

# Key Findings from Phase 1

## Research on Newcomers in the Punjabi Community and COVID-19

### Definition of ‘newcomer’

The government defines newcomers as permanent residents (PR) or landed immigrants for less than five years.

For our study, we also included those who are on a pathway to permanent residency such as international students or post-graduate permit-holders.

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### Methodology

In Phase 1 of the Project, in-depth interviews were held on Zoom with 18 South Asian community workers serving Punjabi and South Asian newcomers in Spring and early Summer of 2021. These 18 responded to flyers and emails inviting settlement workers in Peel Region working with Punjabi newcomers. Outreach was done in consultation with Punjabi Community Health Services (PCHS) in Spring of 2021. A few key community workers in the South Asian community working outside Peel were also contacted for interviews, particularly those working with women.

Phase 2 of the Project in late Summer 2021 included interviews with 15 Punjabi newcomers between 18–40 years of age, most of whom had arrived as international students. The Project also had a parallel study ongoing in India with prospective Punjabi migrants during the pandemic led by Dr. Sugandha Nagpal from O.P Jindal Global University in India. This summary here notes only the main themes that emerged in Phase 1 of the Project in the Greater Toronto Area.



## Geographical areas of work

- Peel** (including Brampton, Mississauga, Springdale)
- Halton** (including Oakville, Burlington, Milton, Caledon)
- Greater Toronto Area**  
(minority of interviews with those serving women)
- International**  
(some workers talked about overseas clients stuck in India/Pakistan)

## What did online settlement service look like during the pandemic?

- Services have expanded beyond these areas, e.g. clients moving out of Peel sometimes did not discontinue contact with settlement worker
- Remote work allowed newcomers to obtain settlement services from diverse locations
- Provincial funding from Newcomer Settlement Program (NSPB) does not specify catchment area or specific immigration categories. Services extended to everyone except visitors/tourists to Canada
- Federal funding from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) is only for individuals with PR status in their first year of citizenship, Live-in Caregiver Program (LICP), and convention refugees; there are no settlement or other federal government funded services for international students, non-status migrants, undocumented migrants or refugee claimants, but informally services are provided for anyone who contacts settlement services such as Punjabi Community Health Services (PCHS)
- Federal government gave emergency funding to members of the community that settlement organizations serve, such as Punjabi newcomers in Peel region funnelled through the Red Cross and the United Way

## Our informants' areas of work

- Intake workers
- Childcare support for newcomers
- Crisis work
- Family counselling
- Work with youth
- Work with seniors
- Assist with housing and setting up
- Employment counselling
- Facilitating employment preparation for internationally educated professionals (IEP)
- Mental health and addictions counselling
- Trauma counselling
- Supporting international students
- Work around violence against women
- Community development



## Personal challenges that community/settlement workers faced

- High stress serving clients with small children attending school online
- Managing remote work (this included the time needed to adjust and negotiate space, time, breaks and holidays at home; the need to purchase furniture to accommodate work from home)
- Switching from office environment to remote work
- Missing social connections from on-site work
- Dealing with internet issues, lack of technical knowledge, lack of printer
- Service Canada not accepting three-way calls, thus hindering client support/advocacy
- Dealing with newcomers who expected you to drop-in at their home
- Not being allowed to use video calls (confidentiality reasons), therefore could not observe body language and it was challenging to develop rapport; couldn't check their emotions
- Some programs went hybrid, e.g. violence against women
- Travel by public transit was unsafe but some community organizations and shelters serving vulnerable clients continued to operate; these organizations' spaces had to be retrofitted for the pandemic
- Anti-Asian racism faced in public spaces
- Longer hours, late evening work, additional time spent serving clients in crisis situations
- Worried about family in South Asia
- Deaths in the family due to COVID-19, family separations
- Lunchtime reduced
- Shoulder and neck pain
- Intensity of workload increased
- Too much or too little communication with fellow settlement workers
- Issues related to dynamics of remote supervision
- 99% working in settlement are Punjabi/South Asian women. Childcare was a challenge for these women during lockdown
- Difficulty finding doctors to attend to illness and managing hospital visits for service users

## Personal opportunities for some settlement workers

- For some, remote work was comfortable and secure
- Commute time reduced
- Newfound connectivity, humanity, empathy, compassion

## Personal strategies

- Drew boundaries at home between paid work and unpaid work
- Managed children as well as seniors at home
- Built rapport with newcomers in alternative ways, e.g. talking in their regional language or regular follow-up
- Taking time out for themselves and being more present with newcomers
- Communicating with clients so they felt supported
- Increased cooking and baking for relaxation
- In hybrid work situations, shared yoga exercises and ate together
- Networking and partnering
- Care mongering on social media

- Went above and beyond the job description to help newcomers, e.g. collecting donations for newcomer families
- Promoted newcomers' skills, recognizing and acknowledging them

## Organizational responses to worker challenges

- Deepened existing partnerships (e.g. local networks, regional networks, inter-agency networks with hospitals or schools)
- Cluster meetings of Executive Directors in the city and developed group strategies
- Debriefed with colleagues (Chat and Chai)
- Made laptops and cell phones available to settlement workers
- Exercised flexibility
- Provided guest speakers and training
- Appreciated clients

## Organizational responses to newcomer challenges

- Sought out donations of tablets and cellphones; handed out masks, sanitizers, food vouchers, grocery gift cards
- Provided laptops to newcomers
- Looked for partnerships with other organizations, including hospitals, United Way, schools, Children's Aid Services (CAS)
- *Apna Health*, a partnership between PCHS and Indus Community Services
- Offered food vouchers, gift cards, grocery cards, emergency rent money offered if finances were depleted
- Community ambassador program—outreach workers distributed masks, hand sanitizers, emergency vouchers for taxis, grocery, rent, etc.
- Food delivered to newcomer's homes; PCHS' Langar on wheels meal delivery service (100 meals/day) reached thousands
- *Laadliyan*, a non-profit organization for/of young South Asian women continued important work with women international students, e.g. providing hygiene products
- Developed trauma-informed approach to work
- Set-up isolation spaces to allow individuals (who don't have space in their homes) to quarantine themselves if infected with COVID-19
- Hired additional staff
- Offered webinars, parenting sessions for clients
- Held regional roundtables on issues (e.g. Peel Table on Violence Against Women)
- Created COVID-19-response roundtables for sharing information, ideas and resources
- Created apps for abused women to reach out to shelters, support services and women's organizations
- Mentored smaller groups, e.g. Facebook groups
- Advocated and educated people in their workplaces



## Newcomers' challenges during pandemic lockdown

- Isolation, depression, anxiety, deteriorating mental health, youth feeling forgotten
- Senior clients were often not tech savvy and all services went online; they needed assistance for online activities
- Seniors isolated and lonely; could not travel
- Younger girls trapped inside homes
- Mothers handling virtual learning and paid work simultaneously
- Landlord abuse of international students: evictions, confiscation of passports, derogatory comments, sexual services demanded, overcrowding in “quarantine hotels”
- Precarious finances, job losses and precarious housing created a vicious cycle
- Pregnancies among young women international students with husbands not in Canada
- International students struggled academically, e.g. due to lack of internet access and loss of employment
- International students in private colleges more vulnerable and mistreated
- Lack of transportation to and from isolation hotels
- Abused women forced to live with perpetrators; coercive control around vaccinations
- Undocumented women without status lived with uncertainty around deportations, no respite or access to jobs or safe spaces
- Expense of three days in quarantine hotels (despite full vaccination)
- Some did not have cell phones, tablets or computers
- Abused women who were criminalized, while criminal justice organizations were not functioning due to closures related to the pandemic
- Gender expectations, i.e. men were to get a job and women to be caregivers
- Escalation of violence against women of all ages
- Increase in opioid deaths
- Temporary and permanent layoffs triggered a vicious cycle of poverty, eviction, etc.
- Lack of transportation, especially in Peel region
- Prepared to take up “survival” jobs, but scared of infection
- Prepared to take “survival” jobs, but discouraged by landlord
- Lack of daycare, schools closed, limited space in the house
- Digital addiction for children
- Reduced or drained savings
- Could not return to home country
- Could not have educational and professional credentials evaluated
- Unable to attend skill training workshops due to lack of technological skills
- Eligibility for government payments yet lacking a Social Insurance Number (SIN) became a barrier, e.g. for refugee claimants, international students, seniors on super visas
- The need to show credit and pay advance rent for rental housing
- Precarious shelter
- Furniture banks closed during lockdown
- Waiting list for device lending
- Lack of vaccine information among international students or misinformation, e.g. that the vaccination is not free

## Key reflections and memorable quotes from informants

- Who is a newcomer? What about a woman who has young kids and has left her marriage? Is she not in a position to receive settlement services?
- Socio-economic differences exist ... those less privileged find more here ... more settled families, a huge shift in roles...
- What does a “better life” look like? How can we define it?
- How do we better stand up for ourselves as a community?
- The Punjabi community is fractured
- We need to do introspection on our model minority image. Some of us carry privileges
- The pandemic is like a prism
- Many South Asian employers are exploiting their own community members
- Internalized racism and intra-ethnic racism in the South Asian community
- Notion of “staying home” during the pandemic: Staying home is not safe for some and others may not have a home to stay in
- Services need to be “violence informed” and “trauma informed”
- Allocate funding in consultation with programs on the ground
- Pre-arrival services would help prospective immigrants
- Need to take a family approach in service delivery
- The importance of taking a hybrid approach into the future by combining remote and in-person services
- Smaller organizations do not have as much leverage as larger organizations due to a lack of core funding
- As a temporary measure, the three-month moratorium for newcomers being covered under the Ontario Health Insurance Plan (OHIP) was removed if you entered Canada after 19 March 2020

## Challenges before the South Asian community

- Rise of nationalism and anti-immigrant feeling; climate of fear has detrimental effect on newcomers
- Demand for immigrants who can pay for their own settlement, which has given rise to polarization of settled and new immigrants
- Emphasis on immigrants moving to smaller cities and towns
- Assumption that technology will solve all problems
- Racism in the labour market in the guise of “soft skills” requirements; the language barrier persists
- Funding flow slowed during the pandemic to support organizations (e.g. delayed by six months in one case and then had to be spent in three months)
- While partnerships within the South Asian community have worked, those with mainstream institutions have been problematic because of funding inequities
- Decision-making of Premier was often not in keeping with Chief Medical Officers’ advice during the pandemic