

Refugees Discuss their Settlement Experience in New Brunswick

By Mikael Hellstrom, University of New Brunswick Saint John

Introduction

New Brunswick is the only province in Canada with a declining population. The provincial government considers this demographic issue a primary concern (Government of New Brunswick, 2014) and sees refugee reception as a potential way to break this trend. This ambition prompted the provincial government to welcome almost 1500 Syrian refugees to Fredericton, Moncton and Saint John beginning in 2015 (Government of Canada, 2017). However, even the largest population centres of New Brunswick would count as third or fourth tier in terms of national immigrant reception, and thus remote in a Canadian perspective, contending with the gravitational pull of cities like Montreal or Toronto.

Previous research shows that immigrants landing in sparsely populated areas often leave within a couple of years to seek residence in major metropolitan areas. Push factors include lack of access to adequate settlement services, satisfactory employment for adult migrants, and educational opportunities for their children. Specifically, this includes inadequate English language courses or hostile service agency staff (Krahn, Derwing, & Abu-Laban, 2005), lack of translation services or culturally-appropriate educational services (Carter, Morrish, & Amoyaw, 2008), as well as sufficiently sized ethno-cultural communities that can provide informal support (Hugo, 2008). However, if the migrants stay longer than two years, they are likely to settle (Carter, Morrish, & Amoyaw, 2008; Donato, Tolbert II, Nucci, & Kawano, 2007; Fonseca, 2008; Hugo, 2008; Krahn, Derwing, & Abu-Laban, 2005).

This policy brief asks: What do refugees feel about the services they have received and whether they intend to stay in the province? How do their responses compare to previous research on retention of immigrants outside major metropolitan areas? The research is part of my post-doctoral research project on refugee settlement in the province of New Brunswick. This policy brief is based on conversations with 40 refugee participants from the cities of Fredericton, Moncton and Saint John in New Brunswick. The participants identified their experiences of skills and qualifications recognition, and English as a Second Language courses (ESL). They also provided suggestions for reforming settlement services and foreign qualifications recognition and discussed whether they planned to stay in the province. The participants' accounts provide insights that policy makers should take into account when developing policies for refugee resettlement in New Brunswick.

Approaches and Results

The research was qualitative, consisting of 20 face-to-face semi-structured interviews and one focus group with about 20 participants. About 80 percent of the participants were male and 20

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percent female. The researcher approached local community centres and they, in turn, recruited participants. The interviews varied in length between 10 and 45 minutes.

Many of the participants revealed considerable employment and professional experience. The male participants listed up to 20 years of experience from some 19 different occupations. The majority had blue-collar backgrounds: bricklayers, bus drivers, carpenters, mechanics, tailors and welders. The female participants were mostly homemakers. When they talked about potential careers in Canada, they spoke of professions where they could draw on their experiences as homemakers, like childcare or restaurant services.

Table 1 below lists the services they reported as appreciating the most. In all three cities, participants emphasized translation and housing services:

Appreciated volunteer services that participants mentioned explicitly, by city.		
Fredericton	Moncton	Saint John
Translation	Translation	Translation
Housing	Housing	Housing
Halal food	Advice by phone at any time	Assistance with setting up bank accounts
	Transportation	

Table 1: Services appreciated by refugee newcomers in New Brunswick, by city.

However, participants still encountered barriers to settlement, the most significant being entering the labour market. They said that they needed a better social network to find a job, particularly when they had difficulties with the English language. They also felt that Canadian employers often ignored their foreign experience and that the Canadian systems for credentials recognition and occupational certification were too difficult to navigate. This finding is consistent with previous research (Guo, 2009; Bauder, 2003; Basran & Li, 1998; Hawthorne, 2016). In many cases, there was no bridging training available: they had to redo their entire professional training. Even when they had the option to achieve recognition for their credentials, the process could take several years. Likewise, participants expressed vexation over the demand that they had to achieve Canadian Language Benchmark level 4 to access many career paths, even when they did not try to draw upon previous experience. These barriers made it hard for them to become self-sustaining, resulting in frustration.

Language training was thus one of the most important issues for the participants. They expressed frustrations with the availability of ESL courses. Specifically, the low number of weekly hours, the mixed competency levels in the classes – which meant that higher performing students had to wait for the low performing students to catch up – and that the curriculum was not particularly relevant.

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The participants had some suggestions for service improvement, mostly focusing on ESL training and credentials recognition. They wanted more hours per week and proposed moving ESL training into workplaces so they could learn English while working. Likewise, they wanted a curriculum that would help more in everyday life, for example, when meeting health care professionals. They also had proposals for how the credentials recognition system could be adapted for faster labour market entry. Several felt that they could pass the certification test if it was available in Arabic.

Some participants emphasized the importance of family reunification to reduce anxiety during their settlement process. One respondent spoke about her separation from an adult daughter with a family of her own while another respondent spoke about being separated from his mother. While the participants who raised this issue were in the minority, those who did stressed that it was critical for their mental health and expressed great frustration over the regulations that kept them apart from their family members. Previous research explored in this brief pays little attention this issue, possibly because it focused more on other immigration streams.

As for staying in New Brunswick permanently, the participants held very similar views. Most participants found the province attractive for several reasons: helpful settlement services, welcoming communities that provide them with a high quality of life, friendliness of local residents, and low cost of living. However, if they could not find satisfactory employment, they would leave, they said.

Implications and Recommendations

The narratives suggest that New Brunswick, as a province, has some traits policy makers could leverage when using immigration and refugee resettlement to reverse declining population trend. Participants felt that New Brunswickers were nice and welcoming, and the low cost of living facilitates settlement, as do the services provided by agencies.

However, these assets might not be sufficient to make refugees stay. Job opportunities remains the key issue. Like in other parts of the country, New Brunswick lacks infrastructure for prompt foreign credentials recognition and harnessing refugees' transferable skills. New Brunswick governments and key gatekeeping bodies, including professional colleges and associations with jurisdiction over certification, need to examine how to reform established systems to facilitate labour market entry. The provincial government could provide funding for bridging programs in key occupations.

This study has provided an initial survey of the skills the refugees have brought with them, offering some idea of what type of bridging programs, including occupationally specific English that could speed up settlement. The Province of New Brunswick has an opportunity to draw upon lessons learned from bridging programs elsewhere in Canada. If program tuition fees are too costly or courses take too long to complete, students will be discouraged from taking them

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(Blythe, Baumann, Rhéaume, & McIntosh, 2009). Likewise, the curriculum should address students' actual knowledge gaps. If the curriculum assumes knowledge gaps that the students do not have, then students will become frustrated (Neiterman & Bourgeault, 2015).

Another possible initiative would be internship programs to introduce refugees to Canadian workplaces. While working, the interns could also develop their English skills, gain Canadian experience, and develop the social network they need to find a job. The issue of family reunification, however, is squarely within the jurisdiction of the federal government.

Previous research showed that immigrants landing in sparsely populated areas often leave within a couple of years if they do not get to adequate settlement services and cannot find satisfactory employment and educational opportunities for their children (Carter, Morrish, & Amoyaw, 2008; Donato, Tolbert II, Nucci, & Kawano, 2007; Fonseca, 2008; Hugo, 2008; Krahn, Derwing, & Abu-Laban, 2005). The refugees landing in New Brunswick have appreciated many of the initial settlement services, and finding educational opportunities do not seem to be an issue for them. Finding satisfactory employment, however, remains an issue, and if the Province of New Brunswick wants to use refugee reception to increase the population, it will have to find ways to speed up refugee entry into the labour market.

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Author's Biography

Mikael Hellstrom holds the Purdy Crawford/TD Canada Post-doctoral Fellowship in Accessibility at the University of New Brunswick Saint John, Department of History and Politics. Mikael has been active in the field of immigration and refugee settlement for twenty years, beginning in 1998 working at a small non-government organization aiming to bridge highly skilled, long-term unemployed immigrants into the labour market in Stockholm, Sweden. After completing a Bachelor (1998) and Master of Arts (2001) in Political Science and Public Management at Stockholm University, he moved to Canada in 2005, becoming an immigrant himself, to pursue his dissertation. His experiences working as a project manager for the NGO in Stockholm informed the subject of the thesis, which compared public management models in Sweden and Canada, showing how organizational solutions in public administration can affect how immigrant communities organize address community needs. He completed his dissertation in Political Science in 2015 at the University of Alberta.

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