Julie Drolet and Gayatri Moorthi

The Settlement Experiences of Syrian Newcomers in Alberta: Social Connections and Interactions

Abstract

Syrian refugees resettling in Alberta face complex integration challenges. Social connections are a key foundation to successful integration. The goal of this exploratory study was to better understand the nature of social networks, social support and social capital among Syrian refugees arriving in Alberta in 2015 and in 2016. The study also focused on comparing the resettlement experience of refugees from larger centers and small centers in Alberta, differentiating the experience of government assisted refugees (GARs), privately sponsored refugees (PSRs) and blended visa office referred (BVOR) refugees. The data are drawn from a larger study that sought to understand the resettlement experience and the challenges faced by incoming refugees. A mixed method approach including surveys, community forums and interviews was used to collect data from five cities in Alberta. The study found that social relationships are crucial to settlement and integration. The importance of ethno-cultural communities, sponsors and community organizations in settlement and integration is discussed. Overall, the study found that while newcomers were making friends and building ties, these were still nebulous and largely focused on settlement needs or linking to socio-cultural community. GARs had stronger links to settlement agencies as compared to PSRs who were more closely linked to community networks. Refugees in smaller centers reported a higher level of belonging and reported more engagement with settlement or community organizations, but had lower rates of participation in recreation or religious activities. While most participants experienced a certain sense of belonging to Canada, they simultaneously felt challenged while managing settlement concerns and combatting racism and social exclusion.

Keywords: Refugees, settlement, urban areas, integration.

Résumé

Les réfugiés syriens qui se réinstallent en Alberta font face à des défis d'intégration complexes. Les liens sociaux sont une base clé pour une intégration réussie. Le but de cette étude exploratoire était de mieux comprendre la nature des réseaux sociaux, du soutien social et du capital social chez les réfugiés syriens arrivant en Alberta en 2015 et en 2016. L'étude visait également à comparer l'expérience de réinstallation des réfugiés des grands centres et des petits centres en Alberta, différencier l'expérience des réfugiés parrainés par le gouvernement (RPG), des réfugiés parrainés par le secteur privé (RPP) et des réfugiés parrainés par un bureau de visas mixte (BVOR). Les données proviennent d'une étude plus vaste visant à comprendre l'expérience de réinstallation et les défis auxquels sont confrontés les nouveaux réfugiés. Une méthode mixte comprenant des sondages, des forums communautaires et des entrevues a été utilisée pour recueillir des données dans cinq villes de l'Alberta. L'étude a révélé que les relations sociales sont cruciales pour l'établissement et l'intégration. L'importance des communautés ethnoculturelles, des commanditaires et des organismes communautaires dans l'établissement et l'intégration est discutée. Dans l'ensemble, l'étude a révélé que même si les nouveaux arrivants se faisaient des amis et tissaient des liens, ceux-ci étaient encore nébuleux et axés en grande partie sur les besoins d'établissement ou sur les liens

avec la communauté socioculturelle. Les RPG avaient des liens plus étroits avec les organismes d'établissement que les RPS qui étaient plus étroitement liés aux réseaux communautaires. Les réfugiés dans les plus petits centres ont déclaré un plus haut niveau d'appartenance et ont signalé un plus grand engagement avec les organismes d'établissement ou les organismes communautaires, mais avaient des taux plus faibles de participation aux activités récréatives ou religieuses. Même si la plupart des participants ont éprouvé un certain sentiment d'appartenance au Canada, ils se sont sentis simultanément confrontés à des difficultés liées à la gestion des problèmes d'établissement et à la lutte contre le racisme et l'exclusion sociale.

Mots clés : Réfugiés, établissement, zones urbaines, intégration.

INTRODUCTION

The Syrian conflict has displaced more than 5.5 million refugees since 2011 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] 2017). Canada was one of the key refugee destinations for many fleeing Syrians. By early 2017, Canada had received a total of 40,081 Syrian refugees, of whom 21,876 (54.6%) were Government Assisted Refugees (GARs), 14,274 (35.6%) were Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSRs) and 3,931 (9.8%) were Blended Visa-Office Referred Refugees (BVORs) through the #WelcomeRefugees initiative of the government (Government of Canada 2017)[1]. The Canadian government prioritized the most vulnerable and marginalized refugees in need of immediate resettlement such as children, women, families, elderly and disabled and members of the LGBTQ community.

Alberta is one of the top three destinations for refugees after Ontario and Quebec. In 2016, there was an 86% increase in refugees as compared to 2015 (IRCC 2016a). A total of 7415 Syrian refugees were admitted to Alberta from January 2015 until September 2016. Many refugees settled in large centres such as Edmonton and Calgary, but their numbers were also high in smaller cities like Medicine Hat, Red Deer and Lethbridge. The sheer numbers and the pace of their arrival presented several challenges. While some of these cities had well-developed systems and services with cultural tools to support refugees, other communities had to rapidly expand or strengthen their capacity. These refugees also arrived in a contentious socio-political environment. On one hand, there was a significant investment of resources across all levels of government to ensure a smooth resettlement process and a strong surge of support from communities, families, settlement agencies and non-profits to settle incoming refugees[2] (IRCC 2017). On the other hand, the economic downturn led to some discontentment and tensions around spending public money to support incoming Syrians; issues of racism, Islamophobia, stereotyping, acculturation and

integration also came to the fore during this process (McCarthy 2017; Tyyska et al. 2017). Given this context, an exploratory study was undertaken in 2016 to understand the unique needs, barriers and everyday experience of settlement for Syrian refugees in Alberta[3]. The goal was to provide a platform to hear the stories and understand the challenges of settlement across both large and small centres, and document any differences between GARs, PSRs, and BVORs in order to strengthen client-centered programming in the province. This paper will report specifically on the data about the nature of social connections and social networks among recently arrived Syrian refugees. It will detail how they build community, develop a sense of belonging and adapt their identities to become integrated into Canadian life. The next section provides a profile of Syrian refugees arriving in Alberta and discusses the settlement process; settlement and integration; settlement and city size; social connections, networks and social relationships; and social capital, drawing from the relevant literature. The research methodology is presented, followed by the findings, discussion and conclusion.

SETTLEMENT AND SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

Settlement Process

The resettlement of refugees is part of Canada's humanitarian tradition to offer protection to individuals and families that are displaced and persecuted (Government of Canada 2017). Syrian refugees entering Canada are granted permanent residency status; GARs access a range of services and supports through the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) and settlement programs that include reception, accommodation, orientation, language learning, community and employment services, foreign credential recognition support and settlement information (IRCC 2016a). Additional support services include: childcare, transportation assistance, translation, interpretation, crisis counselling and provisions for disabilities (CIC 2017; IRCC 2017). PSRs and BVORs access similar supports through their sponsors, settlement agencies and community organizations. For the first year, GARs receive monthly income support based on provincial social assistance rates, and BVORs receive similar income support for six months (with the remaining six months provided by the sponsors). Overall, studies show that refugees broadly benefit from government programming and access to public spaces and institutions (Agrawal and Zeitouny 2017; IRCC 2016a). In addition, resettled refugee families are eligible to apply for the Canada Child Benefit that provides $450 per month per child (CIC 2017).

Evaluation of this wave of Syrian refugees highlighted that as compared to GARs or BVORs, PSRs tended to be older, higher educated, more fluent in official languages and with smaller family sizes (IRCC 2016b). PSRs were more likely to

report that their immediate needs were met and that they received more help as compared to GARs (IRCC 2016b). The report also pointed out that Syrian refugees are "community-oriented and maintain strong connections with their cultural and religious communities" (IRCC 2016b). Further, unlike other refugee groups, there was increased use of social media and mobile applications to connect actively with others, specifically using WhatsApp (IRCC 2016b). Some of the key challenges that the refugees faced included: learning an official language, finding employment, housing, getting their education/work experience recognized, health and social integration (AAISA 2016; IRCC 2016b). The settlement experience of refugees are shaped by factors such as refugee category, age, gender, education, race and migration history (Agrawal and Zeitouny 2017; Earnest 2005; Hyman, Vu and Beiser 2000; Lamba and Krahn 2003; Makwarimba et al. 2013). Refugee category, especially, is seen as a key factor in differing settlement outcomes.

Some studies show that the PSR program is often more effective than the GAR program in promoting long-term integration of refugees, as sponsors may expose the refugees to a broader range of services as compared to settlement workers (Agrawal and Zeitouny 2017). Further, private sponsors can be flexible and draw on their knowledge and social networks to cater to specific needs of each refugee as compared to generic settlement programming offered to GARs (Beiser 2003). However, research also shows that PSRs' experiences differed widely based on the sponsor's capacity and commitment (Agrawal and Zeitouny 2017). The settlement process can be onerous on the sponsor both materially and mentally; cultural, linguistic or religious differences may lead to tensions or challenges between the sponsor and refugee (Agrawal and Zeitouny 2017; Derwing and Mulder 2003; Wood, McGrath and Young 2012). This study was keen to examine these differences in sites of settlement and refugee category to detail the impact on settlement and integration.

Settlement and Integration

Canada's immigrant integration model is based on mutual adaptation by newcomers and Canadian society. Integration is understood as a multifaceted phenomenon that is 'individualized, contested and contextual' (Government of Canada 2016; Robinson 1998). Ager and Strang (2008) have a developed a 10-domain conceptual framework for the integration of refugees that includes markers and means such as employment, housing, education and health. The second layer focuses specifically on social connections, particularly social bridges, bonds and links. More recently, Cherti and McNeil (2012) have developed a more grounded approach to integration which acknowledges the fluidity of communities as ever-changing entities and focuses on the crucial domain of everyday experience. Migration is seen as a complex phenomenon where people continually move, settle and constantly "negotiate and renegoti-

ate their own identities and their relationships with others" (18). This paper draws on such an everyday approach toward settlement for Syrians. Refugees face several structural and systemic barriers in their resettlement process and many of the settlement and integration challenges are interconnected. For instance, they may experience challenges in language learning, foreign skill or education recognition, housing, precarious employment or high rates of unemployment, insufficient Canadian references or work experience, health issues, trauma and other forms of discrimination (Bemak and Chung 2017; Brunner, Hyndman and Friesen 2010; Carter et al. 2008; Devoretz, Pivnenko and Beiser 2004; Francis and Hiebert 2014; Krahn, Derwing, Mulder and Wilkinson 2000; Murdie 2008; Murdie and Logan 2011; Noh et al. 1999; Sherrell, D'Addario and Hiebert 2007). This paper embeds their social connections in this broader contested nature of settlement and integration to provide a deeper picture of their struggles and strengths.

Settlement and City Size

This paper studies settlement across both large urban centres and small cities in Alberta to understand the differences in experience (Frideres 2006). Larger centres tend to attract more immigrants and refugees because of their size, diversity, economic opportunity and ethno-cultural or community connections (Hyndman, Schuurman and Fiedler 2006; Krahn, Derwing and Abu-Laban 2005). However, large centers may face challenges of scale or population size, which necessitates the development of "one size fits all" policies while working with immigrants (Collett 2006). Consequently, such policies can in turn lead to disenfranchisement or a lack of belonging among refugees or immigrants. Studies that look at social integration show that larger cities often have stronger boundaries that separate communities and enable the development of ethnic enclaves (Frideres 2006). While such ethnic neighborhoods may provide security, information about housing, employment, and other day-to-day activities, it may also limit interactions with mainstream/host populations (Kazemipur 2008; Lamba 2003). Employment rates among immigrants are the highest outside the three largest urban centers and concurrently income levels of immigrants are higher in these second and third tier cities as well (Frideres 2006). These trends seem to indicate that, in some cases, smaller towns and cities may have developed effective strategies to facilitate integration of immigrants (Derwing and Krahn 2006; Garcea 2006). While some smaller centres may lack resources or opportunities, they often have community members who are more engaged and invested in this process and could mobilize resources more effectively to meet refugee needs (Agrawal and Zeitouny 2017; Bonifacio and Drolet 2017). In contrast, Abu-Laban et al. (1999) studied the settlement experiences of refugees based on the size of communities in Alberta and found that the refugee retention rate was highest in the

largest cities of Edmonton and Calgary and lowest in the smallest cities of Grande Prairie and Ft. McMurray. Among medium-sized cities, Lethbridge had the lowest retention when compared with Red Deer and Medicine Hat. Refugees tended to move to the nearest larger cities in the province for employment, language supports and education. This study, though dated, provides key insights to understand the location dynamics of settlement and integration.

Social Connections, Networks and Social Relationships

Social relationships, ties and connections are key factors for successful refugee resettlement and lay the foundation of citizenship, rights and resettlement (Elliot and Yusuf 2014; Zetter et al. 2006). Social connections and a sense of belonging that come from associations with support groups, new friendships, and community connections are key factors in facilitating acceptance of personal responsibility and recovering from the losses that accompany migration and resettlement (Pottie, Brown and Dunn 2005). Belonging refers to a sense of security, feeling connected to a broader community and vested in the core institutions of society (Reitz 2009).

Most refugees are linked with extended family networks and, as resettlement continues, more extensive extra-familial networks involving neighbors, co-workers, employers, other community members, and a wide range of service providers are constructed (Lamba and Krahn 2003). In fact, some refugees engage in secondary migration to access meaningful social support (Chung, Hong and Newbold 2013; Simich 2003). Menjivar (1995) found that if previously arrived immigrants were well settled, supported by the state and had economic capital, they were more likely to have positive supportive relationships with newcomers. A supportive context becomes critical to establishing and maintaining social networks within their communities (Makwarimba et al. 2013; Riaño-Alcalá and Goldring 2014).

Social support and strength of social networks, both within refugee communities and between resettled refugees and the host community, help resettled refugees integrate into Canadian society (Hyndman, D'Addario and Stevens 2014). Social support is said to have a buffering impact on stress and physical and emotional health and is impacted by personal, social and environmental factors (Finch and Vega 2003; Hagan 1998; Karen, Uddin and Bibas 2016; Simich et al. 2005). Our study explores both quality of social support and level of support through social participation measures.

Social Capital

Social capital (Bourdieu 1986; Putnam 2007), in the context of refugee resettlement, can play a critical role in accessing knowledge and resources or act as opportunities to occupy/access social positions (Coleman 1990; Dahinden 2013; Drever and

Hoffmeister 2008; Engbersen, Van San and Leerkes 2006; Kitching, Smallbone and Athayde 2009; Van Meeteren, Engbersen and Van San 2009). Anthias and Cederberg (2009) argue that social capital does not equate to a resource unless it can be used for social advancement. Bonding social capital underlies relationships amongst families, community members and ethnic groups and helps to strengthen, support and empower refugees (Elliot and Yusuf 2014). For instance, African refugees from Ethiopia and Somalia were found to obtain information on initial settlement through personal networks of friends, family and compatriots (Danso 2002). Bridging social capital supports the development of connections with external groups and encourages participation in broader social life (Edwards 2010). Bridging social capital can be built through friendly neighborhood encounters and community engagement that helps refugees feel welcomed and supported (Ager and Strang 2008). Scholars have argued that bonding social capital can strengthen ties but reduce bridging social capital that may be necessary for integration (Amin 2005; Kindler, Ratcheva and Piechowska 2015). Social capital shapes the nature of social ties and relationships. Next, the paper will detail the methodology and highlight the results of the study.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Sites

The data for this paper were drawn from a broader study that focused on settlement, challenges across settings and current needs of Syrian refugees who arrived between 2015 and 2016 (Moorthi, Elford and Drolet 2017). The paper draws specifically on data pertaining to social relationships, networks and ties in the context of settlement and integration. A mixed methods approach was used to understand the resettlement process of three categories of refugees in five cities in Alberta, of which two are large cities (Calgary and Edmonton) and three are small cities (Lethbridge, Medicine Hat and Red Deer). Larger cities have populations over a million, a diversified economy, a fair amount of ethnic and cultural diversity, and a large range of services for immigrants (Krahn, Derwing and Abu-Laban 2005). In comparison, smaller cities have a population below a million, limited immigrant services, employment opportunities, and diversity (Krahn et al. 2005). The latter cities are also considered small, because they have certain characteristics: 1) a discernable downtown core; 2) an authentic, locally celebrated history in a place physically separate from major metropolitan centres; 3) a measurable level of cultural participation including a tradition of volunteerism, growth coalitions, and leadership; and 4) a creative cultural policy that links the city's centre and heritage to its outlying areas and communities (Drolet et al. 2008).

Community forums were organized in collaboration with Resettlement Assistance Providers (RAP) organizations in all cities to introduce the study to potential participants. This skewed the study sample both in terms of refugee category and gender as it was dependent on attendee profiles. All forum attendees were approached to participate in the survey. Additionally, a sample of 20 participants was approached to participate in in-depth interview in four cities (excluding Lethbridge). They were recruited through the community forums and through existing networks of RAP providers. The interviews were designed to provide a deeper perspective of the newcomers' experiences in their new communities. All data were collected by bilingual research assistants who spoke English and Arabic. The study had several limitations that include a small sample of PSRs, that makes it difficult to make strong conclusions around the specific findings for PSRs. Additionally, the sample was chosen from immigrant serving agencies increasing the likelihood of a skewed sample that already access settlement services and find them helpful.

Sample
Survey Participants
The survey had a total sample size of 100 participants, of which 56% were men and 44% women; 54% were Arabic, 42% were Arabic Sunni Muslim and 4% were Kurdish (only half of the sample shared their ethnicity). The majority of the survey participants were GARs (83%) and other refugee groups participated as follows: PSRs (10%), BVORs (5%) and other/don't know (2%). Over half (54%) of the sample was from a small city (Red Deer, Lethbridge and Medicine Hat) and 46% were from a large city (Calgary and Edmonton). The sample distribution across cities was as follows: Lethbridge: 13%; Medicine Hat: 15%; Red Deer: 26%; Calgary: 23%; and Edmonton: 23%. The majority (74%) of the sample group was between the ages of 25 to 44. In terms of education, 50% had completed primary school or secondary schooling, 20% had completed high school and 19% of the sample had education beyond high school. A majority of survey participants were students (47%) or unemployed and looking for work (27%). It is likely that the survey participants who identified as students were enrolled in English language classes. Only about 8% of the sample was engaged in either full time or part time work. Seventy-nine per cent of the survey sample was paying market rents and about 15% were paying subsidized rents.

Interview Participants
Men represented 40% of the interview participants while women represented 60% of the interview participants. GARs made up 55% of the interviewees compared to 25% PSRs and 20% BVORs. Smaller cities represented 40% of the sample with 60% from a large city. The sample distribution across cities was as follows: Medicine Hat:
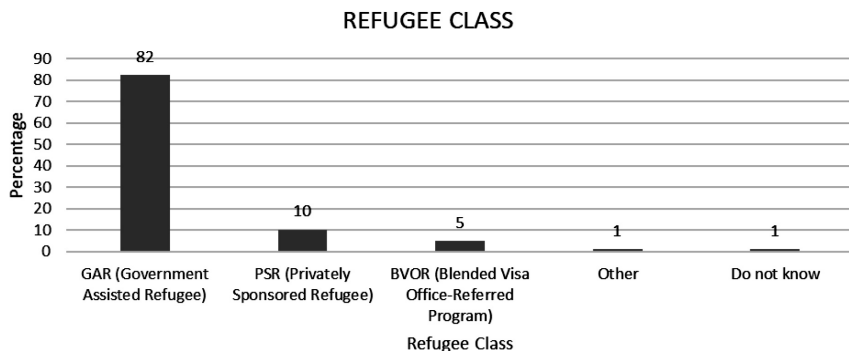
REFUGEE CLASS

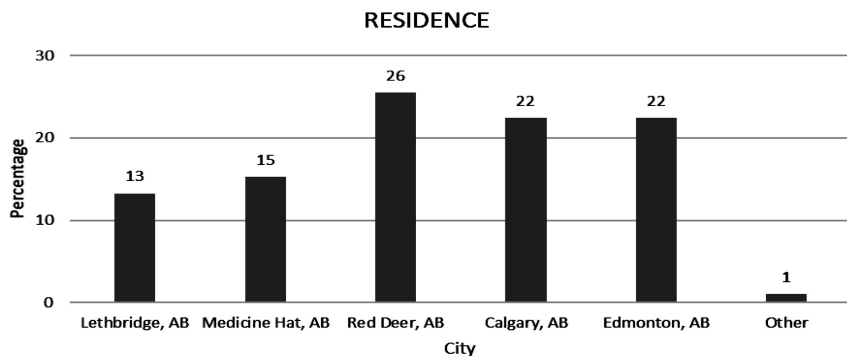Fig.1. Refugee Class distribution of sample

RESIDENCE

Fig. 2. City distribution of sample

10%; Red Deer: 30%; Calgary: 35%; and Edmonton: 25%. A $25 gift card was provided to each interview participant to compensate for his or her time in the study.

Analysis

The research team conducted a mixed method analysis process that included the following steps: first, each qualitative interview was translated and transcribed from Arabic to English; next, it was coded to include critical themes and identify important quotes that illustrated key ideas. This process was iterative and followed the broad principles of grounded theory analysis (Glaser 1992). For the quantitative data analysis, SPSS was used to run both frequencies and cross tabulations. Given the small sample size of the survey data and the categorical nature of the data, the correlations were not calculated. Informed consent of participants was obtained in advance of data collection, and research ethics approval for the study was obtained through the Research Ethics Board at the University of Calgary.

FINDINGS

The goal of this study was to hear the stories and everyday struggles of newly arriving Syrian refugees to Alberta and to understand the role of social connections and interactions in supporting settlement and integration. For refugees in the study, the route to Canada was paved with high risk that placed their lives in danger and came with significant challenges of losing their jobs, homes, belongings and social supports. They often made multiple stops across destinations such as Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon, facing brutal conditions before settling in their current locations. Study participants' access to basic services, safety, respect and freedom was one of the most critical characteristics of their new environment.

Finding Community: Settlement Needs

The participants built social connections around two key drivers: settlement needs and socio-cultural community, similar to other key research (Lamba and Krahn 2003; Pottie, Brown and Dunn 2005). These settlement-driven social connections and networks were primarily with settlement organizations and workers, private sponsors or charitable organizations that supported their settlement, employers, housing providers and language educators; more distant ties to childcare providers and schools were also seen (Lamba and Krahn 2003). These networks helped to link with both formal and informal resources supporting both material and psychological needs.

> Mostly the immigrant-serving agency provided me with hope and a positive attitude. They really try to help you out with anything they can whether it was general inquiries or questions or just providing general information. The immigrant-serving agency is even helping me meet a lawyer to assist me with inquiries. (BVOR woman participant 4)

The quantitative data also supported these qualitative narratives; 67% of survey respondents found settlement organizations very important in helping them settle, and about 28% found them important. About 72% of the survey sample had visited an immigrant serving agency, reflecting the high rate of interactions and connections made for settlement needs and 52% of survey respondents received some type of orientation from a settlement agency.

When comparing results based on city size, there was no significant differences in refugees making connections with both settlement agencies and community organizations. In terms of differences between refugee classes, our study found that all PSRs and BVORs found that the role of community organizations was critical to settlement, more so than GARs who were often more closely linked to settlement agencies. Community organizations included faith-based groups and networks

(faith-based organizations, mosques, religious institutions), neighborhood connections (e.g., Community Leagues), municipal libraries, community centres, among others. In order to explain this anomaly, it is possible that GARs rely on RAP and settlement providers to meet their settlement needs while PSRs and BVORs access more services and programs in the community facilitated through their sponsors.

Sponsors played a key role for PSRs, however, the interview respondents highlighted that the level of support was variable or limited in nature. These relationships were often the first social ties that refugees developed within their new social environment and were laden with several expectations and needs (Beiser 2003; Neuwirth and Clarke 1981). Participants in our study discussed how the sponsors provided extensive support and guidance—connecting them to jobs, linking them to immigrant serving organizations, and helping them find housing or schooling for their children (Drever and Hoffmeister 2008; Engbersen et al. 2006; Kitching et al. 2009; Van Meeteren et al. 2009). It was also deeply personal and a close relationship for some, with a strong dependency on the sponsor not simply for material resources or social capital but also for emotional or psychological needs.

> I passed through an extremely rough time, even more rough than our immigration here, but my sponsors were there to fully support me: I had a nervous breakdown because my brother-in-law was killed in the war back home and I suffered tremendously. My sponsors tried to make me feel better, they hosted a social function for me, they even told me not to worry and that they will sponsor my sister for me... I don't do anything – not even one step – without informing them. (PSR, woman participant 1).

However, some sponsors only provided basic support for a few days and expected the refugees to navigate the community on their own (Agrawal and Zeitouny 2017). PSR interviewees also reported having weaker connections to settlement agencies and reported greater self-reliance, or utilizing networks through sponsors to find work, housing or language education, including community organizations. Only in the case of private sponsors did large cities tend to report a higher percentage (54%) that reported private sponsors important or very important as compared to small cities (45%). Further research is needed to understand these nuances in support. Addressing settlement needs was a crucial foundation for building social connections in their new communities, helping forge strong bonds for refugees, through community organizations and settlement needs, that vary by refugee class and city context.

Making Community Links: Canadian and Ethno-Cultural

The second key driver to build social connections was finding a socio-cultural community in their new community. Refugees reported building social connections with

neighbors, other refugees/immigrants, religious community members or those with a similar ethno-cultural background (Ager and Strang 2008). The study found 63% of survey participants felt that the local community was welcoming and supportive, a sentiment that was echoed by interview participants in the study:

> One time, I was doing grocery shopping at the Superstore…then went to the cashier to pay, the lady who was waiting to pay in front me asked me where are you from and I said, Syria. She said, I would like to pay for your groceries. I said, but I have money to pay for that, if you see someone who is more in need that myself, then if you wish you can pay for them…She said, I saw you and your wife, I felt I want to help (GAR male participant 1)

Some refugees were also conscious about making these links with the mainstream community, more so than with the Syrian community, as they emphasized the need to integrate, improve their language skills and build social capital.

> I value being connected to both communities; the Arabic and the Canadian. But perhaps I feel that I need the Canadian community support a little more because I am coming to their culture and I need to feel welcomed and also adjusted to their ways. (BVOR participant 3)
>
> …(if) your environment is all Arabic, then you will never advance in the English, in getting accustomed to the culture. If you are surrounded with Canadians, integration is easier… (GAR participant 3)

Participants shared stories of reaching out to socializing with their neighbors, making friends at LINC classes, having picnics or social gatherings, celebrating Ramadan and participating in sports activities with friends. Such interactions, emergent connections and casual exchange both among refugees and between the refugees and the host/mainstream population provided insight into the granular and everyday nature of integration (Cherti and McNeil 2012).

> …the truth is that without people and the help of others you cannot live. I value the social connections I made a lot. We benefit and learn a lot from connecting with other people. (GAR male participant 2)

The survey specifically explored social participation and found that the majority of participants are gathering with family or friends outside their homes at least once a day (38%) or once a week (47%). In terms of religious activities, most respondents (60%) indicated they participate in religious activities at least once a week. In terms of sports and physical activities, the rate of participation significantly drops with only 10% of respondents indicating they participate in physical activity once a day. When comparing 'frequent participation' (once a day/once a week) between larger cities and small cities, there was no major difference observed in terms of

gathering with friends and family, sports or educational activities. However, large city respondents reported slightly higher percentages of participation as compared to small cities in terms of recreation and religious activities, and this could be partly due to availability of religious spaces or recreation opportunities. Recreation in Arabic is ﻪﯾﻓﺭﺗ (tarfeeh), which is synonymous to entertainment. Many newcomer families are struggling to survive in their new environment and engagement in recreational activities was viewed as less of a priority and more as a luxury.

The next important aspect of building social networks was the role of the Syrian community. The survey found 88% of the respondents indicated that the community was very important or important (Edwards 2010). Only 12% of survey respondents found the existing Syrian community not at all important in settling into a new environment. The Syrian community support helped to buffer the impacts and stress related to migration—from finding good housing, sharing tips about job search, and parenting advice to providing insight on how to adapt to the new community (Finch and Vega 2003; Hagan 1998; IRCC 2016a ; Karen, Uddin and Bibas 2016; Simich et al. 2005).

> There are lots of Syrians around me. We visit each other very often, we go to school together, we live in the same community. Most of us came together as refugees. Having all these Syrians together makes it so much easier to adjust to the new environment. (GAR male participant 4)
>
> Having a Syrian community around contributes to our emotional health. (GAR female participant 4)
>
> Within the Syrian refugees, we made a WhatsApp group, if anyone needs anything, like translation, or food, or furniture, immigration papers, etc., they can post it, and anyone who can help will pitch in. (GAR male participant 1)

Interestingly, interview participants highlighted that the Syrian community who had lived in Canada for a significant period were not always very receptive of the newly arrived refugees and preferred to keep their distance. Even though the ethno-cultural community can become a critical source of support, the participants' comments highlighted that the community has inherent social tensions and fissures that produced some challenges in settlement (Menjivar 1995).

> I am facing great difficulty with the Syrian community here because it seems like they are all clustered into groups and to be honest, I don't feel welcomed in any of the groups. So, although I tried, I can't seem to get into the community. They say we go way back and we are comfortable with the people we already know, so we don't want to add anyone into the group. I found some might also befriend you for awhile and then they stop. (BVOR female participant 3)

> I only have a few Syrian friends because there is a divide between us. One is that we have different backgrounds: some are more urban people so different mentality and the others come from the rural areas. Even being educated and modern plays a role. The other reason is religious views that I prefer not to get into… (GAR female participant 4)

The interview participants not only highlighted the diversity but also the depth of social connections within the Syrian community. While most reported positive and supportive relationships marked with familiarity and comfort of a shared history and culture, a few spoke of the challenges of establishing close and deep relationships. As seen by the participation rates, many refugees were involved with family and friends as well as in religious activities, which provided them with an outlet for social engagement and integration with Canadian society. Given that most of these connections were new and forged under the stressful context of settlement, participants were yet to establish relationships that were like those back in Syria.

Belonging and Challenges in Making New Connections

The survey and interviews explored Syrian refugees' perspective and level of belonging within Canada and challenges to settlement. The survey found 94% of respondents felt a sense of belonging within Canada; only 6% responded no to this question. However, in a separate question almost 22% reported challenges in terms of belonging.

The survey also found that 33% of the participants found adjusting to the city, town and community as a challenge. Of the respondents who said they felt that they belonged in Canada, 55% of those settled in small cities as compared to 44% who belonged to large cities. Overall, refugees in small cities felt a greater sense of belonging than large cities (Abu-Laban et al. 1999; Agrawal and Zeitouny 2017). The qualitative interviews highlighted some of the reasons why refugees may have felt unwelcomed, isolated and disconnected in Canada. For some, the cultural differences between the newly arrived Syrian refugees and the Canadian community were difficult to overcome. For others, their sense of belonging was impacted by their settlement process during which their expectations were often not met. Participants reported feeling a drop in their standard of living due to loss of adequate income, lack of health resources, employment and lack of recognition of their education, skills and expertise, in comparison to their lives in Syria.

One of the factors that impacted their sense of belonging was the loss of social connections. About 18% of the survey respondents reported that making friends and social connections was another key challenge. The study participants felt both uprooted from their social life and unable to reconcile the new social fabric of the Canadian context. Social connections are embedded in language and culture and for the Syrian refugee population they were now often alienated from both.

> Our Syrian culture is all about the social life, and being able to go out with family and friends is a huge part of our lives. It troubles me and my kids that we don't have that anymore. (PSR female respondent 2)

Social connections and participation in social activities were the foundation for all aspects of societal life in Syria. In Syria, participants shared that they had lifelong friendships and relatives that lived around them; people would visit with each other regularly and often without prior scheduling. Even after a long day's work, participants shared stories where they would go out and socialize with friends and family until the late hours of the night. However, in Canada life was more individual focused and newly arrived refugees lacked social networks to build social capital which in turn increased challenges to access resources, find services or participate in the social fabric of Canadian society (Dahinden 2013; Kitching et al. 2009; Van Meeteren et al. 2009). Lack of public transportation, economic stressors such as long working hours or less money to spend on social activities and language barriers were key issues that prevented social interactions.

Another key challenge to building social connections was related to racism and discrimination. Participants shared stories from the community and workplace interactions where they felt "used" or mistreated because they were considered as outsiders:

> One of my kids woke up one day for school and told me he really doesn't want to go because whenever he gets into an argument with his friends at school they yell at him 'go back to your country'. He said that really bothers him. I told him it's normal, he said that it's not the only time that it happened, and that he just never told me before. Another incident was a kid in the hockey field at a park that asked my son, 'are you Muslim' he replied 'yes' then he told him 'who brought you here', my son replied 'the prime minister,' then he told him 'he brought you here to kill you.' I am not okay with my kids having to deal with those kinds of comments. (GAR woman 5)
> One of the girls were told that Syrians brought the mice and dirt with them…I have faced a person that holds a grudge about the Syrians that are taking the government's money. (GAR woman 2)

In some small cities that had a small refugee population or a relatively small Muslim population, some interview participants shared their concerns around adapting to the local context and the heightened experience of being 'different'. Some others spoke about small cities not having religious spaces to practice their religion or even grocery stores to buy their culturally appropriate food.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Participants in the study found social connections to be a critical component of their resettlement, since it made them feel part of the community. The context of the

social relationships for Syrian refugees was both precarious and new. Refugees at the time of the study were early in their settlement process, largely grateful for the safety of their community and the opportunity to rebuild their lives. However, at the same time they were still coming to terms with their migration journey, the changes in their life circumstances and adapting to new conditions. As the paper discusses later, this adaptation process was not without challenges or concerns. The social connections that were formed were mostly emergent and tenuous, focused on building a social support network and meeting settlement needs. For respondents who were used to leveraging social connections to secure resources and services, the challenges are steep. The study found that overall participants felt supported by ethno-cultural communities, settlement organizations and community organizations. However, the quality of this support varied over time and remained largely restricted to providing material supports.

Refugees from small cities reported greater connections with settlement and community agencies but also reported challenges in terms of access to ethno-cultural resources. PSRs had varied experiences with their sponsors but overall had more extensive community links as compared to GARs or BVORs. Given the small sample size of PSRs and BVORs, the recommendations need to be viewed in the context of this limitation. The small city context may require resettled refugees to access more mainstream services delivered by community organizations than large cities where there are multiple immigrant settlement agencies. In Alberta, there may be only one settlement agency or a satellite office of a settlement agency, given demographics. There is a need to better understand how resettled refugees access mainstream services in small cities. With this finding, policy implications need to consider how to support the settlement of refugees through non-traditional community organizations in the mainstream.

The study identified several opportunities to strengthen professional development for RAP providers, private sponsors, and other frontline staff working with refugees drawing on a peer navigator model (Kelly et al. 2014; Manderson et al. 2012). These include developing stronger skills around trauma-informed practice, strengths-based practice and empowerment focus for refugee clients (British Columbia Provincial Mental Health and Substance Use Planning Council 2013; Graybeal 2001). The study highlighted the need to increase professional development opportunities that allow for sharing of best practices and focus on skills in counselling, crisis care, conflict management, and referral support. Bridging programs and partnerships between settlement agencies and mainstream community organizations in multiple geographic sites could play a role in meeting diverse needs such as translation and interpretation. The final report of the study recommended strengthening social connections in order to find employment, access resources and

express identity, as well as specific service and systems suggestions (Moorthi, Elford and Drolet 2017). Given the current socio-political and economic global climate, these refugees are also facing several challenges in terms of Islamophobia, racism and discrimination, some of which were also reported in this study. This study provides a brief glimpse into the settlement journey; however, more long-term research is needed to track long-term impacts and outcomes of migration.

NOTES

1. GAR: Under the Government-Assisted Refugees (GAR) Program, refugees are referred to Canada for resettlement by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) or another referral organization. Individuals cannot apply directly.

PSR: Refugees are referred to Canada for resettlement by a private sponsor. Being a privately sponsored refugee means that a group of people in Canada have volunteered to support the refugee. The sponsorship group will support all settlement needs including housing, clothing, and food for one year after arrival or until they can support themselves, whichever comes first.

BVOR: The Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) Program matches refugees identified for resettlement by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) with private sponsors in Canada. The UNHCR identifies the refugees. The Government of Canada gives up to six months of income support. Private sponsors give another six months of financial support. They also give up to a year of social and emotional support. The Interim Federal Health Program and provincial health care also cover refugees for the length of the sponsorship (one year).

2. In 2017-18, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada is investing more than $690 million for immigrants and refugees.
3. Alberta Association for Immigrant Serving Agencies commissioned the research with funding from IRCC.

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JULIE DROLET is Professor in the Central and Northern Alberta Region of the Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary. She is a co-investigator in *Pathways to*

Prosperity (p2pcanada.ca), a research alliance dedicated to fostering welcoming communities that promote the economic, social and civic integration of migrants and minorities in Canada. She was previously a domain leader in the Settlement, Integration, and Welcoming Communities Domain with the Metropolis BC Network. In addition, she has extensive practice experience in the field of international social work. She has published extensively in international social work and social development with a particular focus on gender and development, climate change and disasters, international social protection initiatives, international and Canadian field education, qualitative research, and international migration and Canadian immigration. Her current interests focus on social work and disasters, immigrant and refugee settlement and integration, social work field education, and social protection in Swaziland.

GAYATRI MOORTHI is a Principal Consultant at Habitus Consulting Collective based in Calgary, Alberta. Her work primarily focuses on immigration, health and development. Through her practice she focuses on working with non-profits, government and private institutions to develop strong evaluative frameworks, evidence-based practice and collective impact partnerships.