

Report #3

Settlement experiences of recently arrived refugees from Syria and Iraq in Victoria in 2018/19: 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
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

While refugee intakes have been halted with COVID-19, there is no more controversial issue related to Australia's contemporary immigration program than that of refugees, that is, 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 third 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 248 refugee families – 131 Syrian, 84 Iraqi and 33 Afghan families – and surveyed 699 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 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 additional places plus Syrians and Iraqis who arrived in the annual humanitarian intake – with the majority settling in metropolitan areas in New South Wales (14,096; 56%) and Victoria (7,207; 29%), followed by Queensland (1,766; 7%) (Collins et al. 2018, 5)².

The focus of this third report is to explore the challenges and opportunities of settlement in Australia from the experiences of the Syrian and Iraqi refugees who have settled in Victoria. 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. The important policy implications relate to 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 following review of 57 submissions, the Shergold report made 7 key policy recommendations. At the end of our three-year longitudinal study, by late 2021, we will be in a position to comment on the efficacy of the Shergold recommendations and present the policy implications of our research.

² These numbers are for all refugees over one year periods, these figures are for Syrians and Iraqis over a 2.5 year period. The numbers previous figures cited are for all refugees over one year periods.

The Research

The project employs a mixed-method approach, which includes face-to-face or telephone 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 AMES Australia (AMES), Access Community Services, 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 Round One – the first year of the research project (2018/2019) - we interviewed 248 families in all states: that is, a total of 699 individuals, across NSW, Queensland and Victoria (see Tables 4.1, 4.2). These comprised 131 Syrian, 84 Iraqi and 33 Afghan families (our control group). These figures include a supplementary group of families in Victoria, recruited to augment the total number in that survey population, and not included in previous reports. The Victorian research did not include Afghan families. 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 Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane, regional Australia has become increasingly important as a destination for refugee arrivals. To evaluate the experience of newly arrived refugee families in non-metropolitan areas, we interviewed refugee families in regional Victoria, NSW, and Queensland.

The purpose of this report is to present the findings from the first year of Victoria interviews and surveys which included 40 families in total, 33 from Syria and 7 from Iraq. Interview and survey data were collected across two locations in metropolitan (Syria, $n=24$; and Iraq, $n=7$) and regional (Syria, $n=9$) Victoria. 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 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 BNLA 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. The BNLA data is a very useful point of comparison for our research project findings. Our survey questions were taken from the BNLA to permit this comparison to be made as a yardstick for the Syrian conflict refugees and Afghan control refugee settlement outcomes. The key point to keep in mind is that many of those in the BNLA have arrived earlier than our informants. This means that our comparative outcomes become better when viewed in the light that our informants were more recently arrived. The Victorian data 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 Victoria research with refugee families in their settlement process.

Key findings

Refugees very grateful for the opportunity to settle in Victoria

In this report we interviewed and surveyed 40 refugee families - 33 Syrian and 7 Iraqi families - living in metropolitan or in regional Victoria. For many refugees in Victoria, the decision to come to Australia was one of necessity, not choice. In contrast, several Syrian and Iraqi refugees in Victoria were sponsored by community members, often family, already living in Victoria, that is, they arrived under the Community Proposal Pilot (CPP) or Community Support Program (CSP) (Visa 202), where their settlement costs were entirely funded by Australian community members. In other words, they chose Victoria. Notwithstanding the family connection, it should be noted that they were still driven from their homeland. All the Syrian and Iraqi refugees we interviewed were very grateful to be given the opportunity for their family to settle in Victoria. They all want to repay Australia: the adult refugees through their employment expertise and contributions to the labour force and young refugees by contributing to the community and society. Most want to become Australian citizens as soon as possible.

Diversity of the refugee intake

The refugee families from Syria and Iraq were not homogenous, with significant diversity evident in their religious, ethnic, educational, employment and linguistic backgrounds, age, and family size. This challenges refugee stereotypes which see refugees as homogenous. The largest ethnic group of adult individuals in the Victorian cohort identified themselves as Syrian (41 out of 89), followed by Assyrian and Syriac (each 13 out of 89). Most were Christians, with the nine Syrian families in regional Vic all Muslims. Arabic and English were widely spoken by those from Syria and Iraq though many other languages – including Syriac, Assyrian, Chaldean and Aramaic - were spoken at home by these refugee families.

Syrian and Iraqi Refugees Highly Educated

Many refugees from Syria had professional backgrounds while those from Syria and Iraq had successful careers prior to displacement. Compared to the Victorian population they are highly educated: 39 of the 89 refugee adults surveyed (43%) held a tertiary education qualification. This compares to the 27 per cent of Australians who hold a university degree,³ and to the 35 per cent of refugees from all national backgrounds who have a tertiary education qualification (as found in the Building a New Life in Australia study).

Refugee settlement is difficult

Australia is a strange land to most refugees on arrival. Other than information provided during induction programs immediately before arrival, and information sourced on the internet, many refugees knew little about Australian culture and life. Even those with family

³ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/612854/australia-population-with-university-degree/>

already in Victoria were both scared and excited when arriving in Melbourne for the first time, hopeful but uncertain about their future life in Australia.

Victorian on-arrival services for refugees first rate

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 months of settlement. AMES provided critical settlement services to the newly arrived refugee families: they assisted them to find accommodation, to register for Medicare and Centrelink, to 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. This saw the emergence of a strong relationship between refugee families with their AMES case worker.

Employment is a key challenge

In 2018 most of the refugee informants in Victoria – like other states – had not yet entered the labour market but were engaged in English-language training. Hence only 18 per cent of those surveyed had paid employment. While this is slightly 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 refugees who did not have paid work had not yet started to look for jobs as they were still learning English or had caring responsibilities.

Refugees want jobs not welfare

Those who were looking for work were very unhappy having to rely 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.

Qualification recognition a barrier to Australian employment

Gaining recognition in Australia of their professional and technical qualifications achieved prior to arrival in Australia is a significant barrier to getting commensurate employment in Australia for the Syrian and Iraqi refugees. Often the process of qualifications accreditation clashed with English language instruction and the need and desire for swift entry into employment.

Learn English or get a job?

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. Refugees reported that they were frustrated by 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.

Refugees confident about their employment future in Victoria

Encouragingly, 13 per cent of adult refugees surveyed in 2018-19 were 'very confident' about their employment future in Australia and a further 22 per cent were 'mostly confident'.

COVID-19 has dramatically reduced employment opportunities throughout most of 2020 and the first quarter of 2021. This will make employment outcomes for refugees in Victoria and other Australian states much more challenging.

Refugee entrepreneurship in Victoria should be supported

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. Several refugee informants reported that they had owned their own business prior to coming to Australia and would like to do so again in Victoria. For these refugees, programs to assist them to set up their own business, like Ignite (Collins 2017b), Thrive (The Incus Group 2019) and others (Legrain and Burridge 2019), would greatly assist them to create their own jobs by starting their own business in Victoria.

English Language Important

Attendance at English language classes at TAFE and other providers 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. Women with responsibility for pre-school aged children, those with caring responsibilities, older adults and those with complex health issues could generally not find the free time to attend English-language training classes.

One size doesn't fit all in refugee English language classes

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 profession and qualification recognition tasks. There were concerns about the lack of recognition of the diversity of literacy, educational and professional abilities and needs with regards to English language delivery. A Volunteer Tutor program could assist those refugees who cannot access English language classes because of the responsibility of caring for children, the elderly and/or those in refugee families with disability or illness.

Refugees find friendly neighbours in Victoria

Settling into strange, new neighbourhoods in a strange country is difficult. Feeling welcome by neighbours assists refugee arrivals with feelings of belonging. Most refugee adults surveyed in Victoria (79%), the majority of whom are settled in metropolitan areas, reported that the people in their neighbourhood were friendly. While this result compares less

favourably to refugees in the national BNLA survey (87%) and to our refugee informants in Queensland and NSW, it is still a strong, positive result. Another aspect of social inclusion and successful settlement relates to whether new refugee arrivals had social interaction with their neighbours. Overall, 39 per cent of our refugee informants reported that it was easy to talk to their neighbours, slightly less than the national BNLA study (49%) but similar to results for NSW and Queensland. 56% of refugees who settled in regional Vic reported that it was easy to talk to their neighbours.

Regional refugee settlement in Victoria a success

It is interesting that all refugees who settled in regional Vic found that people in their neighbourhood were friendly, although the number of respondents in regional Vic was small. In addition, all adult refugees who settled in regional Vic found it a safe place to live, and reported that it was a good place to bring up their children. This is a strong argument in favour of more settlement of refugees in regional Victoria.

Victoria a good place to bring up refugee 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: 82 per cent of the refugees surveyed thought that their Victorian neighbourhood was a good place to bring up their children. This was slightly less than the BNLA national result and the results for NSW and Qld.

Victorian schools get a tick from refugee parents and children

Refugees are motivated to provide a good future for their children. Education opportunity is an important component of this. 77 per cent of refugee adults who settled in Victoria were happy with the schools in their neighbourhood, like the Queensland result (79%) though behind the NSW result (90%). In this instance, refugees who settled in metropolitan Victoria perceived better schooling (83%) than those who settled in the regional location (56%). Young refugees (YP) agreed that they are receiving good education opportunities in Victorian schools: one in three rated their schooling as 'excellent' with another 48 per cent of YP living in metropolitan Vic (and 26 per cent of YP living in regional Vic) rating their schooling as 'very good'.

Young refugees in Victoria are very impressive

The young people involved in our research were overwhelmingly impressive in their achievements given the short time they had been in Australia. Most were optimistic about the future, had a wide network of friends from various backgrounds and really enjoyed their schools. They picked-up English much faster than their parents, while they all felt safe living in their metropolitan or regional neighbourhood in Victoria. 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 schoolteachers.

Most refugees safe and happy living in Victoria

Like any country, Australia has its cultural idiosyncrasies that newcomers find different and sometimes difficult to understand and adjust to. This is often seen in Australian 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 Victoria were similar: 56 per cent found it easy to understand Australian ways and culture, despite a shorter period of settlement. Slightly more refugees living in regional Vic (61%) found it easy to understand Australian ways and culture than refugees living in metropolitan Vic (55%).

Adult refugees are unanimous that Victoria is a safe place to live and bring up their families no matter whether they live in metropolitan or regional locations. All adult refugees who settled in regional Vic found it a safe place to live while 88 per cent of the adult refugees who live in metropolitan Vic reported that its was a safe place for them and their children.

Most refugees judge resettlement of their families in Victoria as a success

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. The long and uncertain 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. 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? One in two refugee adults living in Victoria were either 'very happy' (13%) or 'mostly happy' (39%) living in Victoria. While refugees who settled in regional Vic were more likely (17%) than those who lived in metropolitan Vic (13%) to respond that they were 'very happy' with life in Australia, 42 per cent of those living in the metropolitan location said that they were 'mostly happy' compared to 28 per cent of those in the regional location. This is a strong indication that despite the great suffering and trauma that these refugees have experienced in family life – and despite the difficulties that they have faced in starting up a new life in a strange country – refugee settlement in Victoria is judged to be a success in the eyes of the refugees themselves.

Refugees arrive after traumatic experiences of displacement

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 part of their lived experience that goes to weigh heavily on refugee families, particularly the adults, in their life in Australia. Refugee families have been fractured by the processes of displacement from their homeland. Most have family back in Syria and Iraq and many have family members who are refugees spread across Europe, Scandinavia, Latin American 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 and by phone. Their virtual family connection helps them to navigate the ups and downs of life in Australia. They are a constant source of support, but also a constant source of worry:

most have tried – unsuccessfully – to have parents and other close family reunited with them in Australia. This is their biggest concern as they navigate new lives in Victoria.

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