



Facilitating the integration of newcomer children and youth

Study on the integration of newly-arrived Syrian refugees
Submission to Senate Standing Committee on Human Rights, May 2016



Boys & Girls Clubs of Canada

Rachel Guin
Director, Research and Public Policy
2005 Sheppard Ave. E., Suite 400
Toronto, ON M2J 5B4
T 613/ 260-2274
F 416/ 640-5331
www.bgccan.com

About Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada

Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada is dedicated to supporting and encouraging children and youth as they discover, develop and achieve great futures. We are a national charity serving 96 member Clubs that provide services to 200,000 young people in 625 locations across Canada. For 116 years, we have welcomed children, youth, and families that reflect the diversity of Canada into Clubs in small and large cities, and rural and Aboriginal communities.

Boys and Girls Clubs have welcomed Syrian children, youth, and their families, opening Club doors during the day and integrating children into regular after school programs. Clubs have a long history of working with young people from around the world and their efforts have been bolstered by Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada's Newcomer Youth Advancement Program.

Given the integration challenges that immigrant youth face, we recommend the government provide additional resources to help them get off to a good start in Canada. We also encourage the government to adopt a universal approach to integration – one that is best suited to Canada's diversity and can meet the needs of the most vulnerable.

1. The need for a youth focused approach

Canada's immigration plan for 2016 identifies a target of 300,000 new immigrants this year.¹ Of that total, refugees will make up 55,800 (up from 24,800 in the previous year). The government plans to complete the resettlement of Syrian refugees and welcome higher numbers of refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Columbia, and Eritrea, fulfilling existing resettlement commitments. Reuniting families is also a priority.² In the coming year the government will increase admissions of sponsored spouses, partners and children, admitting a total of 60,000.

Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada commends the Senate for conducting a study on how we can ensure the successful integration of Syrian refugees and encourage you to consider how policies and programs could help support all newcomer youth regardless of their place of origin or their immigration class. **Canada's family-focused immigration plan calls for increased investments to ensure the successful integration of newcomer youth.**

YOUNG PEOPLE'S DISTINCT EXPERIENCE OF IMMIGRATION

According to the UN High Commission on Human Rights, nearly half of all refugees are minors.³ Youth who arrive as refugees often come from countries of conflict and tend to have experienced trauma, displaying higher than average rates of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Young refugees often come from extremely difficult situations where schooling has been highly disrupted or where no formal schooling was available.

¹ Campbell & Cohen Law Firm. Canada Immigration News. CanadaVisa. <http://www.canadavisa.com/news/canada-aims-to-welcome-up-to-305-000-new-permanent-residents-in-2016-across-all-immigration-categories.html>

² Liberal Party of Canada. Election Platform. Retrieved from <https://www.liberal.ca/realchange/reuniting-families/>

³ UNHCR. 2010. 2009 Global Trends: Refugees, Asylum-seekers, Returnees, Internally Displaced and Stateless Persons. Switzerland: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. <http://www.unhcr.org/4c11f0be9.html>

Canada's focus on welcoming Syrian families has meant that over half of refugees are under the age of 24. One of the first steps in integrating these families involved registering children in school and ensuring they can access after school recreation programs that help them make friends and learn about Canada's diverse cultures.

Boys and Girls Clubs in Moncton, Toronto, Calgary, Edmonton, Peel, Lethbridge, Winnipeg, and Ottawa are working with settlement agencies and local immigrant organizations to help Syrian children and youth access Club programs. The outreach they are doing with Syrian families is similar to the outreach they conduct whenever their community welcomes newcomers. **A universal approach to services ensures everyone is always welcome at the Club.**

A recent report by Statistics Canada found that parental levels of education and their lack of official language skills had a major impact on outcomes for young immigrants, especially for adolescents.⁴ Early exposure to Canadian society mitigated the effects of parental disadvantage, translating into better educational outcomes for childhood immigrants. **These findings highlight the importance of government investment in programs that can support the successful integration of youth, starting with adolescents for whom integration will be the most challenging.**

Although the study concludes that "refugee children are a resilient group, and that most of them are well integrated into Canadian society," we were struck by the difference in outcomes by class of immigrant – living-caregiver immigrants' children fared the least well of all their peers. **This supports our position that a universal approach to the integration of newcomer children and youth is extremely valuable.**

Newcomer youth face many barriers including a lack of familiarity with the school system and lack of official language proficiency. They also struggle with many of the issues other Canadian youth face, albeit with fewer resources to help them cope: feelings of isolation and loneliness, mental health challenges, bullying, etc. A staff member from the Boys and Girls Clubs of Winnipeg explains some of the challenges: "We need to reach out to these youth before the local gangs do – who literally hang outside the housing families are placed in."

The struggle experienced by the children of Somali refugees can serve as an example of the difficulties young immigrants, refugees in particular, can encounter.⁵ While first generation Somalis integrated well, their children felt disenfranchised by racism and negative portrayals of their culture. They became targets for victimization and gang recruitment. The Somali experience has shown us that integration takes a sustained effort by the community in its entirety. **Addressing the challenges that newcomer youth face is an effective way to foster social cohesion.**⁶

It is smarter to invest in newcomer youth now, as well as into the future, to ensure their ongoing integration and engagement with the community rather than have to implement reactive measures to address the negative behaviours of youth who are marginalized, isolated, and disconnected from community.

POLICIES THAT SUPPORT INTEGRATION

The Canadian Council for Refugees describes the refugee process as a continuum with settlement at one end (arriving, adjusting, obtaining housing and a job, improving or acquiring language skills) and integration at the other end (full and

⁴ Hou, Feng & Aneta Bonikowska. April 25, 2016. Educational and Labour Market Outcomes of Childhood Immigrants by Admission Class. Statistics Canada. <http://www5.statcan.gc.ca/olc-cel/olc.action?ObjId=11F0019M2016377&ObjType=46&lang=en&limit=0>

⁵ Andrew-Gee, E. & Sengupta, J. Somalis share lessons with refugees on transitioning to Canadian Life. Globe and Mail. December 18, 2015. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/toronto/refugees-helping-refugees/article27870128/>

⁶ Berns-McGown, R. 2013. I am Canadian: Challenging stereotypes about young Somali Canadians. Institute for Research on Public Policy. <http://irpp.org/research-studies/study-no38/>

equal participation in society's social, political, and cultural spheres).⁷ Boys and Girls Clubs help especially at the latter end of the spectrum, ensuring young people feel a sense of belonging and helping them adapt.

The UNHCR conducted a review of trends in the development of policies relevant to the integration of refugees. They found that refugees are more often isolated – having fewer networks, perhaps struggling with language ability, not to mention healing the violence and trauma they may have experienced. While refugees share common experiences they are not a homogeneous group. Services should thus meet specific needs.

The UNHCR found value in fostering connections between refugees and the receiving population and emphasized the link between social integration and active citizenship and involvement in community activities, school events, sports, volunteering, etc. We highlight two of their recommendations:

- More collective efforts are needed by all stakeholders to support social networking, such as mentor projects and volunteer interaction. Existing good practices in this regard can usefully be replicated.
- Strong anti-discrimination framework and promotion of intercultural dialogue should be included in strategies to promote active citizenship. Community engagement, such as sports clubs and recreational activities, should be promoted and facilitated.⁸

Along similar lines, Ager and Strang propose a conceptual framework for understanding the core domains of successful refugee integration (see table below).⁹ **Boys and Girls Clubs would like to see investment in youth programs that foster links between youth and their new home communities and help them gain the language and cultural knowledge they need to succeed academically and in employment.**

Markers and Means -support integration	employment	housing	education	health
Social Connections -links fostered between people and communities that nurture a sense of belonging	social bridges (relationship between refugees & host community)	social bonds (proximity to family and like-ethnic groups)	social links (connection between refugees and structures of the state)	
Facilitators -help refugees gain cultural knowledge for integration	Language and cultural knowledge		Safety and stability	
Foundations -informs integration policies	Rights and citizenship			

In the short term, government should fund initiatives that provide youth with facilitators and social connections – initiatives that support youth to be healthy, to succeed academically, and to make transitions to employment. Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada has developed a program that helps local Clubs effectively reach and serve newcomer youth.

⁷ Canadian Council for Refugees. 2006. Gender Based Analysis of Settlement. Retrieved from www.ccrweb.ca/GBAresearch.pdf

⁸ NHCR. 2013. A New Beginning: Refugee Integration in Europe. <http://www.unhcr.org/52403d389.html>

⁹ Ager, A. & Strang, A. (2008). Understanding Integration: A Conceptual Framework. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 21, 2

2. Newcomer Youth Advancement Program

Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada's Newcomer Youth Advancement Program (NYAP) supports the healthy development of newcomer youth and their families and helps them build strong social and community connections. The program acts as a launch pad for youth to build skills, develop friendships and support networks, and gain self-confidence.

Clubs have tailored outreach strategies to local needs, developing community partnerships with settlement agencies and schools, connecting one-on-one with newcomer youth and families, conducting street outreach efforts, and delivering presentations and information sessions.

For the past three years, the NYAP has provided over 2,750 newcomers with access to Boys and Girls Clubs facilities and programming at nine Clubs – Edmonton, Calgary, Winnipeg, London, Hamilton, Toronto, Scarborough, LaSalle, and Moncton. Three more locations were added in 2016, in Longueuil, St. John's, and a second location in Toronto. Two more locations will be added in 2017.

An external evaluation has identified the following short-term outcomes of the Newcomer Youth Advancement Program:

Outcomes from the NYAP Logic Model

- Members feel welcomed, accepted, valued and respected
- Improved sense of belonging
- Improved cultural awareness and sensitivity
- Improved leadership and self-direction
- Improved communications and social skills
- Improved attitudes about school
- Improved health and nutrition

Additional Outcomes Experienced by Youth

- Development of positive relationships
- Increased confidence and self-esteem
- Developed positive sense of self and personal growth
- Increased engagement in community
- Increased breadth of experiences
- Increased employment skills

YOUTH AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

The Newcomer Youth Advancement Program provides:

- **Academic engagement** such as tutoring programs and educational activities strengthen academic competencies and help newcomers adjust to school life¹⁰
 - "School work was very difficult for two reasons, the first being I was looking at work I had never learned before and two it was in a language I did not understand...Going to the Boys and Girls Club program helped me learn French and English faster. I was learning in a fun environment...I also found help with doing my school work and projects."

¹⁰ Hou & Bonokowska (2016) conclude that "Improving the educational attainment of the children of immigrants from a disadvantaged socioeconomic background is crucial for ensuring that all children of immigrants have equal opportunities for economic success".

- **Employment support** helps newcomer youth search for work, create resumes, and prepare for job interviews. It also helps them understand the cultural role of youth employment (employment is higher in established Canadian youth as compared to newcomer youth). Clubs are also a source of employment.
- **Leadership development and civic engagement** encourage newcomer youth to participate as young leaders in their communities by having them organize Club and community events and participate in volunteer opportunities
 - The mentorship I received was fundamental in bettering my abilities as a leader, role model, and helped me to become more accountable and set goals that were realistic and tangible.
- **Recreational sports** help newcomer youth develop social skills and friendships by interacting with other youth without relying entirely on language skills
 - “Finding friends was hard at school...at lunch I would sit at a table with a few other kids and tried to communicate. When I came to the Boys and Girls Clubs programming it was easier for me to make friends because...we played soccer. We didn't have to talk in soccer we just played and people would talk to me after.”
- **Skill Development** provides youth with training and certification in transferrable skills such as safe food handling, first aid and babysitting
- **Cooking activities** help newcomer youth learn about Canadian culture and engage their families in Club life
- **Arts and multimedia** gives newcomer youth innovative ways to express themselves and share their experiences, while improving English speaking skills
 - “Had I not come to the programs at the Boys and Girls Club I feel it would have been very hard to adjust to life in Canada, things were very different. I still come here to play with friends and receive homework help as I did 6 years ago when I first moved here.”

BUILDING ON THE SUCCESS OF THE NEWCOMER YOUTH ADVANCEMENT PROGRAM

Developing trust with newcomer youth and their families is key to the NYAP. The program has been successful with newcomer youth primarily through the use of dedicated staff and safe spaces free from discrimination.

Moving forward, and with the support of a private family foundation, BGCC will:

- Expand community partnerships with a focus on schools;
- Empower newcomer youth to take on leadership roles in NYAP programming;
- Expand multilingual capacities; and
- Build Club capacities to expand their NYAP programming

3. In Conclusion

As the government considers how to support the integration of Syrian refugees, **Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada** offers the following recommendations for your consideration:

- Ensure youth (adolescents and young adults) have extra support with integration to mitigate the additional challenges they face when integrating into Canadian society.
- Invest in targeted universal programs that effectively support the medium-term integration of all newcomer youth, regardless of their immigration class.