

Report #2

Settlement experiences of recently arrived refugees from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan in New South Wales in 2018: Executive Summary

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Cover illustration: 'Refugees Welcome' (Photo: Dimitria Groutsis, 2017)

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Abbreviations

ARC	Australian Research Council
BNLA	Building a New Life in Australia (The Longitudinal Study of Humanitarian Migrants)
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
DSS	Department of Social Services
ISIS	Islamic State (militant group)
NSW	New South Wales
Qld	Queensland
SSI	Settlement Services International
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UTS	University Technology Sydney
USyd	University of Sydney
Vic	Victoria
WSU	Western Sydney University

Background

There is no more controversial issue related to Australia's contemporary immigration program than that of refugees, those who arrive in Australia under the humanitarian component of the annual permanent intake program plus those unauthorised arrivals who are determined by Australia to have refugee status. Refugees were arriving on Australian shores seeking asylum prior to the Second World War. Following the fall of Saigon in 1975, thousands of Vietnamese arrived after a dangerous, perilous journey by small boat. From the 1990s small boats of asylum seekers again began to arrive on north-west Australian shores, this time mostly people escaping conflict and persecution in the Middle East. Since that time – under Coalition and Labor governments – Australia's humanitarian (refugee) intake has become a political football.

Much of the refugee debate in Australia is based on stereotypes, generalisations and pre-determined political ideology. We urgently need to reinsert evidence-based research about the settlement experiences and outcomes of recently-arrived refugees in Australia into this debate.

The present report is the second of three place-based reports on the outcomes of the first year of a three-year research project – funded by the Australian Research Council – examining the settlement, employment and education experiences and outcomes of recently-arrived Syrian, Iraqi and Afghan refugees. It is a longitudinal study: we have interviewed 233 refugee families – 118 Syrian, 82 Iraqi and 33 Afghan families – and surveyed 632 individuals settling in New South Wales (NSW), Queensland (Qld) and Victoria (Vic).

In 2015, the Australian Government announced the one-off resettlement of 12,000 Syrian and Iraqi refugees in addition to the annual intake of refugees under the humanitarian program. These two groups were identified and targeted as in need of support because the Syrian conflict and the Islamic State (ISIS) persecution in Syria and Iraq displaced millions of refugees and generated unprecedented flows of refugees to Europe. Like the Canadian government, the Australian government opened its doors to Syrian-conflict refugees. Most arrived in Australia in 2017, when the Humanitarian Program was increased from 13,750 refugees in 2016-2017 to 16,250 refugees in 2017-2018. The intake was to further increase to 18,750 refugees in 2018-2019 (DSS 2019).

For the purposes of our study, we have conducted interviews and surveys with **Syrian** and **Iraqi** refugee families in order to evaluate the settlement outcomes of the Syrian-conflict intake. Since the eruption of the Syrian conflict in 2011 nearly seven million Syrians and Iraqis have fled the region seeking safety in neighbouring countries including Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey for instance; and beyond, including various countries in Europe, Australia and Canada. The Australian Government placed a priority on 'persecuted minorities who sought refuge from the conflict in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey' (DFAT, 2015). Refugees were selected for settlement in Australia from either United Nations High

Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) camps or directly from urban communities in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey (DFAT, 2017). Between 1 July 2015 and 31 December 2017, the number of Syrian and Iraqi refugees (mainly Christian) rose to 24,926 – the 12,000 plus Syrians and Iraqis who arrived in the annual humanitarian intake – with the majority settling in metropolitan areas in New South Wales and Victoria, followed by Queensland (Collins et al. 2018, 5).

We also interviewed and surveyed refugee families from **Afghanistan** (mainly Muslim) as a control group to provide an evaluation of the convergence and divergence between the services provided, and settlement outcomes and experiences of the targeted and select group of Syrian and Iraqi refugees, and those entering Australia under the main humanitarian program. According to the UNHCR, there are almost 2.5 million registered refugees from Afghanistan (<https://www.unhcr.org/en-au/afghanistan.html>). We spoke with refugee families who arrived from approximately mid-2015 to the end of 2017, though most arrived in 2017.

The focus of this second report is to explore the challenges and opportunities of settlement in Australia from the experiences of the Syrian, Iraqi and Afghan refugees themselves in New South Wales. Ultimately, the aim of reporting on the outcomes of the research is not only to present evidence but also to spark a conversation about, and to contribute to an understanding of the contribution that refugees make to Australian society and how we can enhance the social well-being, employability prospects, economic security and educational opportunities of recently arrived refugees in Australia. Finally, our reports aim to inform policy and services to enhance the settlement experience of this group. The recent Shergold Report (Shergold et al. 2019) presented the findings of a *Review into Integration, Employment and Settlement Outcomes for Refugees and Humanitarian Entrants in Australia*. After an intensive consultation period with 90 key informants and reviewing 57 submissions, the Shergold report made 7 key policy recommendations. At the end of our three-year longitudinal study we will be in a position to comment on the efficacy of the Shergold recommendations and present the policy implications of our research.

The Research

The project employs a mixed-method approach, which includes face-to-face interviews, a survey and an analysis of primary and secondary source material. In addition to giving voice to refugee families, evidence building also includes insights from conversations with key stakeholders in the field, such as policymakers, representatives from non-government organisations, employers and educators along with our national and international partners many of whom are at the coal face of refugee service provision. Finally, the dominant popular discourse is also assessed with examinations of secondary source material appearing in the media.

The project is funded by an Australian Research Council (ARC)-Linkage Grant, in partnership with industry, including Access Community Services, AMES Australia, Multicultural Australia (MA) and Settlement Services International (SSI) who provide valuable input in interviewee recruitment and research outputs. Challenging and/or affirming our approach to policy and practice on refugee settlement are our discussions and collaborations with these industry partners in Australia along with researchers in Canada, Finland, Germany, New Zealand, Sweden and the UK.

A key point of departure from the extant literature and policy documents is that the family is the social unit through which refugee settlement is experienced and negotiated and hence where settlement outcomes are investigated and analysed. In 2018, we interviewed 233 families: that is, a total of 632 individuals, across NSW, Queensland and Victoria, comprised of 118 Syrian, 82 Iraqi and 33 Afghan families (the latter is our control group). Children aged 5-18 years also participated in the research with their parent's consent, although those over 16 could participate without parental consent if needed.

Another key point of departure is that while most refugees settled in Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne, regional Australia has become increasingly important as a destination for refugee arrivals. In order to evaluate the experience of newly-arrived refugee families in regional areas, we interviewed refugee families in Wollongong and Coffs Harbour in NSW, in Logan and Toowoomba in Queensland, and in Shepparton in Victoria.

The purpose of this report is to present the findings from the New South Wales interviews and surveys which included 133 families in total, 54 from Syria, 56 from Iraq and 23 from Afghanistan. Interview and survey data were collected across six locations, including Auburn (Afghanistan, n=19), Fairfield (Syria, n=17; and Iraq, n=27), Liverpool (Syria, n=3; and Iraq, n=22), Parramatta (Syria, n=19; and Iraq, n=1), Coffs Harbour (Syria, n=6; Iraq, n=3; and Afghanistan, n=4), and Wollongong (Syria, n=7; and Iraq, n=3). Two pilot Syrian family interviews were conducted initially in the region of Bankstown. The informants were recruited through our Industry Partner networks.

Another key point of departure is that the research project is longitudinal in design. We visit the refugee families once a year for three years in order to better capture their changing settlement experiences and outcomes. Our survey questions – answered on iPad and linked

to Qualtrics – were derived from some questions furnishing the BNLA (Building a New Life in Australia) longitudinal survey of newly-arrived refugees in Australia, conducted by the Department of Social Services since 2013. The first wave of data collection ran from October 2013 to March 2014, with following waves conducted in October to March each year subsequently. This allows us to compare and benchmark the outcomes for Syrian, Iraqi and Afghan refugees in 2018 with the BNLA results. It also permits us to measure the change in an individual's outcomes: for instance in terms of number of friends, English language ability, employment and education, and of course, challenges and opportunities during the settlement process – over the three years of the study.

In the next section, we highlight some of the key findings of the New South Wales research with refugee families in their settlement process.

Key Findings

Refugees very grateful for opportunity to settle in Australia

For many refugees in NSW, the decision to come to Australia was one of necessity, not choice. All the Syrian, Iraqi and Afghan refugees we interviewed were very grateful to be given the opportunity for their family to settle in Australia. They all want to repay Australia: the adult refugees through their employment expertise and young refugees by contributing to the community and society. Most want to become Australian citizens as soon as possible.

Diversity of refugee informants

The refugee families from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan were not homogenous, with significant diversity in their religious, ethnic, educational, employment and linguistic backgrounds and family size. This is a strong finding that challenges refugee stereotypes.

Most of the refugee informants from Syria and Iraq were Christians while the refugees from Afghanistan were Muslims. Significant ethnic diversity was also evident among our informants: 45 adults reported that they were of Assyrian background, 28 Hazara, 27 Armenian, 23 Chaldean, 13 Ezidi, 9 Tajik, 8 Mandaean, 8 Kurdish, 6 Aramaic and 3 Pashtu.

While Arabic and English were widely spoken by those from Syria and Iraq, and most from Afghanistan spoke Dari, our refugee informants spoke 20 languages other than English, Arabic and Dari.

Many refugees from Syria had professional backgrounds while those from Syria and Iraq had successful careers and were highly educated, compared to the Afghan families who had often been marginalized in transition countries.

Most refugees from Syria and Iraq arrived on family-sponsored visas (202) with pre-migration family links to Australia, while many who arrived from Afghanistan arrived on a woman-at-risk Visas. The Afghan refugee families were generally much larger than those from Syria and Iraq, were often sole-parent families, and were less likely to speak some English on arrival.

Refugees arrive after traumatic experiences

All our refugee informants had difficult experiences in their homeland prior to fleeing for their safety. While it was not our intention to dwell on these experiences because we did not want to revisit this trauma, it is baggage that weighs heavily on refugee families, particularly the adults, in their life in Australia.

Refugee Family Displacement

Refugee families have been fractured by the processes of displacement from their homeland. All have family back in the homeland and many have family members who are refugees spread across Europe, Scandinavia, and North America. Despite the absence of their family as a support network living with them in Australia, they connect frequently – sometimes daily – on social media, with their family members around the globe. Their virtual family help them to navigate the ups and downs of life in Australia. Most have tried – unsuccessfully – to have parents and other close family reunited with them in Australia. This is a significant worry.

Settlement is difficult for newly arrived refugees

Australia was a strange land to most refugees on arrival. Other than information provided during induction programs immediately before arrival, and the internet, many refugees knew little about Australian culture and life. They were scared and excited when arriving in Sydney for the first time, hopeful but uncertain about their future life in Australia.

Success of on-arrival programs and services for refugees

Most of the refugees were full of praise for the service providers who met them at the airport and guided them through the challenging first six months of settlement. The NSW settlement service providers (SSI and its network of Migrant Resource Centres in Sydney, Anglicare in Wollongong, and SSI in Coffs Harbour) assisted them to find accommodation, register for Medicare and Centrelink, get their children into local schools and to navigate the maze of Australian laws, regulations, and institutions and their immediate surrounds including transport and shopping. The emergent relationship with their case worker resulted in some refugees naming their Australian-born children after them.

Most refugee families arrived in 2017 when the number of refugees arriving in Australia effectively doubled the intake of previous decades,² putting unprecedented demands on resources of the service providers and making these outcomes even more remarkable.

² 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 from the 13,750 intake of 2015-16. These two facts meant a one-off doubling of the humanitarian intake.

Refugee employment a key challenge

In 2018 most of the refugee informants in NSW – like other states – had not yet entered the labour market but were engaged in English-language training. Hence only 11 per cent of those surveyed had paid employment. While this is well below the 21 per cent who had paid employment according to the BNLA survey, it is important to remember that most of those we surveyed had been in the country for between one to two years, while those participating in the BNLA survey had been in Australia for approximately three years (BNLA 2017: 13). Most of the 88 per cent we interviewed who did not have paid work were not employed because they had not started to look for jobs as they were still learning English or had caring responsibilities. Therefore they had not yet entered the Australian labour market

The refugees we interviewed who were looking for work were very unhappy to have no work while relying on welfare benefits in Australia. They want to start working as soon as possible to feel a sense of self, to rebuild their lives in Australia and as a way of repaying Australian society for providing safe refuge for them and their families.

The research in Australia and internationally suggests that for refugees and humanitarian immigrants, getting access to the labour market is perhaps the greatest settlement challenge that they face. We visited them again in 2019 and will also see them in 2020 to monitor their success in this regard.

Gaining recognition in Australia of their professional and technical qualifications is a significant barrier to getting commensurate employment in Australia for the Syrian and Iraqi refugees.

Many refugee informants spoke of their dilemma of the need to get employment as soon as possible versus the importance of waiting until their English language was at the level required for their preferred job.

Encouragingly, 21 per cent of adult refugees surveyed were 'Very confident' about their employment future in Australia and a further 19 per cent were 'Mostly confident'.

Refugee entrepreneurship

Opening a small business is one strategy that refugees adopt to overcome the barriers that they face in getting access to the labour market (Collins 2017a; Collins 2017b). Refugees have the highest rate of entrepreneurship of any category of immigrant arrivals in Australia. Of the refugee informants in NSW, 36 ran their own business prior to displacement from their homeland.

A significant group of respondents indicated that they would like to establish their own business in Australia including jewellers, car mechanics and caterers.

Syrian-conflict refugees exceptional

The Syrian-conflict intake selected mainly Christian refugees from Syria and Iraq who had impressive education achievements, and employment histories and achievements, prior to displacement. 38 Iraqi and 20 Syrian adult refugees interviewed in NSW held a tertiary education degree, together representing 36 per cent of the Iraqi and Syrian informants who answered this question (160 in total). This compares to the 27 per cent of Australians who hold a university degree (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/612854/australia-population-with-university-degree/>). The majority of female refugees did not have paid employment prior to displacement from their homeland.

Many Syrians and Iraqis are professionals: we interviewed engineers, pharmacists, doctors, architects, dentists, finance specialists and the like. They were anxious to continue their professions in Australia. They are well qualified, and their educational attainment at the secondary and tertiary level is comparable to the BNLA cohort and substantially higher the Afghani control group.

Afghan refugees

Most of the refugees from Afghanistan were Hazaras who were subject to great discrimination and persecution by the Taliban prior to their displacement. Many arrived on woman-at-risk visas (204) in large families having a sole female parent. The Taliban also denied education and employment opportunities to most Hazara in Afghanistan, so that the parent(s) often arrive with very little education or employment history.

The majority of the families interviewed from Afghanistan were relieved to be in Australia. They felt safe and happy.

The majority were learning English and for those without employment, they were hopeful for future work with expectations for work in any area of the labour market.

English language training

English language competency was seen by refugees as the biggest hurdle in accessing employment: most were delaying entry into the labour market while their English-language ability was getting up to speed.

Attendance at English language classes at TAFE and other providers (510 hours is available to all newly arrived refugees) provided refugees not only with an opportunity to learn English but also with an opportunity to make new friends in Australia. That is, English language classes assisted adult refugees to build linguistic and social capital in Australia, critical pre-requisites for successful settlement.

While there was a lot of praise for English language classes provided and for their English-language teachers, there was also considerable concern voiced regarding

overcrowding and inflexibility in delivery, including place, time of day and level of education related to language ability (adults in families).

Highly educated refugees wanted English-language training to be linked more to their future employment needs and to their qualification recognition tasks. They were in the same classes as refugees with no education and little literacy in their mother tongue, let alone English.

Respondents noted that they were frustrated by the clash between English language training and employment access.

Women with responsibility for pre-school children and aged, sick and infirm adults could generally not find the free time to attend English-language training classes at TAFE.

Friendly Neighbours

Settling into strange, new neighbourhoods in a strange country is difficult. Feeling welcome by neighbours assists with feelings of belonging.

Most refugee adults surveyed in NSW (92%), the majority of whom are settled in metropolitan areas, reported that the people in their neighbourhood were friendly. This compares favourably to refugees in the national BNLA survey (87%) and to our refugee informants in Queensland and Victoria. The religion of the refugee made little difference in this regard.

Talking to the neighbours

Another aspect of social inclusion and successful settlement relates to whether new refugee arrivals had social relations with their neighbours. Overall, two in three (66%) of our NSW refugee informants reported that it was easy to make friends with their neighbours, a stronger result than found in the national BNLA study. Moreover 41 per cent of our New South Wales refugee informants reported that it was easy to talk to their neighbours, slightly less than the national BNLA study (49%), even though the NSW refugees had lived next to their neighbours for less than a year while those in the BNLA had done so for up to three years.

A good place to bring up their children

In addition to escaping persecution, a key motivation of most of our refugee informants to come to Australia was driven by the need to secure a better future for their children. Many of the adults conceded that while they themselves might have difficulties with language or employment they were confident that their children would have a good life in Australia: 83 per cent of NSW refugees thought that their neighbourhood is a good place to bring up their children. This was only slightly behind the BNLA national result.

Good schools for refugee children

Refugees are motivated to provide a good future for their children. Education opportunity is an important component of this. Refugee adults in NSW (77%) were happier with schools in their neighbourhood than refugees who settled in Queensland or Victoria (69%).

Young refugees agreed that they are receiving good education opportunities in NSW schools: across NSW 80 per cent of young refugees find their educational experiences 'Very good' or 'Excellent'.

Young people are impressive

The young people involved in our research were overwhelmingly impressive in their English language skills given the short time they had been in Australia. They were optimistic about the future, in the main had a wide network of friends from various backgrounds and really enjoyed their schools. Of course, the first six months had been difficult for them, missing friends, extended family and the lifestyle, but they had adjusted with the help of community organisations, school friends and school teachers.

Friendship networks and feelings of belonging of young refugees

A key dimension of the settlement experiences of refugee young people relates to their friendship networks. While we expect that many refugee young people have friends from the same ethnic/religious/national background as themselves (an aspect of bonding social capital), a mark of successful settlement would be making friends of different backgrounds. We found that most have five or more friends of different backgrounds to themselves. Many also said that they would like more opportunities to mix with locally born Australians.

Another very subjective but important dimension of the settlement experiences of refugee young people relates to their feelings of belonging in the local community: nine out of ten young people in NSW felt that they belonged to the community 'Often', 'Most of the time' or 'Always'.

New South Wales a safe place for refugee families

The long and risky journey that a refugee family makes to a country like Australia is primarily motivated by the urgent need to provide a safe environment for themselves and their children. Adult refugees are unanimous that NSW is a safe place to live and bring up their families no matter whether they live in Sydney suburbs or Wollongong or Coffs Harbour. 96 per cent of the adult refugees we surveyed reported that NSW was a safe place for them and their children. This is a remarkable result, stronger than

the results we found in Qld and Victoria (87%) and stronger than the results of the BNLA longitudinal survey (93%).

All young people we surveyed noted feeling safe in their neighbourhood in all locations.

Understanding Australian culture

Like any country, Australia has its cultural idiosyncrasies that newcomers find different and sometimes difficult to understand and to adjust to. This is often seen in colloquial language and expressions as well as other cultural mores. In the national BNLA survey, six out of ten refugees (59%) found it easy to understand Australian ways and culture. The newly-arrived refugees in New South Wales were similar: 60 per cent found it easy to understand Australian ways and culture, despite a much shorter period of settlement. Refugees living in Liverpool (77%) reported the most success understanding Australian ways and culture.

Most refugees happy in New South Wales

In this report we have discussed many aspects of settlement outcomes for refugee families (adults and young people) who we have interviewed and surveyed for this research project. To see how these different aspects of settlement balance out in the minds of the refugees themselves we asked a final question: how happy are you with your current life in Australia? Refugee adults living in NSW were more likely to respond 'Very happy' to this question (44%) than refugees living in other states of Australia. Overall, 74 per cent of refugees were 'Very happy' or 'Mostly happy' living in NSW, compared to 58% per cent of refugees living in the other states. This is a strong indication that despite the great suffering and trauma that these refugees have experienced in the family life, refugee settlement in Australia is judged to be a success in the eyes of the refugees themselves.

Dissecting this finding by the religion of refugees, our research found that Muslim refugees – in this case those from Afghanistan, mostly Hazara – are the most likely (74%) to report that they are 'Very happy' or 'Mostly happy' with their lives in Australia, a similar result to that of Christian refugees (70% 'Very happy' or 'Mostly happy'). 63 per cent of Ezidi refugees reported overall happiness with their life as a refugee living in NSW. By country of displacement, while the results show that refugees from Afghanistan are most happy with life in Australia (82% 'Very happy' and 9% 'Mostly happy'), most of the refugees from Syria (38% 'Very happy' and 27% 'Mostly happy') and Iraq (35% 'Very happy' and 42% 'Mostly happy') report overall happiness settling in NSW, despite their difficulties with settlement, family reunion and employment.

Other findings

We asked our refugee informants about experiences of racism in Australia. Perhaps surprisingly – given the dog whistle politics about refugees that has dominated political and public discourses in Australia for two decades at least – most said that they had not experienced racism in New South Wales. A few informants recounted an incident in public that they felt was racist.

Most of the refugees felt happy with their lives in Australia and positive about their future. All of those interviewed stated that they wanted to take up Australian citizenship as soon as possible and some had in fact already gained Australian citizenship.

All respondents noted that Australia was now their home.

One aspect of our research design was to include refugee experiences of settlement in non-metropolitan areas, in addition to that of those refugees living in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. The regional NSW sites were Wollongong and Coffs Harbour. A key finding is that refugee settlement in non-metropolitan areas of NSW appears to have been successful from the viewpoint of the refugees themselves.

Life in Australia has challenged gender relations within families in Australia. In many instances life in Australia meant living in a society with stronger laws, policies and practices of human rights and gender equality, challenging male authority in the family, particularly when males were not working and home with their wife, or when it was the women – who mostly had home duties prior to displacement – who found a job. Young people also had greater rights and this was also a source of tension for some families.

Many of our refugee informants reported that the costs of accommodation – particularly in Sydney – and the cost of living in general was a key area of difficulty for them.

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