



REFUGEE SETTLEMENT SNAPSHOT 2018: Parramatta, NSW



(Photo: Dimitria Groutsis, 2017)

In 2017 the number of refugees arriving in Australia effectively doubled the intake of previous decades. This is because most of the special one-off intake of 12,000 Syrian Conflict refugees that was announced by Prime Minister Abbott in 2015 in fact arrived in 2017. In addition, the annual intake of humanitarian entrants was increased to 16,250 in 2017-18. Most of these newly-arrived refugee families settled in New South Wales (NSW), Victoria and Queensland.

As part of a study on Settlement Outcomes of Refugee Families in Australia, funded by the Australian Research Council, and led by Professor Jock Collins (University of Technology Sydney), Professor Carol Reid (Western Sydney University), and Associate Professor Dimitria Groutsis (University of Sydney), the first of three years of data collection has been completed. We interviewed and surveyed newly arrived refugee families from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan in four metropolitan and two regional sites in New South Wales: Parramatta, Auburn, Liverpool, and Fairfield in metropolitan Western Sydney; and Coffs Harbour and Wollongong in regional NSW.

This report provides a snapshot of the findings of our fieldwork in the area covered by our partner in Parramatta. We acknowledge the critical support of Settlement Services International (SSI) Ltd, a partner in the research, who guided us in approaching one of their partner organisations, and Community Migrant Resource Centre (CMRC), for assistance in finding refugee families as participants. CMRC identified **19 Syrian families and one Iraqi family** who became participants in the Parramatta-region interviews: specifically, Ryde and Holroyd were identified as areas where refugees from the Syrian conflict have resettled. In 2018, these families were interviewed, mainly in their homes, and they provided valuable insights into their settlement experiences. In these Parramatta families, **36 adults and 14 young people** participated in interviews and completed an accompanying online survey. The survey is informed by the national Building a New Life in Australia (BNLA) longitudinal survey of refugees in Australia, in order to ensure benchmarking with the survey instrument used for the purposes of this study. This snapshot identifies some of the respondent's hopes, opinions and concerns about their settlement.

Broad themes emerging from the interviews with the Parramatta family members included:

- Coming to Australia
- English language skills
- Access to and participation in employment
- The local area / neighbourhood
- Bringing up children / education
- Social integration / belonging
- Future plans

Starting a new life in a new land is difficult. **Yet all of the Parramatta family members were happy and grateful to be in Australia. Many admired the country's respect for all people, and the rule of law:**

Thanks for government of Australia ... who give us this chance to learn. (Syrian female, 2018)

In Australia there is respect (Syrian male, 2018)

Some expressed appreciation for **services and support, particularly where case workers invested a real commitment in helping families:**

Everything was really smooth and nice and careful. We got really good help with the first things you have to know about, like transport and how to do shopping, how to find house, so yeah basic things. I met my case manager who helps me with my resumé and I used to go for workshops each Friday. So, we were talking and, she's really lovely lady, and she ask me about what I like... (Syrian female, 2018)

The importance of **English language skills** to refugee families was clear, both in order to communicate and interact with others in their new neighbourhoods and to get an education or a job. **Learning the English language for adults and children can be very difficult.**

There were varying levels of satisfaction with different adult English language course providers. **One provider focused too much on grammar at the expense of conversational English:**

It's not very interesting for me to have to go to school, because it's only grammar (Syrian male, 2018)

I just left the classes because I didn't like being there. I don't have the patience of being there (Syrian male, 2018)

Adult family members wanted classes based on age groups and particular language needs:

I studied three months English ... then I felt like it's wasting time ... it's really hard to speak English there. For me it was, I want something more interesting and more effective to my life so I start to look for something different... Yes I'm learning through conversation and talking, and it's a lot of kind of text book grammar learning in those courses. (Syrian female, 2018)

On the other hand, **other adults enjoyed the chance to learn and improve their English language with practice and enquiry:**

When I start at TAFE, I used to hold my phone all the time and like, opening, like, translating every word and 'please can you spell this word for me?' (Syrian female, 2018)

We still got school twice a week, Monday and Tuesday – TAFE. Me and my wife – it's very good. (Syrian male, 2018)

However, some adult family members had difficulty attending English classes outside their home due to caring responsibilities:

Yeah, I go to English language classes, but not every day; but because I care for my husband. (Syrian female, 2018)

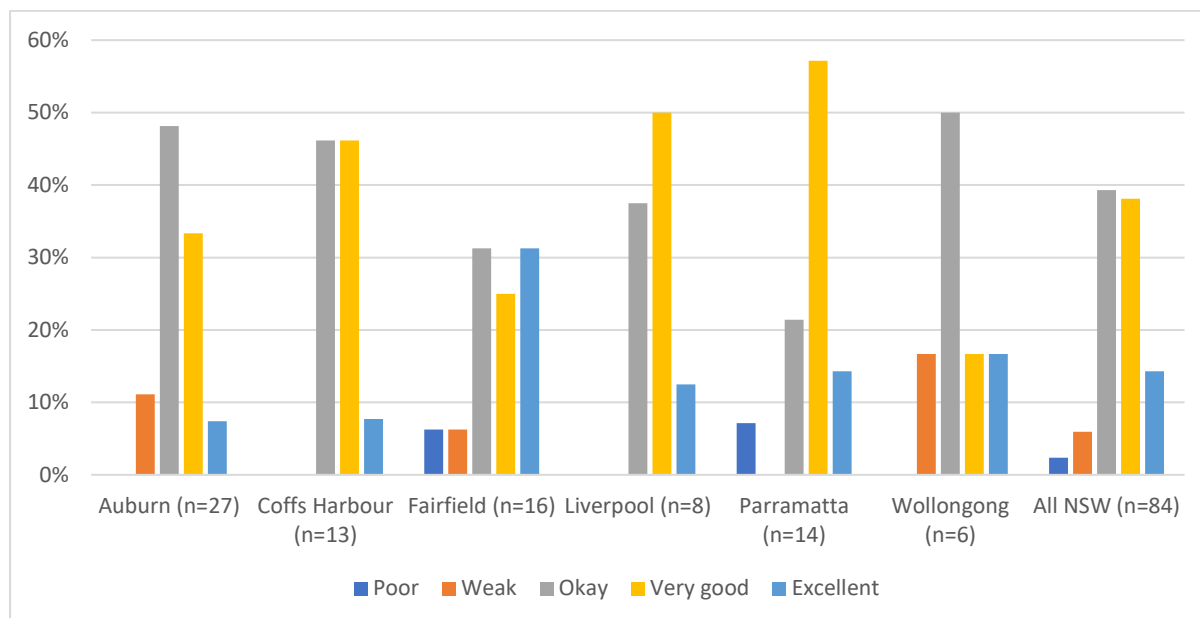
Young people generally liked learning English language:

I like maths and English, like, I like when you do paragraphs and things (Young Syrian male, 2018)

Yes I like learning English (Young Syrian male, 2018)

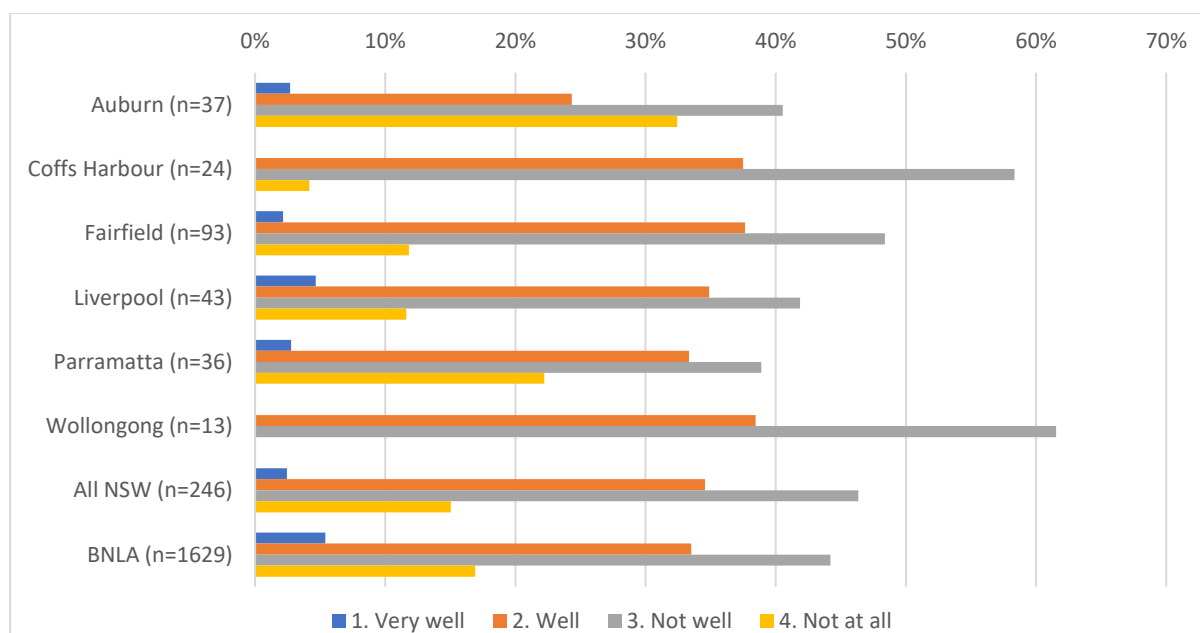
We asked the cohort of young people in Parramatta, Auburn, Liverpool, Fairfield, Coffs Harbour and Wollongong who were refugees from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan to rate their English language reading ability as ‘poor’, ‘weak’, ‘okay’, ‘very good’ or ‘excellent’. **Young people in Parramatta were particularly skilled in reading English: 71% of the young people in Parramatta assessed their reading ability as ‘excellent’ or ‘very good’, which was considerably higher than the percentage for the whole of the NSW cohort (52%)** (Figure 1).

Figure 1: NSW young people: ability to read English



We also asked the adults in the NSW cohort of newly arrived Syrian, Iraqi and Afghan refugees whether they could speak English ‘very well’, ‘well’, ‘not well’ or ‘not at all’. **The proportion of adults in Parramatta who assessed themselves as being able to speak English ‘very well’ or ‘well’ (36%), was slightly lower than the proportion of refugees who responded that way in the national BNLA survey (39%)** (Figure 2).

Figure 2: NSW adults: How well do you speak English?



A lack of English language skills was a frustrating barrier to employment for both men and women. For instance, two sisters acknowledged that they need English to find work, and were annoyed that they are always asked if they are finding work when their English is not good enough. Several of the other Parramatta adults also commented:

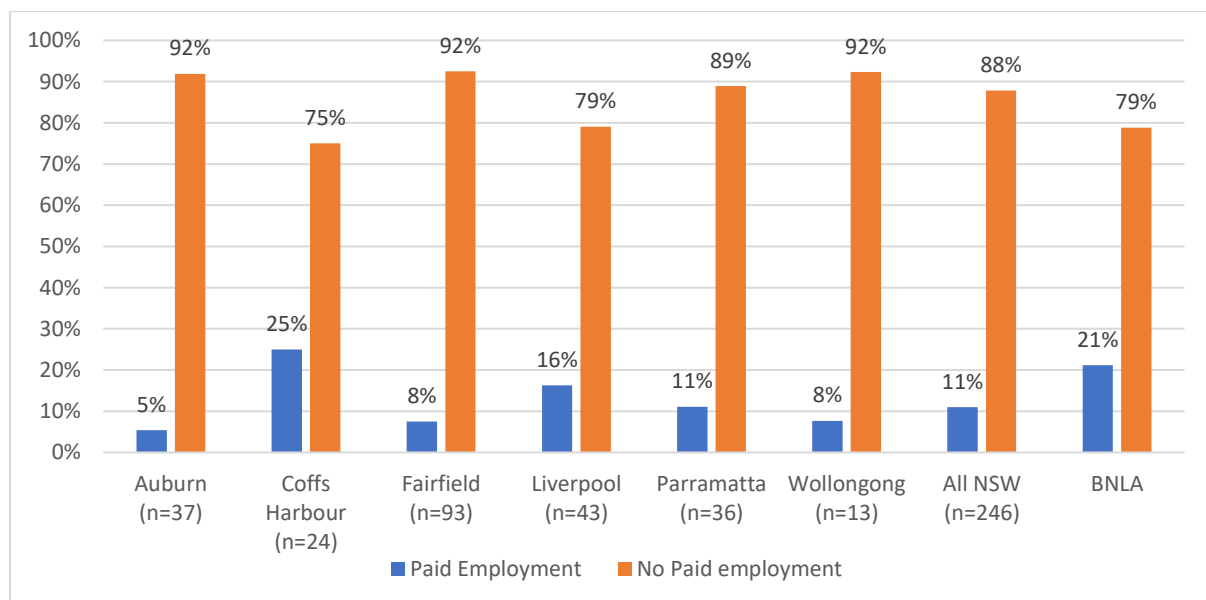
I don't work... They told me 'go learn English and then come here and then bring us a licence from TAFE. And get a certificate'. (Syrian male, 2018)

I want work, but where is work for me? I'm not talking very well English. (Syrian male, 2018)

It's because they know we don't know the language. I'm used to work, from a very young age, when I was 19; and I love to work, and I'm not used to just sitting down, sitting at home. (Syrian female, 2018)

For adult refugees generally - and for those in Parramatta more specifically - getting a job in Australia is an important priority. Since this was the first year of settlement in Australia for most of the NSW refugees interviewed/surveyed, most of them had not yet found employment because most were still learning English and settling into their life in Australia. Notably, employment outcomes for the recently arrived refugees in NSW were less positive than those for refugees surveyed in the national BNLA survey. We will follow these same families over the next two years and hope to see these employment results improve greatly. **Of the groups surveyed in NSW, an average proportion of those in Parramatta (11%) were in employment (Figure 3).**

Figure 3: NSW adults and employment



Most of the adults in the Parramatta refugee families interviewed were concerned about the difficulty in finding work. While some were looking for specific roles, many did not mind doing any type of work. **Respondents reported that their poor English skills, a lack of local experience, age, and lack of Australian credentials were the main reasons behind not finding work.**

Indeed, unemployment seems to have made a severe negative impact on the wellbeing of many families in Parramatta, particularly the men who used to be the breadwinners for their families back home. **Working was described as an essential ingredient in having a good life, playing a major role in forming their identities:**

I don't work. This is what bothers me a lot. I'm really stressed because of it; I am psychologically distressed because of it. (Syrian male, 2018)

It's the worst thing ever, finding work. (Syrian female, 2018)

Work is very very difficult here. No experience, a little English, but have all people to work. All people like work but not find yet. (Syrian female, 2018)

I told all of my friends and people, also Australians that I don't know, that if there is any work outside Sydney anywhere, any kind of work that – kind of harvesting machinery, I can go there and work. Go there for months and leave my family here. I can go alone and work. (Syrian male, 2018)

Everything here is really beautiful and perfect. The only problem is not being able to work. Because once you work then your – your stress and all of that pressure goes away. If you don't work then you remember a lot; you keep remembering having – especially Armenians. Especially – this is specifically true for Armenians who come here because they have – they all have trades. They all have good professions. They know how to work. But they can't work here, they are having difficulty. (Syrian female, 2018)

Some suggested the need for courses to make them more employable.

Having a job is linked to positive outcomes, such as learning conversational or practical English:

I don't go to English classes because my hours are finished. And then this work came up. I plan to learn at work from my colleagues, from my boss. (Syrian male, 2018)

As well as getting accommodation:

Our house was approved because my son works. (Syrian female, 2018)

I'm not happy in this home but I cannot rent another one, because when you go to information and nobody give you home because you are on Centrelink. It's very hard. (Syrian female, 2018)

Employment is also linked to a positive outlook for the future:

If I find work here, then yes, I think I have a good future in Australia. (Syrian female, 2018)

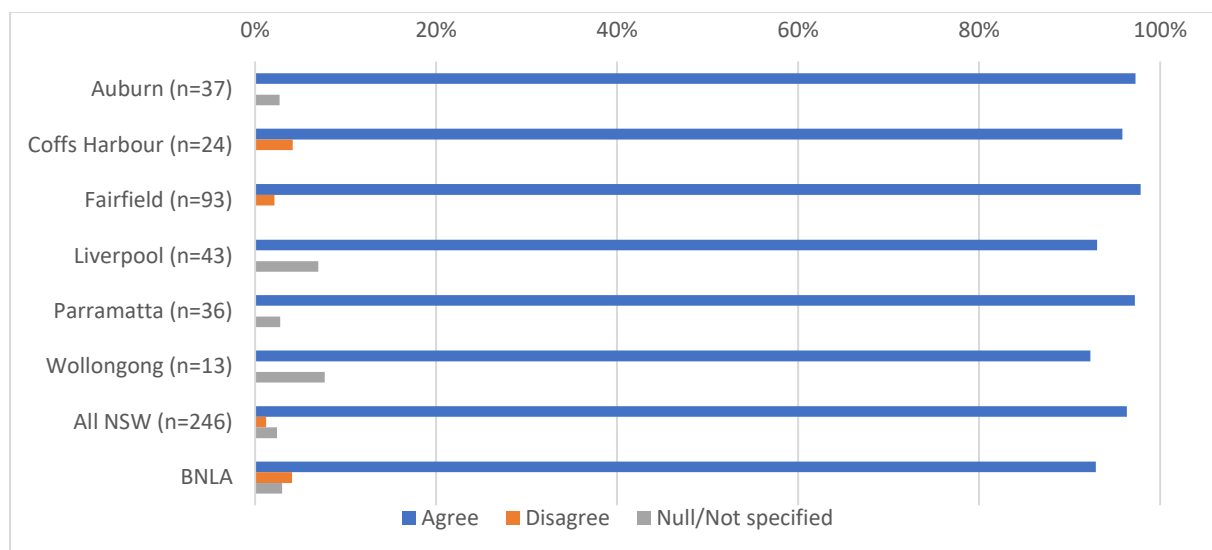
One of the key reasons that refugees come to Australia is to find a safe environment to bring up their families. **Like refugees in most other NSW locations, every one of the young family members (100%) and every one of the adult family members in Parramatta who responded to the question (97%) felt safe living there (Figure 4);** commenting:

Yeah, of course, I feel very safe. (Syrian male, 2018)

We feel very safe here. (Syrian female, 2018)

I don't feel any fear, I hear about things and people, like, lock the door and blah blah blah, but I don't feel anything, I feel safe. I'm not sure about any problems, but around me I feel safe. (Syrian female, 2018)

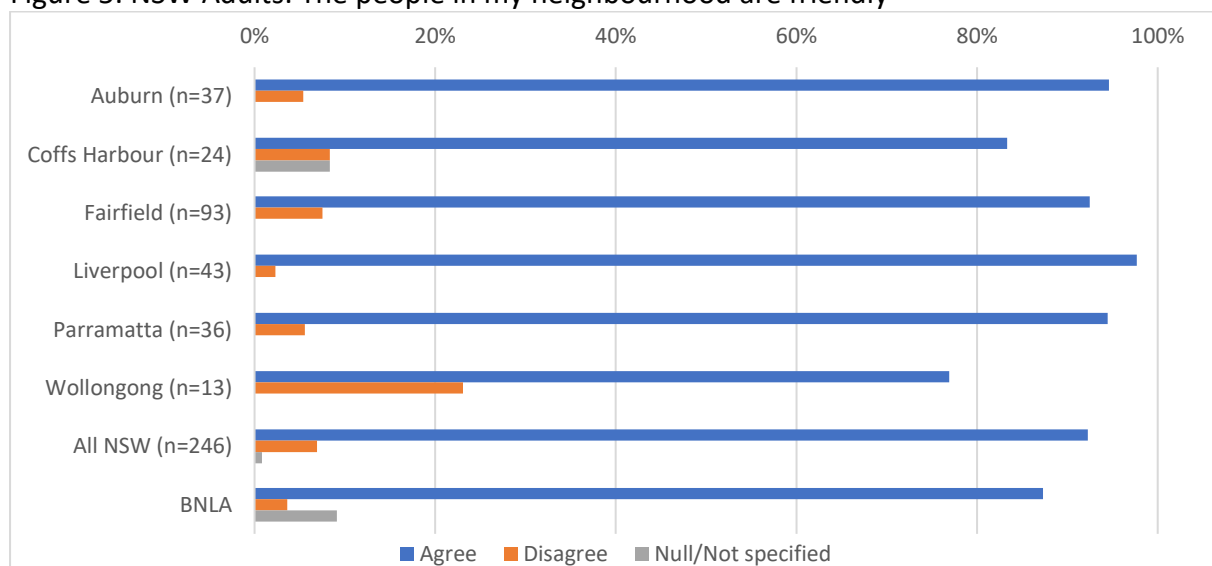
Figure 4: NSW adults: I feel safe in my neighbourhood



In addition, **nine out of ten (94%) of the adults interviewed in Parramatta thought that their neighbours were friendly** (Figure 5), again a similar proportion to refugees in other locations. One commented:

I have Cubans neighbour; she has helped me so much. Like my mother, she helped me all the time... Every day she come and my English is better because she is coming every day to me. (Syrian female, 2018)

Figure 5: NSW Adults: The people in my neighbourhood are friendly



Yet it is very different living in Australia when compared to their life in their home country and many found the move challenging. Some of the refugee adults in Parramatta had difficulty finding accommodation, either through lack of a rental history or lack of a job, or through having caring or work commitments which left no time:

One of the really difficult challenges we're facing as newly-arrived refugees is finding accommodation, because the first thing they ask is a history, like renting history, and how can we get it? (Syrian female, 2018)

Others were able to secure accommodation close to amenities like a shopping centre, church and medical care:

Yes, it's a good place, because it's close to the hospital, as my wife has got disabilities and we need to take her back and forth to the hospital, as well as being within the community, the Arab community, and then the family as well. (Syrian male, 2018)

There was recognition of the importance of connecting with community, both their own and the wider community:

Within our experience of going to church every Sunday, we experienced sharing coffees together, and meeting each other at church, which is more of a friend community, to see people and get to know each other. (Syrian male, 2018)

If we were to communicate with our neighbours or like clubs, things, of course our situation would be different, like psychologically we'd feel a lot better if there were ways to connect others around us, through clubs, through neighbours. (Syrian male, 2018)

The overwhelming majority of adults interviewed in Parramatta seemed homesick and drew many contrasts between social life in their home country and Australia:

When you come here for just like a holiday, it's different from being forced to come... (Syrian female, 2018)

You almost need to make an appointment to see our friends and family here. (Syrian male, 2018)

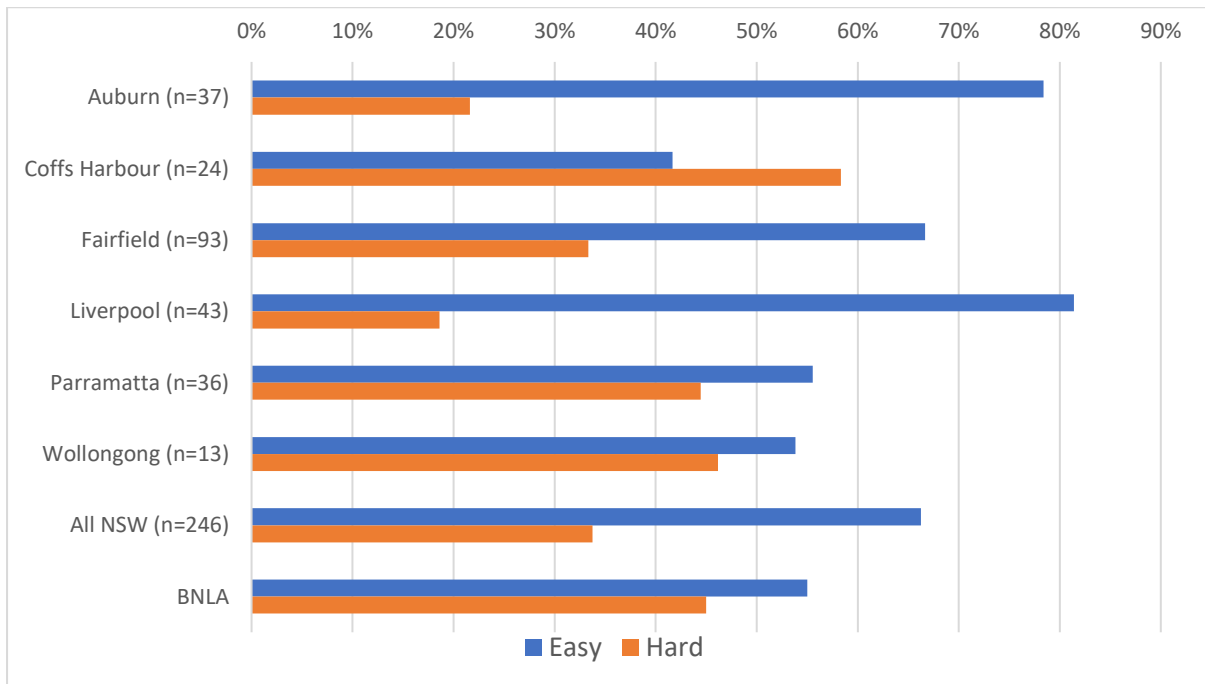
Now I don't have anything, I have only four walls. My shop is gone, but only I have four walls because everything is gone. (Syrian female, 2018)

We're not used to this. You leave in the morning, 'good morning' to this person and 'good morning' to another and we're, like, 'come here, let's have a coffee'. (Syrian male, 2018)

And I still see some Armenian families in the shopping centre, but we don't visit each other. Back in Syria we used to come and... ..offer coffee. It's completely different. The customs and traditions are completely different. (Syrian male, 2018)

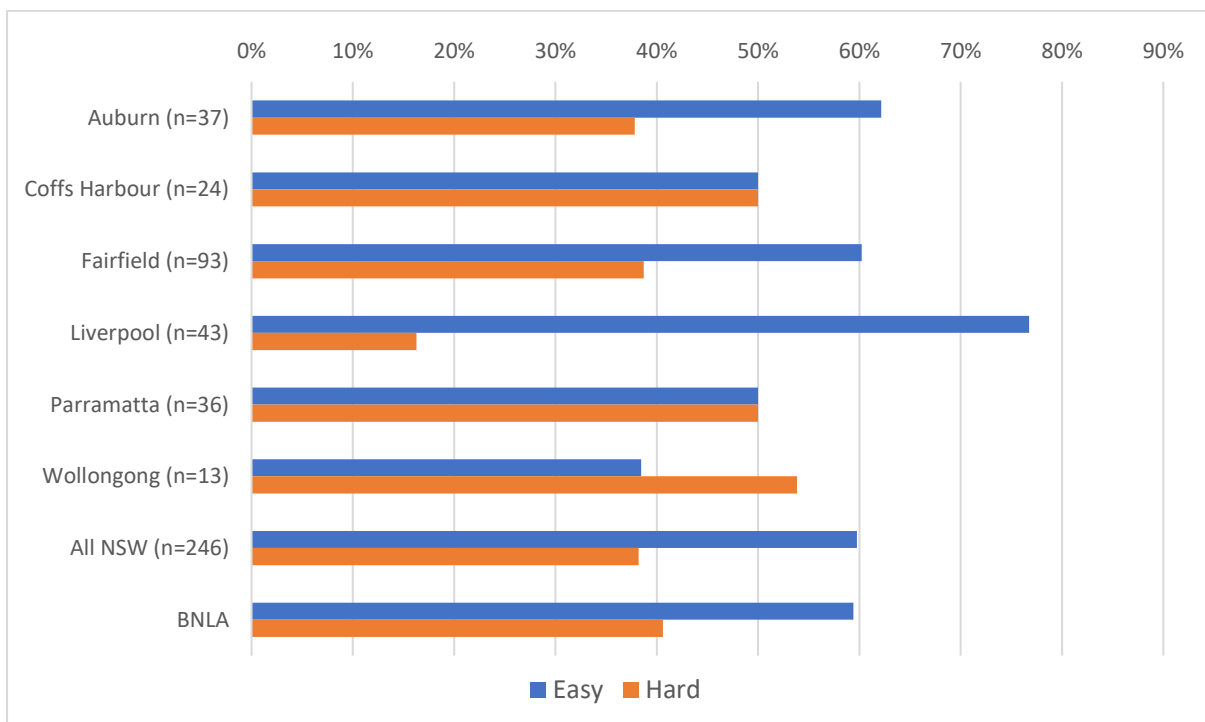
After one to two years of settlement, just over half of the adults (56%) surveyed in Parramatta said that they found it easy to make friends, a slightly greater proportion than that recorded in the BNLA survey (55%), (Figure 6).

Figure 6: NSW adults: how easy have you found it to make friends in Australia?



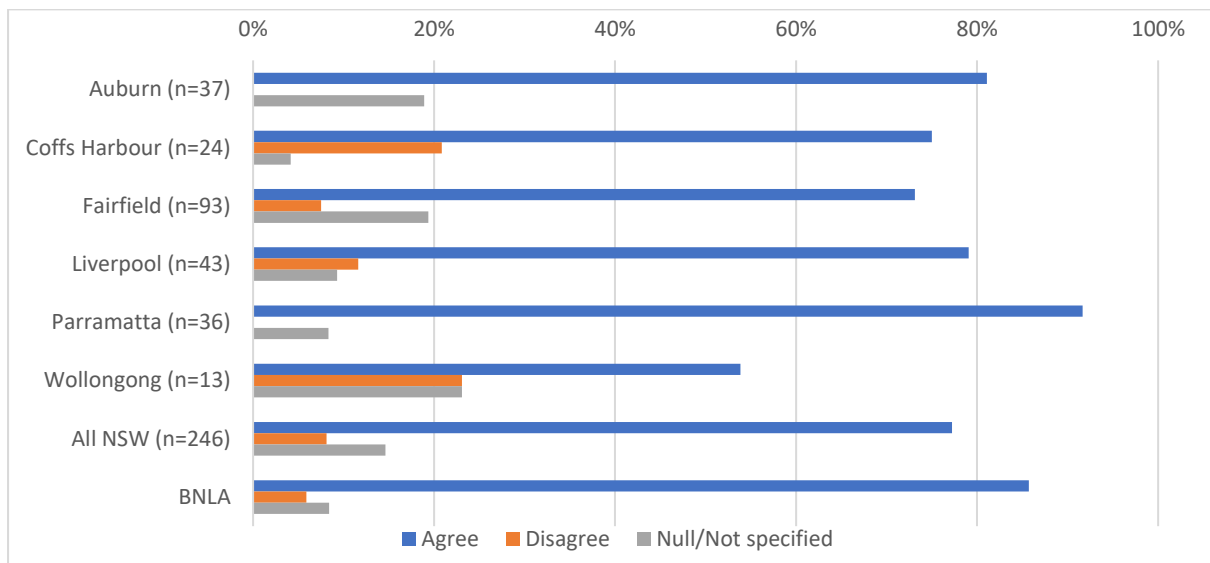
Similarly, only half of the adults (50%) said that they found it easy to understand the Australian way of life, a lower proportion than that recorded by the BNLA survey (59%), (Figure 7).

Figure 7: NSW adults and understanding Australian ways



All refugees want their children to have a good future in Australia. The adults in the Parramatta families were confident about their children’s education: all of those who responded to the question about schools – an overwhelming nine out of ten (92%) – agreed that the schools in Parramatta were good (Figure 8).

Figure 8: NSW adults: My neighbourhood has good schools for my children

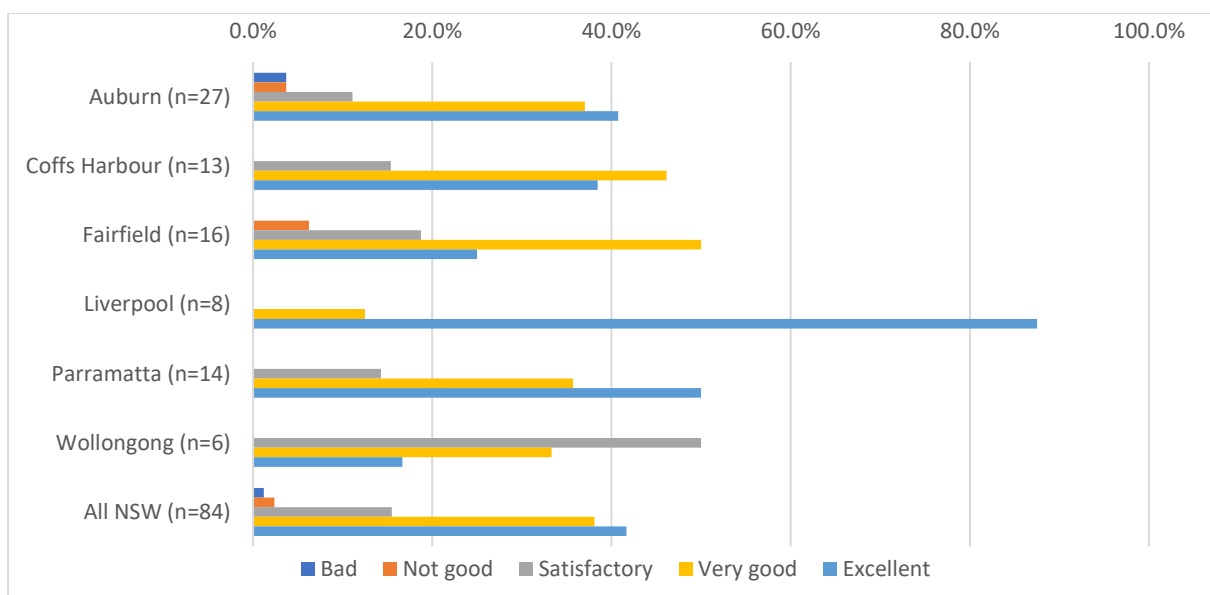


Four out of five young people living in Parramatta (86%) thought that their school or TAFE was ‘excellent’ or ‘very good’, which was higher than the percentage for the whole of the NSW cohort (80%), (Figure 9). Young people were enjoying school and interested in learning:

At TAFE, I am interested in doing free courses like English for academic purposes. I will do that. (Young Syrian female, 2018)

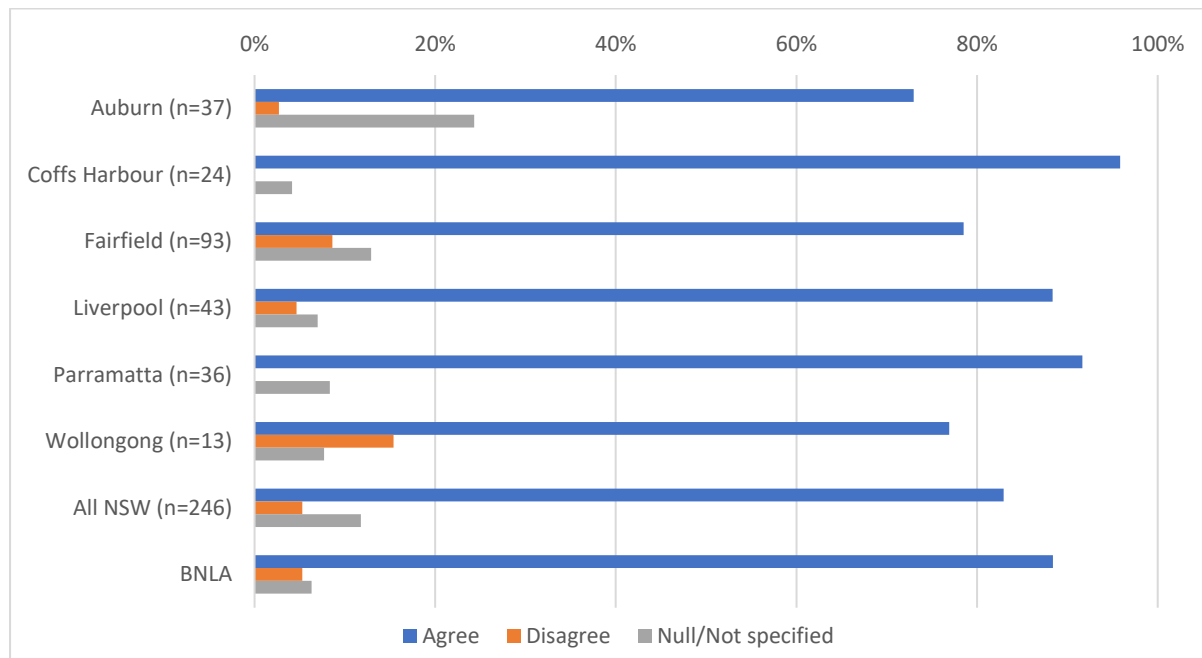
What I like about my school is that the teacher is friendly; they respect you. If you don’t understand a word, they will help you to understand the meaning. I not have favourite subject, now. All subjects are good. (Young Syrian male, 2018)

Figure 9: NSW young people: How is school/TAFE?



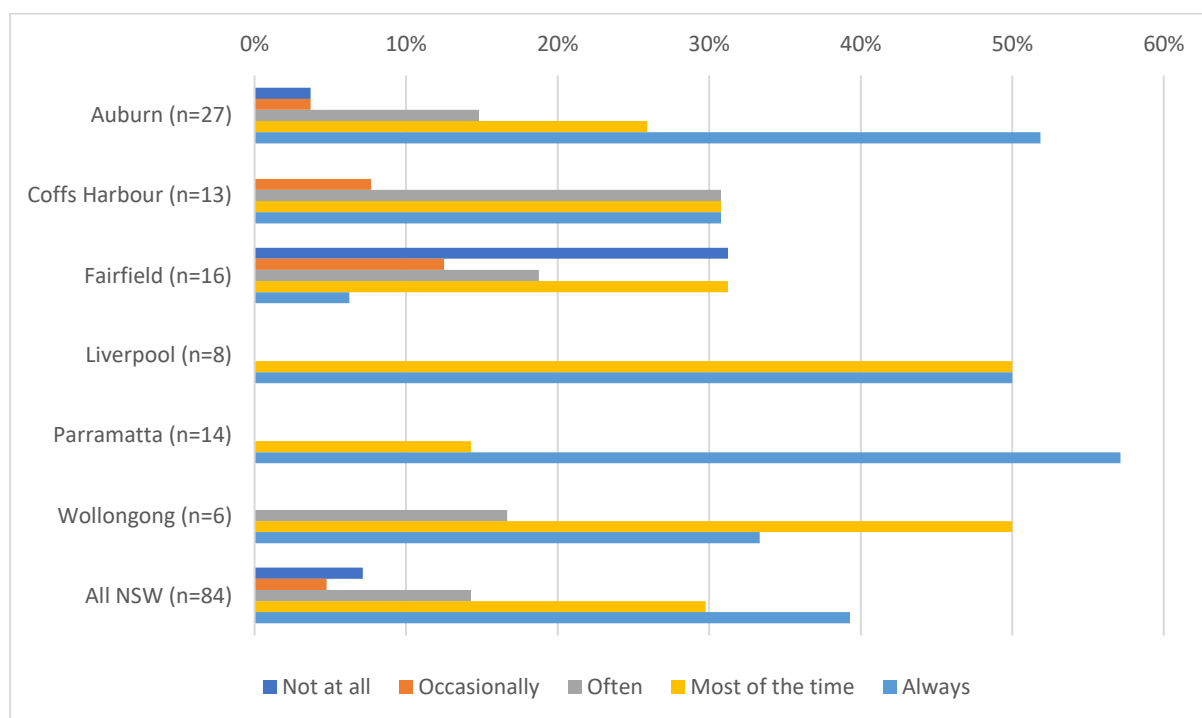
Moreover, the adults in the Parramatta families were confident about the neighbourhood environment for their children. Nine out of ten responded to the question about their children and the neighbourhood – (92%) – and all of these agreed that their local area was a good place to bring up their children (Figure 10).

Figure 10: NSW adults: My neighbourhood is a good place to bring up my children



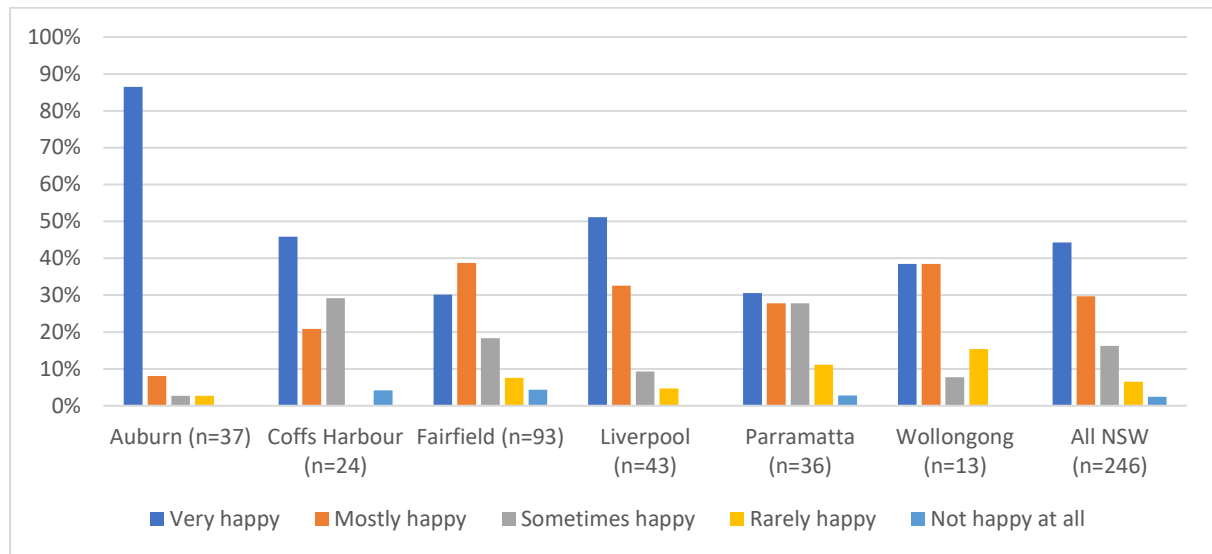
Parramatta was the location with the highest proportion (57%) of young people who ‘always’ felt they belonged to the local community, a considerably higher proportion than the average for NSW (39%), (Figure 11).

Figure 11: NSW young people: Do you feel you belong to the local community?



Moving your family to a new country is difficult, particularly when you are escaping war and conflict. Nevertheless, four out of five adults surveyed in Parramatta (87%) had found some happiness in Australia, and three out of five (59%) were ‘very’ or ‘mostly’ happy with their life now (Figure 12).

Figure 12: NSW adults: how happy are you with your current life in Australia?



Although finding happiness in Australia, almost all of the Parramatta families still had somebody back in Syria or Iraq who they wanted to sponsor to come to Australia. Many longed to be reunited with their loved ones and were in regular contact with their relatives overseas using social media.

I hope my son comes to visit here, but now one year and four months in Australia, I don't see my son.
(Syrian male, 2018)

Of course I miss Syria and family. You have history, you have your family. You have mother ...
(Syrian female, 2018)

Yes I am still in touch with my daughter overseas every day. We speak with my daughter from 5 or 6pm till 11 or 12. Every day, every day.
(Syrian male, 2018)

I speak every day with my family... Wi-fi is very good, easy to speak every day with your family. Every day I get up at 5 o'clock in the morning to speak to my family, because it is night for them.
(Syrian female, 2018)

I'm hoping my sister can join me here. That's one of my only hopes. I would like to start with the hope question.
(Young Syrian female, 2018)

A few remained deep in despair:

Three quarters of Syrians are not thinking about the future anymore. Because we used to think about the future, we used to build a house, like, have a house, start for, like, think about the future. But then everything is gone. Not only in my view, this is the view of, like, 70, 80 per cent of Syrians. There is no future.
(Syrian male, 2018)

Many of the adults interviewed in Parramatta have developed a sense of belonging to Australia, and they look to the future, where their hopes lie:

Today, I set another goal, like a big goal for myself. I want to... my goal from now to five years – I want to teach at TAFE. (Syrian female, 2018)

My future hopes are to work and live here. (Syrian male, 2018)

For most adults in Parramatta, the future lies with hopes for their children:

For my future I hope that my children can get to a stage so my son is a mechanic and then my daughter would like to study. (Syrian male, 2018)

I hope that my children will eventually get a good job in Australia, god willing. Maybe not for me, but for them. (Syrian female, 2018)

For me there is no future to be honest. Just to be honest with you. For my kids I want to raise them up and they go to university and they choose their own in the field they like. (Syrian male, 2018)

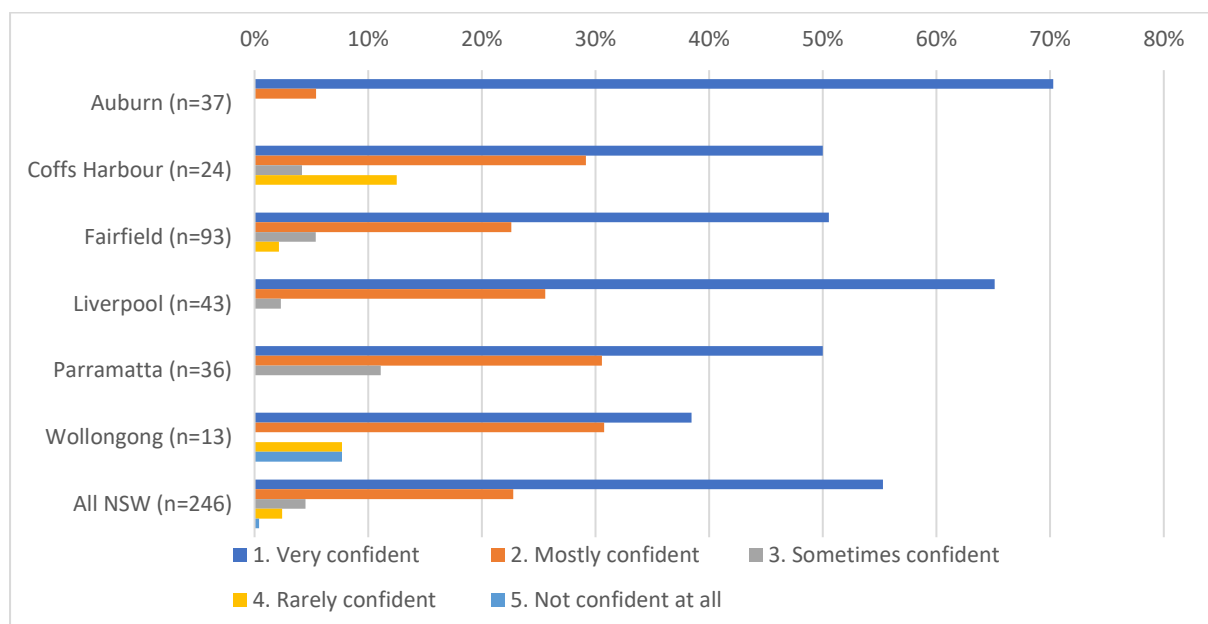
Fulfilling that hope, the young people in Parramatta were enthusiastic and aspirational:

I want to be a soccer player. Yeah, and nothing else. Yeah, and my first day in high school could also be good. (Young Syrian male, 2018)

After I learn English more, I want to study security. (Young Syrian female, 2018)

All of the adults in Parramatta who answered the survey question were confident about their children’s future in Australia; and four out of five (81%) were ‘very’ or ‘mostly’ confident (Figure 13).

Figure 13: NSW adults: How confident are you about your children’s future in Australia?



CONCLUSION

All of the newly-arrived Syrian and Iraqi refugees in the Ryde and Holroyd areas of the Parramatta region were very thankful for the opportunity that Australia provided for them of a safe haven. They were very confident that Australia would provide a great future for their families, though they were worried about finding a job.

All of the families interviewed in Parramatta were very satisfied with the on-arrival services provided to them and their families by the Community Migrant Resource Centre. CMRC found them accommodation, linked them to welfare services and guided them through the difficult first months of settlement in NSW. This was even though CMRC had more than double the normal number of refugee arrivals in 2017 when most of the families that we interviewed arrived.

Many of the newly-arrived refugees in Parramatta had highly-paid jobs in Syria and Iraq before the conflict; some owned their own business. **Their greatest concern is to find a job in Australia.** None of the adult refugees interviewed was content to rely on welfare payments. They were very frustrated that they could not work and contribute to their new society. One frustration was that they needed Australian work experience to get a job, but could not get the Australian work experience required, creating a cycle of exclusion and frustration.

Some adult refugees in Parramatta had a good command of English while others did not. Most have attended the English language courses providing 510 hours of tuition, though those with children or other caring responsibilities could not always get to these classes. Attending English language classes provided them with an opportunity to make new friends in Australia. However, there was a concern that the courses were not tailored to the different language needs of different refugee arrivals. An added frustration was that they could not look for employment or accept employment opportunities while learning English due to the lack of flexibility in the language tuition.

We will visit these families again in 2019 and 2020 to trace their settlement journey in NSW.

We thank them for opening their doors and their hearts to us. We also thank SSI and CMRC for all the help that they provided in this research project and for the bilingual refugees who assisted in this research project as bilingual research assistants.