housing phase. This would mean that every RAP SPO would have some specialized in-house early intervention staffing resources to provide additional supports.

Develop a national pre- and post- assessment tool for settlement informed trauma program to be conducted only by a clinical professional in order to evaluate the progress and impact of the clinical intervention on convention refugees. Finally, when IRCC decides to resettle new refugee special populations, provide RAP SPOs with a population health profile so that they can prepare, in advance of arrival, any needed specialized interventions (e.g. specialized trauma support team for refugee women survivors of sexual violence). Related to this would be increased collaboration with Provincial-Territorial Government partners on more effective co-planning around refugee trauma related needs especially for refugee children in the public school system.

6. *Expand Mental Health-related Coverage under Interim Federal Health (IFH)*. At present most refugees are usually only eligible for IFH coverage for their first year in Canada and subsequently, miss out on the mental health related coverage because most do not access those services during this time owing to immediate focus on stabilization and meeting basic needs. Extending mental health coverage under IFH for up to 3 years after arrival in Canada for convention refugee would

improve settlement outcomes over the longer period. Most refugees have little or no mental health when they actually need it unless they pay themselves or must wait months for an intervention.

The Government of Canada is encouraged to recognize and expand coverage to include all registered clinical counsellors (RCC) regardless of whether they belong to a provincial regulatory body or a volunteer membership association, they should be recognized and covered as a low cost and effective mental health intervention. Currently, RCC's are covered under IFH in some but not all provinces across Canada.

The Government of BC is encouraged to explore:

7. *Mitigate financial barriers to post-secondary education* through introduction of changes to BC Student Assistance program similar to those introduced in Ontario in 2017 that would make tuition free for low-income households (\$50,000 or less per year) and/or New Brunswick's 'free tuition bursary' that provides non-repayable grants to students with household incomes less than \$60,000 per year. This recommendation would apply to all BC low income families. Further, refugees would benefit from targeted information and orientation sessions related to Post-Secondary Education in BC during the first year after arrival.

IRCC and the Government of BC are encouraged to:

8. *Targeted Employment Service Interventions for Job-Ready Refugees*. Besides the implementation of a refugee strength-based assessment tool including documenting prior employment and skill sets conducted prior to arrival in Canada, more targeted service interventions are needed to support refugees, who are job ready, to integrate into the labour market. Some current gaps include supporting refugee entrepreneurship and self employment initiatives; culturally relevant career and alternative career assessment testing, similar to what exists on a fee for service basis for high school students and young adults unclear about their future educational or career options. Funding for job specific training programs that include a wage subsidy and English language component should also be considered for specific occupations.

IRCC, the Government of BC and Translink are encouraged to:

9. *Expand Access to Low-Cost Transportation Options.* As noted, Syrian families tend to be larger than most Canadian born families and as such, this poses significant challenges of moving a family of 6-10 members throughout Metro Vancouver to access various resources, medical appointments, work and school. As affordable housing options are increasingly found eastward within Metro Vancouver and the Fraser Valley, the cost and location of transit vis a vis accessing community resources is problematic. This is a reality not just for refugees but also for other low income BC residents. Under the federal government, IRCC resettlement assistance program (RAP) income support, while adults destined to Vancouver are provided with a monthly three zone bus pass, children and youth are not. We are recommending IRCC provide government assisted refugees under RAP income support with a monthly bus pass for GAR children and youth.

Additionally, the Government of BC and Translink are encouraged to implement a low cost monthly pass for all low-income families including refugees similar to the Calgary Transit Model. Calgary has introduced an innovative sliding scale pricing system that assesses income and assigns a purchase price based on income. In short, the less an applicant earns, the less they will need to pay. The monthly pass can be as low as \$5.15 in 2018. The Calgary Transit model is a promising practise that could provide important insights on the costs and benefits of such a system.

Conclusion

If one was to look at this report through the eyes of low income BC families, including members of some of our Indigenous Peoples, many of the findings would be quite similar. While we have chosen to undertake this report to better understand the settlement process of this recent large group of refugee newcomers, we cannot isolate our findings from those of low income families in general.

Not unlike previous refugee populations that have successfully settled and integrated in BC (Hungarians, Ismaili, Vietnamese, Somali, etc), after two years in Canada, Syrian refugees are showing significant positive developments associated with their settlement and integration process. This is especially seen in the language acquisition process, labour market attachment rates and equally important, but more difficult to measure, feelings of welcome, inclusion, community and civic participation.

While there are several positive elements that indicate greater integration after two years in Canada, we cannot lose sight of a minority of Syrians who continue to struggle for various reasons. The horrific migration-related trauma of living through a civil war and years in an urban or closed refugee camps call for new national models of support. If Canada continues to select special refugee populations for resettlement like the Syrians or more recently the survivors of Daesh and the Yazidis, we urgently need a Pan-Canadian settlement informed refugee trauma program funded in large part by the Federal Government through the Department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada.

Although the timeframe of Operation Syrian Refugees did not allow for in-person pre-arrival services, the importance of in-person pre-arrival services especially for humanitarian immigration stream can not be over emphasized. The need for service enhancements to strengthen pre- and post- arrival service continuum including a new proposed refugee strength-based assessment tool and ways for in Canada service providers to participate in pre-arrival services from Canada need to be seriously considered.

While the fundamentals of Canada's settlement language program for newcomers are sound, there is a need identified for a small minority population which are not able to access classroom-based models. This is especially problematic for women with young

children who are not able to attend classes because of the lack of child care options. New and emerging models being tested in different parts of Canada need to be expanded and brought into future Adult English language approaches.

The last word must go to Syrian refugees themselves through the overwhelming sense of gratitude and eagerness to give back and contribute to their new home.

“Thankful at the Canadian government has treated as well as the Canadian people. No countries in the Middle East [were] willing to accept us.”

“Grateful for the Government and to the Canadian people for their help and assistance.”

“I am very happy, and I am excited to have my kids grow up and integrate into a country like this.”

“It feels like everyone is trying to help us, it’s so nice. I feel like I can interact with people in all circumstances.”

“So happy to be here. I am willing to host a new Syrian family in my house: give a hand to a family, the same way Canada gave a hand to ours. Justin Trudeau is the best.”

