# Alberta Syrian Refugee Resettlement Experience Study

Alberta Association of Immigrant Serving Agencies (AAISA)

In collaboration with:

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

HABITUS Consulting Collective Inc.

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# Acronyms & Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| AAISA | Alberta Association of Immigrant Serving Agencies |
| BICS | Basic Interpretation Communication Skills |
| BVOR | Blended Visa Office-Referred |
| CALPS | Cognitive Academic Language proficiency |
| ESL | English as a Second Language |
| GAR | Government Assisted Refugee |
| IFHP | Interim Federal Health Program |
| IRCC | Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada |
| IRPA | Immigration and Refugee Protection Act |
| LINC | Language Instruction for Newcomer Canadians |
| PR | Permanent Resident |
| PSR | Privately Sponsored Refugee |
| PTSD | Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder |
| RAP | Resettlement Assistance Program |
| SAH | Sponsorship Agreement Holder |
| SPO | Service Provider Organization |
| SWIS | Settlement Workers in Schools |
| UNHCR | United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees |

# I. AAISA

The Alberta Association of Immigrant Serving Agencies (AAISA) is a regionally and nationally recognized leader in the settlement and integration sector. As an umbrella organization, AAISA's mandate is to build sectorial capacity by providing member agencies that serve newcomers access to relevant and meaningful professional development opportunities, to act as a liaison with stakeholders, and provide a centre for knowledge, expertise, and leadership.

Our member agencies provide services to assist newcomers in becoming fully integrated members of Alberta society. Examples of services include orientation, interpretation, counselling, employment services, educational assistance, and programs for immigrant youth.

# II. Acknowledgements


## AAISA

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## Habitus Consulting Collective

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Calgary Immigrant Women's Association, Calgary
Catholic Social Services, Red Deer
SAAMIS, Medicine Hat
Lethbridge Family Services, Lethbridge
Catholic Social Services, Edmonton

We would like to thank all participants who shared their stories with us.

# III. Executive Summary

The Alberta Syrian Refugee Resettlement Experience Study was a six- month study into the early resettlement experiences of Syrian refugees across Alberta. The study explored three broad areas - employment, language and social connections through a mixed method approach. The goal of the study was to shed light on the unique needs, barriers, and experiences of Syrian refugees, to inform the development of client-centered programming.

The study sample was composed of 100 Syrian refugees from five cities: Calgary, Edmonton, Medicine Hat, Red Deer, and Lethbridge. For the purposes of analysis, Calgary and Edmonton were combined as large centres and Medicine Hat, Red Deer, and Lethbridge were combined together as small centres. Twenty in-depth interviews with refugees from four cities (Calgary, Edmonton, Medicine Hat, Red Deer) were also carried out to deepen our understanding of resettlement experiences. The majority of participants in the survey sample were either working in part-time jobs, students or looking for work. Employment was a key challenge for these refugees. The quantitative sample saw a high number of Government Assisted Refugees (GARs) who were most likely to have primary or secondary level education. Their skills and experience did not match job opportunities or their lack of English language skills posed as a critical barrier.

Social relationships are crucial to settlement and integration. Overall, the study found that refugees were making friends and building ties, however these were still nebulous and largely transactional in nature. Male participants were more likely than women to participate in social, cultural and educational activities and smaller centres saw higher rates of participation. While most participants experienced a certain sense of belonging to Canada they simultaneously felt challenged while considering issues such as loss of identity, managing settlement concerns and combatting racism and social exclusion.

Language was one of the other key challenges for incoming Syrian refugees. With low levels of English comprehension and speaking skills it was difficult to find jobs and build social relationships. For those with higher literacy levels in their own language learning English was easier but they wanted more tailored learning opportunities to bridge learning with work opportunities. For those with lower literacy levels there were steep challenges in learning English.

The study provided further insight around specific factors such as gender and geographical location with regards to settlement. Women in the survey had higher language skills and were more likely to be students or have full-time employment as compared to men. Men were more likely than women to be looking for work and struggled with English language fluency. There were higher rates of satisfaction with employment among women as compared to men. Despite the linguistic challenges men tended to participate in social activities more than women.

In terms of location, small centres and large centres saw some critical differences. There were higher rates of employment and survey participants reported greater satisfaction with employment in larger centres as compared to smaller centres. Large centres also saw a higher proportion of individuals who were able to pay bills and save money. Survey respondents reported higher rates of participation in religious and recreation activities in larger centres as compared to smaller centres. Of the total respondents from small centres, almost twice as many felt a sense of belonging as compared to those who did not feel a sense of belonging in larger centres. In comparison, of the total number of large centre respondents a majority did not feel a sense of belonging.

The study proposes several specific service strategies and approaches to working with Syrian refugees. These include: creating a peer navigator model; developing a trauma informed framework for practice; developing a strengths-based needs assessment process; and embedding social well-being as a core outcome for all settlement services with Syrian refugees.

# IV. Introduction

In September 2016 AAISA began a research project to understand the resettlement experiences of Syrian refugees arriving to Alberta during 2015 and 2016. With funding from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), this project was carried out in collaboration with HABITUS Consulting Collective, and Dr. Julie Drolet, Associate Professor, Faculty of Social Work at the University of Calgary.

This project is in response to the need identified by AAISA for enhanced knowledge about resettlement needs based on the Provincial Needs Assessment.[1]

According to the provincial needs assessment the top five refugee needs in Alberta were the following, ranked in order of importance:

1. Language;
2. Housing;
3. Health;
4. Social Integration; and
5. Employment.

The Provincial Needs Assessment Report also highlighted the overlapping needs shaped by age, gender and diversity. The assessment found that while organizations were capable of meeting most needs of refugees there were areas of improvement such as: collaboration and relationship building within the sector, communication and information sharing in rural areas or small centres, and the capacity of the staff to adapt to the needs of the clients.

One of the key recommendations of the project was to develop client-centred programming that focuses on developing programs that are responsive to the needs of refugees. By developing strategies that are flexible and involve informal and culturally sensitive programming, including first-language services, free child-care and availability of pre-arrival services, the system of services can meet the needs of refugees more fully.

## Project Goals

The two key goals of this project are:

1. Develop a body of knowledge on the unique needs, barriers and reflections of Syrian refugees, in order to better understand their immediate settlement and integration experiences (within the first 6-18 months of arrival); and build upon the recommendations of AAISA's Provincial Needs Assessment: Improving Refugee Resettlement in Alberta.[2]

2. Inform the development of client-centred programs, services and policies that foster successful settlement and integration. This includes: an increased emphasis on client-centred approaches to service delivery; an exploration of outcomes for Syrian

refugees in the areas of labour market integration, language training, and social connection; deepening the understanding of resettlement experiences between Government Assisted Refugees (GARs),[1] Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSRs)[2] and Blended Visa Office- Referred (BVORs).[3]

## Research Significance

This project will significantly contribute to the limited knowledge base about the lived experience of Syrian refugees particularly drawing attention to the strengths and challenges of their integration and settlement process. It will inform the development of strategies to collaboratively resolve issues challenging refugees' settlement and integration. Finally, the study will develop key recommendations to develop a client-centered care model.

[1] Under the Government-Assisted Refugees (GAR) Program, refugees are referred to Canada for resettlement by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) or another referral organization. Individuals cannot apply directly. A refugee must register for refugee status with the UNHCR or state authorities to be considered by a referral organization. A GAR's initial resettlement in Canada is entirely supported by the Government of Canada or the province of Quebec. This support is delivered by non-governmental agencies called service provider organizations funded by IRCC. GARs receive support for up to one year from the date they arrive in Canada, or until they are able to support themselves, whichever happens first.

[2] Under the Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) Program, refugees are referred to Canada for resettlement by a private sponsor. Being a privately sponsored refugee means that a group of people in Canada have volunteered to support the refugee. The sponsorship group will support all settlement needs including housing, clothing, and food for one year after arrival or until they can support themselves, whichever comes first.

[3] The Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) Program matches refugees identified for resettlement by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) with private sponsors in Canada. The UNHCR identifies the refugees. The Government of Canada gives up to six months of income support. Private sponsors give another six months of financial support. They also give up to a year of social and emotional support. The Interim Federal Health Program and provincial health care also cover refugees for the length of the sponsorship (one year).

# V. Approach & Methodology

A mixed method study design was adopted based on the goals and assessment of the project parameters. It incorporated both qualitative and quantitative methods to develop a deeper understanding of resettlement and integration from the perspectives of Syrian refugees in Alberta.

The study focused on exploring the differences between GARs, PSRs and BVORs. The study was also keen to understand the difference in settlement experiences between small centres and larger centres. To support this analysis Edmonton and Calgary were grouped together as large centres and Lethbridge, Medicine Hat and Red Deer were grouped as small centres. For city specific analytics please contact AAISA for more information.

## Research Questions

The key research questions that have guided this work are based on three areas:

1. Access to Settlement Services (including labour market integration, language training, and social connections)

    - What are the main factors that influence a positive resettlement experience for Syrian refugees in Alberta?
    - What are the (resettlement) challenges facing Syrian refugees in Alberta?
    - How do Syrian refugees access the services provided by agencies in their community and build individual capacity?

2. Personal Resettlement Needs (within the scope of settlement services)

    - What are the social, economic, and language needs of Syrian refugees in Alberta?
    - How do Syrian refugees define meaningful employment?
    - How are Syrian refugees developing the official language skills needed to function in Canadian society?
    - What types of programs and services are most needed in Alberta in order to support their language skills, Labour market and social integration?

3. Welcoming Communities

    - How do Syrian refugees feel in their new communities?
    - Are Syrian refugees not only able to meet their basic needs but thrive in their new communities?

- What are the challenges facing Syrian refugees in Alberta?
- Do Syrian refugees feel connected to their community?
- Do they have access to public spaces and linkages to the broader community?
- Do Syrian refugees have the opportunities to access a broad range of opportunities including social, economic and language programming in their community?

## Participants

The **participants** in this research project are recently settled (2015 & 2016) Syrian refugees in Calgary, Edmonton, Red Deer, Lethbridge and Medicine Hat.


Resettlement Assistance Providers helped to recruit participants for the study. Brief details of the sample are provided below. Further details will be included in the results section of the report.

**Survey Sample Characteristics at a glance**:

- The total sample size was 100 with about 56% males and 44% females.
- 74% of the sample was between the ages of 25 to 44.
- A majority of survey participants had been in Canada between 8-11 months.
- 83% were GARs, 10% PSRs, and 5% BVORs (2% Other or don't know).
- 54% of the sample was from a smaller centre and 46% was from a larger centre.

- The sample distribution across centres was as follows: Lethbridge: 13%; Medicine Hat: 15%; Red Deer 26%; Calgary 23%; and Edmonton 23%.

**Interview sample characteristics at a glance:**

- The total sample size was 20 with 40% males and 60% female.
- 55% of the sample was GARs (11); 25% were PSRs (5) and 20% were BVORs (4).
- 40% of the sample was from a smaller centre and 60% of the sample was from a larger centre.
- The sample distribution across centres was as follows: Medicine Hat: 10%; Red Deer 30%; Calgary 35%; Edmonton 25%.

## Methods

1. Review of Literature: The research team carried out a brief review of literature on refugee resettlement and an analysis of the uptake of settlement services by destinations and categories (GARs, PSRs and BVORs). The review of literature served as a basis for developing the survey and conducting interviews.

2. Community Forums and Survey: In collaboration with RAP providers, community forums were held in 5 cities. These forums introduced the study to the participants and provided an opportunity to conduct the survey. The **first language survey** in Arabic was designed to gain a deeper understanding of Syrian refugees' experiences of resettlement and access to settlement services. **The survey was delivered in person** during community forums. The survey was available in both English and Arabic. The total sample size was 100.

3. Interviews: The study conducted a deep dive into experiences of resettlement and welcoming communities through in-depth interviews. Using the services of Arabic speaking research assistants, 20 interviews with Syrian refugees were conducted. **Participants were recruited through existing networks** and via the community forum. They were given a $25 gift card to compensate them for their time and attention to the research.

## Analysis Approach

The research team conducted a mixed method analysis process that included the following steps. First, every qualitative interview was translated from Arabic to English and transcribed to include critical themes and identify important quotes that illustrated key ideas. Second, all the qualitative interviews were read over several times and discussed with the larger team to identify key overarching themes. This process was iterative and followed the broad principles of grounded theory analysis. Language, employment and social connections were the three broad sections under which the themes were separated. Finally, within each theme ideas

were developed into a narrative and written out considering both theoretical frameworks and the context of these stories. Additionally, the qualitative data highlighted any gender differences or differences between GARs, PSRs and BVORs, and took into account the geographic location of settlement (small/large centres).

For the quantitative data the research team first cleaned the data and then used SPSS to run both frequencies and cross tabulations. Given the small sample size of the survey data and the categorical nature of the data the co-relation coefficient was not run. However, this report does include trends observed in the cross-tabulations. The cross tabulations looked at how (dependent variables) language, employment and social connections were impacted by (independent variables) gender, small (Medicine Hat, Lethbridge & Red Deer)/ large centres (Edmonton & Calgary) and education. The report has also been able to compare the data with other comparable data sets – IRCC data source and the Calgary Well-Being Report as required.

The final report includes a joint analysis of mixed method data where qualitative data and quantitative data was compared and contrasted to develop an enriched understanding. In some cases, the data was complementary while in others it provided a contrast. Through a discussion of multiple dimensions of the data, the report is able to provide a critical picture of the experiences of refugee resettlement in Alberta.

## Language Needs

To accommodate the language needs of the participants the research team hired three Arabic speaking research assistants who supported both data collection and analysis.

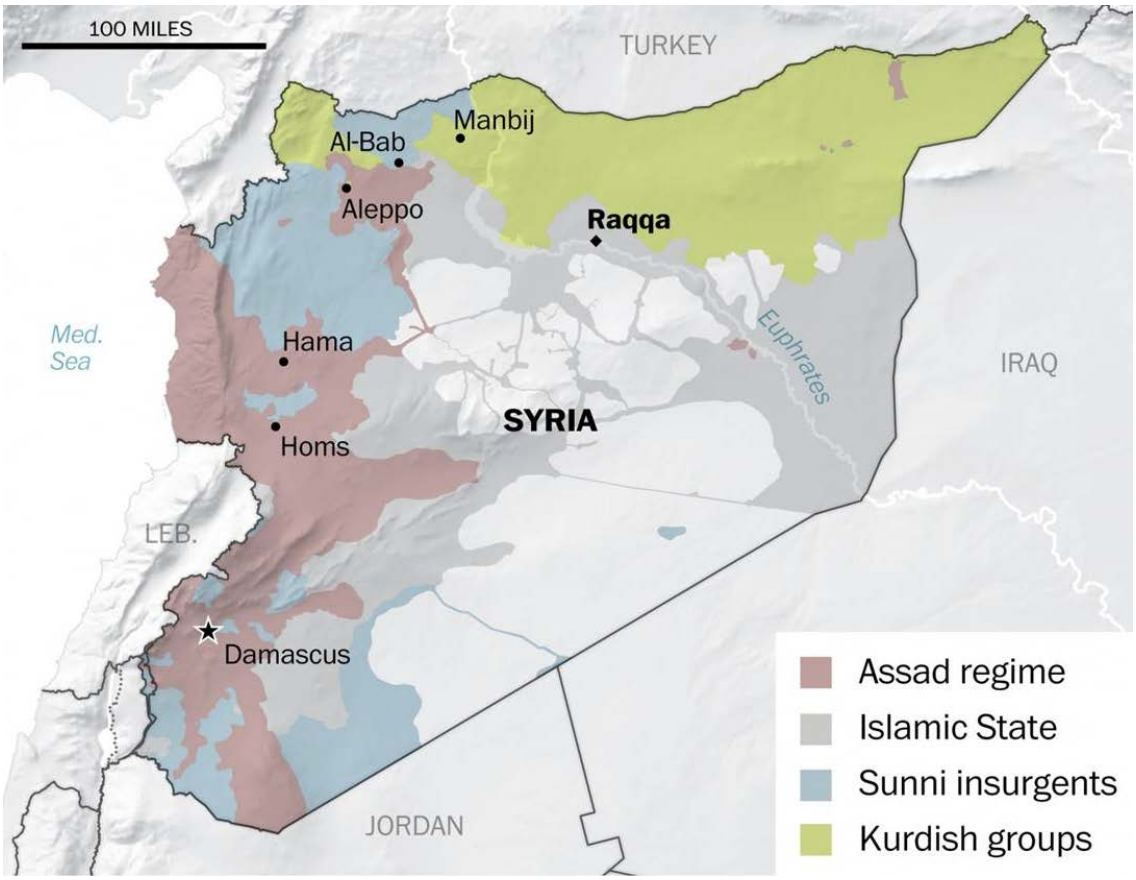
## Risks and Ethics

Researchers were aware of the significant vulnerabilities and risks associated with Syrian refugee populations. A research ethics review was conducted by the University of Calgary to ensure that researchers took all the key precautions to minimize risk. All data collectors underwent University of Calgary's ethics training, training on research methods and how to manage when participants displayed any sign of potential distress. Consent forms or verbal consent was sought before conducting any data collection.

## Limitations

There are several limitations for the current study. Given the budget and timeline limitations, the sample size was small and geographically restricted. Participants were mainly selected through the community forums organized by RAP providers leading to a skew in sampling with more GAR representation. Due to budgetary restrictions interviews could only be conducted in four cities (Lethbridge excluded).

# VI. Syrian Conflict & Immigration in Alberta Background




**Syrian Conflict as of February 27, 2017[3]**

## Context of the Conflict and the Refugee Crisis

This report will provide a brief context to civil war in Syria. While it is difficult to concisely narrate the complicated history and geo-politics of the region, this section will highlight some of the key events and stages which led to thousands of Syrians losing their lives and millions displaced in six years of armed conflict.[4] The unrest began with anti-government protests before it escalated into a full-scale civil war that now involves jihadist militants from so-called Islamic State. The involvement of fighters from the Islamic State has escalated the conflict with brutal consequences for the local people. The war has pitched the country's Sunni majority against the president's Shia sect, and has drawn-in regional and world powers.

Iran and Russia are supporting President Assad while the Sunni-dominated opposition has, meanwhile, attracted varying degrees of support from its international backers - Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Jordan, along with the US, UK and France. As efforts to broker peace continue the humanitarian crisis keeps growing unabated.

## Syrian Refugee Resettlement

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there is an unprecedented 65.3 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, including 21.3 million refugees and over half of these refugees are under the age of eighteen.[5] The war in Syria is part of the global refugee crisis. Since 2011, over 4.8 million Syrian refugees have fled their homes to seek protection in neighbouring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt.[6]

The 1951 Refugee Convention defines a refugee as "a person who has fled his/her country because of a well-founded fear of persecution on one of five grounds: race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion."[7] The resettlement of refugees is part of Canada's humanitarian tradition. The Canadian Refugee and Humanitarian Resettlement Program operates for those seeking protection from outside Canada, and the focus of refugee selection places greater emphasis on the need for protection and less on the ability of a refugee to become established in Canada post-IRPA.[8]

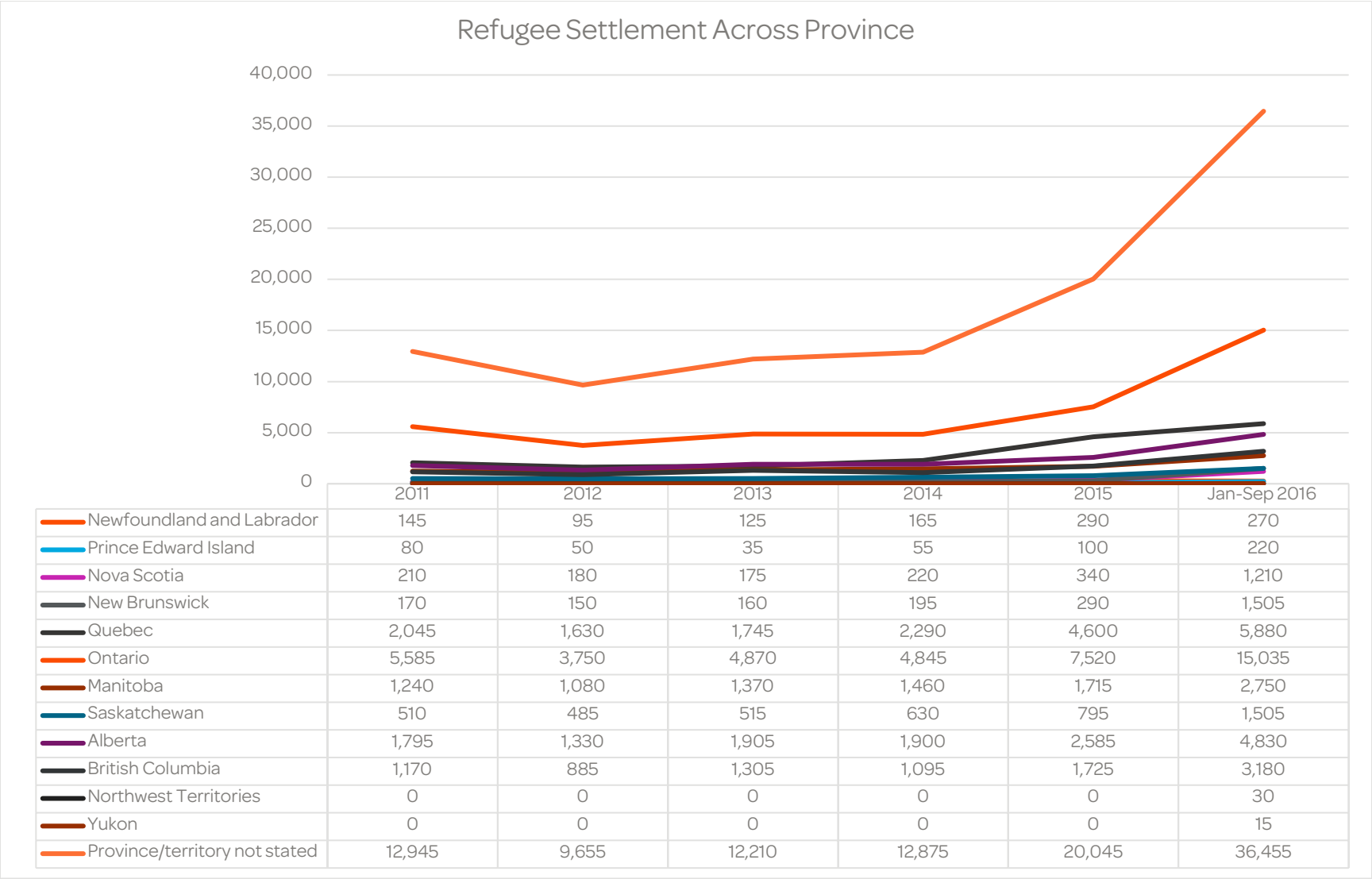
In addition, "resettled refugees are also exempt from inadmissibility to Canada for financial reasons, or for excessive demand on health or social services."[9] Canada is internationally recognized as a leader in refugee resettlement and a destination choice for refugees. The Government of Canada is resettling refugees to Canada, and in collaboration with federal, provincial, municipal and community partners, and private individuals, supports the resettlement and integration of refugees. "Every refugee's journey is unique in terms of the opportunities and challenges they face as they resettle and make Canada their new home."[10]

This project was undertaken to better understand the perspectives and lived experiences of Syrian refugees arriving in Alberta in 2015 and in 2016. It is critically important to ensure that newly-arrived Syrian refugees integrate successfully.

## Syrian Refugee Arrivals

40, 0981 Syrian refugees were resettled under initiative as of January 29, 2017 through the #Welcome Refugees initiative.[11] The number of refugee arrivals in Canada and Alberta is likely to continue to rise. The federal government's 2017 Immigration Levels Plan sets a target of 40,000 refugees and protected persons, which is higher than all recent years with the exception of 2016.[12]

As seen in Figure 1, Alberta is one of the top three destinations for refugees after Ontario and Quebec.




| | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | Jan-Sep 2016 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Newfoundland and Labrador | 145 | 95 | 125 | 165 | 290 | 270 |
| Prince Edward Island | 80 | 50 | 35 | 55 | 100 | 220 |
| Nova Scotia | 210 | 180 | 175 | 220 | 340 | 1,210 |
| New Brunswick | 170 | 150 | 160 | 195 | 290 | 1,505 |
| Quebec | 2,045 | 1,630 | 1,745 | 2,290 | 4,600 | 5,880 |
| Ontario | 5,585 | 3,750 | 4,870 | 4,845 | 7,520 | 15,035 |
| Manitoba | 1,240 | 1,080 | 1,370 | 1,460 | 1,715 | 2,750 |
| Saskatchewan | 510 | 485 | 515 | 630 | 795 | 1,505 |
| Alberta | 1,795 | 1,330 | 1,905 | 1,900 | 2,585 | 4,830 |
| British Columbia | 1,170 | 885 | 1,305 | 1,095 | 1,725 | 3,180 |
| Northwest Territories | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 30 |
| Yukon | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 15 |
| Province/territory not stated | 12,945 | 9,655 | 12,210 | 12,875 | 20,045 | 36,455 |

**FIGURE 1** [13]

A total of 7415 Syrian refugees were admitted from January 2015 until September 2016 in Alberta.[14] The following graphs highlight that the past few years have seen a steep increase in the resettlement of refugees in Alberta. 2015 and 2016, in particular, have seen a sharp rise in the total number of refugees with an increase in all categories especially the BVORs and PSR numbers.

In 2015 a total of 2585 refugees were resettled in Alberta as compared to 4830 that were admitted until September 2015.[15] This is an 86% increase in the number of refugees that were resettled in Alberta. Figure 3 highlights that there has been a steady increase in all categories of refugees; the last year has seen increases in BVOR and PSR categories. Male refugees outnumbered females across all categories.

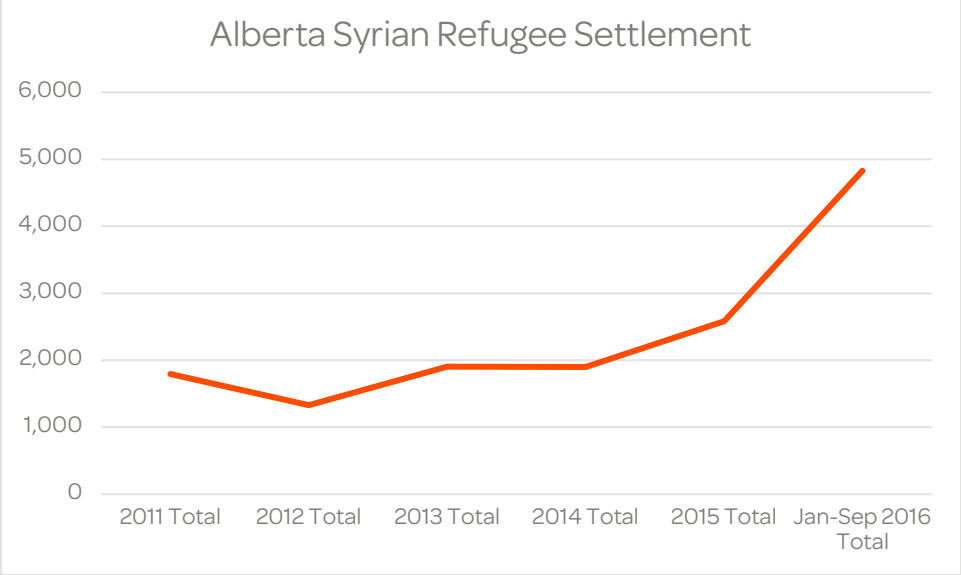



**FIGURE 2** [16]

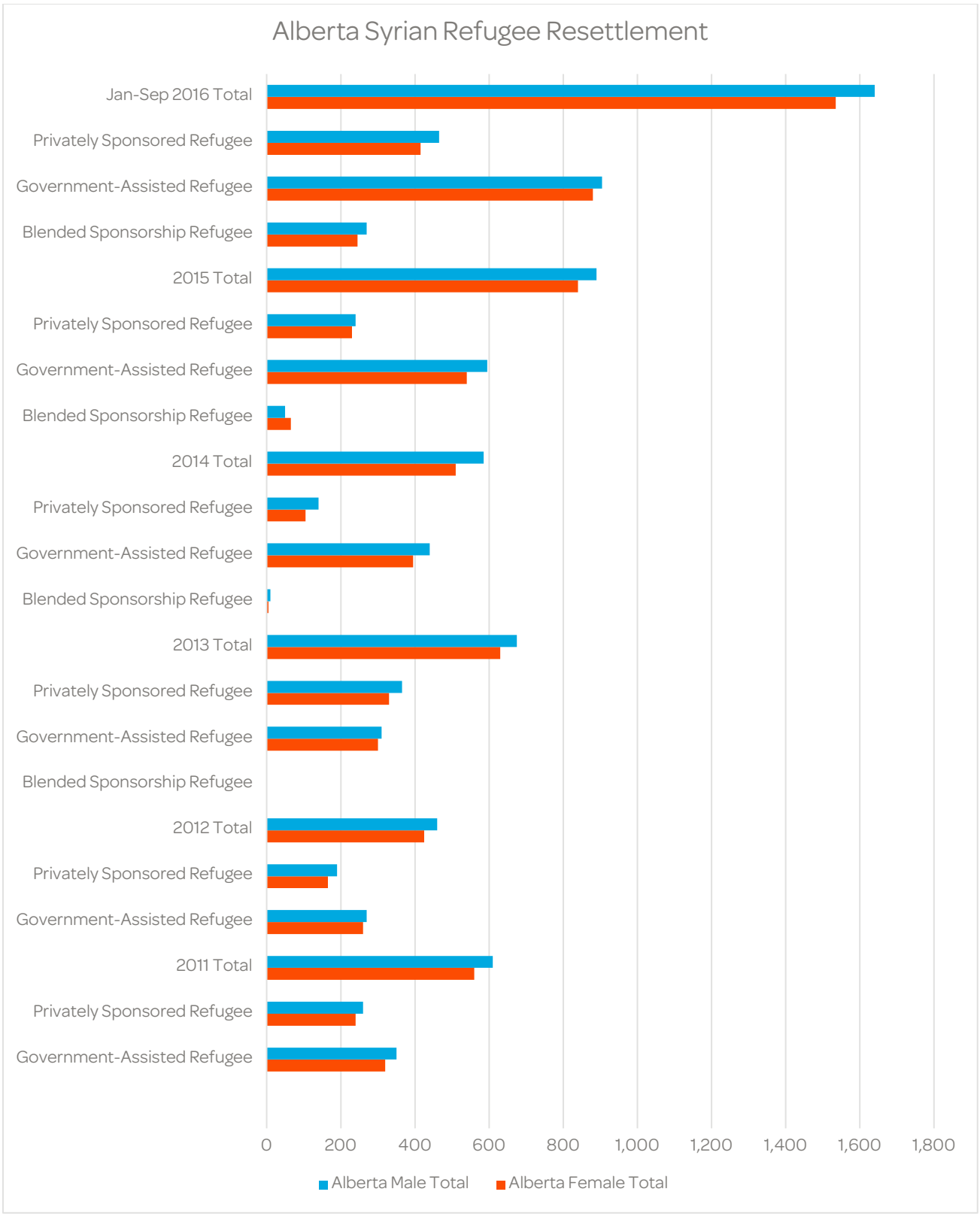

Alberta Syrian Refugee Resettlement
Jan-Sep 2016 Total
Privately Sponsored Refugee
Government-Assisted Refugee
Blended Sponsorship Refugee
2015 Total
Privately Sponsored Refugee
Government-Assisted Refugee
Blended Sponsorship Refugee
2014 Total
Privately Sponsored Refugee
Government-Assisted Refugee
Blended Sponsorship Refugee
2013 Total
Privately Sponsored Refugee
Government-Assisted Refugee
Blended Sponsorship Refugee
2012 Total
Privately Sponsored Refugee
Government-Assisted Refugee
2011 Total
Privately Sponsored Refugee
Government-Assisted Refugee
0
200
400
600
800
1,000
1,200
1,400
1,600
1,800
Alberta Male Total
Alberta Female Total

**FIGURE 3** [17]

# VII. Literature Review

Refugees resettling in Alberta face distinct integration challenges from other immigrants. Integration is understood as a multifaceted phenomenon, and for refugees, that includes mental health and mental health-related issues.[18] Specifically, following the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA) there is an increase in the number and proportion of refugee clients that experience barriers to resettlement such as lack of education, inability to speak English or French, and presenting with complex needs (e.g., medical conditions, exposure to trauma).[19] There are a number of critical areas where stakeholders involved in refugee resettlement can improve to better meet the complex and interconnected needs of refugees. A review of the academic peer-reviewed and grey literature was conducted to summarize what is known about the resettlement and integration of refugees in Canada with a focus on language, employment and social connections.

## Language

Language ability is recognized as a powerful predictor of successful settlement and integration.[20] Language ability is important for social integration as well as facilitating access to employment. Studies demonstrate that low official language ability affects refugees' ability to access services and more generally participate in Canadian society, and over time, particularly affects access to employment, employability, labour force participation, occupational mobility, higher education, and ability to access appropriate social and health services.[21] For example, in a study conducted by Beiser and Hou[22] with Southeast Asian refugees, they found that by the end of the first decade English language fluency was a significant predictor of depression and employment. This was particularly present among refugee women and people who did not become engaged in the labour market during the earliest years of resettlement. Several studies identify a number of factors that influence language learning among refugees such as demographic factors (e.g., age, marital status, family size), pre-migration factors (e.g., previous exposure to the host language and formal education), and post-migration factors (e.g., provision of opportunities and incentives).

Some of the challenges cited regarding language training include long waiting times to access language training programs, lack of job-specific language training, and lack of adaptation of language training for people who are illiterate or have low levels of education.[23] Further, language training barriers are experienced differently by refugee populations. For example, women experience language training barriers due to gendered divisions of labour in the family (e.g., caregiving roles) and older adults may face learning difficulties and educational gaps that can become challenges when trying to learn Canada's official languages.[24]

It is also noted in the literature that it is important for refugees to take language classes upon arrival and to avoid dropping out due to employment or family obligations. For example, in a

study conducted with Acehnese refugees in Vancouver it was reported that no one in their group who had dropped out of English language classes had ever returned.[25]

Finally, previous studies suggest that a "one size fits all" model is unlikely to be the best approach to resettlement programming.[26] Many of the settlement and integration challenges experienced by refugees are interconnected (e.g., language, employment, social connections). These interconnections between language and employment will be further discussed in the next section.

## Employment

Finding employment and participating in the labour force is considered an important indicator of settlement, and is associated with economic and social integration.[27] Related to employment is education, which provides skills and competencies to support subsequent employment.[28] The literature provides strong evidence that refugees experience significant employment challenges in their early years of settlement.

In terms of employment, the evidence from the literature suggests that refugees experience high rates of unemployment during their early years of settlement.[29] The most common barriers are limited English language skills, discrimination on the part of employers, lack of Canadian work experience, and reluctance by licensing bodies to recognize foreign educational and occupational credentials. A number of studies have shown that many foreign-trained professionals who come from developing countries, especially women, experience challenges with the lack of recognition of their international or foreign credentials.[30]

The employment opportunities that refugees do obtain tend to be at low salary and skill levels, regardless of their qualifications and education level. For example, a study of relatively highly educated refugees in Alberta, who had been in professional or managerial positions prior to their arrival in Canada, found that they experience much higher rates of unemployment, part-time employment, and temporary employment than Canadian-born individuals.[31] In another study, it was found that "refugees are concentrated in precarious employment (e.g., security cleaning, warehouse, factory, etc.) characterized by low pay, no job security, poor and often unsafe working conditions, excessive hours, and no benefits."[32] GARs have been shown to demonstrate poorer economic integration than PSRs in the early years.[33] In order to explain this difference, it is suggested that PSRs may have higher access to social capital (e.g., networks) in comparison to GARs.[34]

Several studies discuss the impact of unemployment on human well-being. A qualitative study of underemployed immigrant and refugee men found that experiencing a decline in employment, compared with their occupations in their home countries, led to feelings of alienation and frustration.[35] Similarly, a large-scale study of Southeast Asian refugees in Vancouver found that unemployment was a risk factor for depression, particularly among men.[36] Despite facing challenges with respect to employment in a study conducted with

Acehnese refugees in Vancouver, it was found that remittances are still sent home to support family members.[37]

The next section of the literature review will focus on social connections.

## Social Connections

The importance of social connections and social support networks during initial settlement in Canada is well documented.[38] For refugees in the early years of resettlement, emotional support may be particularly important; in fact, some refugees have been known to engage in secondary migration in order to access meaningful social support.[39] Most refugees are connected with extended family networks, and as resettlement continues, more extensive extra-familial networks involving neighbours, co-workers, employers, other community members, and a wide range of service providers are constructed.[40]

Some of the challenges experienced by specific refugee populations provide insight into systems of institutional and everyday racism, and forms of social exclusion, that affect social connections. African refugees from Ethiopia and Somalia were found to obtain information on initial settlement through personal networks of friends, family and compatriots.[41]

A study of Sudanese and Somali refugees in Toronto and Edmonton found that these refugees experienced difficulties establishing and maintaining social networks.[42] Similarly, in a study of Colombian immigrants and refugees, the researchers found that, compared to the other Colombian classes of immigrants, refugees tended to be fearful and distrustful of others in the Colombian resettled community, resulting in a lack of social cohesion.[43] This leads into racism and discrimination. There is evidence in the literature that refugees report experiences of racism and discrimination in their settlement experiences.[44]

For refugee women, in a study based in Hamilton, social connections as forms of informal and formal support were found to build resilience among refugees.[45] A study conducted in Vancouver indicated that Black African women refugees face isolation as an outcome of both social exclusion and social withdrawal, that this manifests in the practice of staying 'at home,'[46] and that social programming is recommended to develop genuine social relationships.

Social connections and a sense of belonging that came from associations with support groups, new friendships, and community connections were key factors in facilitating acceptance of personal responsibility and recovering from the losses that accompany migration and resettlement.[47] Levels of social support and strength of social networks, both within refugee communities and between resettled refugees and the host community, are among the most critical factors in how both resettled refugees and refugee claimants integrate into Canadian society.[48]

For many refugees, reuniting with family members is an especially long process.[49] Refugees are often concerned about the challenges facing family members left in their home country, their inability to communicate with their kin, and the prolonged process of family reunification.[50] Family separation from living family members such as children, parents or siblings, who remain overseas in high conflict areas, figures as a significant source of suffering and worry. This combined with experiences of isolation becomes traumatizing.[51]

## Housing

Refugees face major challenges in securing acceptable housing.[52] The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) defines acceptable housing as housing that is adequate in condition (no repairs required), suitable in size (enough bedrooms for household make-up) and affordable.[53] Affordable housing represents less than 30 per cent of before-tax household income. Housing costs for renters include rent and payments for electricity, fuel, water and other municipal services.[54] Households are in core housing need if their accommodation does not meet one or more of these three criteria and they pay more than 30 per cent of their before-tax household income on housing.

Overall, affordability was found to be the most important barrier for immigrants and refugees in acquiring adequate and suitable housing, especially in high-cost cities such as Calgary.[55] This was specifically relevant when the cost of housing is greater than refugees' levels of income (e.g., from income assistance, or private sponsorship). For example, income support (based on provincial social assistance rates) is insufficient to meet the basic needs of GARs as the majority of their income (upwards of 56%) is used for housing, placing them in core housing need.[56] Similarly, in a study conducted in Vancouver the researchers found that "80 percent of refugees receiving RAP and 70 percent of income assistance recipients spend over half of their monthly income on housing."[57] Financial challenges experienced by refugees are compounded by the repayment of the transportation and medical loans received when arriving to Canada.[58]

Housing affordability is linked with suitability, as renters are forced to live in over-crowded dwellings when they cannot afford housing that is large enough for their family.[59] Other challenges include finding housing in relatively good condition (e.g., maintenance and healthy condition), suitable for a large family, located in a safe neighbourhood, and accessing reliable information about housing vacancies.[60] Studies on housing have found that many visible minorities experience discrimination in rental housing markets based on source of income, and race, ethnic and cultural background.[61]

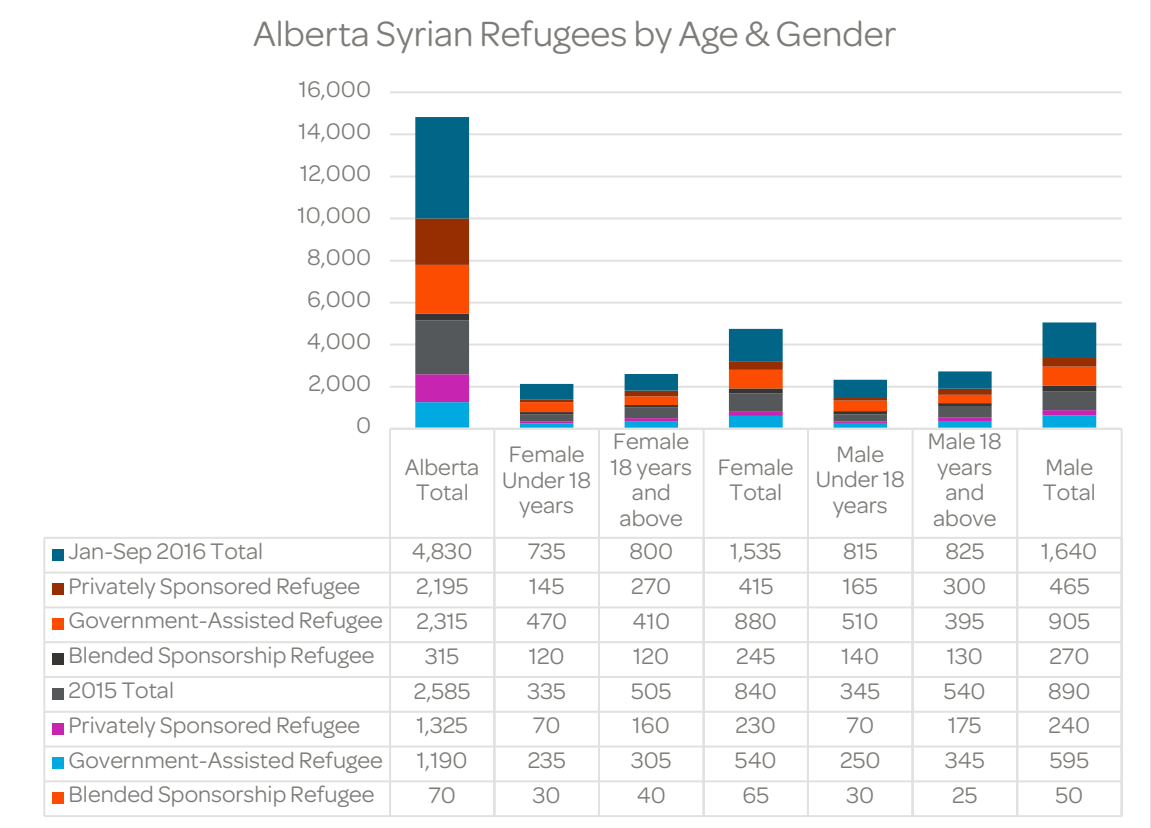
# VIII. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

## Demographic Data of Survey Participants

Sample demographics, based on survey data are represented in %. Comparisons are drawn with IRCC data sets where possible (the data is presented in actual numbers).

### Sex

Total females among the refugees in Alberta admitted from 2015 until September 2016 was 2,375. Of this 1,305 were above the age of 18.[62] Total males admitted in Alberta from 2015 until September 2016 was 2,530. Of this 1,365 were above the age of 18 years.[63] Approximately half of the refugees were below the age of 18 years in this time period. The following graphs highlight the key dimensions of age and gender for refugees resettled in the last two years in Alberta.




| | Alberta Total | Female Under 18 years | Female 18 years and above | Female Total | Male Under 18 years | Male 18 years and above | Male Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Jan-Sep 2016 Total | 4,830 | 735 | 800 | 1,535 | 815 | 825 | 1,640 |
| Privately Sponsored Refugee | 2,195 | 145 | 270 | 415 | 165 | 300 | 465 |
| Government-Assisted Refugee | 2,315 | 470 | 410 | 880 | 510 | 395 | 905 |
| Blended Sponsorship Refugee | 315 | 120 | 120 | 245 | 140 | 130 | 270 |
| 2015 Total | 2,585 | 335 | 505 | 840 | 345 | 540 | 890 |
| Privately Sponsored Refugee | 1,325 | 70 | 160 | 230 | 70 | 175 | 240 |
| Government-Assisted Refugee | 1,190 | 235 | 305 | 540 | 250 | 345 | 595 |
| Blended Sponsorship Refugee | 70 | 30 | 40 | 65 | 30 | 25 | 50 |

**FIGURE 4** [64]

Above 18 year females were 49% of the total refugee population as compared to 51% of males. The study had a similar male to female ratio with 44% female and 56% males.

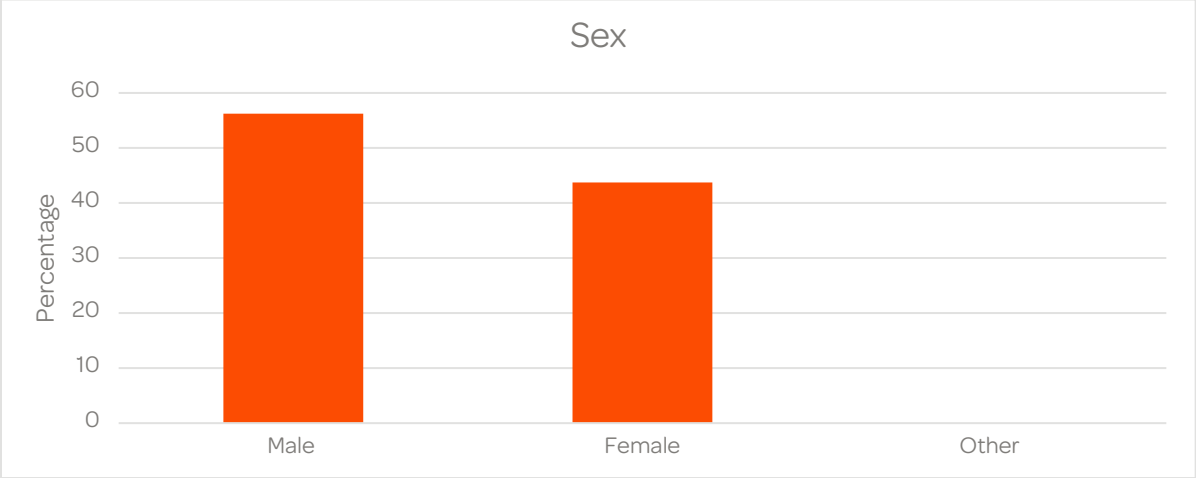



**FIGURE 5; SOURCE: AAISA SYRIAN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT STUDY, 2017**

## Age

In terms of age the survey sample included participants ranging from 18 to 54 years, with a mean age of 36 years. This refugee population is significantly younger and the study sample reflects a similar demographic.

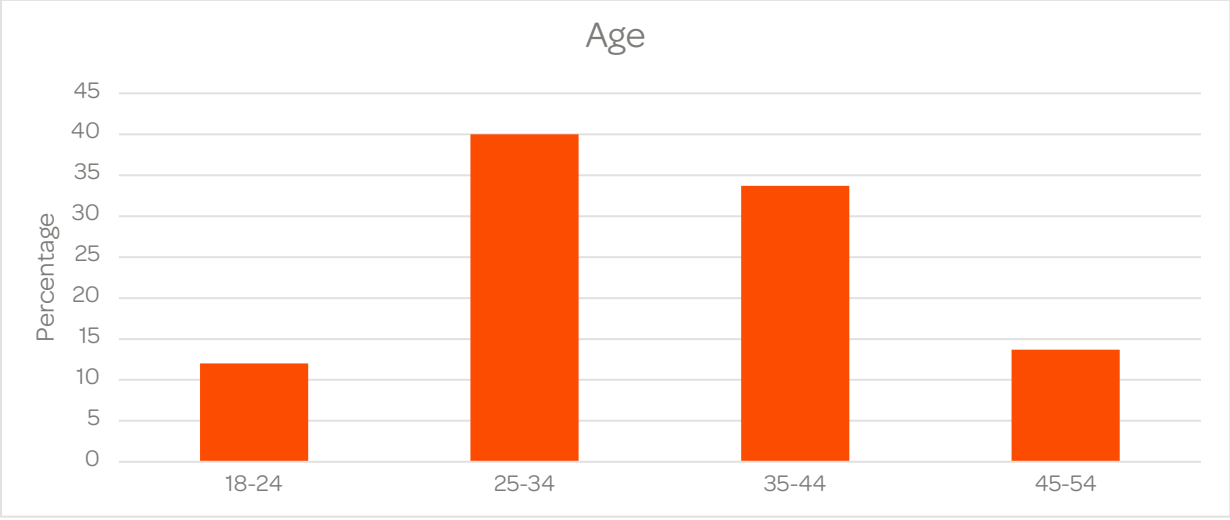



**FIGURE 6; SOURCE: AAISA SYRIAN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT STUDY, 2017**

## Household Composition

95% of those within the study sample were married, with about 4% single and 1% widowed.

A majority of study participants lived in households with about 4-7 people (47%) and 2-4 people (42%). 11% had a household of more than 7 people (Figure 7). Since a majority of the survey sample were GARs, a greater percentage reported a larger family size.

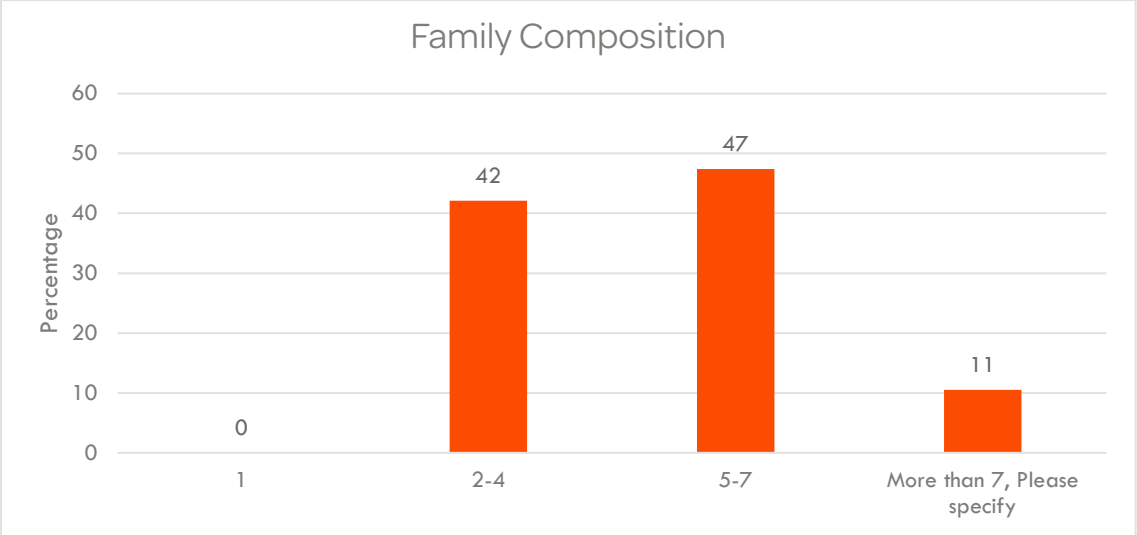



**FIGURE 7; SOURCE: AAISA SYRIAN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT STUDY, 2017**

This reflects the trend observed provincially with GARs, PSRs and BVORs (Figure 8). A majority of PSRs have 1-2 members with 4 member families being quite common. GARs on the other hand are likely to have between 3-8 members in most cases. The graph below shows number of family members (X axis) and number of total families (Y axis) for the three refugee categories.

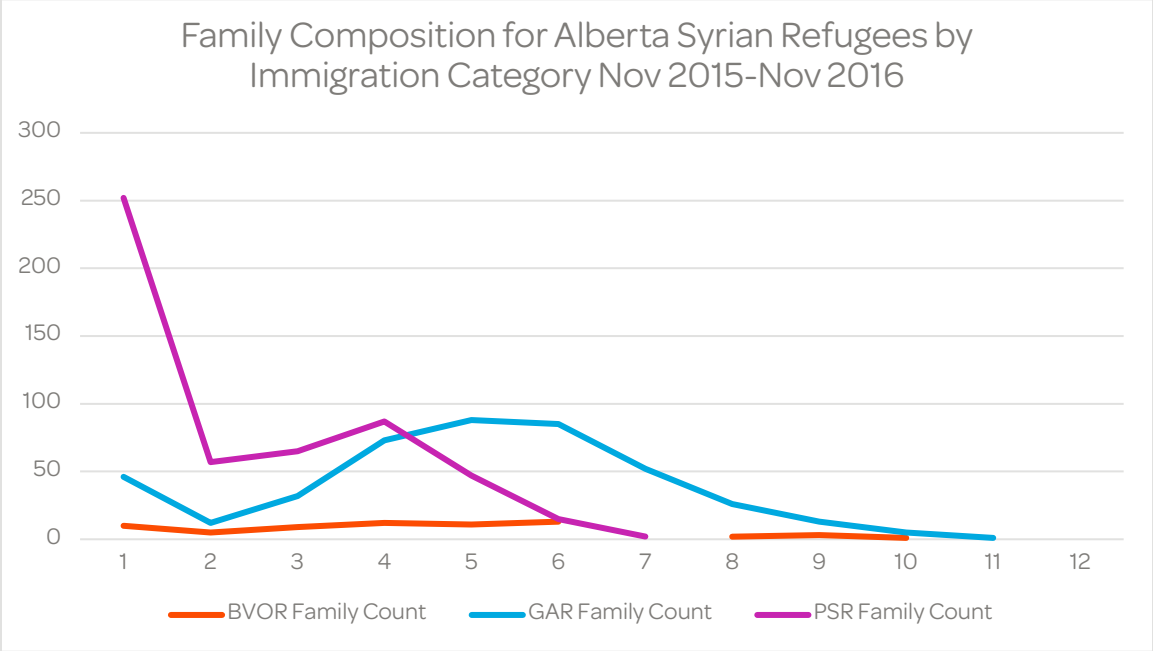



**FIGURE 8**[65]

The study sample shows that the majority (47%) of families had between 2-4 children that lived at home and were below 18 years of age. 28% of the sample had 5-7 children and 20% had one child below the age of 18. Once again, given the larger proportion of GARs in the sample, this trend is reflective of the population characteristics in the study.

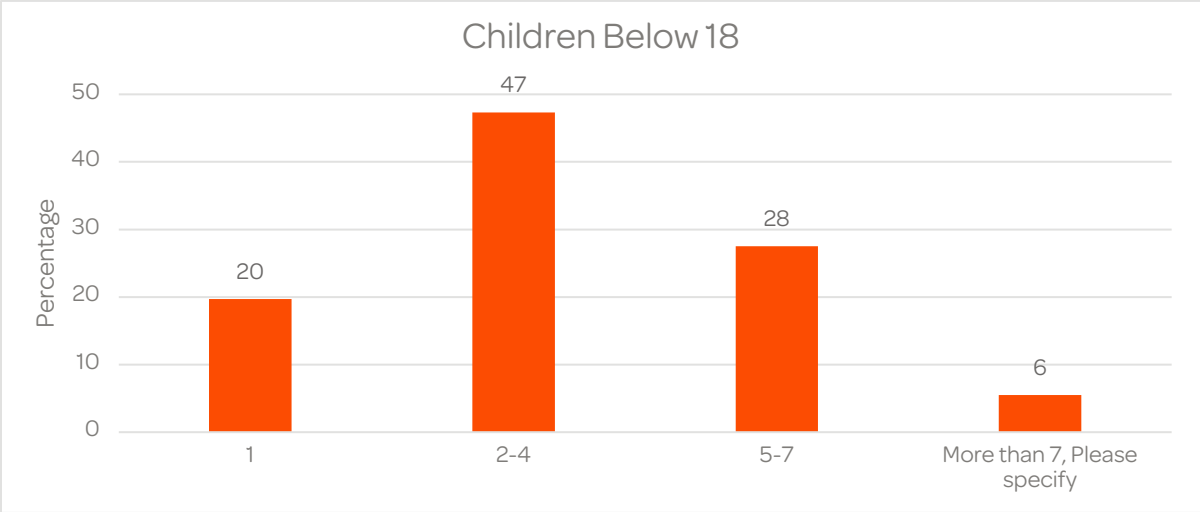



**FIGURE 9; SOURCE: AAISA SYRIAN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT STUDY 2017**

## Religion

95% of the survey sample was Muslim with 5% stating they were Christian.

## Language & Education

97% of the survey sample spoke Arabic with a minority speaking Kurdish and English. In terms of education, 8% had not completed any formal education, 25% had completed primary school, 28% had completed secondary schooling, 20% had completed high school and 19% of the sample had education beyond high school.

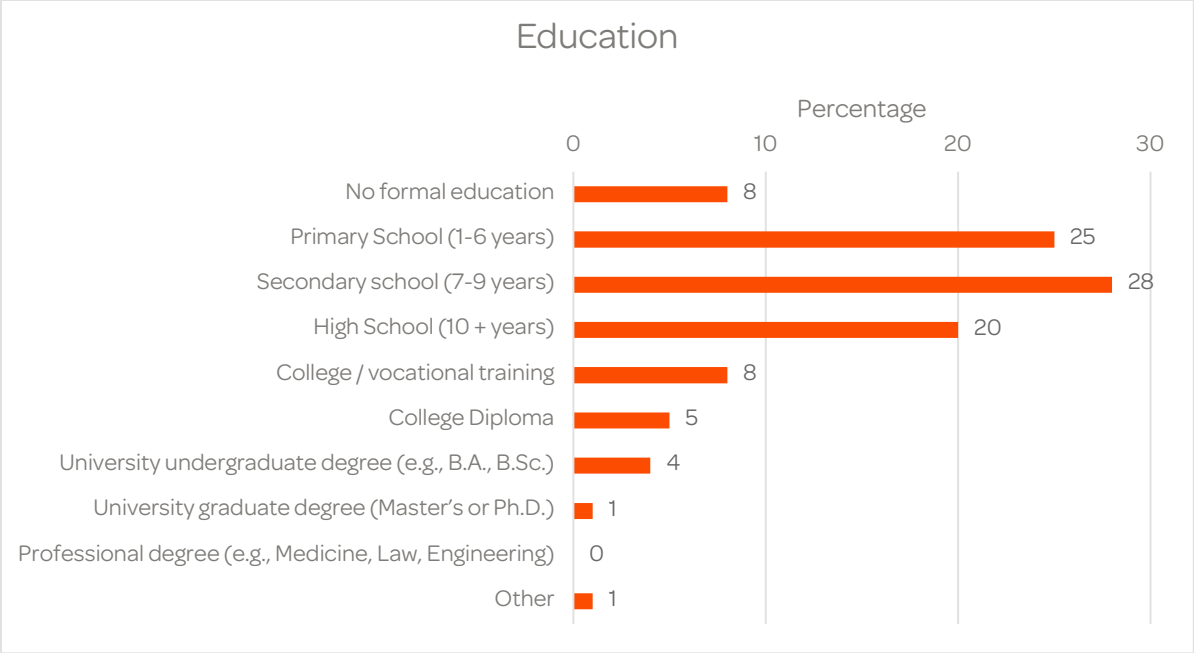



**FIGURE 10; SOURCE: AAISA SYRIAN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT STUDY, 2017**

## Residence

46% of the survey sample resided in larger centres such as Calgary and Edmonton with an equal split between the two cities. 54% of the survey sample was from smaller centres.

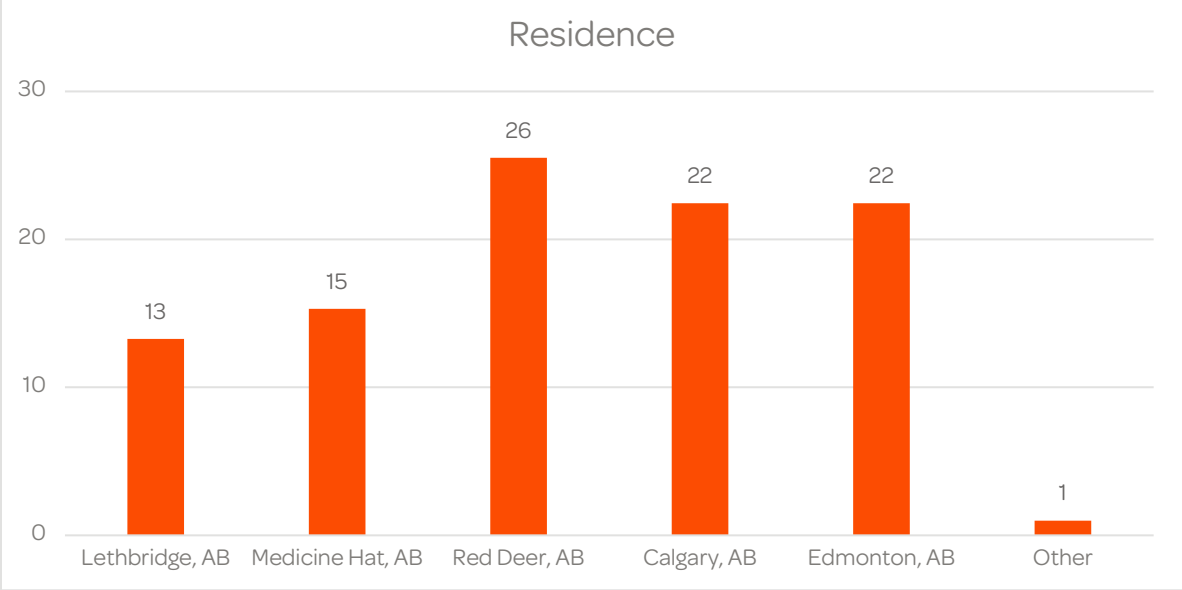
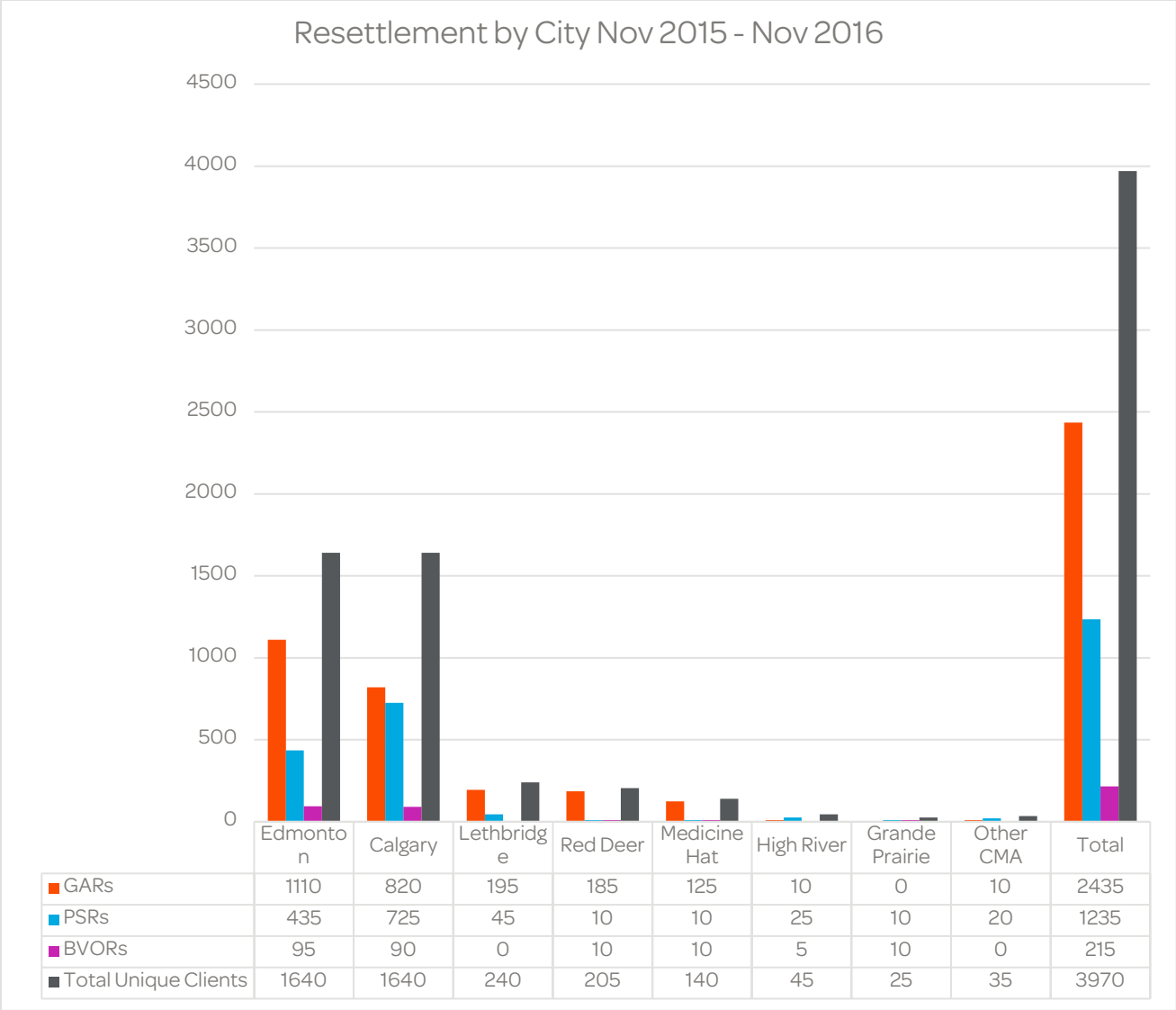



**FIGURE 11; SOURCE: AAISA SYRIAN REFUGEE RESETTTLEMENT STUDY, 2017**




| | Edmonton | Calgary | Lethbridge | Red Deer | Medicine Hat | High River | Grande Prairie | Other CMA | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| GARs | 1110 | 820 | 195 | 185 | 125 | 10 | 0 | 10 | 2435 |
| PSRs | 435 | 725 | 45 | 10 | 10 | 25 | 10 | 20 | 1235 |
| BVORs | 95 | 90 | 0 | 10 | 10 | 5 | 10 | 0 | 215 |
| Total Unique Clients | 1640 | 1640 | 240 | 205 | 140 | 45 | 25 | 35 | 3970 |

**FIGURE 12** [66]

The survey respondents were asked if they had lived in another place before Canada or Alberta (besides Syria) and 95% responded no. Only 5% had lived elsewhere before their current residence.

In terms of duration of residence in Canada, 65% of the survey sample had lived in Canada for 8-11 months, 23% for 12-15 months and 11% for between 4-7 months. Only 1% of the survey sample had lived within Canada for 0-3 months.

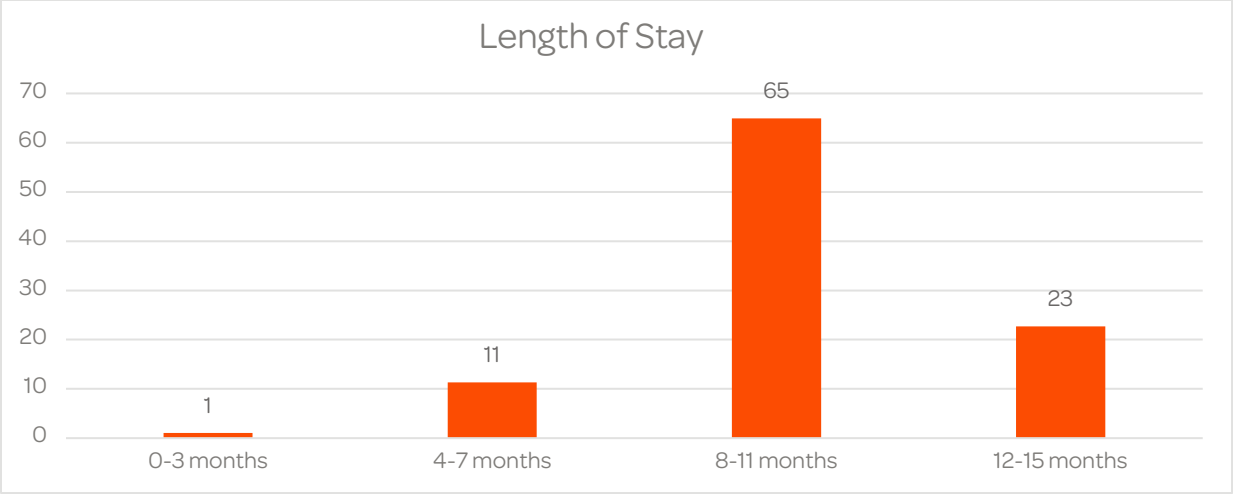



**FIGURE 13; SOURCE: AAISA SYRIAN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT STUDY, 2017**

## Refugee Class

82% of the survey sample were GARs, 10% were PSRs and 5% were BVORs (Figure 14). In 2016, 48% of the refugees resettled in Alberta were GARs; 45% were PSRs and 6% were BVORs (Figure 15). The study survey sample had an overrepresentation of GARs and under-representation of PSRs.

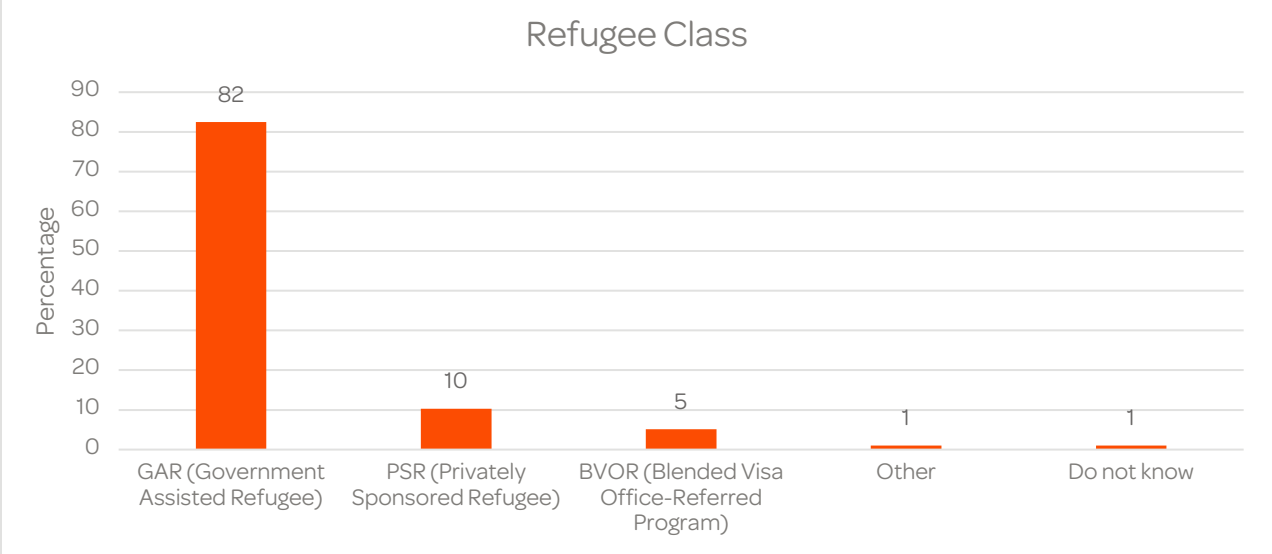
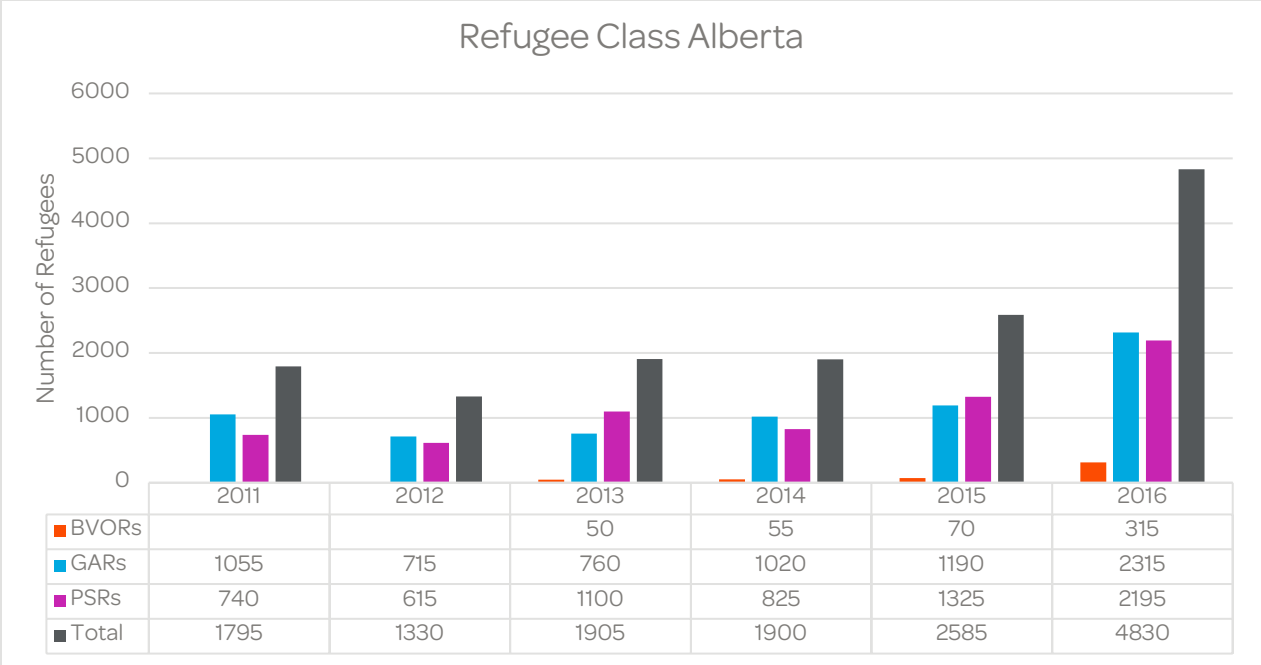



**FIGURE 14; SOURCE: AAISA SYRIAN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT STUDY, 2017**




| | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| BVORs | | | 50 | 55 | 70 | 315 |
| GARs | 1055 | 715 | 760 | 1020 | 1190 | 2315 |
| PSRs | 740 | 615 | 1100 | 825 | 1325 | 2195 |
| Total | 1795 | 1330 | 1905 | 1900 | 2585 | 4830 |

**FIGURE 15** [67]

## Access to Settlement Services

72% of the survey sample had visited an immigrant serving agency, 24% of the sample had never visited and 3% were not sure. However, the term immigrant serving agency may not have been fully understood and therefore these figures need to be viewed with caution. Of those who had visited an immigrant serving agency 43% said they had visited between 1-2 times; 13% had visited between 3-4 times and 42% had visited 5 or more times.

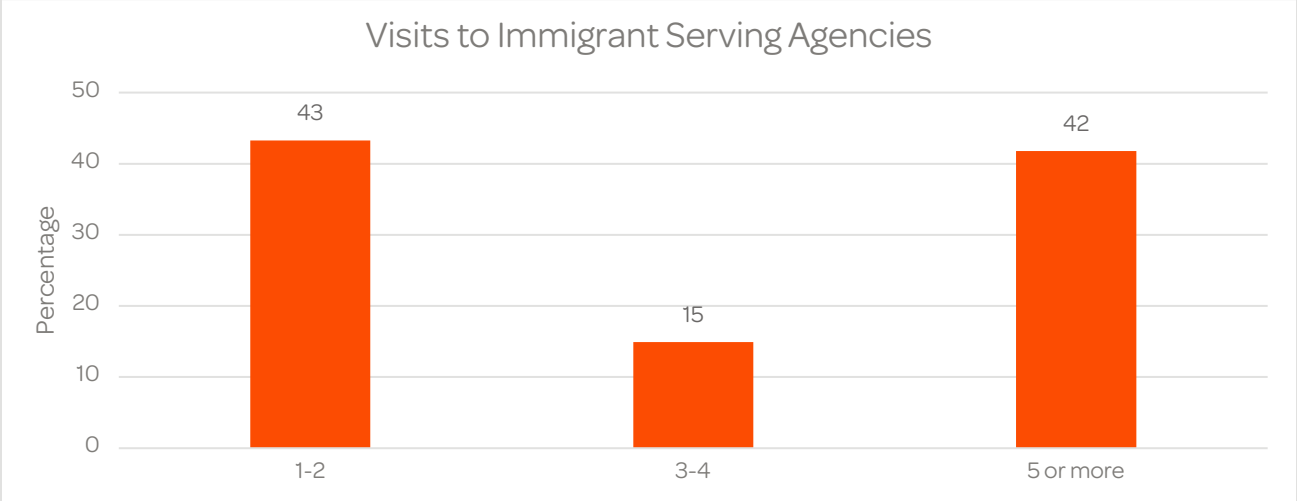



**FIGURE 16; SOURCE: AAISA SYRIAN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT STUDY, 2017**

## Housing

79% of the survey sample were paying market rents and about 15% were paying subsidized rents. 66% of the survey sample reported their current housing met their needs and 34% of the survey sample reported their housing did not meet their needs. Qualitative interviews also highlighted that small housing size and affordability were key issues for Syrian families.

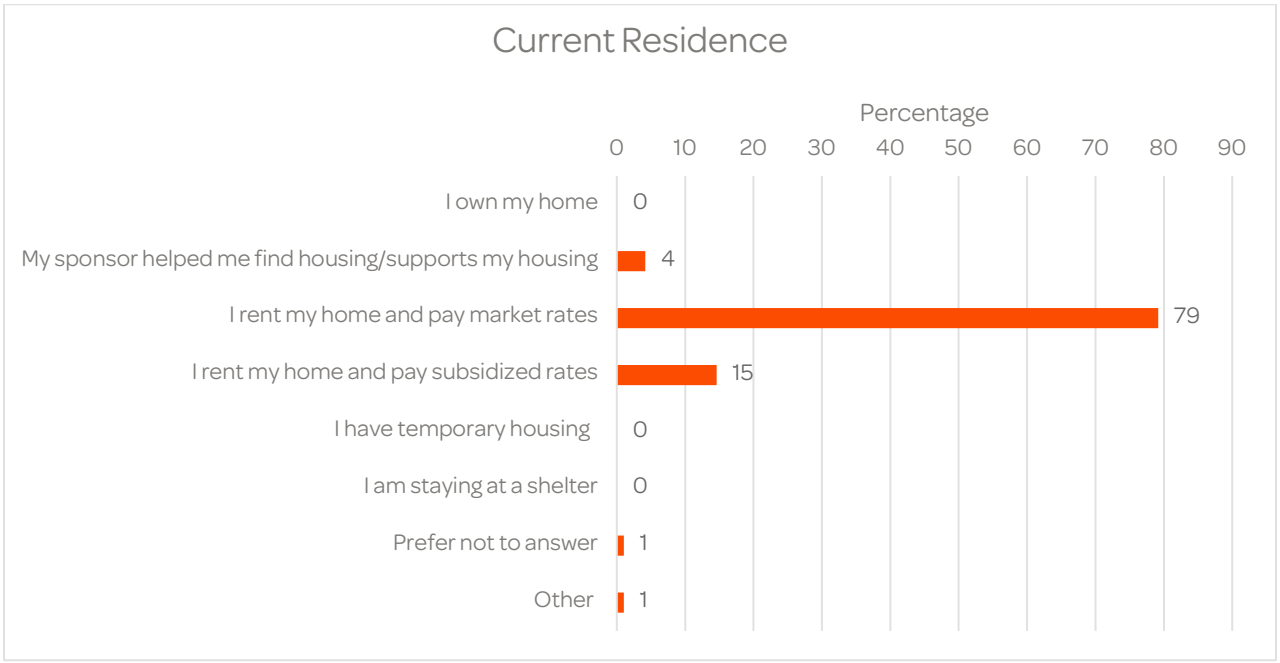



**FIGURE 17; SOURCE: AAISA SYRIAN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT STUDY, 2017**

## Employment

Employment posed as one of the main factors contributing to settlement in Alberta. Unanimously, participants pointed out the importance of employment for financial stability, feelings of independence as well as settlement and integration in Alberta. The challenges participants faced in this sector were related to the lack of recognition of their foreign credentials and work experience from their country of origin. In addition, some jobs refugees used to be employed in sectors prior to migration are perceived to not conform to the Canadian labour market needs. Other challenges in finding employment pertained to language capacities of the refugees which put them on a lower paying scale as compared to what they could earn in Canada, if their English language levels were higher. Social networks were perceived to play an important role in finding employment.

Resettled Syrian refugees reported working long hours to support their families, and were hindered from attending English language classes to enhance their work conditions, and they felt that they were put in a vicious circle. While comparing small cities to large urban centres, as far as employment opportunities are concerned, many participants posited that the employment opportunities in small cities may be somewhat limited as compared to the larger cities. Hence many participants considered moving from small city to a larger urban centre, if they are unable to find employment.

### Current Employment Status

A majority of survey participants were students (47%) or unemployed and looking for work (27%). Only about 8% of the sample was engaged in either full time or part time work. Part of this statistic is reflective of the sampling strategy employed for the survey in this study. Overall, a majority of survey participants were either a student or unemployed looking for work.

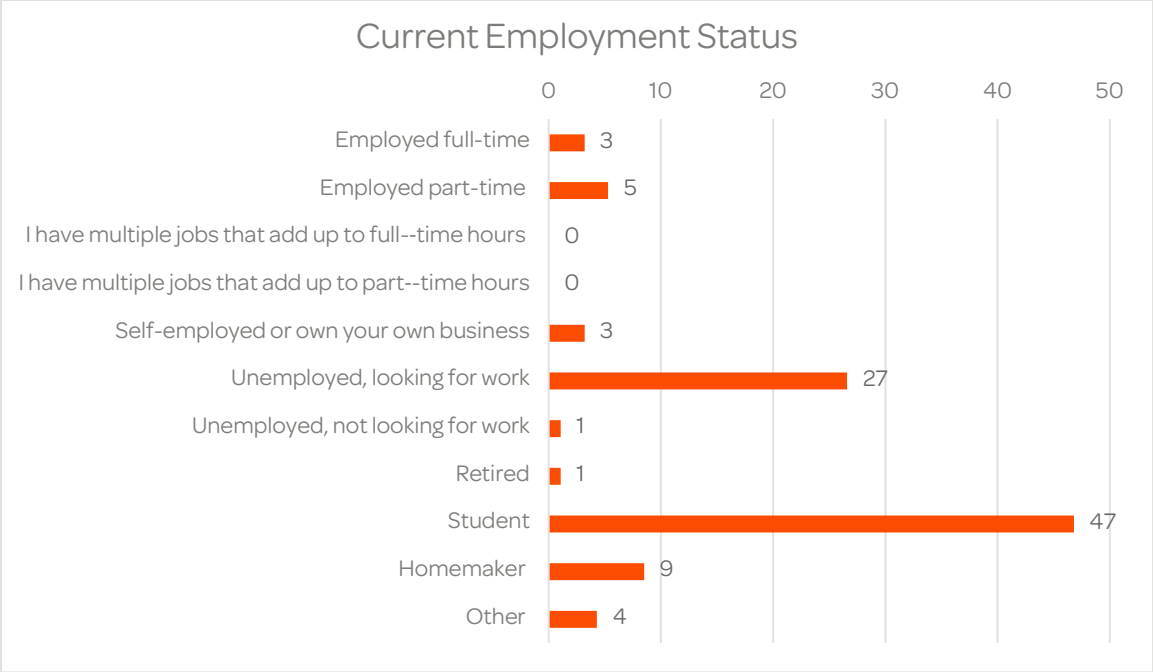



**FIGURE 18; SOURCE: AAISA SYRIAN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT STUDY, 2017**

*Among all females 53% in our survey sample were students; 19.5% were homemakers; 12% were unemployed and looking for work and only 7% were employed full time or part time. Among all the males 39% were students and a similar percentage were unemployed and looking for work. 9% had either part time or full time employment. Employment rates among men were slightly higher than women. Men were more likely to be looking for work as compared to women.*

## Importance of Employment

Most interview participants indicated the importance of employment for financial stability and better settlement in Alberta. For example, an interview respondent shared *"the employment is the bigger issue" (PSR Man 3).* Refugees, like other immigrants, require appropriate employment opportunities to settle in local communities. Yet accessing employment that is appropriate to the experience of the individual is a challenge.

According, to an interview respondent, *"here everything is good, but our only problem is employment" (GAR man 2).* Being able to find employment in the short- to medium-term was recognized as a key settlement need and important for the well-being of the household unit.

As stated by an interview respondent: "*The most important thing I wanted to know [pre-migration] was that: would my husband be able to find employment after one year? … Because if he [husband] didn't work the house will not flourish" (GAR woman 3).*

Securing employment is important for the economic and social integration of the individual worker as well as the resettled family and/or household unit. However, refugees experience a number of employment challenges, which will be discussed in the next section.

For many participants' employment brought with it social status, a sense of achievement and fulfilment. Without adequate means to provide for themselves and their families the lack of employment impacted more than their economic stability — it impacted their self-esteem, mental health and social position.

## Challenges in Employment

Syrian refugees who resettled to Canada in 2015 and 2016 reported several challenges to finding employment. Many interview respondents reported their inability to work in their field of work experience and/or expertise pre-migration. Refugees struggled because their credentials are not recognized or because the field of their work does not conform to the Canadian labour market needs. For example, an interview respondent explained the gap in terms of his personal experience due to the lack of recognition of previous education and actual work performed.

> *"My personal qualifications are much, much higher than I do now ... It hurts me that I had to work at the produce section at a grocery store because my degree qualifies [me] to do much more ... I had a good experience here but again finding work is most important. ...Through contacts, I was able to get another job. It's a little better than the grocery store but there is a lot of gap between my qualifications and the type of work I do. I consider myself advancing little by little." (PSR man 3)*

Another interview respondent faced the lack of recognition of previous education, experience and/or training in a professional field. Specifically, he reported that *"I was a cleaner in the company and the employer asked me what I did back home I told him I was an engineer but desperate times call for desperate measures." (PSR man 2)*

What is termed "survival" employment can lead to underemployment with negative "painful" and "desperate" measures that affect one's labour market experiences and ability to support their families.

A second challenge reported by interview respondents focused on the field of work pre-migration that does not conform to Canadian labour market needs. There is a perception by interview respondents that refugees' training and experience in the home country does not match the jobs available in Canada. As stated by an interview respondent,

> *"We can't find employment... He was a shop owner back in Syria." (GAR woman 1)*

Finding employment opportunities that allow resettled refugees to use their pre-migration skills and experiences is a challenge. For example, a respondent (PSR man 1) stated, "*I used to*

*work as a ceramic/construction worker. My job doesn't need a language, but I can't find an employment here".*

The graph below shows the range of responses that describe their current work situation. Given the overall low educational qualifications of the sample no respondent felt that they were more qualified than their job required. However, in terms of experience and skills people felt undervalued.

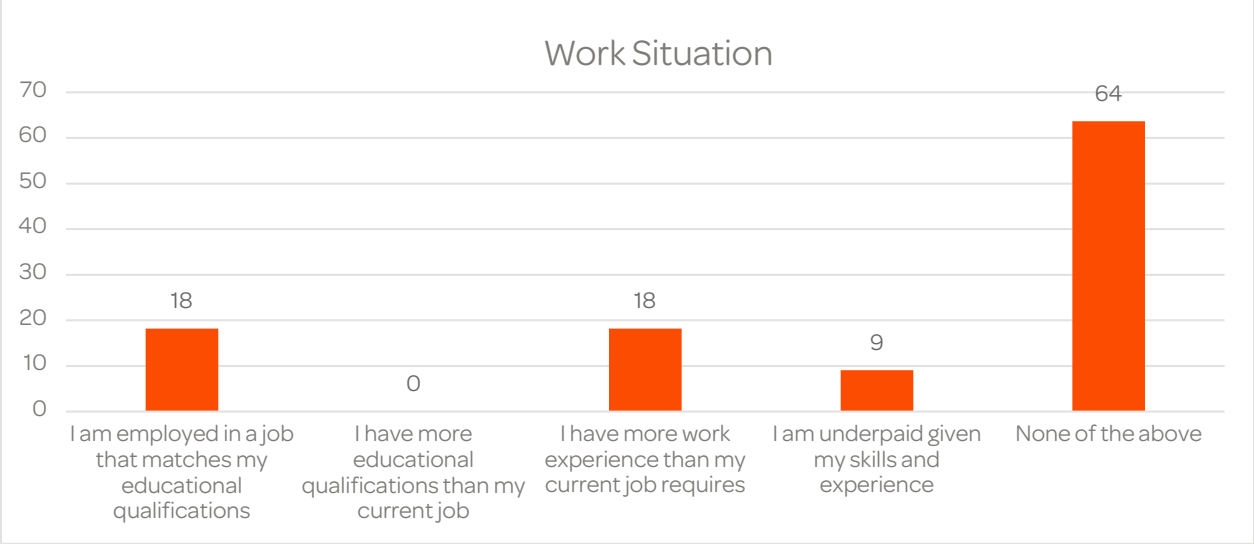



**FIGURE 19; SOURCE: AAISA SYRIAN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT STUDY, 2017**

The survey results indicate that in terms of challenges a majority of survey participants found accessing employment (29%) and making enough money to pay expenses (28%) challenging.


**FIGURE 20; SOURCE: AAISA SYRIAN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT STUDY, 2017**

## Financial Stability

In terms of financial stability approximately 37% of survey respondents indicated that they were able to pay their bills but were worried about the future. About 25% also indicated that they were dependent on government assistance. 17% indicated that they struggled to pay their bills while about 16% indicated that they were able to pay bills and living expenses. In this question participants could select more than one response. Overall, a majority of survey participants were struggling financially. Paying bills and meeting their financial needs adequately was a critical concern for approximately half the sample. With low levels of support reported from family, friends and sponsors the respondents were in a critical financial state at the time of the study. The figure on financial condition highlights the differences across the survey participants.

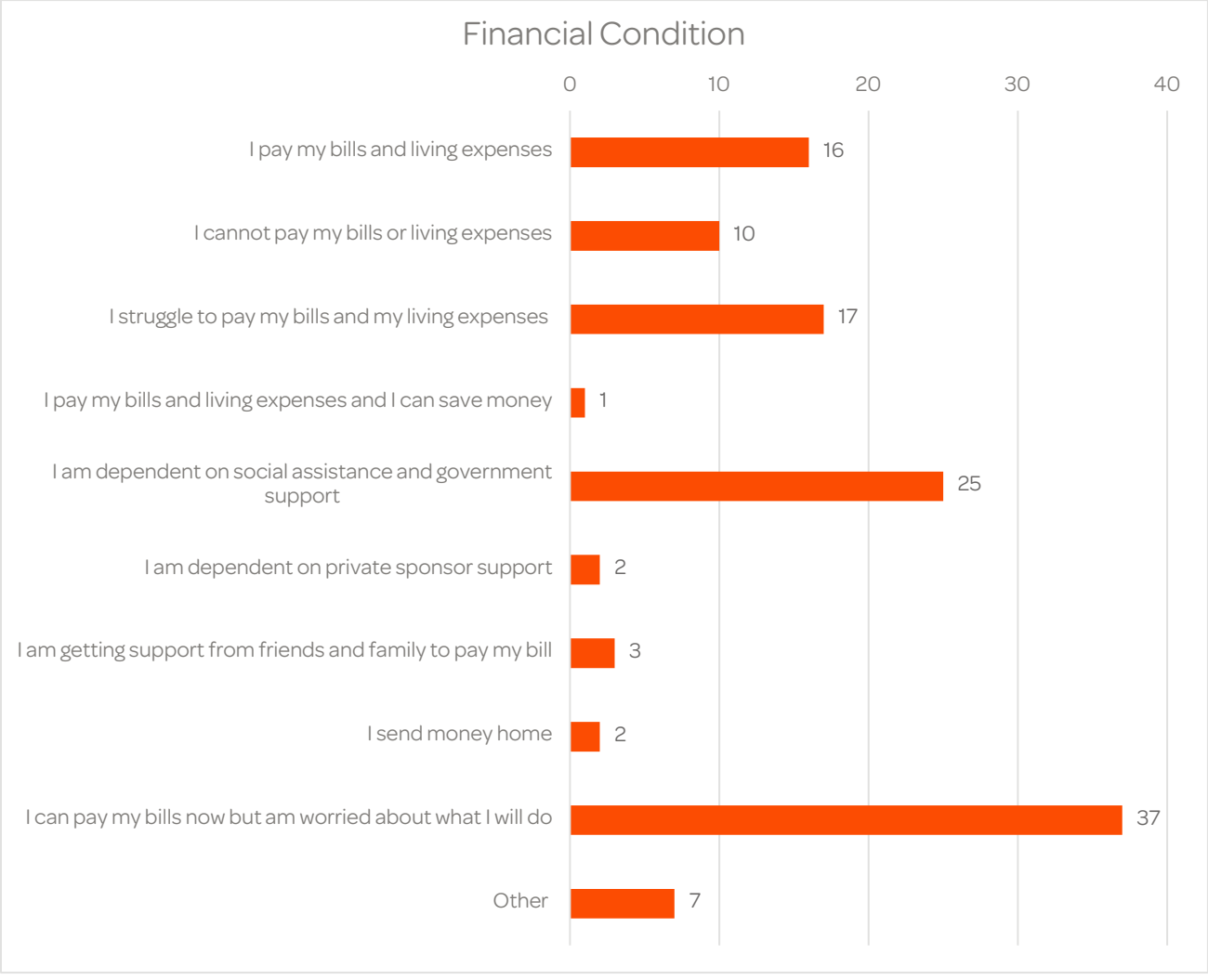



**FIGURE 21; SOURCE: AAISA SYRIAN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT STUDY, 2017**

When comparing the two genders, it was clear that women were more financially dependent on others to pay bills. Our sample showed that they were approximately two times less likely to pay bills or living expenses, none reported having any savings and about twice more likely to be getting help to pay their expenses. Those with higher levels of education were also more likely to find part time or full time employment. Those with only primary education were more likely to be unemployed or be a student.

The perspectives of resettled Syrian refugees in Alberta provide insights on the challenges they face in the labour market. Respondents in the study experience multiple difficulties in seeking employment due to the lack of foreign credential recognition, perceived mismatch between pre-migration work experience and Canadian work experience, lack of job contacts or networks, and language barriers.

## Language as a Barrier to Employment

Language did pose as a barrier to social connections and settlement, and it is no less of a barrier in employment. The first thing an employer asks about is English, even if participants were looking for survival jobs. Participants are aware of such a reality and most of them are working to enhance their language skills, however, such efforts are not stress-free. Some participants have deferred the job search until their English language skills improve, while others cannot afford to continue English classes and had to go directly to work in order to support their families.

Interview respondents explained how language training interconnects with the need to access employment:

> *"We knew before coming here that you will not find good employment till your English language skills get better." (GAR woman 2)*

Some interview respondents were hopeful that improved English language levels would result in better employment opportunities:

> *"Now, that his English level is not that good, he will not find the job that he wants, however, once he does reach a good English level, then he would be able to work anything." (GAR woman 3)*

Becoming proficient in English and building one's confidence can take time, as explained by a female interview respondent:

> *"I do realize that I can get a job now, but I have been into interviews where I blush because I am so embarrassed I didn't understand a specific word or a phrase. I will focus on my English a little bit more until I feel I am confident to pursue a career. I know though that life and adjustments will get better and easier in Canada, next year and the year after and so on." (BVOR woman 2)*

Learning the English language and being able to understand, speak, read and write is crucial to labour market integration:

> *"As soon as I came, I started searching for work. Now, because my English was not that great, I was satisfied with the work that I had. My personal qualifications are much much higher than I do now but in terms of English, I'm not great with the language so I was satisfied. It hurts me that I had to work at the produce section at Superstore because my degree qualifies to do much more ..." (PSR man 3)*

Interview respondents recognized the importance of employment services and language training, and demonstrated their motivation and potential to contribute to Canadian society:

> *"The most important services we need is employment and language. If they give me money and I sit at home, I don't want it. I want opportunities, I want to contribute, I want to be productive." (PSR man 3)*

The survey data found that level of English comprehension or fluency was an acute challenge in terms of employment for about 25% of the survey sample. 14% felt that there was a lack of diverse opportunities of work in their community and about 9% felt that they didn't have enough education, training or experience in terms of employment.

### Underemployment

Out of the total number of survey respondents only 11 answered this question. Of those who responded 18% felt that they were employed in jobs that matched their qualifications while 18% felt that their work experience was greater than their current job required.

*All those who felt that they were underpaid given their skills and qualifications were PSRs. All those who reported having more work experience than their current job requires were men. Both genders reported equally on being underpaid given their skills and experience. This is an area that requires further exploration since it would be important to understand how such comparisons are being made and understood.*

### Challenges with Long Working Hours

Survival jobs do not pay well. Since the expenses of the families were barely covered by the one year sponsorship support (government or private sponsor), or not for those who crossed the month 13, newly arrived Syrian refugees had to work long hours in order to attempt to meet basic expenses. More than half of what the participants earned went into paying housing rent, leaving very little for daily expenses, utilities, insurance, and other household needs.

Interview respondents described working long hours due to job insecurity, and encountering misunderstandings that could potentially result in their exploitation:

> *"I work 12 hours a day to make money, and I go on trying to save any dollar I can in order to get by. I run into people with misunderstanding that don't know how tough it is for me and they are simply trying to make money off of me." (PSR man 2)*

Refugees are working multiple contract or part-time positions, resulting in long working hours in order to meet basic living expenses:

> *"The only difficulty that am facing here is that life is so career oriented, a person is forced to work all day just in order to have an ordinary life. It's even tougher for us because we came here with nothing. We had to start from scratch so in our case not only is my husband working all day but all night as well."(BVOR woman 3)*

Refugees experience precarious work as a result of holding multiple jobs, and working irregular or long hours. Precarious refugee workers suffer health consequences as a result of their lower income and work schedule that negatively affects their physical and mental health:

> *"The first time I worked was because an immigrant serving agency gave me a food safety training and certificate which helped me get a job at a pizza restaurant as a supervisor. I worked so hard there almost 12 hours a day with no time off." (PSR woman 2)*

An interview respondent discussed her family's experience of moving to Alberta in search of employment, resulting in long working hours:

> *"My husband had a friend here in Alberta that encouraged him to move here [from New Brunswick], and said that he would help us with finding a lawyer, job and getting settled in ... my husband was immediately secured with a job with long hours of 10am-11pm." (BVOR woman 3)*

## Employment Opportunities in Small Cities

The study considered the resettlement experiences of Syrian refugees in large urban centres (Edmonton, Calgary) and smaller centres (Lethbridge, Medicine Hat and Red Deer). This section will discuss the perceptions of interview respondents on the availability of employment opportunities in large urban and smaller centres in Alberta.

According to the interview participants in small cities (Lethbridge, Medicine Hat and Red Deer), there is a common perception that employment opportunities in smaller centres are limited as compared to larger urban centres in Alberta. Among the reasons cited are: low population, limited Arab community, as well as a small number of hiring businesses or companies.

Interview respondents are searching for employment opportunities, and expressed their willingness to move to other provinces in order to find work:

> *"I was planning to move to London, Ontario, as I heard that the employment opportunities are much more than Medicine Hat and the education for my kids is better." (GAR man 2)*

The challenges of finding work are perceived to be the result of a somewhat limited population in small cities:

> *"We can't find employment. Even if he's working on his own, very little people. He was a shop owner back in Syria. (GAR woman 1)*

Pre-migration work experience is not viewed as a viable opportunity for some interview respondents, as experienced by a government-assisted refugee woman:

> *"My husband used to have his own Syrian sweets bakery. Unfortunately, that is a dead end career path in a small town." (GAR woman 5)*

The importance of social capital and human capital is discussed in the search for appropriate employment opportunities:

> *"I used to be a construction painter before arriving to Canada. There is only one company here that can hire me in Medicine Hat. I went there, and I gave them my resume, and the immigrant serving agency personnel came with me as well. I had an interview, however, I never heard back from them." (GAR man 2)*

Interview respondents commented on the challenges in securing employment due to the rise of precarious and non-standard work in Canada:

> *"We used to tell people there that we want to work they used to answer us; don't worry even the Canadians who used to live here for long they can't find work." [Was living in NB and moved to Edmonton] (GAR woman 6)*

The next section will focus on Syrian refugee's attitudes towards employment.

## Refugee's Attitudes towards Employment

Attitudes towards employment varied among participants. While newly arrived Syrian refugees arriving from urban areas are used to working full time and year-long, refugees from rural areas are accustomed to seasonal work and adjusted to short-term unemployment. In addition, finding employment opportunities is sometimes facilitated from connections and face-to-face interaction, yet in Canada, many companies hire using online interface, which operates to the disadvantage of the participants in this study.

Interview respondents highlighted diverse attitudes towards employment based on pre-migration urban and rural work experiences:

> *"We are from the city so I believe that it's in our personality to be in a full-time employment. Some of the refugees from the rural areas are used to working on seasons." (GAR woman 4)*

The importance of employment for refugee health and well-being was expressed by an interview respondent:

> *For us, employment is essential. For one year we were covered by the government, but I was sick for this one year. I mean, I got sick because I was not working. "We are not used to be sitting in the house and not working. "..."When you are working, you feel good." (GAR man 2)*

The use of technology in the search for work proved to be a challenge for some interview participants. Specifically, applying on-line for work resulted in disappointing outcomes for some:

> *"I had such a hard time finding work. They kept telling me to apply on-line but that didn't work. If I had a contact and they let me work, they [would] automatically like me and my work ethics. But to get in the door in the first place is very difficult.... the opportunity is difficult." (PSR man 3)*

There is a wide range of supports, services and programs designed to assist in addressing the challenges for immigrants with respect to employment and the labour market. The next section will discuss the role of settlement agencies in supporting refugees with employment.

## The Importance of the Settlement Agencies' Role with Employment

The role of immigrant serving agencies was evident and clear among the participants. Some agencies helped in writing resumes, finding job opportunities or volunteering opportunities, which would allow Syrian refugees to gain Canadian experience. Other immigrant settlement agencies sent personnel with newly arrived refugees to interviews for moral support. The newly arrived interview participants were thankful for such opportunities and those who are not employed yet, are eager to join the workforce.

Employment programs designed to meet the needs of refugee women are welcomed opportunities to develop work and language skills on the path to obtain meaningful employment:

> *"I do believe that the program I am taking at the immigrant serving agency now, called "link to success for employment skills and work placement" helped me a lot more in carrying a conversation than the LINC classes, because at LINC you are only fed information and you mostly listen. In the immigrant serving agency's program you converse because it's a smaller class and there are more conversations in English. I see this course as the best opportunity I have received since I got to Canada." (BVOR woman 3)*

Immigrant serving agencies were found to provide support for the job search process and referrals to relevant resources:

> *"I worked at a restaurant before this that robbed me and I didn't appreciate it, they didn't pay you over time. Short hours and very horrible treatments. I went back to the immigrant serving agency and she helped me to find my current job, she applied my resume and I got the job within 5 days. ... My wife is in a great program at an immigrant serving agency, which pays her and gives her daycare allowance. ...The biggest help from the immigrant serving agency would be helping me find my job." (PSR man 2)*

Interview respondents discussed the importance of morale support and expressed their considerable appreciation for the work of immigrant serving agencies in meeting their individuals' needs:

> *"Mostly the immigrant serving agency provided me with hope and a positive attitude. They really try to help you out with anything they can whether it was general inquiries or questions or just providing general information. The*

*immigrant serving agency is even helping me meet a lawyer in order to assist me with inquiries." (BVOR woman 4)*

Recommendations were offered by Syrian refugees on how to foster volunteer experience that would assist in their future searches for employment:

> *"For example, the immigrant serving agency when I am in my first year, I don't need a CV or resume because I am not even ready to start working in this society yet. What I wish this immigrant serving agency and other centres do is provide guaranteed volunteer opportunities for the newcomers and get them integrated that way, and expose them to Canadian experience. These centres should concentrate more on providing newcomers with opportunities to link and connect their previous work experience with similar Canadian volunteer opportunities. Even it was volunteering for two hours a week." (GAR man 4)*

A refugee woman interview respondent was empowered by improving her English language skills, meeting new people, and developing pre-employment skills through her connection with an immigrant serving agency and participating in a program:

> *"I am so thankful for their persistence in me joining, because my English is getting better, I am meeting new people, I learned how to make a resume, how to act in a job interview, and anything employment related." What the immigrant serving agency aims to do in this program is give you employment skills for three months then put you in a job placement for three months in order for you to have the valuable Canadian experience on your resume." (BVOR woman 2)*

By providing personal assistance immigrant serving agencies serve an important role in supporting Syrian refugees' employment searches in small cities:

> *"There is only one company here that can hire me in Medicine Hat. I went there, and I gave them my resume, and the immigrant serving agency personnel came with me as well." (GAR man 2)*

A majority of survey participants (35%) cited using language training as a key service; 12% cited using resume help as useful; 10% found job search help useful. All other services (e.g., mentoring, bridging programs, networking, assessment of foreign qualifications, workplace programs, change careers, skills upgrading, skills training, volunteering) had somewhat an equal utilization though fairly low utilization overall. There is a need to better understand how to connect Syrian refugees to employment services and programs and identify barriers that may hinder their participation in these programs.

## Helpful in Finding Employment

Given low employment rates in the survey sample only 34 survey respondents answered the question on what was helpful in finding employment. A majority cited friends, family and networks as most critical in finding employment. Networking events (15 respondents) and private sponsor support (12 respondents) were also extremely helpful for a small minority in finding or keeping employment.

## Satisfaction with Current Employment

Of the total survey sample 12 people responded to this question and 50% of the respondents were satisfied or somewhat satisfied with their current employment. While 50% were not at all satisfied. Given the overall low employment rate these statistics provide only a broad trend and further research is needed.

*Among those who were satisfied with their employment women were 100% of the sample that answered yes. Among women overall 75% were satisfied and 25% were not satisfied. In the somewhat and no categories men were a far greater majority, indicating that overall men were less likely than women to be satisfied with their employment. Among men overall 63% were somewhat satisfied and 33% were not at all satisfied.*

**Employment Summary**

Employment is one of the key factors shaping settlement in Alberta. Beyond financial stability the study highlighted the importance of employment helping individuals feel competent, independent and secure. The quantitative data highlighted that majority of participants were most likely not educated beyond high school. A significant proportion felt undervalued and underpaid in terms of their experience and skills.

Men were more likely than women to report underemployment and lack of satisfaction. Among those who were employed women reported higher rates of employment and also greater satisfaction. Participants highlighted the perceived lack of job opportunities in smaller centres and the challenges of adapting to the perceived limited options in these centres. Higher education increased the likelihood of employment and to a degree of financial stability for the study participants.

The key challenges participants faced were related to the lack of recognition of their foreign credentials and work experience from their country of origin, adapting to the Canadian labour market demands, employment connections and networks, and language competencies.

Networking and support of private sponsors were seen as critical in helping finding jobs. Without strong networks and language as a key barrier, employment that matched their skills and experience was hard to find.

## Social Connections

Social connections are considered an important measure to understand quality of life.[68] Social connections, in this study, are defined by parameters such as participation in social, cultural and recreational dimensions of life. Research shows that it is only through full participation in all aspects of social life that individuals can integrate fully and build strong connections with others.[69] Social participation frequency is a crucial aspect of quality of life.[70] When individuals become engaged in activities and close relationships it positively impacts well-being, health and integration. Social participation along with sense of belonging is an important indicator of social integration.[71]

Social engagement has been measured through frequency of participation across social activities: gatherings with family and/or friends; religious activities; sports; recreational activities; and educational and cultural activities[4]. Gilmour[72] highlights that the greater the number of frequent social activities in which one is involved, the more likely one is to have positive self-reported health, and the less likely one is to feel lonely and dissatisfied with life.

The survey also explored questions around the importance of ethno-cultural communities, sponsors and community organizations to settlement and integration. Questions about social belonging as well as social and emotional support were also asked to understand the nature of social connections.

The study found that overall participants felt supported by ethno-cultural communities, settlement organizations and community organizations. However, the quality of this support varied over time and remained largely restricted to providing material supports. Social and mental health supports continued to remain challenging for the Syrian refugee population. This impacted their sense of belonging and ability to integrate in Canadian society. This section of the report will explore the ways Syrian refugees built social relationships and managed their well-being.

### Building a Community

One of the crucial questions this study explored was the importance of community links to support settlement and integration. The survey asked six questions to explore if refugees had prior social links and what types of social connections were critical in settlement and integration.

The majority of survey participants (81%) did not know anyone before they arrived in Canada. Only 19% knew people before arrival. 63% of survey participants felt that the **local community** was welcoming and supportive and 37% found their role important. The

[4] According to Gilmour (2012), frequent participation is defined as once a week or more for: gatherings with family/friends; religious activities; sports; and recreational activities.

qualitative findings support the quantitative data as most refugees that were interviewed felt that they were welcomed in Canada:

> *"People in Canada are very friendly, if you ask for any help, they are always ready to help and this makes feel very comfortable. Even if I didn't have an Arabic community around me, I would still feel very comfortable with Canadians. The Canadian people are fantastic. I plan to stay in Canada until the day I die because its people are great." (GAR man 4)*

In addition, some participants felt that unlike other countries, the government of Canada had welcomed refugees. This had in turn created a supportive environment where the Canadian community was more receptive of them as refugees.

> *"…The individual here in Canada has dignity and human rights … much more than any other place … maybe because they invited us here but in other countries the Syrians forced themselves, I have family that is a refugee in Germany, if they need a translator, they have to pay him $25…and the houses are outrageously expensive there and they ask them to full pay for it … how can they afford it being refugees." (BVOR Woman 4)*

Many participants considered Canada home from the day they arrived at the airport. Canada for the participants was the land of opportunities and a new chapter in their lives. Life in Canada for the newly arrived Syrian refugees was better as compared to their life before in Syria or any other country (Lebanon, Jordan, or Egypt) they may have migrated to prior to arriving to Canada. They felt they were treated well in Canada and shared several examples of their positive experience.

> *"I was one of the refugees that lived in a camp in Jordan for over a year. I have seen conditions that even, pardon me for using this word, but animals wouldn't bare. So when you come and ask me about how I am adjusting to Canada, I have a roof over my head a place to sleep, they give us money for a house, they are educating me, I can't complain about the small details that might bother me. I don't allow anything to bother me because finding refuge in Canada is like a dream come true." (GAR man 3)*

> *"Here I feel like I am an equal and a member of the community. " (BVOR woman 1)*

> *"Being a Syrian under the current circumstances we have been to other countries and the treatment was horrible, we were looked down at. It stopped when we first entered the airport in Canada, we became an equal member of the society. "…Canada gave me a home when I needed one the most, I will be forever grateful for that." (BVOR woman 3)*

> *"Canada is great. In Jordan we had absolutely no importance at all…we had no human value or dignity, especially the Syrian refugees…We were treated very*

*badly…even the children no one used to care about them…they used [to] be hit in school. Thank God, we love living here. I felt like I was in another world. When we first came in at the airport, this person smiles [at] us, this person says hi to us, this person plays with my kids. We received a lot of attention…. way more than we expected. As soon [as] we came we felt very much at ease and felt very safe. If you have safety and a peace of mind you have everything." (GAR man 5)*

For about 51% of the survey respondents the Syrian community was very important and about 37% cited the Syrian community/ethno-cultural community as important. Only 12% found them not at all important in settling to a new environment.

Interestingly, interview participants highlighted that the **Syrian community** who had lived in Canada for a significant period were not always very receptive of the newly arrived refugees and preferred to keep their distance. Even though the ethno-cultural community can become a critical source of support, the participant's comment highlighted that the community can have inherent social tensions and fissures that can produce challenges in settlement.

*"I am facing great difficulty with the Syrian community here because it seems like they are all clustered into groups and to be honest, I don't feel welcomed in any of the groups. So, although I tried, I can't seem to get into the community. They say we go way back and we are comfortable with the people we already know, so we don't want to add anyone into the group. I found some might also befriend you for a while and then they stop". (BVOR woman 3)*

67% of survey respondents found settlement organizations very important in helping them settle; about 28% found them important and only 5% felt that they were not at all important.

When the survey specifically asked about orientation to Canada, 52% of the respondents highlighted that they received some type of orientation from an immigrant serving agency. Family and friends (16%) were also an important source of support providing orientation to incoming refugees.

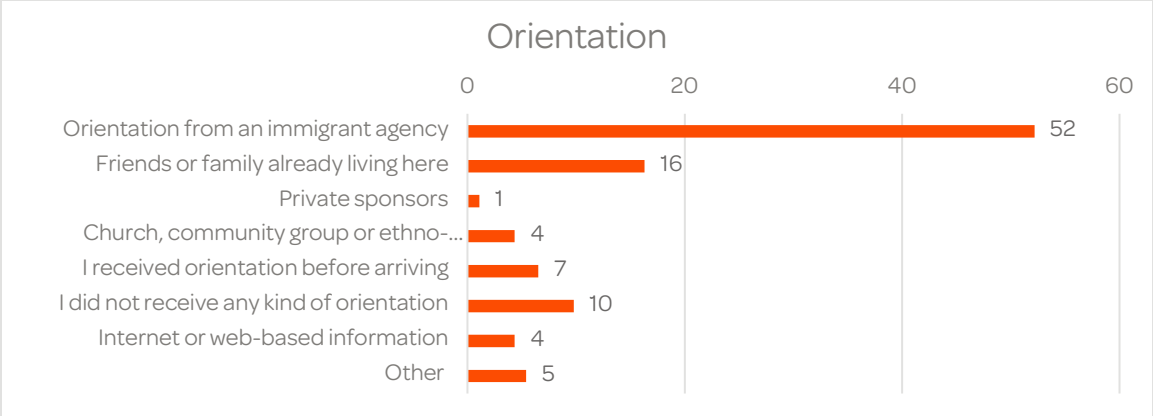



**FIGURE 22; SOURCE: AAISA SYRIAN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT STUDY, 2017**

When comparing both men and women, overall men reported slightly higher percentages as compared to women when asked how important ethno-cultural community, local community and settlement organizations were in terms of helping them settle and adjust to a new environment.

When comparing small centres and large centres not much difference was observed. In most cases, smaller centres reported a slightly higher percentage of people who found the Syrian community, local communities, community organizations, settlement organizations and ethno-cultural communities critical in helping them adjust to a new environment. Only in the case of private sponsors, larger centres tended to report a higher percentage who found private sponsors important or very important as compared to a small centres. Qualitative interviews, conversely highlighted that larger centres were perceived to be more diverse with greater opportunities and more programs.

Overall, the study highlighted the importance of ethno-cultural communities, community organizations and settlement providers in helping refugees settle and integrate. At the same time participants shared that previously settled Syrian community members were not always helpful. In fact, participants pointed to the tensions that surrounded integrating not only with those belonging to other communities, but also integrating within their own community.

Through deeper analysis, it was revealed that small centres reported slightly higher percentages of support (across all categories, except private sponsor) as compared to larger centres. A key finding from the Provincial Needs Assessment was that there is strong rural community connection programs in comparison to urban centres and this study's findings may potentially be linked to the availability of such programs. This needs to be evaluated more closely with a larger sample as it may be related to several conflating factors that can shape perception of support. Questions that emerge from this data include: What factors increase the sense of support in small communities as opposed to large? What are the mechanisms that make new refugees feel supported? What are the lessons that can inform

settlement strategies from small centres to large centres and large centres to small centres? The next section explores the approach and perspectives of Syrian refugees as they build new social connections.

## Making New Social Connections

Majority of participants (92%), according to the survey, had made new friends and social connections since arrival. This was a significant finding given the immediate challenges of settlement.

Qualitative interviews highlighted that technology played a key role in supporting new connections among refugees. Participants highlighted that they were able to stay in touch with the use of social media as well as group chat applications such as "what's app". Such a communication technology allowed the group to stay in touch and disseminate information regarding events, outings, or supporting the emerging needs of this community such as the need for furniture, a recommendation for a family physician or accessing services. This type of social link was critical to building community in a new context.

> *"Most of us came here as refugees. Having all these Syrians together make it so much easier to adjust to the new environment." (GAR man 4)*

Even though the quantitative data showed that refugees overall were welcomed and supported, qualitative interviews highlighted that some refugees felt unwelcomed, isolated and disconnected when in Canada. The interviews highlighted that participants felt both uprooted from their social life and unable to reconcile the new social fabric of Canadian context. This is because social connections and participation in social activities were the foundation for all aspects of societal life in Syria. It became the way one was able to learn about employment opportunities, and stay in touch with the family and friends.

> *"Our Syrian culture is all about the social life, and being able to go out with family and friends is a huge part of our lives. It troubles me and my kids that we don't have that anymore." (PSR woman 2)*

Without such a rich social life, interview participants highlighted challenges of accessing resources, participating in activities and building friendships. In addition, participants highlighted that society in Syria is more collective as compared to life in Canada. They shared that people in Canada kept to themselves.

> *"I felt like people here keep things to themselves a lot, everyone has to be self-dependent and you can never count on someone to take care of you, you have to take care of yourself. Everyone is living a busy life." (BVOR woman 3) "…. If someone got a chance for an employment, they don't share it, instead, they keep it to themselves." (PSR woman 2)*

This social disconnection made many participants feel lonely, isolated or secluded from their friends and family as well as the rest of the community either because they were not working, or because they were working long hours and had no time to socialize.

> *"So it gets very lonely here..... my biggest struggle here I would say is loneliness." (BVOR woman 3) "In addition, socially we were surrounded by family and friends, I used to feel that I am not alone. Here, I feel I am a loner." (GAR woman 1) You could say I became secluded. With my husband out hunting for jobs all the time, I used to spend all my time with my baby and I became very lonely..." (BVOR woman 2)*

The adjustment to new norms of socialization were described by one interview participant as:

> "*I believe that the food, the water and the air, affect the personality of the people. Here it is cold, so are the people. Their food is bland, and their water gives them a certain perspective we don't have." (GAR man 1) "I have Canadian friends. I am very social, but no matter what, it is not the same as back home, because people maintain a space. "(PSR man 2)*

Qualitative interviews were critical in understanding that despite making new friends and relationships, as reported in the surveys, there was also critical challenges in adjusting and adapting to the new social life of Canada. Both the nature of relationships and social norms were significantly different and this posed challenges. In Syria, participants shared that they had lifelong friendships and relatives that lived around them; people would visit with each other regularly and often without prior scheduling. Even after a long day's work, participants shared stories where they would go out and socialize with friends and family until late hours of the night. In Canada, such a social experience is not possible even for those who overcame the language barriers and reached out to social connections in the Canadian community around them. As newcomers are faced with responsibilities, the places families frequent close early and social connections are far newer and nebulous.

The interviews also highlighted social life was seen as intrinsically linked to other aspects of life such as employment or accessing resources; within this new context refugees were now expected to re-learn how to navigate these structures and systems. Social connections are embedded in language and culture and for the Syrian refugee population they are now alienated from both. The relationship between many members of the society is based on collective responsibility and mutual benefits — 'what goes around comes around' (*kol wou tameh* **كول و طعمي**) or 'eat and feed others' (*Istafeed wou Feed ghayrak*- **استفيد وفيد** ). By coming to Canada, many participants have lost this social capital. Newly arrived Syrian refugees are now challenged to build a new social capital, in the presence of linguistic, monetary, and employment barriers, among others. The next section explores specific social and mental health support.

## Social and Mental Health support

Family and friends in Canada (49%) provided a majority of emotional and mental health support. Colleagues at work or school seemed to provide the next important layer of support (17%) and finally family or friends outside Canada as well immigrant serving agencies were critical support factors (both at 15%). Similarly, family and friends in Canada (53%) provided a majority of social support. Family and friends outside Canada also provided significant social support (14%). In addition, colleagues at work or school seemed important in terms of providing social support (12%). Without strong ties to their new community, this section highlights how prior friendships and relationships continue to support refugees in their mental, emotional and social well-being.

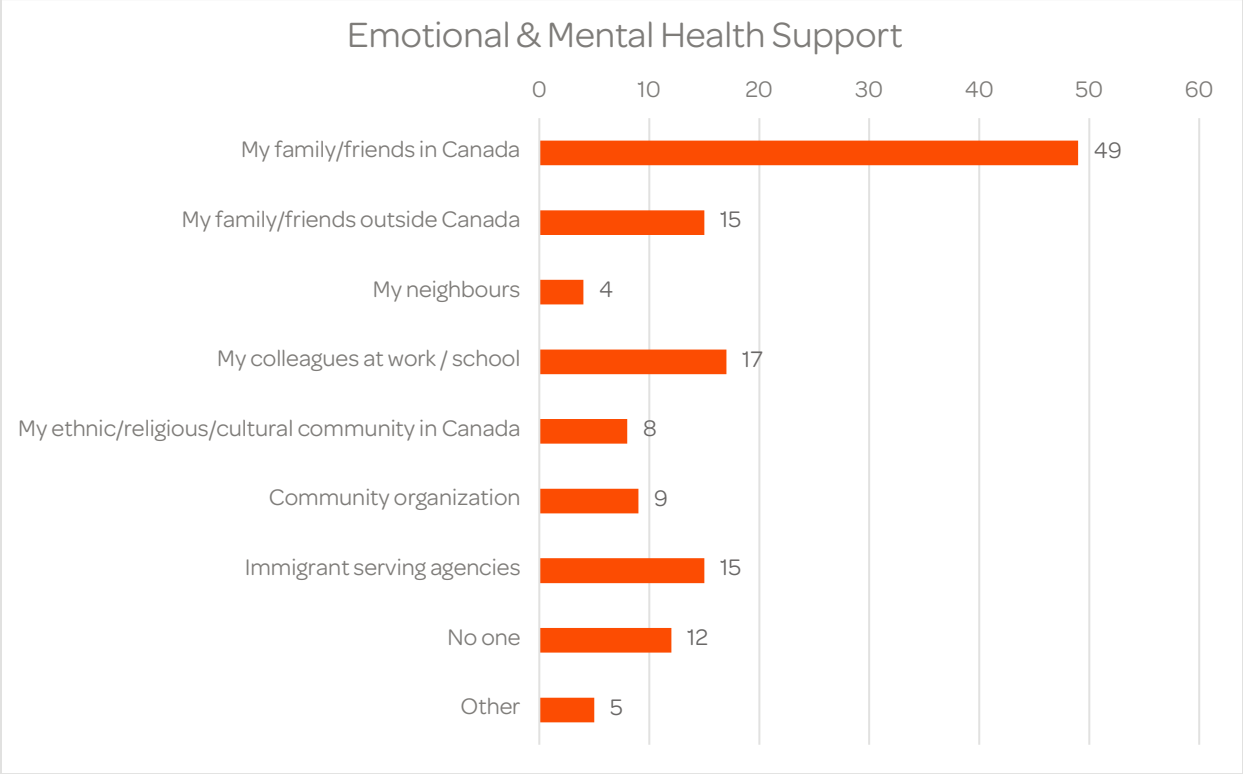



**FIGURE 23; AAISA SYRIAN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT STUDY, 2017**

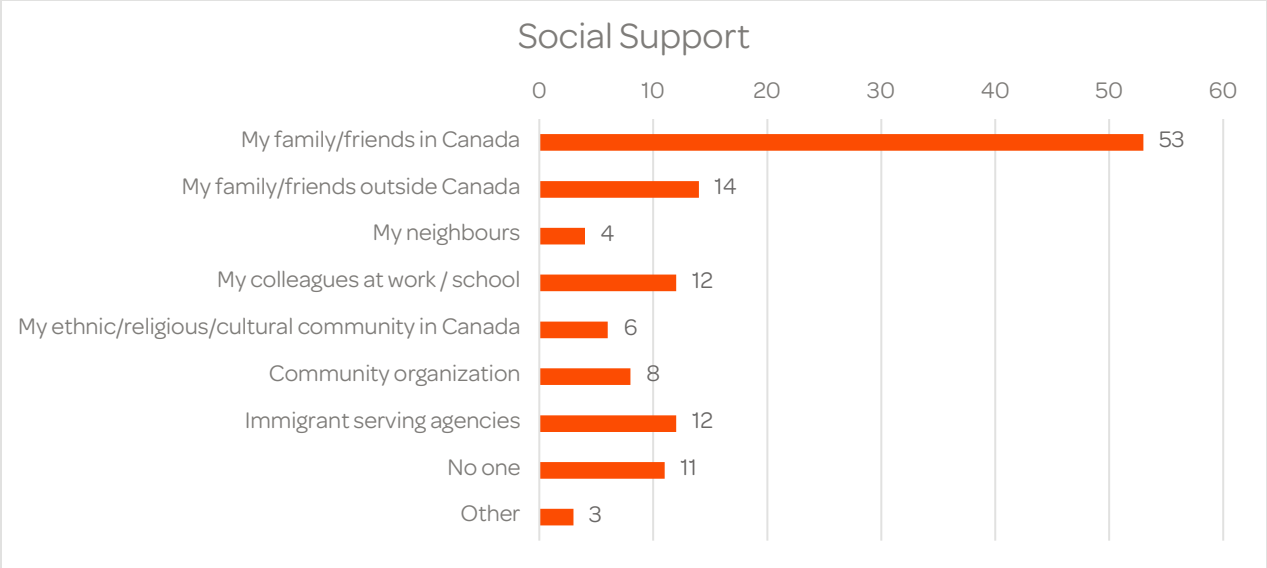



**FIGURE 24; AAISA SYRIAN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT STUDY, 2017**

## Sense of Belonging & Adapting to Canadian Life

One of the important markers for social integration is a sense of belonging, which is understood as the ability to be a full participant and vested in the core institutions of society.[73] Belonging refers to a sense of security and feeling connected to a broader community; non-belonging often brings with it costs such as conflict, substance abuse or loss of gainful employment and increased public spending on health.[74]

The survey and interviews explored Syrian refugees' perspective of and level of belonging within Canada. 94% of respondents felt a sense of belonging within Canada and only 6% responded no to this question. However, in a separate question that asked about challenges to social adjustment, 22% reported challenges related to social belonging.

Sense of belonging is shaped by other factors such as gender, visa status and length of stay. From among those who said yes to the question on 'do you belong', 60% were male and 40% were female. 55% of those who said yes belonged to smaller centres as compared to 44% who belonged to larger centres. 100% of those who said no were female. 67% of those who said no belonged to larger centres. Refugees in smaller centres felt a greater sense of belonging than larger centres.

Qualitative findings were divergent. Some called Canada 'home' from the time they arrived at the airport, while others, despite being thankful to the country, did not feel that they belonged within Canada. Other interview participants highlighted the feeling of being unwelcomed, which may stem from cultural differences between the newly arrived Syrian refugees and the Canadian community.

*"I don't think the community is friendly, I have kids and kids make some sort of noise, people should be somewhat understanding. ..... I also have an issue with dogs, I can't be in the same closed space with them and it worries me how personally people are taking that." (BVOR woman 1) ..... "Unfortunately, her reply was [the landlord when faced with a bed bug issue], "You Syrians are what brought the dirt to this country", she was rude and what she said to me really hurt." (PSR woman 2)*

For others, their sense of belonging was impacted by their settlement process, during which their expectations were often not met. Participants felt the loss of adequate income, employment and lack of recognition of their education, skills and expertise, especially in comparison to their lives in Syria. With the amount of money they were promised to receive once in Canada, they thought they would be better off than where they were; however, with the high cost of living, they realized that such an amount would barely cover their basic expenses. Some participants came to Canada thinking they would be able to address health issues and conditions for themselves and their family members, however, they were not able to achieve this.

*"I don't advise someone with education to come here because any certificates here are not recognized" (BVOR woman 2)*

*"I was a mechanical engineer running my own company a Sony Ericson phone dealer. I had two cars and 2 houses, never had to cook or wash a car I was doing very well, but I lost it all with the war. I don't think about it because I am here to start from scratch and make something out of my self and that attitude will only bring me down."*
*(PSR man 2)*

*"We were living, you can say like princes... Now we are poor." (GAR woman 1)*

Many respondents held a different picture of life in Canada and did not have enough information of what to expect and how to adjust prior to arrival to Canada.

*"I felt deeply depressed because when people used to tell us about Canada, we never expected Canada to be like that. Not like that." (GAR woman 2)*

*"First thing I thought was "am shocked this is Canada?!" I expected an upgrade in life's luxury qualities and there was a definite downgrade. Little things add up." (BVOR woman 1) "So when I first looked out of the plane above Calgary I was already in shock, because it seemed like a lot of land and not much on it. You just see houses and streets. I was expecting a New York Time's Square kind of a place... "(BVOR woman 2)*

They also acutely felt the loss of social connections. Some even felt that refugees were not supported well. Such feelings made them consider that they do not belong here and that one day, they might go back to Syria.

> *"But if today, today, the situation in Syria gets better, all the people [meaning the Syrian Refugees in Canada] will go back, I am certain....." My husband is willing to go back today, we will leave everything behind and go back he said, irrespective of all what has been done. Life here is not stable!!" (GAR woman 1) "No matter how amazing Canada is and how greatly I can make it work I will always want to go back to Syria. Syria is home where you find your mother's bosom. "Even my kids right now say that they want to study here and become a doctor and an engineer because they believe that there are hurt people in Syria that require their help and they need to rebuild Syria back off of the ground." "I believe that I will be back to Syria one day..." (Gar woman 5)*

> *"Support for refugees is needed. And if you don't have the capability of having a strong support group for the refugees, it is better not get refugees." (GAR woman 1)*

> *"I tell people that are planning to come here, don't come wearing your rose colored glasses. Come to Canada expecting that both parents will be working 10 hours a day just to get by." (PSR woman 2)*

Belonging, as these narratives show, remains highly diverse and varied. Given the short span of their residence in Canada, their sense of belonging is tied to early settlement experiences. However, study participants continued to struggle with issues surrounding their settlement such as employment, housing or health and their identity as a community. The figure below highlights that 33% of the participants found adjusting to the city, town and community as a challenge; 22% struggled with feeling that they belonged, which is much higher than the 6% who reported lack of belonging in the other survey question; and making friends and social connections was another key challenge for 18% of the respondents. These challenges threatened their security and ultimately their sense of belonging.

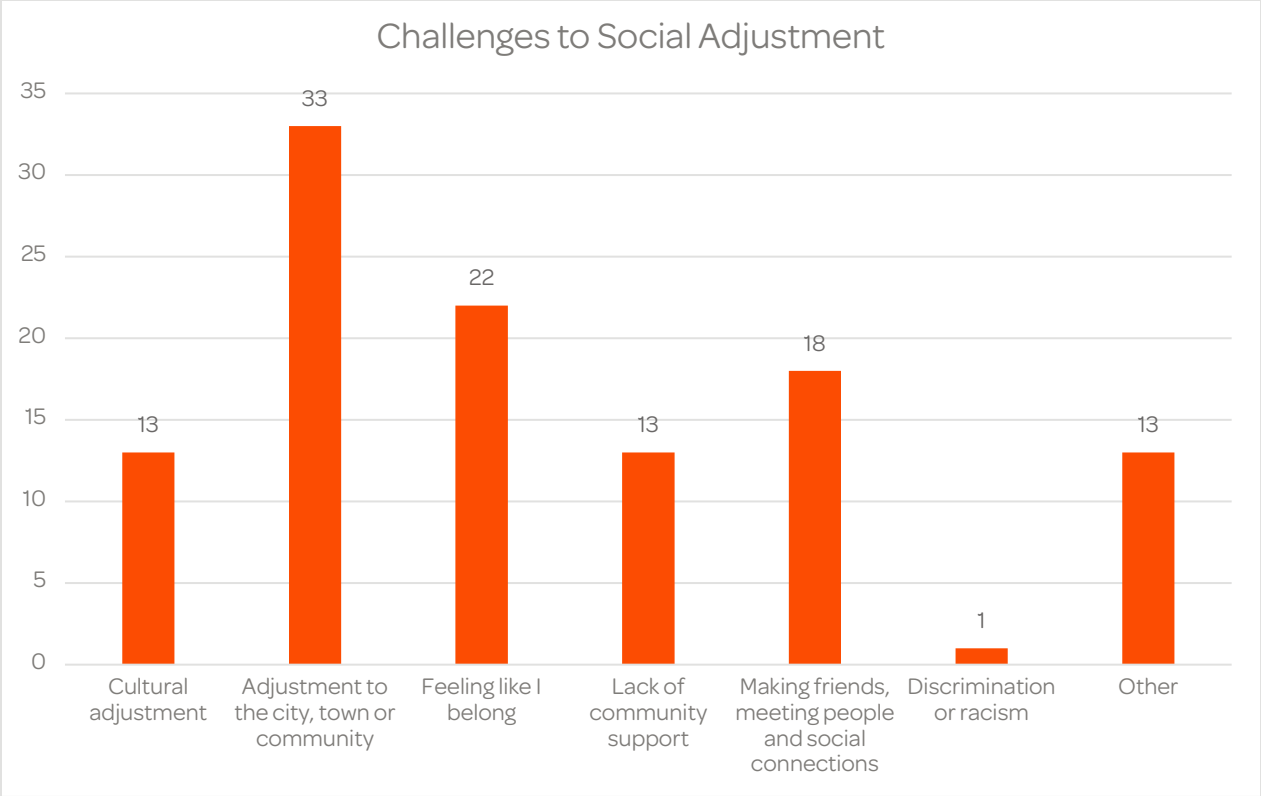



**FIGURE 25; SOURCE: AAISA SYRIAN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT STUDY, 2017**

## Social Participation

A majority of participants are gathering with family or friends outside their homes at least once a day (38%) or once a week (47%). In terms of religious activities most respondents (60%) participated in religious activities at least once a week. In terms of sports and physical activities the percentages significantly drop with only 10% once a day, 20% once a week and 23% once a month. 42% stated never. In terms of recreational activities no one seemed to participate once a day; only 10% once a week, 12% once a month and 61% stated never.

Recreation in Arabic is ترفيه *tarfeeh,* which is synonymous to entertainment. Many newcomer families are struggling to survive in their new environment. Their priorities were mainly learning the language and finding employment before the one year sponsorship support ended and engagement in recreational activities was less of a priority and seen more as a luxury. Furthermore, participants did not link recreation to relaxation and physical health due to their limited experience of recreation in Syria, where opportunities are far more limited in terms of access and affordability. Physical activity is not embedded in the daily routines for many Syrians in the same manner it may be for Canadians, adding to the notion of recreation as a luxury and not a necessity in life.

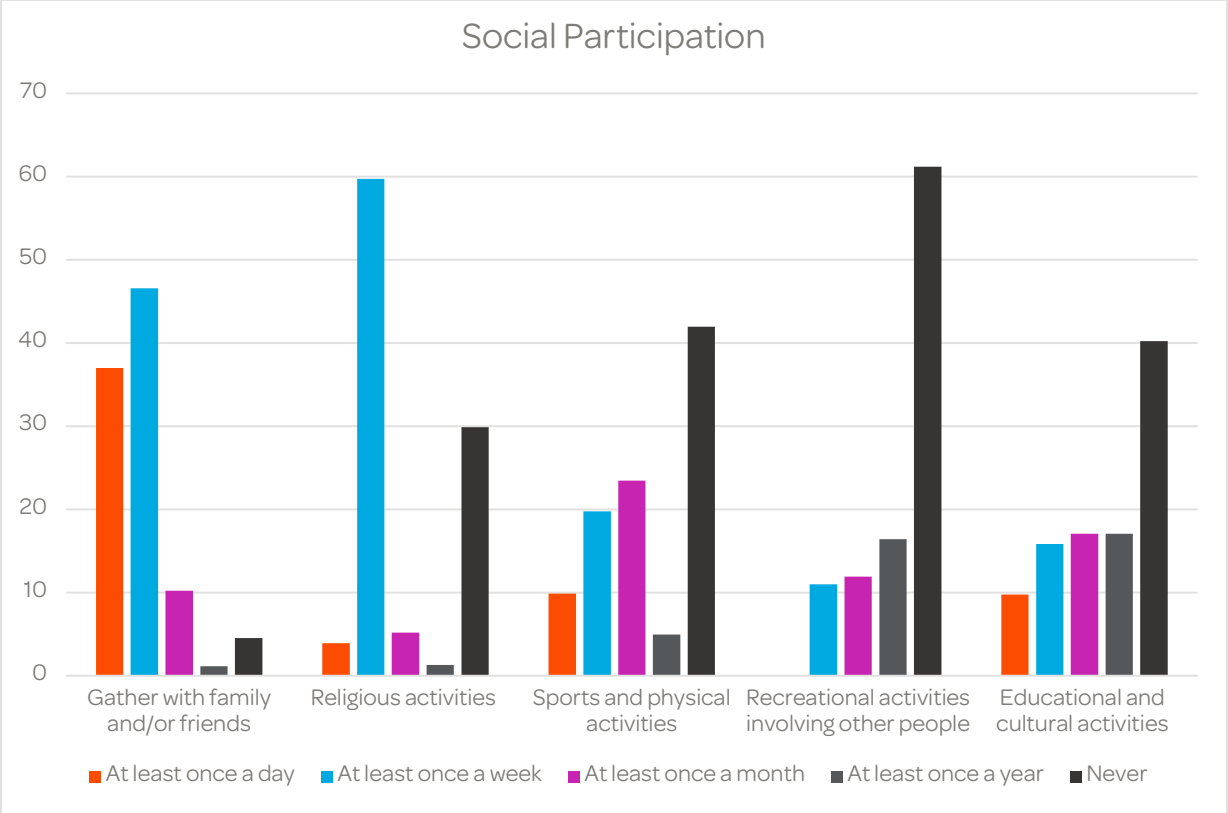



**FIGURE 26; SOURCE: AAISA SYRIAN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT STUDY, 2017**

In order to compare the activities in terms of gender, refugee status and length of residence this report has combined frequency of activities into three joint categories: frequently (once a day and once a week); less frequently (once a month/year) and never.

Men as compared to women were 20% more likely to gather with family and/or friends outside the home and twice as likely to go for religious activities outside the home (since majority of the population was Muslim, this statistic is common as women are more likely to pray at home). When it came to sports and physical activities men composed 73% of those who participated frequently and 70% of those who participated less frequently. Women on the other hand were a small percentage in both these categories. Men were more likely to participate in sports and physical activities as compared to women. In terms of recreation activities men were again more likely to participate frequently or less frequently as compared to women. Men were also more likely to attend educational and cultural activities as compared to women. Overall, men were more likely than women to participate frequently in activities across all categories. Some of these gender differences can be attributed to the division of family duties, since caregiving expectations in large Syrian families is often attributed to women.

When comparing 'frequent participation', larger centres and smaller centres in terms of gathering with friends and family there was no major difference observed. Larger centre respondents reported slightly higher percentages as compared to small centres in terms of

religious activities, and this could be partly due to availability of religious spaces. While not much difference was observed in sports or educational activities, however, larger centres saw a higher percentage reporting frequent participation in recreation activities.

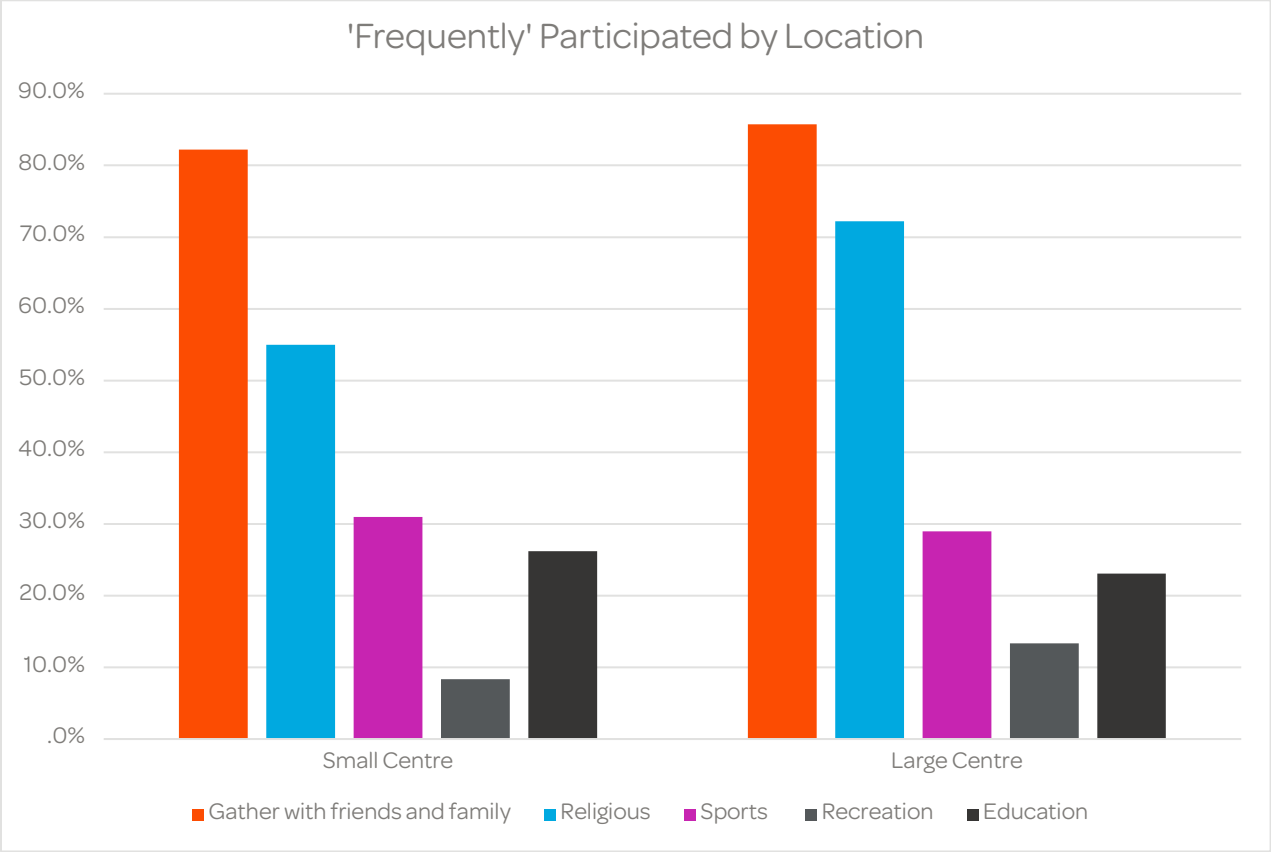



**FIGURE 27; SOURCE: AAISA SYRIAN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT STUDY, 2017**

## Shaping Identities as Refugees

The foundation of social relationships rests on the development of identity both as an individual and as a group. For Syrian refugees their identities are highly contested and mired in social, political and religious crises that are both complicated and dynamic. Their arrival into Canada amidst great global backlash against the acceptance of refugees, combined with growing Islamophobia (Paperny, 2016; Statistics Canada, 2016) and economic concerns given Alberta's economic downturn has created a particularly charged atmosphere for resettlement and integration.

The study revealed several interesting issues that emerged through the qualitative narratives. One of the key sub-themes that emerged was related to the fear of identity loss. This idea is quite common among newly arrived immigrants, however with refugees this can be particularly critical since their migration is forced and often devoid of agency or control,

particularly in terms of settlement location. For the participants in this study, their fears of identity loss were exhibited in three different areas: linguistic, cultural and religious.

**Linguistic** identity was critical to participants and they shared their concerns around passing their shared history and culture via language.

> *"My kids are learning English very well but I also would like them learn Arabic. I feel like they are losing their home language. It would be great if there was a system were kids learn in English but also continue to learn their own home language." (GAR man 4)*

**Cultural** identity was another area of concern as participants spoke about emergent and perceived differences between Canadian and Syrian cultures.

> *"I worry mostly about my kids' wellbeing. I can already see some ideas being put in my eldest son's head, (11 years) in regards to moving out at 16 to go live with his white friends in BC. I already see that I am starting to fail as a mother... I am worried from the things they are asking me about now, wanting to get married and move out." (GAR woman 5)*

> *"I tell my friends: "If you don't have authority over your wife and kids, don't come to Canada." You need your kids to listen to you." (GAR man 1)*

**Religious** identity was crucial to many and preserving as well as celebrating their religion was an important aspect of social well-being.

> *"I do have one fear of living in this community though. Keeping religion out of the point there are somethings that are socially acceptable here that I fear my kids begin to see it as ok. For example having a relationship with someone before marriage, partying too hard, drugs being around. I do understand that the conservative families frown upon these things but I still worry that if my kids are being raised around these social norms they begin to see it as ok. Especially the legalization of marijuana." (BVOR woman 1)*

> *"My husband and I were discussing the Quebec incident [mass shooting]. We managed to completely avoid talking about it in front of my kids. We are genuinely worried about it because we go pray in the masjid (mosque) on a daily basis and I wouldn't want there to be fear in me or my kids from going to a masjid. (GAR woman 5)*

> *"Most important is take education (learning English) very seriously and also keep up with your religion...this is very important." (GAR man 5)*

> *"The only down side from moving to Canada was being almost stripped of my religious rituals throughout the day. We here in Red Deer do not have the option to go to a mosque, or religious gatherings or Islamic schools." (Gar woman 4)*

Another sub theme that emerged was around facing racism and discrimination. Even though only one participant overtly spoke about Islamophobia, others expressed that seeing others like them helped them to feel at ease and adjusted. In some smaller centres that had a small refugee population or a relatively small Muslim population, some interview participants shared their concerns around adapting to the local context and the heightened experience of being 'different'. Some others spoke about smaller centres not having religious spaces to practice their religion or even grocery stores to buy their culturally appropriate food.

Only one participant spoke about Islamophobia overtly and how she was worried this might affect her children.

> *"One of my kids woke up one day for school and told me he really doesn't want to go because whenever he gets into an argument with his friends at school they yell at him 'go back to your country'. He said that really bothers him." I told him it's normal, he said that it's not the only time that it happened, and that he just never told me before. Another incident was "a kid in the hockey field at a park that asked my son, 'are you Muslim' he replied yes then he told him 'who brought you here', my son replied the prime minister, then he told him 'he brought you here to kill you'". I am not okay with my kids having to deal with those kinds of comments." (GAR woman 5)*

At the same time there were also examples of support and a case of solidarity following the Quebec incident[5]. For example, during the week following the Quebec mosque incident, one Syrian refugee told his Canadian friend that he was afraid to go to the mosque for the Friday prayer due to what happened in Quebec. The Canadian friend then spread the word and gathered people from all over the town. They all held hands and made a human chain around the mosque so that Muslims could pray peacefully inside.

[5] A mass shooting occurred on the evening of January 29, 2017, at the Islamic Cultural Centre of Quebec City, a mosque in the Sainte-Foy neighbourhood of Quebec City, Canada. Six people were killed and nineteen others injured when a lone gunman opened fire just before 8:00 pm, shortly after the end of evening prayer

**Social Connections Summary**

Building relationships is a critical aspect of settlement and integration. This study found that overall refugees were making friends in the community and establishing ties in their social network. However, these relationships appeared to be more transactional and focused on securing material goods/services rather than providing social or emotional support. This is quite common among new immigrants and refugees as building social networks takes time and requires trust.

The challenge for this community is both practical and immediate, including language barriers, lack of time and opportunities to build social links and, more broad or global in nature, the rising tide of Islamophobia and international debates surrounding entry of refugees. Men were more likely than women to participate in social, educational, cultural and recreational activities as compared to women.

Even though the survey showed that a majority of refugees reported a sense of belonging to Canada, the qualitative interviews highlighted the underlying dynamics that shape this belonging. Adjustment to social life, struggling with their identity, making new friends and building social capital threatened their sense of belonging and caused insecurity in their uncertain environment.

Refugees are struggling to maintain and build their identity in a new environment. This can produce some conflicts and tensions especially as they try to assert their identity in the face of integrating with mainstream Canadian culture.

## Language

Language training and proficiency is a top concern for refugees settling in Canada and an important component of integration, both in terms of developing social connections and establishing labour force participation. Research has shown that refugees show "the most dramatic levels of improvement in English and French of all categories of immigrants" and when language learning has not proceeded at a good pace, newcomers have felt isolated and marginalized.[75] According to the Provincial Needs Assessment conducted by AAISA, refugees, such as those arriving from Syria, can develop language skills by attending either formal language training, such as Language Instruction for Newcomer Canadians (LINC) typically offered through Settlement Provider Organizations (SPO) or post-secondary institutions, or informal language training like conversation circles offered by a range of organizations.[76]

Research has also shown that English language learners with significant gaps in their education may encounter delays in acquiring new language skills and have difficulty expressing themselves.[77] Already, Syrians participating in this research project had some advantage in terms of language learning, with 86% already literate in their first language and only 14% with very low literacy levels.

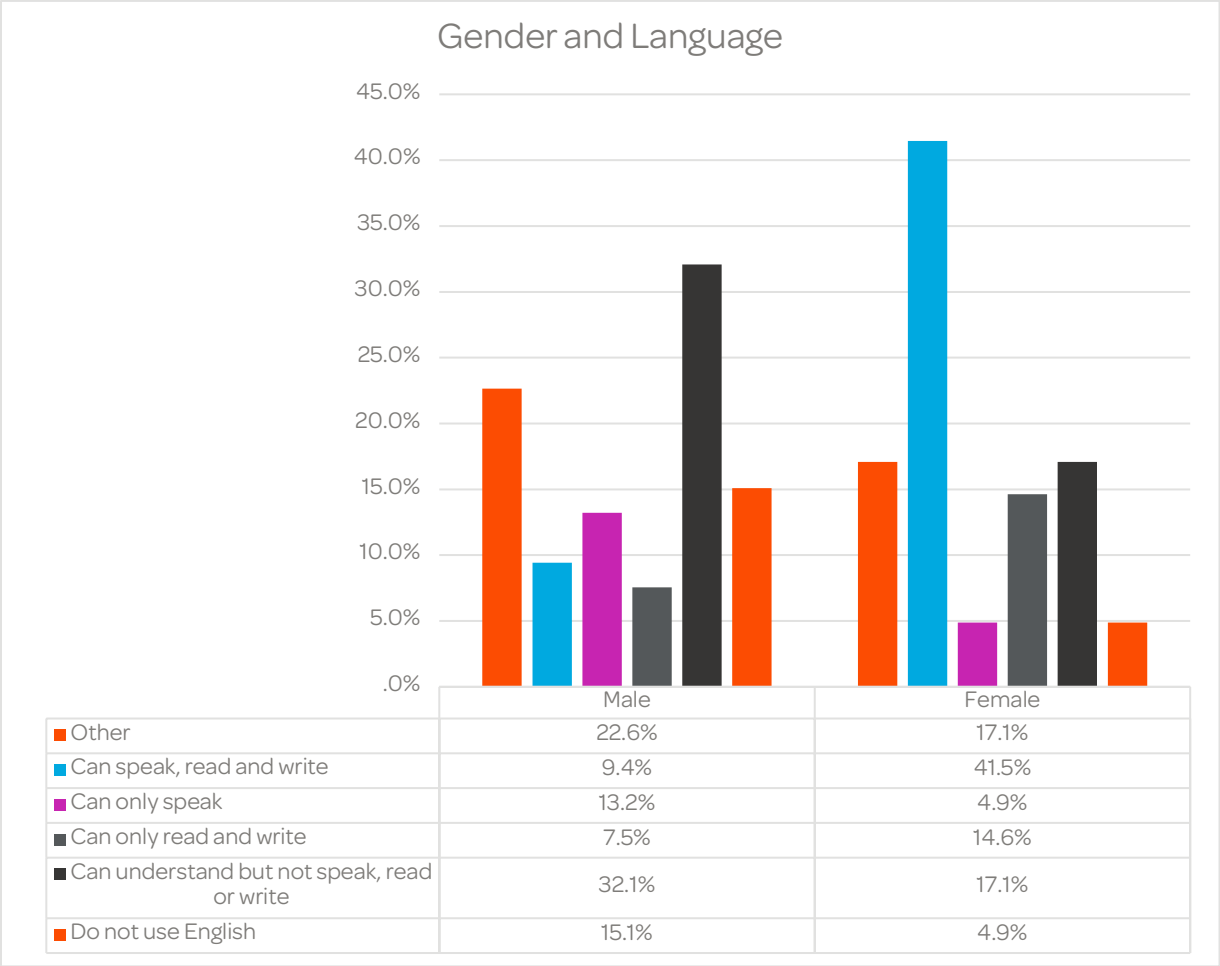
Language ability is defined in this study as English language proficiency and competency using English in day-to-day activities. It has been measured by asking participants about their current level of English and whether it has improved since arriving in Canada. Overall literacy is also measured by asking if participants can read and write in their first language. Participation in language learning is a major component of settlement; within this study participants were asked about LINC classes, additional training, and helpful language learning supports. The survey also explored additional needed supports to improve English.

The study showed that a small minority were fluent in English with most having challenges in communication and language utilization. Language learning differed among the participants depending on their gender, sponsorship type, language exposure, age and human settlement prior to migration (urban or rural). Men had more opportunities to practice their English as compared to women due to higher levels of social participation and employment. GARs were less educated than PSRs, with some being illiterate in their mother tongue. Hence, the difficulty in language learning is complicated further for those who have never been in classrooms or had any formal language learning.

### English Language Fluency

A first step for the majority of Syrians included in the survey as they settle in Canadian cities, is the acquisition of English language skills to a level they can interact with others, search for employment, and begin to form social connections.

The survey employed a question to self-assess English fluency, as spoken, written or reading. Only 22% of the sample reported being able to speak, read and write in English. About 9% could speak and a similar proportion (10%) could only read and write in English. 26% of respondents reported they could understand but not communicate in English, and a further 11% did not use English at all.



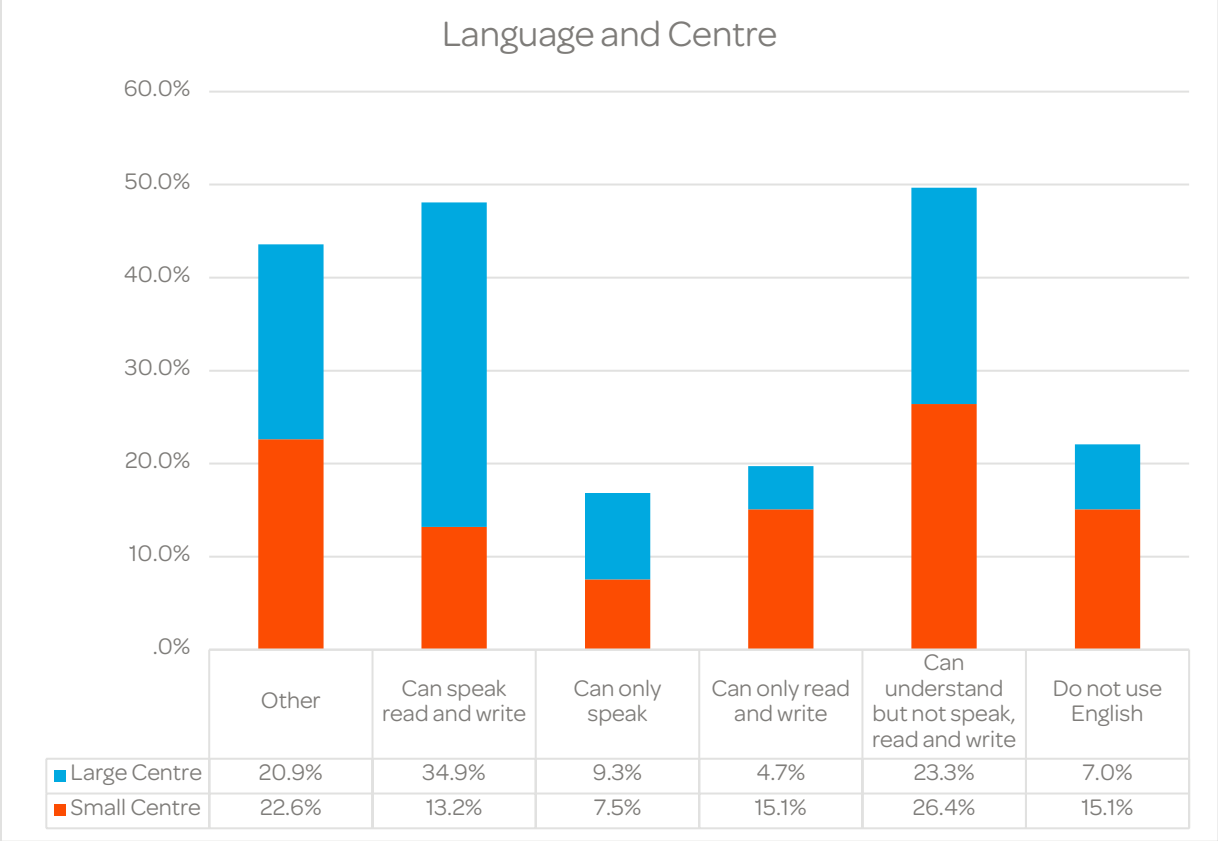

| | Male | Female |
|---|---|---|
| Other | 22.6% | 17.1% |
| Can speak, read and write | 9.4% | 41.5% |
| Can only speak | 13.2% | 4.9% |
| Can only read and write | 7.5% | 14.6% |
| Can understand but not speak, read or write | 32.1% | 17.1% |
| Do not use English | 15.1% | 4.9% |

**FIGURE 28; SOURCE AAISA SYRIAN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT STUDY, 2017**

As shown in Figure 31 9% of all males could speak, read and write in English as compared to 41.5%. The gap between men and women was especially wide in reported levels of English language fluency. 13% of males could speak as compared to 5% of all females. 14.6% of females could read and write as compared to males. The sample, largely comprised of GARs, had higher English language fluency among females as compared to males. This gender difference in English language fluency can have implications for employment programming for newly settled refugees. With higher English language skills, the women may have access to better employment opportunities.

Given higher rates of social participation among males one can assume that as far as practicing the language, males have more opportunities than females. Most of the females in the study were attending English language classes, but that was potentially the limit of their exposure. Based on the interviews it became clear that while learning contexts were critical to language acquisition, it was only through practice in everyday life that competency in English could be achieved.

A higher proportion of those in large centres could speak, read and write (35%) as compared to 13% in small centres. Survey respondents from small centres had a higher percentage of those who did not use English or who could only read and write.




| | Other | Can speak read and write | Can only speak | Can only read and write | Can understand but not speak, read and write | Do not use English |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Large Centre | 20.9% | 34.9% | 9.3% | 4.7% | 23.3% | 7.0% |
| Small Centre | 22.6% | 13.2% | 7.5% | 15.1% | 26.4% | 15.1% |

**FIGURE 29; SOURCE: AAISA SYRIAN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT STUDY 2017**

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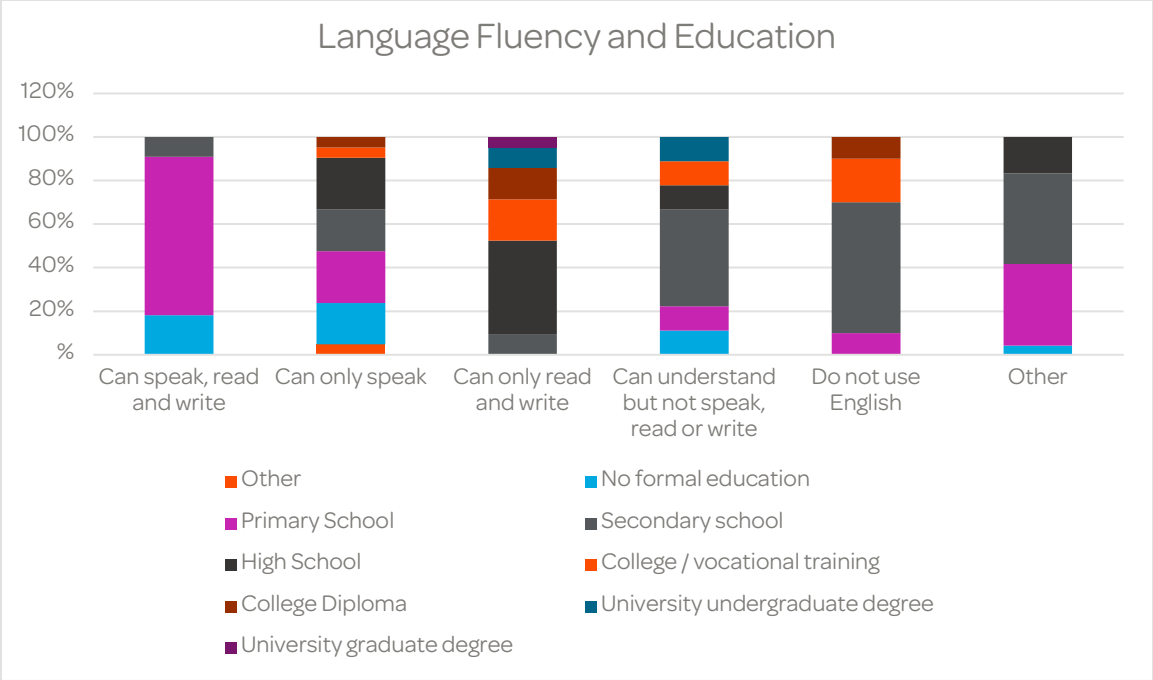


**FIGURE 30; SOURCE: AAISA SYRIAN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT STUDY, 2017**

Those with higher levels of education were also likely to have better English fluency as seen in the graph above. Given that the sample was collected at RAP locations, with many respondents taking LINC classes the language fluency may be less dependent on the prior level of education.

## Importance of Language

English language ability is clearly a critical challenge for newly arrived refugees and is reflected in how Syrian respondents prioritized language learning. Participants linked language learning directly to settlement, making it a key factor for settlement in Alberta.

> *"Once we get the language, we can consider ourselves that we are well settled. We can communicate with people and get a job." (PSR man1)*

> *"Language is essential." (GAR woman 1)*

Learning English was seen as a foundational skill for all aspects of life in Canada, to such an extent that without English, participants needed a great deal of help from translators, friends, and family members everywhere they went. A few participants in the interviews shared few examples of their challenges, '*they speak too fast, we don't get it*', or '*I know what they are saying, I do understand, bits and parts, but, I don't know how to respond*'. Other participants highlighted, '*I have the words in my head, but once I want to talk, I don't know in which order to put them, or if the other person would understand me.*'

Even though newly arrived Syrian refugees were supported by translators from immigrant serving agencies, or other members of the Arab community, this help was not always available, and they felt a need to be independent.

> *"We need it for the least case, we need it for work, we need it to live, we need it, we need it, we need the language and it's all I am focused on." (GAR man 3)*

> *And of course the language.... after we learn the language well and after they stop the income then we will work. If I spoke English well, I would have worked from long time ago.... language is the key. (GAR man 5)*

Language barriers extended to all aspects of settling in their new communities and led to feelings of isolation. For example, participants spoke about the importance of language at the hospital, the doctor's office, the school and over the phone.

> *"It has to be on the phone and it's hard to communicate sometimes. For example, I had an issue with my electricity bill and I couldn't deal with it well on the phone but at the same time, there is not an office where I can go and they can fix it for me. It's very frustrating!!" (PSR man 3)*

> *"When it comes to my neighbors I feel rather secluded because of the language barrier." (GAR woman 4)*

Developing social connections was difficult when participants felt they lacked the language skills necessary to communicate with others. This was especially the case with their children and in their roles as caregivers in the family. Many participants noted that their children learned the language faster than them and that children became translators for their parents. The reason for this was that children were more exposed and immersed in the language at school and were developmentally attuned for language acquisition.

> *"When we first arrived here, my kids found some difficulty, as far as the language is concerned. They always sat on the side, alone, they didn't know how to talk or how to behave in this new environment." (GAR woman 3)*

> *"My kids are adjusting so well because their English is really well." (BVOR woman 1)*

Their own language ability affected not only their own settlement and that of their children. They talked about how language was key to not only building social connections with the community, but within important systems such as schools.

> *"Also, the system here is a bit frustrating because if there is a problem, you cannot go to an office and deal with it. It has to be on the phone and it's hard to communicate sometimes." (PSR man 3)*

## Language Improvement

The importance of language skills in Canada was clearly evident among participants. This translated into more emphasis on English language learning. The perception of advancement in English skills is greatly important to refugees. A majority of participants (47%) felt their language had improved a lot since arrival. 46% felt that their language skills had only improved somewhat while 7% saw no change.

In terms of gender, women tended to report a higher percentage of improvement as compared to men. 62% of all women reported an improvement in their language skills as compared to 36% of all men. Those in larger centres were twice as likely to report improvement in language skills as compared to smaller centres. 67% of the total respondents from large centres reported improvement as compared to 32% of all respondents from small centres. 66% of all respondents from small centres reported a somewhat improvement as compared to 23% of all respondents from large centres.

When English improvement by level of education is considered it becomes clear those with at least a secondary level of education and high school education had the highest percentage of those who said yes their English had improved. Those with primary school education were the most likely to see no improvement in their English as compared to other education categories. Participants with a higher level of education were more likely to have made language gains as compared to those with a lower level of education (Figure 31).

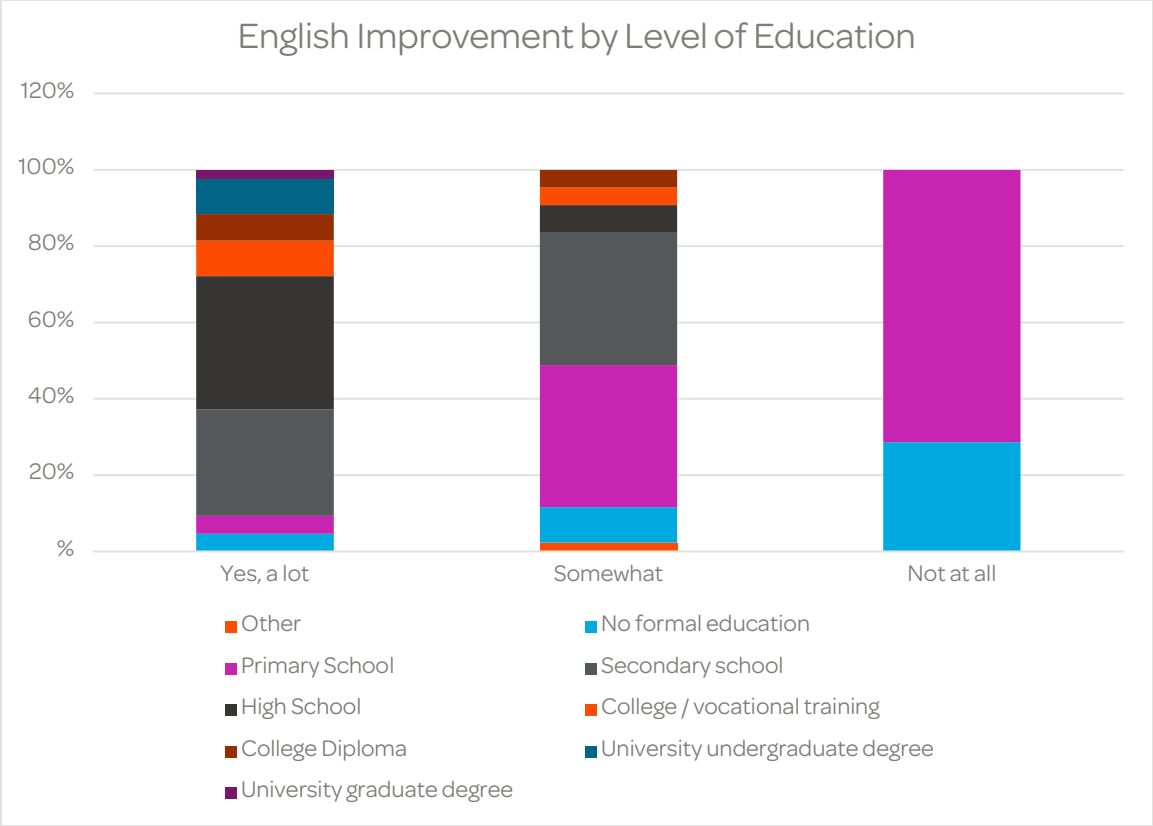


**FIGURE 31; SOURCE: AAISA SYRIAN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT STUDY, 2017**

Part of the challenge is that language learning remains largely standardized for all types of learners and skill levels. In fact, a common complaint is that language education remains de-contextualized and distant from everyday usage. Cummins[78] suggests that a tailored approach must be adopted especially for those with literacy in another language. Since these individuals already possess basic language competencies or non-contextual CALPS (Cognitive Academic Language proficiency) in place, what they need is the context embedded BICS (Basic Interpretation Communication Skills) in order to learn and utilize the new language.

Some participants could enroll in LINC quickly and did not have to wait on long waiting lists for English language classes, others were supported by sponsors to learn, and still more benefited from a special Canadian grant targeted for the newly arrived Syrian refugees. Furthermore, English language learning was not quite challenging for the participants who had previous exposure to the language and who were highly educated and motivated to learn.

> *"I wasn't delayed at all to get into classes. I didn't wait not even 1 month after I made an assessment at CSS." (BVOR woman 4)*

> *"So I did LINC for a while and were able to get advanced quickly because we had some background. Then Concordia opened up 10 seats and I got the grant, and we all have*

*university degrees from Syria. I have a degree from the university back home and now I would like to apply to make the degree equivalent a Canadian one." (GAR man 4)*

74% of the sample was attending LINC classes and about 19% claimed that they were planning to attend. Only 5% reported they were on a waitlist.

Language improvement was often the result of a combination of factors, including the utilization of formal language courses and other informal language support services, like support from sponsors, meeting people in the community, and taking advantage of other opportunities from residing in Canada. When asked what has been most helpful in learning English, formal language classes did rank highly (35%), but second to daily interactions (49%).

*"I feel like my English is going well. I studied English in high school. I watch English movies. There was some English in university as well. So although my language is not advanced but I believe it's better than average." (BVOR woman 2)*
*"One sponsor comes to visit us twice a week and she trains us English and talks to us." (BVOR woman 4)*

LINC and other informal supports were a clear priority for the time being, which was also reflective of participants' current assessment of their English language ability. Only a small minority had taken any additional educational training programs (22%). A majority of participants answered no to this question (79%).

## Language and Employment

In Alberta, the language of employment is predominantly English and therefore posed a significant barrier to overcome for these respondents.

*"English language is a barrier, the first thing they ask you about when you apply for a job, is about English." (GAR man 2)*

Some participants talked about their own skills and potential for work, but with a lack of English, they needed to resort to 'survival jobs'. These jobs were understood as jobs that did not match their skill set or fell far below their qualifications. This work was usually precarious and had low salaries.

*"I had a lot of work experience and I know a lot, but the problem is that my English is not at a high level. If I had good English, then I would be a manager somewhere." (PSR man 3)*

*"Now, that his English level is not that good, [my husband] will not find the job that he wants, however, once he does reach a good English level, then he would be able to work [on] anything." GAR woman 3*

They also spoke about the English language standards of the Canadian job market being difficult to meet, resulting in a delay in their participation in the labour force.

## Overall Language Challenges

Regardless of the variety of supports available, English language learning remained a great challenge for about 70% of survey respondents. For refugees with less education there was disappointment after one year of language learning as their English language level was not up to their own expectations or that of the employing society. Generally, the challenge to learn English seemed insurmountable in the time that participants had (1 year of LINC classes). For many, one year of language learning was not enough to give them the skills needed for the job market or to integrate into Canadian life.

> *"The thing that we experience most difficulty with is the language. Sometimes we go places but we cannot communicate because we don't know the language very well. The school language is different than the street language.... " (GAR man 5)*

In addition, the skills they acquired in this one year of English language learning did not conform to their needs. Therefore, some participants expressed frustration.

> *"One year though to be able to find work is unrealistic for many... I wish that the government will pay for English schooling for two years and perhaps financial funding for two years until the Syrians are ready to find work." (GAR woman 6)*

Others felt that English language classes are 'boring' and a 'waste of time'.

> *"[I] tried taking the LINC classes and I was in level 4/5 and I might be in 6 now but I thought that it was a waste of time and I had to make a living." (PSR man 2)*

> *"After a while, learning English becomes boring. Without a meaningful goal associated with the language, people become bored and do not see the point of learning the language. As a result they want to quit learning English." (GAR man 4)*

While language learning remained a priority, the pressure to find employment and support family members was clear. Participants spoke about the need to balance language learning with financial stability. Many participants felt they had to choose between language learning and employment to sustain their families.

> *"I have never had English in Syria, so I need 2-3 years so that I can attain a strong skills in English. During that period, if I am not working, it is going to be difficult." (GAR man 2)*

**Language Summary**

English language acquisition, fluency and usage are critical indicators of settlement in Alberta. Language plays a key role in not only finding employment but also making social connections and integrating into society.

Only about 22% of the respondents could read and write English with most respondents pointing to several challenges in speaking and understanding the language. Some of these challenges were due to the lack of opportunities to practice the language while others who were not literate in Arabic were struggling to both learn basic language skills as well as learning appropriate usage.

LINC and other informal supports were critical to developing language skills among refugees. However, refugees experienced immense pressure to develop adequate language capacity in the first year in order to become financially independent.

## Other Challenges in Settlement

### Housing

Housing was one of the main settlement issues of concern in the study. Participants reported various housing challenges and issues. While for some the size or the location of the house was an issue, for many others it was the high cost of rent. Many participants felt that the money they are paying for rent is more than half of their sponsorship income provides them and that they had to utilize the children's tax benefit for their housing and related daily living costs.

> *"The rent is very expensive in relation to the income they give us." (GAR woman 6)*

> *"I am currently paying more than half of what I make as rent. So it's really tough. If the money was going to financing a house I wouldn't feel like it's going to waste." (PSR man 2)*

> *"Our income from the government is really good but is not sufficient when you take into account the rent expense. This is a problem that is facing all the Syrians that are coming here." (GAR man 4)*

Furthermore, many participants did not know enough about the housing rental system in Canada and their rights and responsibilities as a tenant. With rental housing contracts in English, participants shared that it was challenging for them to understand the rules and regulations around housing.

> *"Another incident happened with my building manager when we wanted to move in the furniture, he asked me what day would be suitable, I said Sunday and he didn't tell me that I get charged $150 extra because its Sunday. So once I found out I asked if I could change the day. I then picked Tuesday, and when I got there someone else was moving so I had to wait. Once I could use the elevator and by the time I was done I was told that I will pay the $150 regardless because the security guard had to work over time because I was late. If I had been told I would have called off the whole moving because I am trying to save any dollar I can save. "(PSR Man 2)*

Finally, most of the participants reported being on waiting lists for subsidized housing and this created many challenges to find affordable housing.

> *"Most important is government housing. I was finally able to get one but after a long time....it takes a lot of time. When I finally got one I felt like I was in a dream....I expected the waiting to go on for 2 years. Government housing is more convenient in terms of privacy and also makes a big difference in terms of budget. With the money I'm saving, I'm going to open bank accounts for my children and save for the money for them." (GAR man 5)*

One of the critical challenges for participants was to find housing that met their needs as a family.

> *"Honestly I can't lie to you the house is slightly small for us. We are a family of 8 and now that we are looking for a new house landlords don't seem to be very welcoming because we are a huge family." (GAR man 3)*

> *"The place I live in right now is small and expensive. I was really hoping to find a decent place preferably a house with two washrooms that fits us all, remain in the budget and be near the location of my sister's job." (BVOR woman 1)*

> *"When we first got here we were so excited about the nice weather so we stayed in the balcony all day long, lunch breakfast and dinner so our neighbors complained and got us evicted." (BVOR woman 1)*

> *".....We lived in an apartment and I was terrified that my children are going to disturb the neighbor underneath. So I was restricting the children quite a bit." (PSR man 3)*

In addition, some newcomers felt that their families might be unsafe in housing where the neighbors are smoking drugs, or getting in trouble requiring the police to come over and have them arrested.

> *".....Also the smell of marijuana all over the place." (BVOR woman 1)*

> *" Second, our neighbor were people with "bad reputation", so the police frequently came to our building and my kids were seeing people being handcuffed and detained all the time. My kids were scared of these scenes, and I was afraid to leave my wife or kids alone in the house." (GAR man 2)*

The survey showed that roughly 39% of respondents found the housing size, layout and condition did not meet their expectation. 31% found cost to be another critical factor. 13% found neighborhood or community safety to be a critical issue.

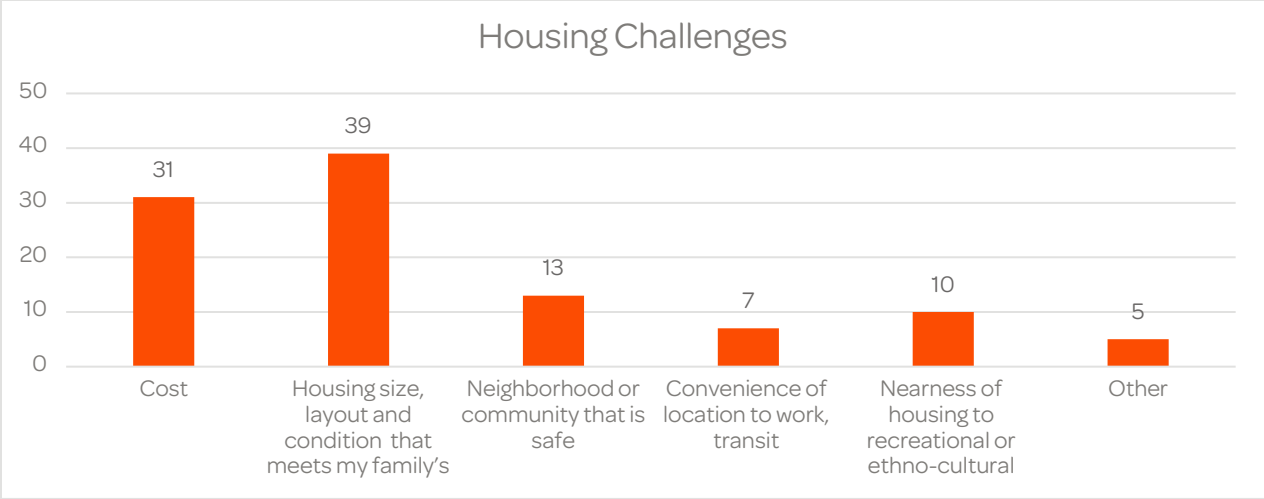


**FIGURE 32; SOURCE: AAISA SYRIAN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT STUDY 2017**

## Family Challenges

Some of the main challenges in settling in terms of social connections was children's schooling and helping children adjust (both cited by 27%) to the population. Finding childcare was also a critical concern with about 14% finding it problematic.

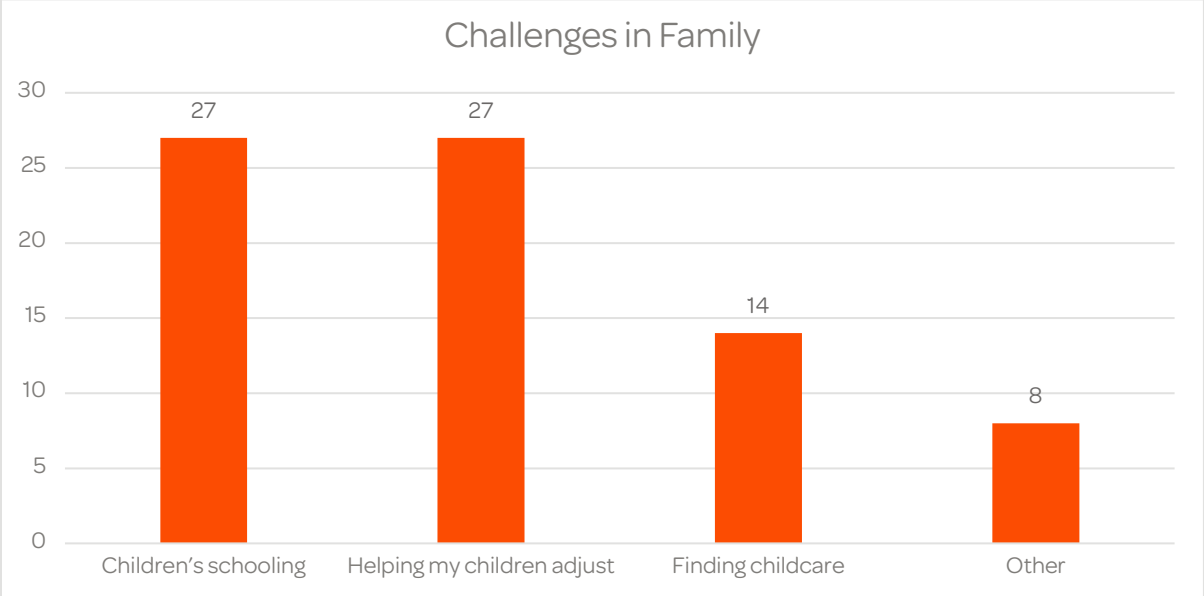


**FIGURE 33; SOURCE: AAISA SYRIAN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT STUDY 2017**

## Transportation

For about 19% of the participants understanding the transportation options or transit system was a significant challenge; 18% also found the inability to afford private transportation was a critical concern. 10% cited navigating the city/community was problematic.

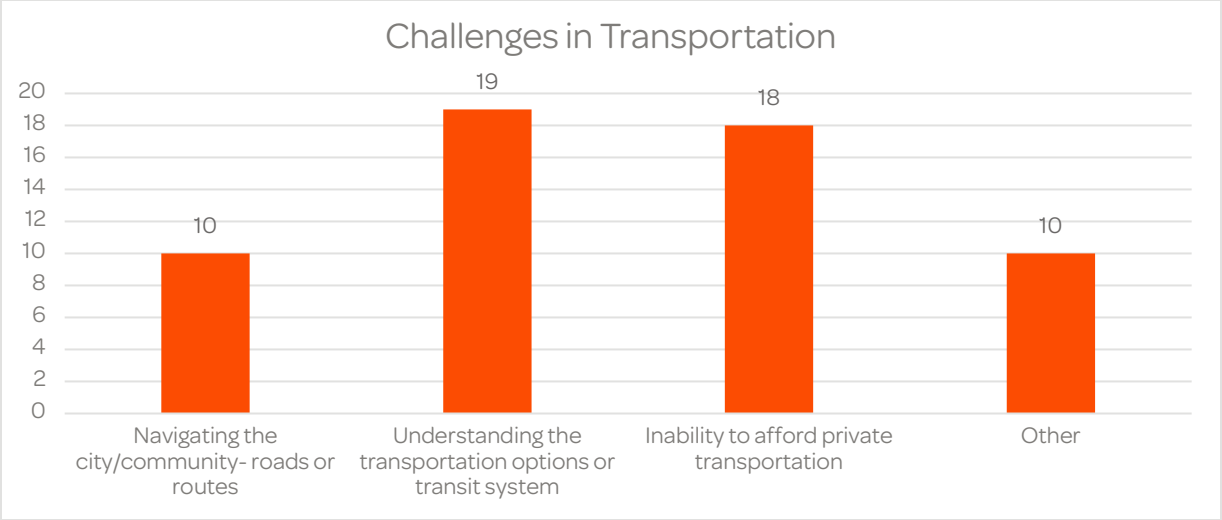


**FIGURE 34; SOURCE: AAISA SYRIAN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT STUDY, 2017**

## Environment Challenges

45% of the participants found adjusting to weather challenging.

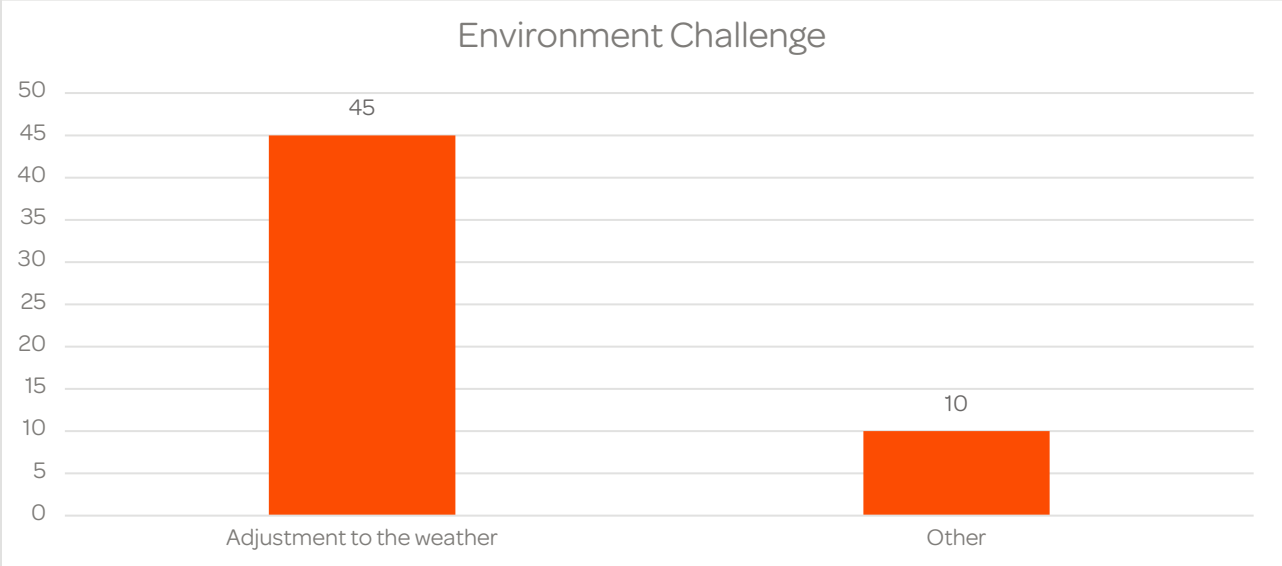


**FIGURE 35; SOURCE: AAISA SYRIAN REFUGEE RESSETTLEMENT STUDY, 2017**

## Health Challenges

With regards to health challenges, 22% of the participants indicated they had difficulty accessing a doctor. Struggling with previous experiences from their home country was also significant for participants (12%) followed by challenges that occur from trying to understand the Canadian health care system (10%). 8% indicated that affording healthcare was difficult, followed by getting a health card (6%), food and diet (6%) and mental health (4%).

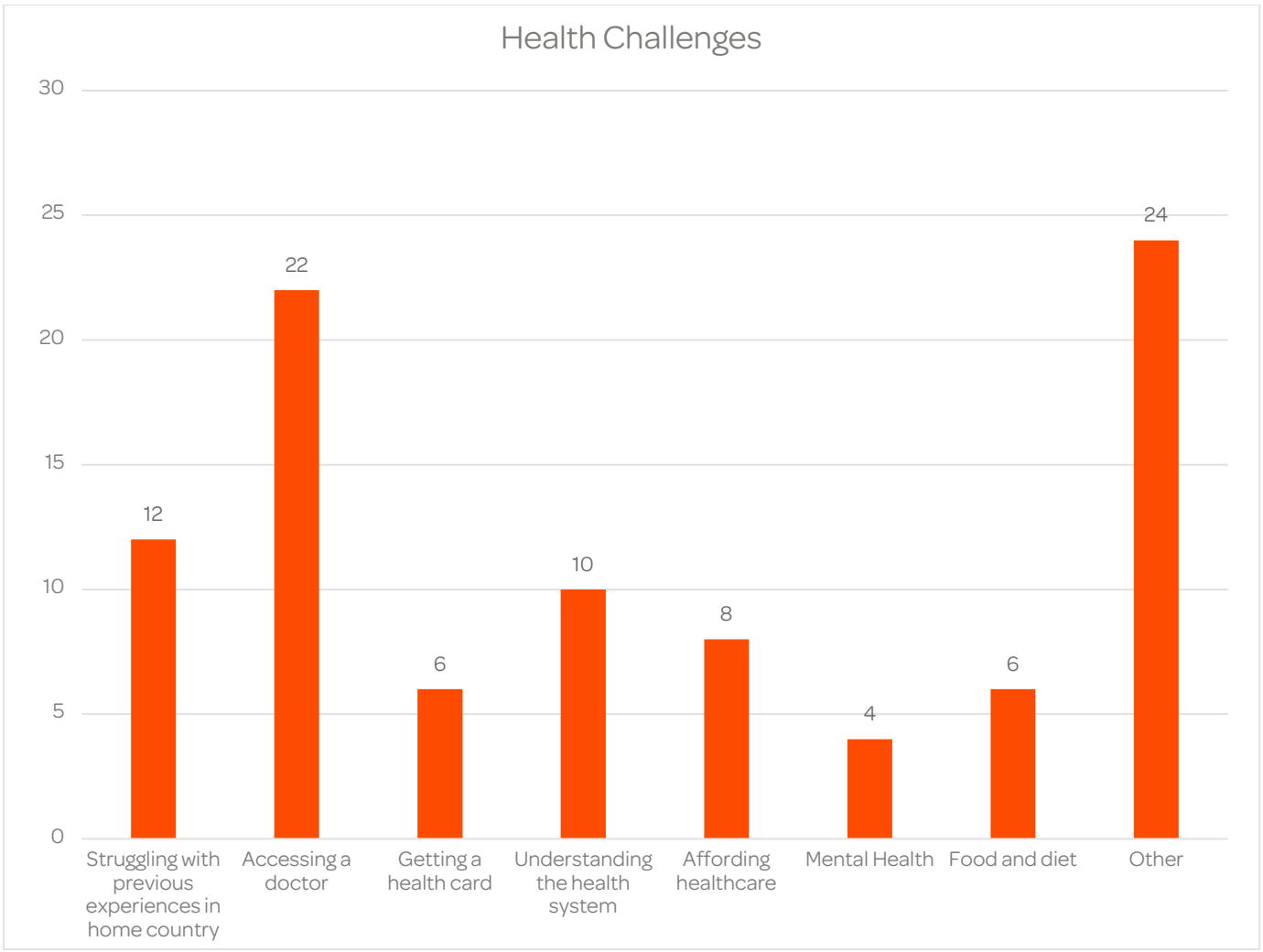


**FIGURE 36; SOURCE: AAISA SYRIAN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT STUDY, 2017**

Despite their disappointments, frustrations, fears of identity loss and difficulties in settlement, most newly arrived Syrian refugees were optimistic about their own future and the future of their children.

> *"I am very optimistic and hope the future will be bright not only for me but for all the Syrian refugees who came to Canada...In the far future, I have hope in my wife and kids. I have set goals for them. I would like my wife to continue college and become a pharmacist. As for my kids, I wish they become doctors, engineers, and pilots." (GAR man 2)*

> *"I would like my future here to be bright. "I have heard so many say that this is a place to insure your kid's future, but where is my future? If Syria's conditions were ok maybe I would never have considered Canada, mind you am very grateful it opened its doors and took us in, that's a blessing but I am starting to believe that*

*all am getting is a piece of my mind and the future will be for my kids." This is just an idea and I will still work very hard to be where I want to be in life and career wise."*
*(BVOR woman 2)*

*"My goal is to open my business. I know that I'm going to face difficulties but I believe that I will thrive. My outlook for the future is very optimistic."(GAR man 4)*

*"In the near future I would like to own my own business. I have always liked cars and I feel I can do very well here. I want my son to have everything he needs. I want to provide for him with all I have got. I also want to raise him in a way where he is capable to stand on his own two feet and never need anything from anyone." (PSR man 2)*

# IX. CONCLUSION

Alberta has welcomed an increasing number of resettled refugees in recent years. The Syrian refugee population presents an important opportunity to better understand how to support short-, medium- and long-term settlement and integration. In order to support the successful settlement of refugees, it is critical to address the barriers and challenges in employment, housing, mental health and social well-being. Some of these challenges are around mental health and social well-being, language proficiency and lack of appropriate employment opportunities. Given the current socio-political and economic global climate, these refugees are also facing several challenges including Islamophobia, racism and discrimination, some of which were also reported in this study.

This study adopted a mixed method approach to understand the resettlement experience of refugees across five cities in Alberta. Given the budgetary and time limitations the results provide us with a small window into the experiences of these incoming populations. The study provides us with some key trends and raised several questions around resettlement and integration.

One of the core pillars of settlement is employment. The study reinforced that employment outcomes are strongly related to social well-being and overall settlement and integration. The survey sample (majority GARs) had mostly primary or secondary school education; they came into Canada with expectations of jobs that matched their skills and experience. For PSRs and BVORs, despite higher levels of education, the employment landscape was equally challenging. Language in all cases played a critical role. Additionally, respondents highlighted a lack of understanding of the employment system, lack of social capital and networks to secure jobs, gaps in skills, lack of credential recognition and challenges to start new entrepreneurial ventures. Those living in large centres perceived greater opportunities as compared to those within small centres. Women with better language skills seemed to fare better even though overall employment rates were low. Within Alberta, economic opportunities, especially in small centres, are perceived by participants as fairly limited in choice. This may create greater competition for employment and possibly reduce opportunities for newcomers to integrate successfully.

A three-pronged approach around this can be utilized: a) continue to focus to integrate newcomers into established streams of the economy by focusing on mentoring, bridging programs, training, upskilling or credential recognition; b) encourage participation in those streams that have labour shortages by training, focused job fairs and knowledge dissemination; c) understand the strengths of the incoming population and encourage new pockets of economic development in the current economy. While strategies a) and b) have been spoken about at great length, more work needs to be done around strategy c), especially tailoring to the needs of those with less literacy or education and more skills and experience.

Social connections are a bedrock for social well-being and developing a strong and integrated society. The study respondents both through the quantitative and qualitative data spoke at length about the social isolation, limited opportunities to develop strong relationships and struggles around identity. For Syrian refugees, social connections were the key to finding jobs, accessing resources and expressing identity. Like many other refugee and immigrant groups before them, the Syrians are juggling competing needs where they are trying to integrate and learn the values of Canadian society and at the same time continue to evoke, remember and enact their social identities as they were back in their home country. As social structures are dismantled and re-created in a new environment with different expectations and ideals, these refugees are struggling to make sense of what it means to be 'Syrian' in this new Canadian environment. The implication of this on settlement is profound. For respondents who were used to leveraging social connections to secure resources and services, the challenges are steep. For most respondents, pre-migration relationships were still the source of emotional and social support. Language and social-cultural adaptation also deepen the fissures for building strong relationships. The study underpinned the importance of supporting refugees in terms of social and mental health needs. Social well-being outcomes are closely tied with success in all other aspects of settlement. A clear example of this was that even though respondents from small centres reported many challenges in employment and settlement services, they simultaneously reported high levels of belonging to Canada as compared to those from large centres. For vulnerable communities, such as the Syrian refugees, that are facing deep issues around religious and identity politics, social well-being outcomes become even more significant in the overall settlement trajectory.

Language is the final, but in some ways, the most critical of all settlement concerns. It is the necessary condition for securing employment and making social connections in a new environment. More critically, language acquisition and proficiency has several inter-linkages with successful integration, belonging and long-term satisfaction. It may support communities to build bridges between communities that may otherwise remain isolated. The study respondents overall were making strong strides to acquire English language proficiency. However, in the immediate context their struggles to settle in a new environment were heightened due to language related challenges. Beyond language support and training refugees spoke about the need of having increased opportunities to practice and converse with native English speakers. Strategies to strengthen English language training to increase practical utility and support employment were other key findings from the study.

In conclusion, the study is an important foray into understanding the resettlement experiences of Syrian refugees. More long-term work needs to be carried out to track settlement outcomes over time and across cities. Special attention within programming needs to be paid around gender, disability, age and prior-migration experience.

# X. Service and System Suggestions

The study provides some clear directions to support the development of a client-centered care model. Participants also suggested services in different domains, which might eventually help newcomers settle more successfully in Alberta. Examples of such services were: a Syrian refugee hotline, volunteering opportunities, help with legal papers, more translation services as well as targeted programs for employment in order to use their experience and expertise in Canada. These suggestions have been grouped together in terms of overall systems suggestions and specific practice recommendations (Appendix 1).

## Overall Suggestions

### Future Research

The study highlighted several key areas that require further exploration and investigation. Further research can be conducted to understand refugee settlement outcomes over time through longitudinal research. Additionally, research to explore gender differences among Syrian refugee men and women can help to build gender specific services. Given the large children and youth population among the Syrian refugees more research around their needs and settlement outcomes can be conducted. Participants greatly appreciated the opportunity to share their views through narrative interviews. Future research can continue to include methodologies that provide a platform for refugee voices and stories. Utilizing creative methods such as action research or participatory research can serve to both empower and engage refugees in critical ways.

### Professional Development and Training

The study identified several opportunities to strengthen professional development for RAP providers, private sponsors, and other frontline staff working with refugees. These include developing stronger skills around trauma-centered care, strengths-based practice and empowerment focus for refugee clients. The study highlighted the need to increase professional development opportunities that allow for sharing of best practices and focus on skills in counselling, crisis care, conflict management, and referral support.

### Policy Development

Given the focus on client-centered care the project highlights the importance of policy to reflect the needs and capacities of incoming refugees. A few key areas of policy work include: providing longer support for incoming refugees both in terms of funding and services; increasing funding for refugees with physical or mental disabilities as they require greater resources; greater involvement of refugees in settlement case planning and choosing settlement location that is suited to their needs; review housing supports to meet housing needs of refugee families both in terms of funding and housing size; and increase funding and develop policies for support services.

## Strengthening Support Services

One of the key recommendations of a client-centered framework is to strengthen support services for refugee families. Given that RAP providers are already serving multiple needs, complementary supports can be provided through a peer navigator model. These complementary services may help to empower clients to effectively utilize services and, engage with the system and community and meet their needs in a timely and tailored manner.

The study showed, that while many refugees could access different services, they continued to face challenges in adapting and understanding the policies, processes, procedures and systems of Canada. For others with limited access to services, the challenges went beyond access – they needed more knowledge, support and guidance to navigate systems. Deeply marginalized groups within the broader Syrian refugee population such as women, individuals with disability, seniors, those with lower literacy and those living in more remote locations were at greatest risk for remaining 'outside' the service delivery system. Moreover, refugee needs continue to evolve as they settle and remain ever-changing. Often their needs are not formal but are informal and more transient. Qualitative interviews highlighted the complexity and nuances of settlement experiences that may remain hidden and unspoken under the formal umbrella of settlement and integration.

Peer navigators have been known to work effectively in many settings including physical and mental health.[79] They are particularly well-positioned as they have personal experience of the system as a client themselves; and they can support the informal needs of refugees in the first language. It should be noted that peer navigators should not replace settlement and integration practitioners, especially considering refugees are a vulnerable population and oversight and accountability is needed. It is also important that peer navigators are embedded within the settlement system and are not operating independently. With these considerations in mind, the peer navigator models should be further explored by AAISA, before being more broadly applied in Alberta's settlement sector. This can be conducted by better understanding the emergence of grassroots support groups during the Syrian influx, and exploring peer navigator models in other fields and jurisdictions.

## Trauma Informed Care

The second recommendation from the study is to adopt a trauma informed lens for working with refugees at the client, staff, agency, and system levels. The core principles of this lens are: trauma awareness; safety; trustworthiness, choice and collaboration; and building of strengths and skills of clients. Trauma can be defined in terms of: child abuse, neglect, witnessing violence and disrupted attachment, as well as later traumatic experiences such as violence, accidents, natural disasters, war, sudden unexpected loss and other life events that are out of one's control and potentially devastating.[80]

The study shed light on the different types of mental health and socialization related challenges faced by Syrian refugees. Refugees are not only coming to terms with prior trauma

but also challenges related to settlement and integration. Adopting a trauma-informed lens in the settlement sector can be operationalized as:

- AAISA can provide specific training to all staff working with refugee and immigrant populations to understand trauma and embed it in service delivery by placing priority on the individual's safety, choice and control. Services are focused on developing a mutually collaborative environment.
- Even though settlement staff may not always be equipped to manage trauma, they can provide a safe and a judgment free environment that places importance on physical and emotional safety.
- Create policies and support structures within organizations and communities that can support those experiencing trauma.

## Specific Service Recommendations

### Initial Reception

Consistent and timely support throughout the initial phase is important for incoming refugees. This means having the same assigned settlement worker that can provide flexible, wrap around support as needed. While some centres were able to do this fairly successfully, other parts of the province struggled as a result of limited resources.

> *"When Syrian first come here, they need a lot of support in terms of knowing the system. They have a lot of questions and they phone the advisor they were assigned from the government. However, because there are a lot of Syrians who are also asking a lot of questions, the advisor wasn't able to get back to us right away. They need time and sometimes it was difficult to wait. I wish that there were a larger number of advisors looking after the Syrians. Or even a hot-line available for us to call for emergency." (GAR man 4)*

> *"We do need more help in translations. I do understand that they are busy and they have other commitments so I understand why they can't be there. I can't take it personally or have expectations, we have to be able to help ourselves, we do need their help so any time they are able to help us it is a favor they are giving us and we are more than thankful."(GAR man 3)*

> *"We wish to have translators at least for the first few months, or at least to get going in English. We know lots of people from Iraq, Eritrea, Sudan, Somalia, who speak both English and Arabic and wo have been like us refugees and who are looking currently for work, why don't they hire them to help us? 1 translator for each 4-5 families." (GAR woman 1)*

Opportunities for Innovation:

- Beyond the settlement worker an easy to access hotline service in Arabic language can be available for anyone who may need help. This service was previously available during the initial influx of refugees and it can be an effective strategy to continually support refugees over time.
- Connecting newly arrived refugees with 'peer refugees' both through social 'meet-ups' and/or connected via social media or virtual groups (like whats app) can help to meet the gap.

## Needs Assessment & Referrals

Given that the needs assessment can be the most fundamental step to support clients there are several ways to strengthen this process to empower clients. Drawing on a strengths-based model the needs assessment can focus on client strengths to identify potential areas of support or enhancement.

The strengths perspective offers a set of guiding principles that recognize that individuals do better when they are helped to identify, recognize, and use the strengths and resources available in themselves and their environment.[81] A strengths-based approach is "an ecological perspective that stresses the importance of examining people's characteristics, the type of environment they live in, and the multiple contexts that influence their lives."[82] All individuals have strengths, yet needs assessment often focus on what is missing, wrong or problematic.

Practitioners undertaking needs assessment must shift from deficit-focused approaches to identifying positive characteristics and qualities with their clients. A client-centered strength-based practice approach is holistic because it incorporates an individual's strengths, skills and abilities.

A strengths-based perspective considers a person's strengths and resources in the change process:

- Focus on trusting and meaningful relationships.
- Empowering individuals to take a lead in their own change process.
- Drawing upon internal resources of motivation and hope.[83]

Opportunities for Innovation:

- Needs are assessed through a collaborative and client-led process. Clients are linked to resources for additional supports and are empowered to co- develop their own case plans.
- Outcomes are measured on an individualized case plan basis that attempts to focus strengths rather than a deficit model of care.
- AAISA can support RAP providers to adapt their needs assessments

## Employment Strategies

Employment-related service suggestions included entrepreneurship training, support for informal income-generating activities, bridging programs (e.g., construction, hospitality, trades, food industry), health and safety training, job readiness programs, on-the-job support, and appropriate work placements. Further, there is a need for networking and for service providers to develop strong professional relationships with employers to increase employment opportunities for resettled refugees.

> *"I suggest that there should be programs from the government during our first year even if it was in Arabic or English that explains to newcomers how to be able to make use of their own work experiences in the Canadian society or how to connect their work background with a similar avenue here in Canada. This will give people incentive to work harder on learning English because they know that after they learn English, they have a clear path or plan regarding work" (GAR man 4)*

Support for long-term career planning and career transitions is needed, as well as accommodations to meet diverse and complex needs. Resettled refugees need to access reliable information and available supports, to connect with employment service providers, and to access targeted resources.

> *"What I wish (name of immigrant serving agency) and other centres do is provide guaranteed volunteer opportunities for the newcomers and get them integrated that way, and expose them to Canadian experience. These centres should concentrate more on providing newcomers with opportunities to link and connect their previous work experience with similar Canadian volunteer opportunities. Even it was volunteering for 2 hours a week." (GAR man 4)*

Employment is a requirement for resettled Syrian refugee families, and decent work is needed that will provide for larger families. Access to employment and training programs will foster the settlement and integration of refugees in local communities and contribute to their health and well-being.

## Embedding Social Well-Being in all Settlement Outcomes

For the Syrian refugee population, the study showed that, social connections were a critical element of their resettlement experience. Participants spoke about developing and harnessing networks to find jobs, learn or practice the English language as well as providing psycho-social support. Social well-being was closely related to their economic well-being and their overall settlement and integration. As programs are being developed settlement providers can focus on centering social well-being as a key outcome for settlement outcomes.

As a core part of social well-being the study highlighted the need to help bridge differences in cultural and social orientation. More widespread orientation on civil laws, rules and regulations around issues like domestic violence, rights and responsibilities as a citizen, housing tenancy,

and Canadian values would also support settlement outcomes. Linking new refugees with other peers or community members can also support the settlement outcomes of refugees.

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