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Assessment of the resettlement of Syrian refugees in Gatineau

The role of the local context and resources

Syrian refugee family surrounded by their sponsorship group in Gatineau

What you need to know

In response to the massive influx of forced displacement caused by the Syrian conflict raging since 2011, the Canadian government launched Operation Syrian Refugees in late 2015. More than 44,000 Syrian refugees were resettled in various Canadian communities, including nearly 400 of them in Gatineau, Quebec. Among these, nearly two thirds were government-assisted refugees, while the others were privately sponsored by groups of 3 to 5 persons or non-profit organizations.

What is this research about?

Since 2019, this study documents the resettlement of Syrian refugees and the factors that fostered or hindered their resilience and, therefore, their integration, by taking into account the context of Gatineau, a medium-sized city located next to a larger city, Ottawa, where English predominates. The factors considered are the human resources that accompanied refugees (professionals, sponsors, civil society) and the policies and services to which they had access. We examine their role in the resettlement trajectories related to housing, francization, employment, socialization and long-term settlement.

How was the research carried out?

Our methodology involved three stages: 1) a survey of 69 refugee families; 2) 16 semi-structured interviews with service providers; and 3) semi-structured interviews with women and men from 8 Syrian families. The study was guided by an advisory committee composed of representatives from service providing organizations and members of Gatineau's Syrian community. We approached the experiences of the refugees from the perspective of the resilience they must deploy to overcome the obstacles paving the way to integration, recognizing that it will depend on the resources they can count on in their environment.

What have we learned from the research?

Compared to privately sponsored refugees (PSRs), government-assisted refugees (GARs) had larger families to support while having less education and less knowledge of Canada's official languages, especially among women, due to different selection criteria. Furthermore, GARs had much less close and warm contact with the people responsible for their sponsorship and benefited from less support than PSRs, in part due to the limited mandate of the organization designated to accompany them. It also appears that the resettlement services of a medium-sized town may not have the scale of those in large cities, nor the flexibility and creativity of those in small towns to deal with a wave of arrivals. Civil society can, however, be very active in making up for the inadequacies of services available to GARs.
Since GARs were predisposed to encounter greater obstacles while having fewer external resources at their disposal that could support their resilience, their resettlement proved to be more difficult in terms of housing, francization and employment. The trajectory in francization is particularly worrying. Initially, the lack of knowledge of the French language was a significant barrier for all Syrian refugees, which amplified other obstacles. Francization programmes, especially those for individuals with little schooling, have not enabled them to acquire sufficient language skills to enter French-speaking jobs. Many have used their social networks rather than employment counselling services and have ended up in Arabic-speaking settings in jobs unrelated to their work experience. This compromises their language and professional skills and, potentially, their future resilience.

How can you use this research?

Practitioners can use this research to improve their services based on the recommendations in the research report, including by:
- Integrating civil society support into the architecture of support services;
- Establishing daycare centres in institutions offering francization training;
- Integrating more authentic conversations into francization training for people with little schooling and exploring other avenues of learning;
- Ensuring that evaluations adequately inform students of their progress in French;
- Placing more emphasis on francization in the workplace;
- Increasing awareness of employment assistance services.

Who is leading this research?

Anyck Dauphin, PhD economics, Département des sciences sociales, Université du Québec en Outaouais.
Luisa Veronis, PhD geography, Department of Geography, Environment and Geomatics, University of Ottawa.
With the collaboration of the advisory committee.

Learn more

Dauphin, A. and L. Veronis (2020) Expériences de réinstallation des réfugiés syriens à Gatineau au Québec, Revue Européenne des Migrations Internationales, 36 (2 & 3) : 185-209.
Dauphin, A. (2021) Bilan de la réinstallation des réfugiés syriens à Gatineau- Research report, Université du Québec en Outaouais, 57 pages.