

# **Operation Syrian Refugees: An Overview of Canada's Resettlement Initiative and Early Outcomes**

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## **1. Introduction**

In November 2015, the Government of Canada committed to welcoming 25,000 Syrian refugees by the end of February 2016 as part of a resettlement initiative called Operation Syrian Refugees. To accomplish this task, while maintaining appropriate security and screening standards, this operation required a resource intensive, expedited process that was unique in terms of past large-scale resettlement initiatives previously undertaken by Canada.

The objective of this report is to reflect on Canada's response to the Syrian resettlement initiative, from the initial mobilization stage to the settlement and integration outcomes of Syrian refugees upon arrival in Canada. The report begins with an overview of Operation Syrian Refugees, in terms of the approach and scope of the initiative, followed by a consideration of the lessons learned and operational challenges of the resettlement effort. The report then provides an analysis of key research findings related to the early settlement and integration outcomes of Syrian refugees. This section provides a preliminary understanding of the resettlement experience, from the perspective of Syrian refugees, receiving communities in Canada, and the settlement sector.

Lastly, the report concludes by reflecting on the vision of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) for settlement policy in Canada, and how IRCC intends to monitor the intermediate and long-term outcomes of Syrian refugees. Canada's model for integration is premised on socio-economic inclusion and mutual adaptation, which through a shared effort, aims to mobilize Canadians and newcomers towards reaching their full economic and social potential. As such, the successful settlement and integration of Syrian refugees remains an on-going multigenerational and whole of society initiative.

## **2. Mobilization and Response to Syrian Refugee Resettlement**

The Government of Canada's commitment to resettle 25,000 Syrian refugees over a four month period was a daunting task that required extensive collaboration from all levels of government, as well as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and Canadian civil society. Operation Syrian Refugees was made possible by the coordinated efforts of multiple federal organizations, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Organization for Migration, the governments of Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey, provincial, territorial, and municipal governments in Canada, NGOs, corporate and community private sponsors, as well as the broad support of Canadians across the country. This level of collaboration was unprecedented in Canada and necessary, especially given that over 250 communities across Canada have welcomed Syrian refugees.

### **2.1 Approach to Operation Syrian Refugees**

To meet the needs of this initiative, IRCC mobilized resources from all non-urgent business to focus on this national project and worked with the UNHCR, the Department of National Defence, Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA), and Global Affairs Canada to identify refugees that could potentially be resettled within the identified timeframe. The process for resettlement for Operation Syrian Refugees was delivered in five phases:

### ***Phase 1: Identifying Syrian refugees to come to Canada***

The Government of Canada worked with the UNHCR in Jordan and Lebanon, as well as State officials in Turkey to identify Syrian refugees in their databases to be resettled. Canada identified triage considerations, which were provided to the UNHCR to assist in identifying the most vulnerable persons, while aiming to screen out those more likely to pose risks. This process prioritized complete families, women at risk, and LGBTI cases. Unaccompanied minors or separated children, persons inadmissible under Canadian legislation (e.g. polygamous marriages, security concerns), and single adult males of fighting age<sup>1</sup> were not considered for this project.

### ***Phase 2: Processing Syrian refugees overseas***

Immigration processing was completed in Amman, Beirut, and Ankara. Global Affairs Canada provided whole-of-government coordination for the deployment of Canadian personnel, including members of Canada's Department of National Defence, who provided support to the process. In Beirut and Amman, Canada established stand-alone Operation Centres to streamline processing and putting partners under one roof to efficiently reduce the number of interactions necessary per application. Clients completed their application forms with English-Arabic speaking contractors to reduce errors, save time, and accommodate the issue of illiteracy. Documents were then both strategically and randomly checked for fraud by on-site CBSA experts. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) scheduled interviews for refugees with Canadian immigration officers. CBSA and Public Safety experts were available at the Operations Centres for immigration officers to consult, also providing interview support to the officers. Full medical immigration screening was done for communicable diseases such as tuberculosis. CBSA, in collaboration with other national security agencies, conducted and processed security screening on all applicants in accordance with domestic legal frameworks and international arrangements. For instance, biometrics, such as fingerprints and digital photos were collected and checked against immigration and security databases, including through Canada's Secure Real-Time Platform connection with the United States.

### ***Phase 3: Transportation to Canada***

Canada engaged with host countries to rapidly facilitate exit permits, in some cases paying exit fines for refugees who were out of status. Transportation to Canada was largely by private charter aircraft. Preparing the flight manifests and matching them with the travel documents, travellers, and exit permits was an immensely complicated and time-sensitive task. Global Affairs Canada and CBSA supported over 150 Operation Syrian Refugees flights by liaising with partner countries in the Middle East and Europe to obtain diplomatic clearances and permissions for overflight, landing and/or refuelling.

### ***Phase 4: Welcoming in Canada***

Charter flights arrived in Toronto and Montreal at airport terminals that had been specifically retrofitted to welcome hundreds of refugees per day. Following arrival in these

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<sup>1</sup> Exceptions were made for LGBTI individuals or those residing with their parents/siblings as part of complete family units. Fighting age was defined as 18-55 years-of-age.

Welcome Centres, all refugees were processed by CBSA officers for admission into the country. This included final verification of identity and screening for signs of illness. As per the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, refugees were granted Permanent Resident status upon arrival, and began their settlement process with the support of service providers and other government agencies that were co-located in the airport Welcome Centres.

### ***Phase 5: Settlement and community integration***

Upon arrival, Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSRs) and Blended Visa Office Referred Refugees (BVORs) continued directly to the community where their private sponsor was located. Government Assisted Refugees (GARs) were matched with communities where settlement supports were in place. Most continued to their new home communities across Canada shortly after arriving in the country. For those whose final destination had not been determined by the time they arrived, temporary accommodation was provided until they were moved to their host communities. In destination cities, refugees received support from settlement service organizations (SPOs) to assist their resettlement and integration into Canadian society.

## **2.2 Civil Society and Community Partnerships**

Community partnerships have played an important role in the unprecedented response of Canadian communities to the Syrian refugee crisis. Preparations in support of this large-scale resettlement effort have required rapid mobilization on the part of many organizations across multiple sectors. Many Local Immigration Partnerships (LIPs) and Réseaux en Immigration Francophone (RIFs) made valuable contributions to the Operation Syrian Refugees initiative by engaging their networks of community stakeholders, as well as sharing their local expertise on newcomer settlement and integration. Activities undertaken by LIPs and RIFs have included participating in meetings with municipal, provincial, and federal level government representatives to raise awareness on refugee needs and available settlement services; identifying gaps at the local level; sharing information with the broader community and stakeholders on the private sponsorship process; and contributing to local communication products, such as supporting the translation of local settlement guides into Arabic, as well as identifying pools of volunteers who speak Arabic.

Community Foundations of Canada partnered with the corporate sector to allocate and direct contributions received from large Canadian companies. By the beginning of January 2016, Community Foundations of Canada had established the Welcome Fund for Syrian Refugees to steward approximately \$5.5 million in contributions from the corporate sector, including seed funding from Manulife, as well as a \$5 million donation from CN. The objective of the Welcome Fund is to support local organizations across Canada in the housing and resettlement efforts for Syrian refugees. Since the Welcome Fund's creation, Community Foundations of Canada has supported the resettlement of refugees through initiatives such as rent subsidies, emergency loan funds, and start-up kits for household goods.

## **2.3 Public Opinion on Syrian Refugee Resettlement**

IRCC regularly conducts ongoing research to help the Department develop a better understanding of Canadian attitudes on issues surrounding immigration. In a study conducted

in January of 2016, IRCC found that a majority of Canadians (71%) believed that accepting refugees is part of Canada's humanitarian tradition. Additionally, the study found that support for Canada's commitment to resettle 25,000 Syrian Refugees had increased from 44% in November 2015, to 53% by January. A subsequent study completed by the Environics Institute for Survey Research, in collaboration with the Canadian Race Relations Foundation (2016) found that just under half (48%) of Canadians have expressed approval in the number of Syrian refugees that have been admitted thus far, while one in ten (10%) believed Canada should admit even more.

The survey also found that just over one-third (36%) of Canadians were concerned that Canada was taking in too many Syrian refugees. For those in this group, 53% believed that Canada lacks the capacity to support the number of refugees arriving, while 40% asserted that accepting a large influx of Syrian refugees would divert resources away from other pressing priorities in Canada. A smaller proportion of Canadians who believe Canada was admitting too many refugees cited reasons such as refugees having different values or lifestyles that don't align with the Canadian way of life (14%), or because refugees are not being adequately screened for security reasons (12%).

Opinions about the number of Syrian refugees being accepted into Canada also varied across the country. Canadians in Alberta (49%), Manitoba (43%), and Saskatchewan (43%) were most likely to say the number of Syrian refugees was too many, while this sentiment was least evident in Atlantic Canada (28%) and British Columbia (29%). Demographically, the concern that Canada is admitting too many Syrian refugees was also more common among Canadians over the age of 45 (42%), compared to those between the ages of 18 and 29 (28%).

## **2.4 Lessons Learned: Operations**

### ***Best Practices***

Establishing a governance structure and operations focal point was an integral part of ensuring Operation Syrian Refugees was a success. The implementation of the Federal Emergency Response Plan (FERP)<sup>2</sup> was an effective way to organize the various departments and agencies involved in this operation. This governance arrangement defined the roles and responsibilities of each federal organization based on their respective enabling legislations and fields of expertise.

The Government Operations Centre<sup>3</sup> (GOC) was also engaged early on to help ensure a rapid response and ongoing coordination among a wide range of partners. The use of the GOC as the coordination mechanism for Phases Four and Five to ensure smooth operations

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<sup>2</sup> The Federal Emergency Response Plan (FERP) is the Government of Canada's "all-hazards" response plan. It provides a framework for effective integration of effort both horizontally and vertically throughout the Federal Government. It also provides the mechanisms and processes to coordinate the structures, the capabilities, and the resources of federal government institutions, non-governmental organizations and the private sector into an integrated emergency response.

<sup>3</sup> The Government Operations Centre (GOC) provides an integrated federal emergency response to events of national interest. It provides 24/7 monitoring and reporting, national-level situational awareness, warning products and integrated risk assessments, as well as national-level planning and whole-of-government response management.

was well-received by stakeholders and departments. To meet the demands of Operation Syrian Refugees, the GOC added 250 surge staff to their existing personnel. Also, keeping the media and Canadians informed and engaged through public events and announcements was key to the successful reception of the refugees.

Overseas Operations Centres were established in Jordan and Lebanon bringing all components necessary for applicant processing under a single roof. Refugees were transported to these centres on IOM buses for a single day of contact with immigration officials. On the day of contact, refugees completed an identification check, biometric requirements, photos, documents and forms, and their interview. Planning and implementing a single streamlined encounter significantly reduced processing times. Additionally, it facilitated communication between the various government and non-government officials involved in the process and it also made it easier for refugees to navigate the complexities of the process. Completing steps such as interviews and medical and security screening concurrently was one of the key adaptations that allowed the government to process more than 25,000 Syrian refugees in the compressed time period.

### ***Challenges in the Resettlement Process***

Although Operation Syrian Refugees was a success in many regards, the sheer rapidness of the initiative, compounded by the ambitious goal to resettle an unprecedented number of refugees in a short timeframe ultimately led to several challenges.

At the processing level, the experience on the ground was that some refugees declined resettlement because the process was perceived to be too hasty. For those that accepted resettlement, many expressed that they had experienced hardship in being swiftly uprooted from refugee communities and extended family. There were many cases where extended family that wished to be resettled together were processed separately; as a result, some families were not prepared to depart for Canada due to extended family members waiting for processing. Additionally, rapid processing for one part of a family and slower timelines for another often meant that even linked extended family members were sometime separated (for example, elderly family members who needed additional medical screening).

Pre-arrival services, particularly orientation, are essential for successful resettlement and setting refugees on a positive integration path. Under usual circumstances, pre-arrival services are delivered on behalf of IRCC by the International Organization for Migration to provide immigrants and refugees with an overview of what to expect upon arrival in Canada. However, due to the expedited nature of this initiative, pre-arrival services were not integrated as part of Operation Syrian Refugees. The failure to provide adequate pre-arrival services inevitably led to many Syrian refugees arriving to Canada with unrealistic expectations, as well as a general lack of knowledge on how to navigate the resettlement process.

At the local level, the main challenge identified by the settlement sector was the lack of capacity to deal with the large influx of Syrian refugees in a constrained timeframe. Resettlement initiatives were most effective in communities that had the existing infrastructure to support refugees, which was often only the case in larger cities in Canada. Thus, although many smaller, rural communities were receptive to resettling Syrian refugees, these communities were often faced with logistical issues that hindered the resettlement process. Across Canada, these challenges were also further exacerbated by resettlement

organizations not receiving timely and detailed profiles of Syrian refugees, prior to arrival. These information gaps contributed to challenges in providing immediate and targeted services for refugees. Furthermore, due to unexpectedly large family sizes, resettlement organizations struggled to find adequate housing for Syrian refugees, which led to some families living in temporary accommodation for longer than what was anticipated. Resettlement organizations were also unprepared to deal with the unexpectedly high number of Syrian children and youth, as many organizations lacked the programming and services needed for this particular group.

Lastly, Operation Syrian Refugees highlighted the need to implement “end-to-end” planning as part of resettlement initiatives. IRCC’s Rapid Impact Evaluation noted that there was a lack of sufficient planning and forward-looking preparations regarding the resettlement and early integration phases that considered the impacts of the initiative, beyond the first initial weeks in Canada. The expedited nature of the resettlement initiative made it challenging for the settlement sector (Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) SPOs, Settlement SPOs, partners and stakeholders) to effectively plan for the delivery of in-Canada services. Adequate pacing is critical to ensuring that the necessary human, community and stakeholder resources can be mobilized and are able to adequately prepare for the arrival and initial settlement of resettled refugees.

### **3. Portrait of Syrian Refugees**

In 2016, IRCC conducted a Rapid Impact Evaluation of Syrian refugees who were resettled as part of the Operation Syrian Refugees initiative. In addition to assessing the immediate outcomes of Syrian refugees upon resettlement, the evaluation also outlined the socio-demographic characteristics of this group.

#### **3.1 Resettlement and Settlement Programs**

Syrian refugees were processed and admitted to Canada under one of the following three resettlement programs for refugees:

*Government-Assisted Refugees (GAR)* were referred to Canada by the United Nations Refugee Agency or the Turkish Government. GARs are supported by the Government of Canada who provides initial resettlement services and income support for up to one year.<sup>4</sup> Since 2002, the GAR program has placed an emphasis on selecting refugees based their need for protection. As a result, GARs often carry higher needs<sup>5</sup> than other refugee groups. GARs are also eligible to receive resettlement services provided through a service provider organization that signed a contribution agreement to deliver these services under IRCC’s Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP).

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<sup>4</sup> Financial support may be provided for up to two years for special cases and three in some exceptional cases, or until clients become self-sufficient, whichever comes first.

<sup>5</sup> Examples of higher needs include high literacy or education needs, health concerns, trauma, physical disabilities, challenging family compositions, lengthy refugee camp histories and limited resilience or coping skills.



*Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSR)* were sponsored by permanent residents or Canadian citizens via one of three streams: Sponsorship Agreement Holder, Group of Five, or Community Sponsors. In each of these PSR streams, sponsors provide financial support or a combination of financial and in-kind support to the PSR for twelve months post arrival in Canada, or until refugees are able to support themselves<sup>6</sup>, whichever comes first.

*Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) refugees* were referred by the UNHCR and identified by Canadian visa officers for participation in the BVOR program based on specific criteria. The refugees' profiles were posted to a designated BVOR website where potential sponsors<sup>7</sup> can select a refugee case to support. BVOR refugees receive up to six months of RAP income support from the Government of Canada and six months of financial support from their sponsor, plus start-up expenses. Private sponsors are responsible for BVOR refugees' social and emotional support for the first year after arrival, as BVOR refugees are not eligible for RAP services.

### **3.2 Characteristics of Syrian Refugees Admitted in Wave 1**

The majority of Syrian refugees admitted as part of this initiative were GARs (57%), followed by PSRs (34%) and BVOR refugees (9%). The socio-demographic characteristics of Syrian refugees were not uniform across all three groups (see Appendix A).

The profile of PSRs differ in comparison to GARs and BVORs. The evaluation found that PSRs were older, with 7% over the age of 60 compared 1% for Syrian GARs and BVORs. In addition, 33% were less than 18 years old, compared to 60% for GARs and 57% for BVOR refugees. PSRs also tended to have smaller family sizes, where 49% were single versus 12% and 21% for GARs and BVOR refugees, respectively. PSRs were found to settle in fewer provinces across the country, with the majority of the PSRs settling in Quebec (43%), Ontario (39%) and Alberta (12%). For GARs, their intended provinces of destination were less concentrated, but they tended to reside in Ontario (42%), Alberta (14%) and British Columbia (12%). Over half of the BVOR refugees settled in Ontario (54%). In terms of official language ability, 18% of PSRs indicated that they had no knowledge of English or French, compared to 84% of the Syrian GARs and 51% of the Syrian BVOR refugees. Additionally, PSRs were more educated, as 32% reported achieving some form of university education, compared to 5% of GARs and 3% of BVORs.

### **3.3 Comparing Syrian Refugees to Other Resettled Refugees**

The demographic characteristics of Syrian refugees resettled as part of Operation Syrian Refugees differ from the profiles of previous refugee cohorts admitted in Canada. The following sub-section compares the demographic characteristics of Syrian refugees, with resettled refugees admitted to Canada between 2010 and 2014.

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<sup>6</sup> Self-sufficient is defined as 1) being enrolled in programs normally outside public school system (e.g., language training and job training); 2) seeking employment; and 3) being employed.

<sup>7</sup> This was changed as a result of the Syrian initiative, in which Community Groups and Groups of Five became eligible to sponsor BVOR refugees.

In comparison previous refugee cohorts, the Syrian GARs resettled as part of Operation Syrian Refugees were less educated, with 81% of Syrian GARs reporting secondary or less as their highest level of education, compared to 57% of GARs admitted from 2010 to 2014. Syrian GARs also had less knowledge of official languages compared to previously resettled GARs, with 84% of Syrian GARs reporting knowing neither English nor French compared to 68% for previous cohorts. Lastly, Syrian GARs were more likely to have larger families than previous refugee cohorts; 57% of Syrian GARs had families that had 4 to 6 members, and 22% had families of 7 or more members. In comparison, 24% of GAR cases admitted between 2010 and 2014 were comprised of 4 to 6 family members and 4% of cases were comprised of 7 or more.

For Syrian PSRs, more reported a higher knowledge of English (80%) than to previous resettled refugees. In addition, the Syrian PSRs are the most educated group, compared not only to previous PSR cohorts, but for all GAR/BVOR refugee cohorts, as well. Syrian PSRs also had smaller families, with 51% of cases being composed of 2 to 6 family members, compared to 40% for previous PSR cohorts.

Prior to the Syrian Refugee initiative, fewer refugees were admitted to Canada under the BVOR program, making the differences among BVOR refugees difficult to measure given the small population size.<sup>8</sup> The total of BVOR refugees admitted in 2013 and 2014 (adults and children) was 216 and the Syrian Refugee initiative represents a 453% increase over previous years (with 968 admissions).

#### **4. Syrian Refugees Post-Arrival Experiences**

The operational challenges of IRCC's initiative to resettle 25,000 Syrian refugees, between November 2015 and March 2016, is only part of the resettlement story; the post-arrival experiences of Syrian refugees and the integration outcomes of this group is also a key area of interest for IRCC.

In order to assess the early settlement outcomes of the 2015-2016 Syrian Refugee initiative, IRCC conducted the Rapid Impact Evaluation in 2016. The evaluation focused on the resettlement process and early settlement outcomes of the Syrian refugee population, as well as the implementation challenges of the initiative. The evaluation was targeted in nature and examined the Syrian refugees by admission category (Government Assisted Refugees (GARs), Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSRs) and Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVORs)), who were admitted to Canada between November 4, 2015 and March 1, 2016. To supplement research on Syrian refugee resettlement, IRCC and Social Science and Humanities Council of Canada (SSHRC) jointly launched a research initiative on Syrian refugee resettlement in Canada, in early 2016. The initiative resulted in 27 research projects that focused on various aspects of refugee resettlement and integration<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> The BVOR program evolved from the former Visa Office Referred program in 2013. As a result, no data exists on the program prior to 2013.

<sup>9</sup> It is to be noted that the IRCC-SSHRC research papers analyze the resettlement outcomes of Syrian refugees beyond those that arrived in Wave 1; in addition to Syrian refugees admitted during the initial resettlement initiative between November 4, 2015 and February 29, 2016, the analysis also

The following section is based on IRCC's Rapid Impact Evaluation and selected key research findings on the resettlement experience of Syrian refugees, focusing on settlement indicators such as language, housing, employment, and healthcare. Subsequent sections include a particular focus on the resettlement and integration of Syrian refugee youth, followed by an assessment of lessons learned from the resettlement initiative.

#### **4.1 Resettlement Information and Settlement Service Use for Immediate Needs**

Meeting the information needs of refugees is an integral component of the resettlement process. IRCC's Rapid Impact Evaluation (2016) found that a large share of Syrian refugees (95.9% of GARs and 76.0% of PSRs) received orientation information about life in Canada as part of the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP). However, due to the expedited nature of the resettlement initiative, as well as the large number of refugees arriving in a compressed time period, RAP orientation was not always provided in a consistent manner. Research by Esses & Hamilton (2017) found that fast-tracked Syrian refugees had received very little pre-arrival information, which often led to unrealistic expectations about the resettlement process. The study also noted several challenges in providing resettlement information, such as limited language proficiency among refugees, constraints in being able to accommodate large families, as well as difficulty in getting information to women, in particular.

In terms of accessing settlement services for immediate needs, IRCC's Rapid Impact Evaluation found that 88.8% of GARs had received RAP services, including reception at port of entry, temporary accommodations and initial orientation, among other services. Moreover, the evaluation also found that 64% of GARs and 75% of PSRs indicated that their overall immediate and essential needs were mostly or completely met soon after their arrival in Canada. Although the use of settlement services among Syrian refugees was high, Service Provider Organizations (SPOs) have identified the need for support services to further facilitate access to settlement services. With many Syrian families arriving with young children, childcare was consistently cited as a challenge for Syrian refugees who sought to access settlement services. Transportation costs were also noted to be an issue for Syrian refugees wishing to access settlement services; as children are not eligible for transportation allowances under RAP funding, transportation costs placed a significant financial burden on Syrian refugees with large families.

#### **4.2 Resettlement Experience: Key Findings**

Initial research findings on the post-arrival experience of Syrian refugees have identified a number of barriers to integration, such as limited language proficiency among Syrian refugees, difficulties securing permanent housing, finding employment, and accessing healthcare services.

##### ***Language***

Language barriers are a major challenge for refugees in the initial stages of arrival and

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includes Syrian refugees who arrived in Wave 2, which comprises all Syrian refugees admitted by the end of 2016, as well as Syrian refugees in Wave 3, which includes all Syrian PSR applications submitted by March 31, 2016.

can greatly hinder the integration progress. As lack of proficiency in English or French can limit social integration and reduce employment opportunities, language needs have been identified as a key issue among Syrian refugees.

IRCC's Rapid Impact evaluation found that 83% of Syrian adult GARs reported not knowing either English or French, compared to 19% of adult PSRs. The evaluation also found that the average Canadian Language Benchmark (CLB) for Syrian refugees was 2.6 out of 12. Of those surveyed, a large share of Syrian refugees (95% of GARs and 78% of PSRs) have enrolled in language classes. As expected, language proficiency of refugees improves with time in Canada; preliminary results of a survey of Syrian refugees resettled in British Columbia found that 87% report their English to be "somewhat or much better" two years after landing (Immigrant Services Society of BC, 2017).

Research has found that despite the desire to improve their language skills, some Syrian refugees with young children have had difficulty attending language classes, due to not being able to find childcare. In these situations, families have opted to send only one parent to attend the classes, typically the father of the household (Fang et al., 2017; Wilkinson et al., 2017). The Rapid Impact Evaluation also noted that 39% of Syrian refugees were unable to attend language classes due to there not being enough space in classes. Given the unprecedented influx of refugees, it is likely that most language classes experienced capacity issues, which has led to longer than usual wait times for refugees seeking to enroll in language training. Due to the pressing need to improve language skills, many Syrian refugees surveyed in the Rapid Impact Evaluation stated that they are trying to learn English on their own while they wait for language classes, using smartphones and apps, such as Google Translate.

### **Housing**

Securing permanent housing is a fundamental and immediate need for refugees. However, the large influx of Syrian refugees compounded by the tight housing markets in major cities across Canada and large family sizes, finding adequate housing for Syrian refugees proved to be an acute challenge for RAP SPOs.

Research by Rose & Charette (2017) emphasized that insufficient advance information about the size of Syrian refugee families placed significant limits on the ability of organizations to plan in advance. Due to unexpectedly large family sizes, many housing offers that had been received were deemed unsuitable because they were too small. As a result, some Syrian refugees experienced long wait times in hotels until adequate housing could be procured. The lack of pre-arrival information related to housing was also cited as an issue among Syrian refugees, as it contributed to widespread misconceptions and inflated expectations of the quality of housing that would be offered upon arrival.

RCC's Rapid Impact Evaluation found that various initiatives were undertaken by SPOs, provincial governments, and communities to help meet the urgent housing need for Syrian refugees, such as negotiating with landlords to provide rent to Syrian refugees at a reduced price for the first 12 months. Despite these initiatives, Syrian refugees living in expensive housing markets such as Toronto and Vancouver struggled to find affordable housing using

RAP income support alone; many large families relied on the Canada Child Benefit<sup>10</sup> to supplement rent. In some cases, Syrian refugees also accessed the Welcome Fund for Syrian Refugees<sup>11</sup> for additional income support. IRCC's Rapid Impact Evaluation and Rose & Charette's research both highlight the importance of providing advance information on the profile of refugees, especially their family sizes, in order to facilitate an efficient and timely resettlement. The Syrian resettlement operation also emphasized the need to revisit income support for refugees, due to the challenges that organizations faced in resettling refugee newcomers in expensive housing markets.

### **Employment**

Employment opportunities for refugees are limited in the initial years of arrival, as many refugees arrive with low language proficiency in English or French. Even refugees with higher levels of education and work experience have historically struggled to find suitable employment in Canada, as they experienced difficulties with the recognition of their credentials.

IRCC's Rapid Impact Evaluation found that 27% of Syrian GARs were referred to employment related services, compared to 63% of PSRs. The evaluation noted that the main challenge for Syrian refugees seeking employment was language ability; RAP SPOs indicated that providing employment services to refugees with lower levels of English and French was difficult, as most of the material is targeted at immigrants with at least some basic knowledge of official languages. Consequently, this has prevented many Syrian refugees from being referred to employment services until they have reached a satisfactory language level. Research by Kosny & Premji (2017) found that in addition to limited language skills, many Syrian refugees often enter the workforce with a lack of information on health and safety standards in the workplace. The study noted that although training on Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) and the Employment Standards Act (ESA) is provided within the language training program, this information is often only provided to refugees enrolled in higher CLB levels. As many Syrian refugees are eager to enter the workforce, Kosny & Premji's research emphasizes the necessity of integrating health and safety training and information on employment rights into lower-level language training.

Almost half of the resettled Syrian refugees have found work in the Sales and Service industry, followed by the Trades and Transport field, which employs just under one fifth of Syrian refugees. Preliminary results from a survey on Syrian refugees resettled as part of Operation Syrian Refugees found that two years after landing, 20% of respondents report enrolling in additional training and employment related programs, in order to improve employment prospects (Immigrant Services Society of BC, 2017).

A recurring employment barrier cited by Syrian refugees was foreign credential recognition; research by Agrawal & Zeitouny (2017) found that foreign credential recognition

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<sup>10</sup> The Canada Child Benefit is a tax-free monthly payment made to eligible families to help them with the cost of raising children under 18 years of age

<sup>11</sup> The Welcome Fund for Syrian Refugees was established by the Community Foundations of Canada with Manulife Financial to address the immediate needs for transitional housing, job training and skills development as identified by the Canadian Government.

and lack of Canadian work experience was a source of frustration among Syrian refugees, who vocalized that despite obtaining education and work experience in their home country, they were unable to find work that was commensurate with their education and abilities. Research by Fang et al. (2017) noted that Syrian refugees often expressed a strong desire to continue the careers they had pursued in their home country. These careers were largely in the trades and included a range of occupations such as mechanics, construction workers, and technicians.

For Syrian refugees who were not currently looking for work, IRCC's Rapid Impact Evaluation found that the main reasons cited included being enrolled in full-time language classes and not being able to find childcare. An additional difficulty regarding employment for refugees is the RAP income support clawback which allows recipients to earn employment income up to 50% of their total monthly RAP income support before any deductions are made. Once additional income earned surpasses 50% of the monthly RAP allowance, all RAP funds exceeding the amount are deducted on a dollar-for-dollar basis. Research by Agrawal & Zeitouny and IRCC's Rapid Impact Evaluation have highlighted that this clawback can be discouraging for Syrian refugees seeking employment in their first year after landing.

### **Health**

Accessible physical and mental healthcare services are an essential part of the resettlement process and necessary for long-term successful integration. RAP SPOs have identified mental health issues as a potential challenge for the Syrian refugee population, as many have experienced some form of trauma.

As is the case with many resettlement services, research has identified language as a persistent barrier for Syrian refugees who seek to access healthcare services. Furthermore, many Syrian refugees have indicated difficulties navigating the healthcare system (Kirova et al., 2017). Research by McKenzie et al. (2017) found that unmet healthcare needs were high among refugees, particularly GARs, and that economic and social factors were important predictors of an unmet health care need. The study also found that although self-perceived mental health was positive among Syrian refugees in the early months of arrival, post-resettlement stress was identified as a key issue; Syrian refugees often reported financial burdens, unemployment, housing, and language acquisition as factors that aggravated stress. Despite the pervasiveness of these resettlement strains on mental health, there is a reluctance among refugees to seek professional mental health services, with most choosing to defer to family and friends as the first and most important line of support. This finding was also highlighted in research by Fang et al. (2017) who found that Syrian refugees were often hesitant about accessing mental health services, due to cultural stigmas surrounding mental health.

### **4.3 Settlement and Integration Challenges of Syrian Refugee Youth**

With a significant share of Syrian refugees arriving as youth (50.5% less than 18 years of age<sup>12</sup>), the successful integration of Syrian refugee youth is a primary concern. Research on childhood refugees in Canada has established that children who arrive as refugees outperform

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<sup>12</sup> This is share of Syrian refugees under the age of 18 in Wave 1 (November 4 2015 – March 1, 2016), according to IRCC's Rapid Impact Evaluation (2016)

third-generation and higher Canadians in educational attainment, and the two groups have similar labour market outcomes (Hou & Bonikowska, 2016). However, these favourable socio-economic outcomes of childhood refugees are contingent on the successful integration of this group; as such, understanding and mitigating the settlement and integration challenges of Syrian refugee youth is crucial.

Research that has focused on the settlement of Syrian refugee students has found that much of this population is dealing with some level of trauma and grief (Papazian-Zohrabian et al., 2017). A secondary issue that has been highlighted in recent literature is the sense of marginalization and exclusion felt by many Syrian refugee youth in school settings, often due to language barriers (Milkie, Maghbooleh, & Peng, 2017; Stewart & Chaar, 2017; Papazian-Zohrabian et al., 2017). Syrian refugee students often expressed a sense of urgency to want to learn English in order to better integrate with their peers (Stewart & Chaar, 2017). While initial difficulties exist, parents of Syrian refugee children have expressed optimism; research by Milkie et al. (2017) noted that when interviewing Syrian mothers, almost all felt that settling children into schools and neighborhoods in Canada has been more favourable than their experience in other countries, as they felt Syrian students were valued by their teachers and their communities in Canada.

## **5. Settlement Programming: Measuring Performance, and Innovation**

Operation Syrian Refugees was ultimately a successful initiative, resettling 25,000 Syrian refugees between November 4, 2015 and February 29, 2016, as well as an additional over 10,000 Syrians by the end of 2016. However, given the expedited nature of this initiative, it is imperative to ensure that Syrian refugees are accessing and benefiting from the various settlement services available to all immigrants and refugees.

Upon arrival in Canada, Syrian refugees have had access to the following two newcomer resettlement and settlement/integration programs:

*Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP)* funds the provision of immediate and essential services (i.e., reception at port of entry, temporary accommodation, assistance in finding permanent accommodation, basic orientation and links to settlement programming and federal and provincial programs) to GARs and other eligible clients through service provider organizations. Similar to BVOR refugees, GARs also receive monthly income support (based on provincial social assistance rates) which is a financial aid intended to provide monthly income support entitlements for shelter, food and incidentals. In the case of GARs, this income support is provided for up to one year or until they become self-sufficient, whichever comes first.

The *Settlement Program* aims to support newcomers' successful settlement and integration so that they may participate and contribute in various aspects of Canadian life. Settlement refers to a short period of mutual adaptation between newcomers and the host society during which the government provides support and services to newcomers, while integration is a two-way process for immigrants to adapt to life in Canada and for Canada to welcome and adapt to new peoples and cultures. Through the Settlement Program, IRCC funds service provider organizations (SPO) to deliver language learning services to newcomers, community

and employment services, path-finding and referral services in support of foreign credential recognition, settlement information and support services that facilitate access to settlement programming.

### **5.1 Monitoring Outcomes of Syrian Refugees**

Given the uniqueness of Operation Syrian Refugees, monitoring the outcomes of refugees resettled as part of the initiative is a key priority for IRCC. By examining the outcomes of this group over time, IRCC is able to assess whether Syrian refugees are successfully integrating into Canadian society.

As mentioned above, in order to assess the early settlement outcomes of the 2015-2016 Syrian Refugee initiative, IRCC conducted the Rapid Impact Evaluation in 2016, which focused on the resettlement process and early settlement outcomes of the Syrian refugee population, as well as the implementation challenges of the initiative. Additionally, IRCC commissioned a joint research initiative with the Social Science and Humanities Council of Canada (SSHRC) in 2016, which has begun to generate important findings about the challenges faced by Syrians, some of which are reviewed in this report.

From the outset, IRCC has developed an Outcomes Measurement Strategy to establish a comprehensive and multifaceted evidence base, support continuous program improvements, and improve newcomer settlement outcomes. The Department is committed to the continuous improvement of the available performance measurement data and analysis of newcomers' settlement outcomes. IRCC achieves this through a number of measures, such as strategically linking IRCC's repurposed person-based administrative data bases with Statistics Canada's tax data and surveys, which enables advanced and granular socio-economic outcomes analysis of settlement program clients. Additionally, planned improvements to existing IRCC data systems, as well as the development of data analysis tools, will significantly enhance the Department's analytical capacity in support of ongoing evidence based planning, policy development and operational decision-making. IRCC is also reporting publically on Syrian settlement and integration outcomes, highlighting emerging issues and gaps that have implications on policies and future actions.

As the first point-of-entry for newcomers, IRCC is chiefly interested in the use of settlement services among Syrian refugees. Currently, settlement service use is tracked in IRCC's Immigration Contribution Agreement Reporting Environment (iCARE)<sup>13</sup>. This system serves to provide IRCC with information on how Syrian refugees are accessing settlement services such as language training, orientation services, and employment-related services. In the long-term, IRCC seeks to use the data collected in iCARE to gauge the effectiveness of various settlement services, as well as identify best practices. According to iCARE data, 88% of adult Syrian refugees have received a language assessment, and 73% have enrolled in language training, as of December 2017. Additionally, just over a quarter (25%) of adult Syrian refugees have received employment-related services.

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<sup>13</sup> The Immigration Contribution Agreement Reporting Environment (iCARE) is a web-based performance measurement data system designed for the collection of client and service information on the Settlement and Resettlement Programs delivered by funding recipient organizations (recipient) to eligible newcomers.



The outcomes of Syrian refugees will also be tracked using tools that enable IRCC to make comparisons to other immigrant and refugee populations in Canada. To measure immediate and intermediate outcomes such as the use of official languages and economic and social participation, starting 2018, IRCC will administer an annual Settlement Outcomes Survey. Furthermore, the 2016 Census, linked with immigration admission categories also serves as a rich data source to measure the ethno-cultural and socio-economic outcomes of Syrian refugees. Moreover, the Longitudinal Immigration Database (IMDB)<sup>14</sup> will allow IRCC to track the economic outcomes of Syrian refugees over time, based on tax records.

## **5.2 Settlement Policy Direction**

The successful settlement and integration of newcomers benefits Canada by building a more inclusive and prosperous nation. Canada's model for integration is premised on social inclusion and mutual adaptation. IRCC intends to deliver on this commitment by building on existing foundation, sharpening focus on demonstrated outcomes through targeted, client-centric programming in collaboration with the civil society, a co-planning approach with provinces and territories, and continuous innovation.

### **National Settlement Co-Planning**

IRCC recognizes that achieving higher-quality settlement services and improving outcomes for newcomers is contingent on better coordination with Provincial and Territorial governments (PTs) who provide complementary settlement and integration services that are critical for the long term integration of newcomers. Moving forward, IRCC intends to develop a national protocol on co-planning and comprehensive information sharing, with principles and processes for priority setting. IRCC also plans to finalize bilateral arrangements and settlement content in bilateral with all PTs. Currently, IRCC has completed and signed agreements with four provinces and has started negotiations with another three. The arrangements are key to formalizing relationships and ensuring efficiency and effectiveness of settlement programming at the bilateral level.

### **Strengthen Settlement Programming**

Ensuring that the Settlement Program is offering innovative and outcomes-based services that meet newcomers' needs is a key priority for IRCC. The Department intends to undertake targeted improvements to language training through system level changes, such as addressing existing gaps and data entry inconsistencies; financial investments that will increase the number of new language training seats, invest in additional online training seats, improve referrals processes, and increase informal language services; and policy measures that focus on meeting the demand for language training and reducing waitlist times. IRCC also seeks to increase opportunities for immigrants by combining language training and employment; The Department will solicit proposals for the expansion of pre-and post-

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<sup>14</sup> The Longitudinal Immigration Database (IMDB) traces the economic outcomes of immigrants to Canada. The IMDB combines landing information from Citizenship and Immigration Canada's administrative files with taxation records from Canada Revenue Agency. The target population consists of all immigrants who have landed since 1980 and who are tax filers.

employment job-specific language training, including language in the workplace over the 3-5 years through engagement with provinces, service providers, sector councils and employers.

IRCC has also committed to strengthening settlement programming for vulnerable newcomers. The 2018 budget pledged \$31.8M over three years to launch a pilot project to support newcomer women, who are also members of visible minority groups, in an effort to remove potential barriers to employment.

## **6. Conclusion**

The Syrians who have arrived to Canada as part of the Operations Syrian Refugees, like millions of other immigrants who have come before them, continue to work hard in investing their efforts and talents in their communities, local labour markets, schools, libraries, etc. As for IRCC, together with our governmental and non-governmental partners, we continue to facilitate the Syrians' multi-generational settlement and integration process through effective and innovative programming, while we also closely monitor their integration; paying close attention to indicators of their socio-economic inclusion; and identifying and addressing barriers to their success.

## APPENDIX A: Socio-Demographic Profile of the Syrian Population (Wave 1)

	GAR		PSR		BVOR		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
<b>Population</b>	14,962	57.2%	8,918	34.1%	2,260	8.6%	<b>26,140**</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
<b>Adults and Minors</b>								
Minors (less than 18)	8,977	60.0%	2,951	33.1%	1,280	56.6%	13,208	<b>50.5%</b>
Adults (18 and over)	5,985	40.0%	5,967	66.9%	980	43.4%	12,932	<b>49.5%</b>
<b>Gender</b>								
Male	7,707	51.5%	4,542	50.9%	1,173	51.9%	13,422	<b>51.3%</b>
Female	7,255	48.5%	4,376	49.1%	1,087	48.1%	12,718	<b>48.7%</b>
<b>Age</b>								
Less than 17	8,977	60.0%	2,951	33.1%	1,280	56.6%	13,208	<b>50.5%</b>
18 to 29	1,950	13.0%	1,668	18.7%	340	15.0%	3,958	<b>15.1%</b>
30 to 39	2,535	16.9%	1,526	17.1%	415	18.4%	4,476	<b>17.1%</b>
40 to 49	1,076	7.2%	1,307	14.7%	160	7.1%	2,643	<b>9.7%</b>
50 to 59	289	1.9%	804	9.0%	45	2.0%	1,138	<b>4.4%</b>
60 or older	135	0.9%	662	7.4%	20	0.9%	817	<b>3.1%</b>
<b>Province of Destination</b>								
NL	196	1.3%	15	0.2%	36	1.6%	247	<b>0.9%</b>
PEI	106	0.7%	70	0.8%	14	0.6%	190	<b>0.7%</b>
NS	676	4.5%	73	0.8%	158	7.0%	907	<b>3.5%</b>
NB	1,208	8.1%	0	0.0%	129	5.7%	1,337	<b>5.1%</b>
QC	918	6.1%	3,857	43.2%	20	0.9%	4,795	<b>18.3%</b>
ON	6,316	42.2%	3,453	38.7%	1,218	53.9%	10,987	<b>42.0%</b>
MB	686	4.6%	53	0.6%	133	5.9%	872	<b>3.3%</b>
SK	1,004	6.7%	20	0.2%	49	2.2%	1,073	<b>4.1%</b>
AB	2,073	13.9%	1,056	11.8%	227	10.0%	3,356	<b>12.8%</b>
BC	1,779	11.9%	307	3.4%	260	11.5%	2,346	<b>9.0%</b>
YK	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	11	0.5%	11	<b>0.5%</b>
Not Stated	0	0.0%	14	0.2%	5	0.2%	19	<b>0.1%</b>
<b>Landed Date</b>								
November 4 – 30, 2015	51	0.3%	219	2.5%	11	0.5%	281	<b>1.1%</b>
December 1 – 31, 2015	2,353	15.7%	2,937	32.9%	436	19.3%	436	<b>19.3%</b>
January 1 – 31, 2016	6,337	42.4%	2,165	24.3%	635	28.1%	9,137	<b>35.0%</b>
February 1 – 29, 2016	6,158	41.2%	3,446	38.7%	1,161	51.4%	10,768	<b>41.2%</b>
March 1, 2016	63	0.4%	148	1.7%	17	0.8%	228	<b>0.9%</b>
<b>Family Size*</b>								
Single	358	11.7%	1,925	48.9%	111	20.6%	2,394	<b>31.8%</b>
2-3	321	10.5%	988	25.1%	68	12.6%	1,377	<b>18.3%</b>
4-6	1,705	55.8%	1,009	25.6%	301	55.8%	3,015	<b>40.0%</b>
7-9	633	20.7%	13	0.4%	48	8.9%	694	<b>9.2%</b>
10 and more	40	1.2%	0	0.0%	11	2.1%	51	<b>0.6%</b>
Source: Global Case Management System.								
*Number is presented by <b>case</b> , rather than by client.								
** For the <u>purposes of analysis for the evaluation</u> , the number 26,140 was used, as it was reflecting the number of admitted Syrian Refugees at the time of data extraction. However, as operational data and admissions data can differ, the official number of Syrian refugees considered part of this initiative is 26,172.								

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