

Understanding Syrian Refugees' Experience In Terms Of Settlement and Participation In Canadian Labour Market: A Mixed Method Approach

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores Syrian refugees' experience in terms of settlement and participation in Canadian labour market. It discusses the findings of research on labour market integration in Canada of racialized immigrants and refugees, as well as the state of economic insecurity among newcomers, to identify systemic patterns of discrimination and policy implications. A mixed method approach with in-depth interview and questionnaire surveys were used for an analysis. Long-term benefit, second-generation success, and reliance on government support were commonly observed. Language barrier, lack of host country's experience, and lack of transportation were cited as common barriers to employment. This research confirms that there is no uniform process for refugees entering into a host country. Canadian government needs to create a structured program to be implemented in each province and deliver the same process for every refugee entering

Keywords: refugees, labour market, employment, settlement, language barrier, Canadian experience

INTRODUCTION

Immigrants in Canada struggle when entering and participating in the labour market. This is significant as Canada has the highest per-capita immigration rate in the world and immigration plays a key role in Canadian culture (Statistics Canada, 2013). Immigrants to Canada enter under different programs and categories, but in the context of refugees, Canada offers a safe asylum and new opportunities for this type of immigrant. Government data shows that since November 4, 2015 more than 40,000 government or privately sponsored Syrian refugees have arrived in Canada. The government has also committed to continuing resettlement of Syrian refugees this year (2018). With this influx, we are observing challenges in refugee resettlement and integration.

Considering the many obstacles government sponsored refugees must overcome, it is realistic to think it will take more than one year for them to resettle completely, which was what was

originally anticipated. According to the Office of the Auditor General of Canada, it was expected to take four to six weeks to find accommodations and one year of refugees having income support from the federal government (2017).

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2009) emphasizes employment as one of six thematic indicators of resettlement and integration of refugees. Employment for refugees is often measured as unskilled or semiskilled, generally from a low socioeconomic status perspective (UNHCR, 2013). It is widely believed that immigrants admitted on compassionate grounds, such as refugees, tend to perform poorly compared to immigrants selected with skills. Immigrants admitted on compassionate grounds may also struggle in the Canadian labour market due to language and cultural barriers (UNHCR, 2013). This pilot project asked the question: Do discriminatory barriers in the labour market exist for refugees from the Arab countries, including Syria?

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Although research this far regarding the Syrian refugees has been limited, it has been indicated that these Syrian refugees' needs were higher than expected. Especially, the government sponsored refugees who were a lot of times women and children, with research indicating they have little to no formal education, making them the most vulnerable (Friscolanti, 2016). Though, this was not discovered until they began arriving in Canada. In addition, the trauma they had just endured, made it necessary for specialized attention and the time necessary to deal with those issues, both physical and emotional (Government of Canada, 2017; Kantor, & Einhorn, 2016). Therefore, when a country helps the most vulnerable, one needs to remember when attempting to measure economic performance, that it was done as a humanitarian undertaking and not for that of the economy. Dealing with the trauma, amidst learning new customs becomes a challenge. This process of resettling can further depend on how they are welcomed and accepted into their host country (Friscolanti, 2016).

How refugees are perceived greatly affects how they are accepted. If they are perceived as wanting to maintain their culture in their host country, people are not as willing to provide assistance and acceptance, but if they are perceived as willing to adopt and integrate into the culture of their host country people are more willing to express acceptance and offer assistance, as well as making the resettlement process a success (Yalcinkaya, Branscombe, Gebauer, Niedlich, & Hakim, 2018; Office of The Auditor General of Canada, 2017). Furthermore, media plays a role in how refugees are perceived. It has been suggested that it depends on the political leaning of a particular organization, which will determine how refugees are portrayed. This notion could be seen during the time of the 2015 election. Prior to the election the media focused on the conflict in Syria, whereas after the election the focus changed to "citizenship and integration." This was a reflection of the two different prime ministers' views. Due to the fact that many from the host country do not have encounters with refugees themselves, they rely on the media for their information. It has been shown that while immigrants are associated with improving the economy, refugees are portrayed in a very negative light, being seen as a potential security risk and a cost to the economy as they resettle (Wallace, 2018). Due to the nature of war and mere survival facing the Syrian refugees, it needed to be dealt with in a swift manner, so processing the refugees as *prima facie* allowed for quicker processing. However, this rapidity also added to the negative perception and fear of it not being done efficiently (Government of Canada, 2017). Moreover, how refugees are

perceived is also affected by the age of the refugee, with adults being seen as less flexible to transform to the new culture, but children seen as more impressionable, (Yalcinkaya et. al, 2018) which suggests in the long term the second generation will have more success integrating into the culture and labour force.

Resettled refugees are considered permanent residents, allowing them full access to government sponsored programs. Due to the permanent resident status they can access English classes as well as training to move into the workforce. Since learning English is one of the main obstacles, research indicates there are substantial wait times to be able to take these classes, which translates to longer waits to find employment (Government of Canada, 2017; Grant, 2017). It has been shown in the past, the benefits of having refugees work far outweigh the cost of the learning curve. The benefits include becoming taxpayers themselves and contributing to the local economy, by bringing more spending to local businesses as they move into areas, regardless of where the money comes from, whether their own savings or financial aid. There is a positive outlook for the future because when looking at refugees from other countries that have been here for many years their unemployment rates are lower than those of Canadian born. (Grant, 2017; Schillings, 2018; Economist, 2018).

In the beginning, there are barriers that exist such as social restrictions as they learn the language and customs of the new country, as mentioned, moreover another barrier facing the Syrian Refugees is that their credentials are not transferable, not being recognized by Canadian agencies. Credentials for training from certificates, degrees and various licenses, additionally, many refugees do not have proof of their experience. This is due to the circumstances in which they had to flee, grabbing their certification or graduate degrees was not a possibility. Even if they do have them getting them translated professionally is costly, too costly for them to afford. It has been suggested that these numerous barriers make employment opportunities more limited (Schillings, 2018; Grant, 2017).

Some refugees say that they don't feel like they belong until they have a job, therefore others suggest let the refugees "be their own solution." Many have the drive and initiative to want to build a new life for themselves and their family. Several of the refugees want to show Canadians their initiative and how hard working they are by giving back to Canada for rescuing them from a war-torn country. Unfortunately, that is not always the case as a large majority, 50 to 90 percent, as of 2017 will be transitioning to welfare in the province they are in. This however is not considered unusual, as they are still learning the language, culture and skills. Encouragingly, it has been shown when given these opportunities, refugees are creating new businesses and expanding employment opportunities even for local residents (Friscolanti, 2016, Grant, 2017; Nadeem, 2018; Arnold-Fernandez & Rawson, 2018).

What is more concerning, is how long they will rely on welfare. Looking back indicates that during the second year many refugees still rely on welfare but by year five only 26% still needed assistance, but these numbers were for privately sponsored refugees, with numbers in government sponsored refugee's numbers much higher at 41%. In a survey conducted in BC by Immigrant Services Society of BC, the number of refugees relying on foodbanks weekly has dropped, the full employment rate is up to 27% which is double from a year ago, and 87% report improvements in the English language and 97% indicate that their children are doing well at

school (Government of Canada, 2018). When looking at the 20-year outlook a Vancouver organization estimates that the Syrian refugees in Vancouver will contribute \$563 million over the 20 years. Statistics also show that the children of refugees, do just as well, if not better than those who are Canadian born. Although this is costly at the beginning, looking long-term Canada will be compensated with refugees contributing to society (Friscolanti, 2016).

Things Canadians take for granted such as physical safety in the workplace, is something that refugees are pleased about in employment in Canada, as that security was often not available to them in a country ravished by war. Not necessarily the security of the job, but the safety standards Canada has so they can perform their duties without fear. Employers need to be mindful of this fear, especially in drills such as a fire drill, which is frightening to these refugees. It is therefore crucial that the host countries understand these needs while providing opportunities for the refugees (Arnold-Fernandez & Rawson, 2018). For example, Halifax started a bridging the gap program, matching Syrian refugee's skills with jobs that are appropriate and are seeing success (Grant, 2017).

Analyzing the data above gives an optimistic outlook for the future of these refugees. It may take longer than originally anticipated but through research we will be able to identify areas that can be improved to help the resettlement process occur in a swift manner without discrimination. The purpose of this research is to identify and confirm the findings thus far.

METHODOLOGY

Setting

Due to the war in Syria, which began in 2011, it was necessary for nearly 1.3 million of the residents to be relocated. It had been estimated that 250,000 of Syrians had already been killed (Government of Canada, 2018; World Vision, 2019). Canada resettled 25,000 refugees from November 2015 to February 2016 and has continued to since then (Government of Canada, 2018). Upon arriving in Canada, the refugees were then dispersed into various communities within Canada, including Abbotsford BC.

Participants

Eight refugees were identified through the Abbotsford Community Services (ACS). ACS worked directly with the refugees whom settled in the Abbotsford area. ACS recruited and obtained permission from each of the refugees, then put them in direct contact with the interviewer. The refugees interviewed have been in Canada from 15 months to 36 months. Two of the eight refugees interviewed were female, with the other six males. The age varied from 18 years of age to mid-forties. Education levels indicated: five had high school education and three had college. However, in the interviews it was discovered that many that had said they had a high school education had actually just entered high school but never graduated. One of the refugees was not working, two were working part time and five were working 30 plus hours a week. The average size of the household they lived in was 5.75 people. The number seeming lower because of one outlier, which was one refugees living on his own. If that outlier was removed the average household size was 6.42 people. Out of these households, four had only one member working, three had two members working and one had zero members working. Five interviewees had someone in their household on assistance, two did not and one did not respond to this question.

Instrument

This research was qualitative in its approach. The questionnaire surveys and the in-person interviews were prepared by the researcher and research assistant. These instruments were then reviewed and approved by the Ethics Board of the University of The Fraser Valley. A translator was also hired to assist with refugees who were unable to speak or understand English well enough to communicate effectively during the interview process.

Procedure

Eight refugees were interviewed, they were referred to and will be referred to throughout this report at participant 1 (P1), participant 2 (P2), up to participant 8 (P8). Prior to beginning the participants filled out a consent form, which included the how their information would be stored. They were also assured that the interview would remain anonymous, so they were able to provide information without fear of being identified.

Upon arrival each participant was given a questionnaire to respond to, prior to the interview. The questions were from the length of time they have been in Canada, schooling prior to arriving in Canada, level of English prior to arriving in Canada and now, English classes provided and the current work situation. The questionnaire was followed by an interview, which was digitally recorded, so the interviewer could listen again to prepare the final report.

Each participant was asked at the end of the interview if there was anything they would like to share for the purposes of this research that had not yet been touched on. At the end of the interview each participant was thanked and given a small gift card as a token of appreciation for their participation. A sample of the survey questionnaire and the interview guidelines can be obtained by request.

RESULTS

Long-Term Benefits and Second-Generation Success

It is reasonable to assume that because of the length of time the participants have been here, the longest being 36 months, it would be too soon to see long-term benefits. One can anticipate that the discoveries found in the literature review above, will also hold true for these recent refugees. However, the participants with children in school, identified that the children's English was at the same level as the other students, indicating that the language barrier the first-generation refugees faced would not be a concern for the second-generation.

Common Barriers to Employment

When it came to entering the work-force, there were three common themes that emerged, as well as some unique themes to certain participants in this pool of participants. However, one could argue that although it was unique to one individual, it was probably representative of refugees as a whole, and therefore important to discuss.

Language Barrier

Every participant felt that not knowing the English language was one of the biggest downfalls they had when trying to enter the work-force. It was not just an insecurity they had, multiple participants were told that once their English improved they could apply again. P1 had applied to

25 different jobs and was rejected from each one due to his lack of English. Interestingly, one participant, who has only been here 24 months indicated that he was told he could not work for the first year, until he had his English classes. However, he did not want to wait, he had a family and felt it was important for him to lead by example. He proceeded to get a job and claims that his English is better because of being forced to learn it by working with only English-speaking people. Whereas many of the participants work for the same company and speak to each other in Arabic and therefore, do not get to practice and develop their English. This is an unfortunate experience as many indicated that in order to pursue a career they wanted or to go to school they needed to improve their English, which is difficult to do when they are not using English consistently.

Lack of Canadian Experience

Even if they had experience in the field it was not recognized when applying for work here in Canada. Others indicated in order to gain Canadian experience they first had to volunteer in a field. Which would explain the extra length of time required on assistance in order to gain experience. One participant, P8, said "People were sympathetic, so they accepted me, but I made a condition that if you don't like my work, within one or two weeks, I will quit. It was a challenge for me." After meeting with the future employer and showing him his work, he said, "He told me, every worker in this company starts about \$20 an hour, but if you do that in this job, I can give you more. I told him give me two weeks to show you how can I do. After that, we can talking about my pay... After about two weeks, when he pay my cheque, and before that he met in . . . we talking something, he told me, I am happy with you. I would like to work together. I start with him, and now I am boss."

Unfortunately, that was only one story like that. Another participant, P1, said he went to a job for a day and completed all the tasks assigned to him. As soon as he finished one job he would ask what to do next and the employer kept giving him work to do. At the end of the day though he was told not to come back and never received pay for that day's work.

On top of having to have Canadian experience, the participants with licenses, certificates or training were not recognized in Canada. It seemed the higher the level of education the more difficult it would be for them to ever enter the same field. This is said because one participant had a nursing license in her home country, which is not accepted here, but when applying for nursing at a university was told she must have her driver's license, which has been a barrier for many refugees. She has taken the test multiple times and failed and now feels she must enter a different field or push her studies for another year as she has missed the deadline for admissions for this year. Another participant with a nursing license now has to move into childcare as she is not able to practice in Canada, demonstrating that her skills are being underutilized. This participant was a maternity nurse and then a school nurse for nine years, in her home country.

Lack of Transportation

The barrier that most participants mentioned that was a surprise to this research was the Insurance Corporation of British Columbia (ICBC). Although, the written portion of the test is available in Arabic, their mother tongue, they all claimed the translation was not in their dialect or the type of Arabic they understood. Adding another layer of difficulty to their adjustment. Also, with the initial influx of refugees from Syria it was understood that they had to leave without notice and were unable to bring their licenses with them, therefore ICBC allowed them to take the written and practical tests to obtain their license. Conversely, the refugees arriving later

experienced a much different encounter, even though some of these refugees did have their license it was not accepted at ICBC and they were told this was due to too many previous people abusing the system and now everyone had to follow the correct procedures. It is worth noting that one participant said he understood why they did this and accepted it, whereas others did feel bitter towards the process. Due to this difficulty, it is typical that only one family member has a driver license and is responsible for driving everyone in the family to appointments etc. on top of usually being the only one in the family working.

Another participant was a taxi driver in his home country, however to be a taxi driver in Canada one must have a class 1 driver's license. He did not experience as many difficulties on the practical part of the test, although he did experience the same difficulties as other participants with the written portion of the test. However, in order to achieve a class 1 driver's license, he has been told he must be fluent in English and not require an interpreter. Two participants had expressed an interest in wanting to drive truck, however again English is the barrier.

Length of Time Relying on Government Support

According to the report from the Auditor General of Canada's office, the Syrian refugees were supposed to receive a standard and uniform service, no matter where they were located in Canada, and through the Auditor General's Report they discovered that did not occur. Many of such facilities had no service standard identified at all (2017). Our findings confirm the findings in this report, even within one city the services were not consistent depending on the date of arrival. For example, the hotel they stayed at, the first wave of immigrants stayed for up to eight months and the last wave only stayed for as little as 8 days. P6 said, "Honestly, they put pressure on me to leave... we will have to find a place for homeless and if you don't go you will have to do it on your own." Another, P8 stated "They had good relationships, friendship relationships with the first group, and they were happy with that... I noticed that they helped some families, they were willing to help them, and they were careless about some other families." Adding, "And this helped me a lot to be a successful person in Canada." Because he had to do things for himself, he learned to become independent.

The participants arrival in Canada ranged from 15 months to 36 months. There was a marked difference in how they felt they were received depending on which wave they arrived in. The participants in the first wave arriving 36 months ago felt that they were well received and had access to many programs. Programs from English classes to cultural classes. Along with these classes, they also had special speakers come in and teach them about the different things Canada has to offer. Whether it was ICBC coming in or Work BC to teach them how to build a resume they all felt they were given the time they needed to grow accustomed to their new surroundings. P1 indicated that even though different programs were available to aid in finding a job, his current job was found through the help of his neighbour. One participant even stated it took 9 months to start English classes because they were told to relax from the trauma of their experiences. Whereas the participants that had only been here 15 to 24 months had a different experience. They were showed one or two places to live, and even though they were not satisfactory were told they had to pick one or they would be on their own for finding a place. One of the participants P5, even stated that he was living in a basement suite attached to a garage where there was so much stuff in the garage "It's like, so like, the owner of my house was put lots of stuff in the garage, and there were some animals... sometimes it's like, scary." Some of the participants in the second and

third arrivals felt that the first arrivals were favoured and treated better than they were, however because they felt they were not treated as well, it forced them to find jobs on their own and not to rely on the system that was not as inviting to them.

It was noted by P8, who was in the last influx of refugees, that he was told by other refugees in the community that he was not as smart as them, “[a]fter I get certificate, or like, I asked somebody here before me and I get job, but they told me no. That’s not good. Just stay and get money from government.” He stated that many of them rely on different government programs from welfare to disability to avoid having to work. This participant also stated “There’s no impossible. Make your own goal and don’t listen to the negative things. With my move, I can give myself one hundred reasons to quit and thousand reasons to stay. The main factor why the refugees are failing because of their rumors and they listen to bad experience of others.” Other participants were offered work, however due to the fact there may be overtime they turned down the job. Certain participants were told their case files were being closed at ACS as they had used all the resources, however the participant indicated he needed citizenship before the file could be closed, but still needs two more years of English to feel comfortable, and this participant has been here 36 months already. Participants in the second wave of refugees, were supported for one year and then told they must find a job as they would no longer receive assistance.

Additional Findings

The majority of participants, being Muslim, indicated that the mosque was also a great source of aid to them, although there were a few participants did not feel they received any aid from the mosque. P1 indicated that the mosque provided additional private English classes for the children. Because Muslims must pray five times a day, it has become an issue for some of them. Some employers allow them to take their breaks, so they can pray, yet others will not allow it, causing an employment barrier for some of the refugees. Other refugees have said they worked around their breaks and changed the time of their prayers as to not interfere with their job, they did not feel it impeded on their beliefs.

Many of the participants come from large families, 6 or more people in a household. It was also mentioned that because they do not want the wives to work they continue to have children. They get more financial help for more children, and the ages in one family can range from a few months to earl 20’s.

Certain refugees were either students or hoped to become students at a post-secondary institution. P2 indicated that she wanted to make a difference in the world and therefore wanted to get her master’s degree, so she could become a professor. Other refugees were hoping to be able to start their own business. P2 indicated that by going through this experience she has become stronger and more self-confident. P4 indicated that extra money is sent home to Syria and would like to have a career with lots of money to help the family in his home country. But the main objective of whatever career is to help people. This was more of a common theme among the younger participants.

CONCLUSION

As many of the refugees said when asked about discrimination in Canada, there are good people and bad people everywhere. You can’t judge everyone by the few. Through this research the

diversity of some of the experiences seemed to be based on the refugees' outlook on their experience as well as their own determination and motivation. The experiences that were not unique confirmed that learning the English language was the first and most important barrier to refugees getting jobs here in Canada, with the second being work experience in Canada and third being transportation, including dealings with ICBC.

As indicated above, it was thought that there would be a uniform process for refugees entering Canada, this research confirmed that there is not. It would be important for the Canadian government to create a program that would be implemented in each province that would deliver the same process for every refugee entering. Taking the data from above shows allowing them to depend indefinitely on the government for financial aid is not beneficial for the refugees. Therefore, ensuring English classes were available immediately upon arrival to Canada would be necessary, including more intensive use of the language. The benefits of being immersed in a language can be seen in schools, such as French Immersion schools.

It had been discovered that many of the refugees worked at the same place and therefore spoke Arabic at work, but this particular company received financial aid for hiring refugees. Therefore, monitoring of companies using this initiative may be required for integration to take place. As mentioned Halifax has implemented a successful program for getting refugees in the workforce. Therefore, the government needs to research what each province has done successfully and use these successes when creating a uniform transition for refugees. Additionally, they need to take the failures and learn from them and ensure they are not repeated in the future.

Lastly, a revamping of the Arabic that the ICBC system uses may be necessary for refugees to have a more successful experience. As well as providing classes for refugees with the rules of the road in Canada, as it is a much different experience then what the refugees are accustomed to.

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