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An Evaluation of Policy Responses To Refugee Resettlement in Rural Canada

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Abstract

While refugees across the globe are largely destined for resettlement in large, urban centres, the expansion of government policies, such as community sponsorship models and regionalization, and informal mechanisms, including family reunification, have resulted in an increase in resettlement in rural and smaller places. Utilizing a scoping review method, this project undertook an extensive review of the literature on rural resettlement and integration in Canada. Funded by the Government of Canada, this project reviews the policy choices available to Canadian policymakers working to support the successful resettlement and integration of refugees outside of major urban centres.

Keywords: public policy, rural communities, refugee resettlement and integration, immigration

Une évaluation des réponses politiques à la réinstallation des réfugiés dans les régions rurales du Canada

Resumé

Alors que les réfugiés à travers le monde sont en grande partie destinés à être réinstallés dans de grands centres urbains, l'expansion des politiques gouvernementales, telles que les modèles de parrainage communautaire et la régionalisation, ainsi que les mécanismes informels tels que le regroupement familial, ont entraîné une augmentation de la réinstallation dans les zones rurales et

de plus petites tailles. À l'aide d'une méthode d'examen de la portée, ce projet a entrepris un examen approfondi de la documentation sur la réinstallation et l'intégration en milieu rural au Canada. Financé par le gouvernement du Canada, ce projet passe en revue les choix politiques qui s'offrent aux décideurs canadiens qui s'efforcent d'appuyer la réinstallation et l'intégration réussies des réfugiés à l'extérieur des grands centres urbains.

Mots-clés : politique publique, communautés rurales, réinstallation et intégration des réfugiés, immigration

1.0 Introduction

While refugees across the globe are largely destined for resettlement in large, urban centres, the proliferation of community sponsorship models, dispersal policies, and informal mechanisms, such as family reunification and secondary migration, have resulted in more and more rural and smaller places welcoming refugee newcomers (Esses & Carter, 2019; Lam, 2021; Bodeux, et al., 2019). In Canada, immigrants, including refugees, disproportionately resettle in urban centers. While 35% of Canada's population lives in Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal, over half of all immigrants are received in one of these three cities (Dennler, 2022). The concentration of immigrants in urban spaces has resulted in a significant knowledge and research gap regarding refugee resettlement and integration in smaller places (Lam, 2021), despite the reality that refugees are living and working in small cities, towns, villages, and rural regions across the country (Haugen, 2019; McNally, 2020).

In response to this knowledge gap, this project, which was funded by the Government of Canada, undertook an extensive review of the existing academic and grey literature on rural refugee resettlement in Canada. Based on the inventory and analysis of 90 studies, this project presents a number of policy recommendations for federal, provincial and local governments looking to facilitate or support the resettlement and integration of refugees in rural and smaller places. Overall, the literature points to five overarching policy recommendations:

1. Governments and policies must acknowledge that refugees, for various reasons, are being resettled in, or choosing to move to, rural and smaller communities. Evidence demonstrates that some refugees want to live in rural places and many have decided to rebuild their lives in smaller communities across the country.
2. Expectations of private refugee sponsors and volunteers need to be clarified in order to facilitate successful sponsorships. Clarification would benefit all sponsors, but specifically those in rural and remote areas where settlement services are limited or unavailable.
3. Immigration policies need to be updated to include rural and smaller places as spaces in which immigrants and refugees are moving to and residing in. For example, access to settlement services must be expanded and/or improved in rural and smaller places.
4. Provincial, municipal and territorial governments need to be involved in addressing service and infrastructure gaps in rural communities.

5. Policy needs to support the efforts of communities to be welcoming spaces for newcomers and involve municipal governments in these endeavours.

While these general recommendations provide broad directions for governments and policymakers, details are lacking about implementation and feasibility. In conclusion, we argue that there is a misalignment between the policy options being put forward in the literature and the realities of life in rural Canada. Across many of the policies identified, the complexities of rurality are not fully addressed, thus limiting the utility of the recommendations.

2.0 Context

In Canada, the majority of refugees in rural places become so through the private refugee sponsorship model, which allows private citizens to raise funds and bring refugees into their community. Sponsors are responsible for helping refugees find and access services, such as housing and language training, and supporting them financially for the refugees' first year in Canada (Labman, 2016). While the majority of government-assisted refugees are sent to major urban centres, the growth of the Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) and Blended Visa Office-Referred programs have played a significant role in an increasing number of refugees arriving in smaller and rural communities (McNally, 2020; Labman, 2016). While government assisted refugees are sent to 36 cities which are considered equipped and thus have specific funding from the federal government in the form of the Resettlement Assistance Program, PSRs and Blended Visa Office-Referred have been sent to hundreds of communities across the country where their sponsors are located (Jenkins, 2019; Kaida et al., 2020). Since these programs allow sponsors to bring refugees into any community big or small, as these programs have grown, more sponsors living in smaller cities and towns, rural villages and hamlets, and northern and remote communities have welcomed and supported refugee newcomers. For example, the Syrian refugee crisis resulted in an influx of refugees being resettled across Canada. Since 2015, over 350 communities across Canada, including many rural and smaller places, have accepted or requested Syrian refugees (Haugen, 2019; Government of Canada 2017). This is not a new phenomenon in Canada, as rural and smaller places have been participating in sponsorship since the program began in the 1970s (Labman, 2016). In addition to private sponsorship, federal, provincial, and municipal governments, and other organizations have created policies and programs to attract and retain immigrants—including refugees—to smaller communities, from the expansion of federally-funded Local Immigration Partnerships in more rural regions to the implementation of the Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot program (Government of Canada, n.d.).

Despite rural Canada's history of accepting refugee newcomers through the private sponsorship program and other policies, the academic and grey literature in Canada is largely focused on urban resettlement and integration (Hyndman et al., 2016; Lam, 2021). The limited literature that does exist (Haugen, 2019; Lam, 2021; McNally, 2020) demonstrates that refugees in rural and smaller places face similar challenges to all rural residents. While rural Canada is incredibly diverse—ranging from fishing villages to northern communities, to agricultural regions, to small and medium-sized cities—smaller places face similar challenges, although to varying degrees, based on dynamics of population density, distance from urban centres and/or diversity (Gadsby & Samson, 2016; Parkins & Reed, 2013). Overall, rural and smaller communities experience barriers associated with limited access to services

(including transportation, healthcare, education, and broadband services), an aging and declining population, outmigration, and few employment options. In Canada and across the globe, rural populations face higher rates of poverty than their urban counterparts (Bertolini, 2019; Moazzami, 2015). Refugee newcomers can face additional challenges in these places because of their limited language skills, specific physical and/or mental health concerns, and/or experiences of discrimination or racism.

In this context, refugees resettled in rural places and their sponsors often rely heavily on volunteers and informal networks to provide basic services and supports. Rural development literature suggests that due to their smaller size, rural communities often have access to enhanced social capital, and close community ties and networks (Beaulieu, 2014; Flora et al., 2018). Utilizing social capital, rural residents can make use of their networks and connections to fill gaps in services, stay in place, and have a good life (Beaulieu, 2014), for themselves, their neighbors, and newcomers. While social capital and volunteer networks can help newcomers find employment, access services, and feel a sense of belonging (Beaulieu, 2014), this reliance on community supports, in the context of neoliberalism and absence of government support for rural refugee resettlement and integration, can lead to volunteer or humanitarian fatigue (Abuhamed, 2020). Additionally, not everyone, especially outsiders, may feel welcome in rural places. Newcomers are not always welcome into tight-knit communities, and it can be difficult for refugees to make social connections in rural places (Phillimore et al., 2021).

Despite the challenges, there are positive opportunities for rural resettlement and some newcomers may want to live rurally (Holley & Jedwab, 2019). Successfully welcoming and integrating refugees can help rural communities meet their labour needs, sustain their population and available services, and enhance diversity (Caldwell et al., 2017). Evidence suggests that smaller communities can be excellent places of welcome, offering more affordable and better-quality housing options—particularly for large families—and opportunities to access social capital by getting to know neighbours (Haugen, 2019; McNally, 2020). Close contact with residents can help newcomers acquire language skills as well as access informal networks and connections to obtain employment and other services. Research shows that all community members play an important role in creating a welcoming environment for newcomers and fostering social inclusion. In some cases, rural communities recognize the importance of a broad community welcome and take steps to prepare extensively for the arrival of newcomers by educating themselves on the culture, language, food, and socioeconomic conditions of the refugees' country of origin. This type of welcome extends past the arrival of refugees and is an active aspect of rural resettlement, especially if refugees decide to stay in the community (Bodeux et al., 2019; Haugen, 2019).

3.0 Methodology

Based on the scoping review method outlined by Arksey and O'Malley (2005), this project identified, catalogued, and analyzed the available academic and grey literature on rural resettlement in Canada. This project utilized a scoping review approach in order to better understand processes of resettlement and integration in rural places and locate gaps in research and knowledge. The scoping review involved five stages: (a) identifying the research questions; (b) identifying relevant studies; (c) study selection; (d) charting the data; and (e) collating, summarising, and reporting the results (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005).

As the available literature on this subject is very limited, this project took a broad approach to the topic. In order to include as many applicable studies as possible, this project defined rural and smaller communities broadly as places outside of major urban centres (such as Montreal, Vancouver and Toronto) that face common challenges associated with rural life. Particular attention was paid to communities with populations less than 125,000. The inclusion criteria for the studies were:

- English or French language
- publicly available—but not necessarily open access
- theoretical or practical knowledge regarding refugee resettlement and integration in rural and smaller places (broadly defined) and outside of major urban centres
- peer-reviewed articles in scholarly journals and grey literature (non-academic studies) of all types

Although sources on refugee resettlement and/or sponsorship in rural Canada were prioritized, given the limited number of sources addressing this topic, relevant studies that broadly addressed resettlement and/or immigration in small and medium-sized cities were also included. Relevant materials were identified from electronic databases, including but not limited to Google, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and various university databases, reference lists, and existing networks and relevant organizations. There was no limit placed on date of publication, however, the majority of the studies that fit the inclusion criteria were published in the last 10–12 years. A variety of grey and academic sources, such as organizational reports and handbooks, peer-reviewed academic publications, evaluation reports, dissertations and theses, and reports from civil society and policy institutes, were included. In order to broadly search the literature, a number of search terms were used in varying sequences, including, but not limited to: (a) rural refugee resettlement, (b) refugee newcomers, (c) refugee integration in rural areas, (d) resettlement in small communities, (e) private refugee sponsorship in rural areas, (f) newcomers living outside of urban centres, (g) retention of refugees in rural places, and (h) best practices for rural sponsorship. Once an initial database was established, duplicate studies were removed. The review resulted in the identification and inclusion of 90 studies, including 58 academic studies and 32 non-academic or grey literature studies.

4.0 Analysis

The following policy recommendations were identified across the literature. The recommendations are not listed in any particular order, as all are important to successful resettlement and integration in rural and smaller communities. While some recommendations are specific to federal, provincial, or municipal government, most can and should be considered by policymakers working in any context.

4.1 Acknowledging That Some Refugees Want to Live in Rural Canada

Numerous studies highlight the desire of some refugees to live in rural communities. When asked, refugees living in rural spaces liked how quiet, affordable, safe, welcoming, and friendly their communities were. They appreciated the lack of traffic, knowing their neighbors, knowing where and how to access available services, and living in a house with a yard (Haugen, 2019). They also noted liking the community connections they have made, and the strong sense of community they

feel (McNally, 2018, 2020). Yet despite the positive experiences of many refugees in rural Canada, the vast majority of refugees are sent to urban centres. Policy changes that recognize that rural places can also be desirable resettlement options would offer the opportunity to settle in a rural community to those refugees who wish to do so, open doors to resettle more refugees, and take advantage of the benefits of rural resettlement (for both the community and the refugees—regardless of if they stay in these communities long-term; Haugen, 2019).

While some of the challenges associated with rural life, such as small populations and long distances from urban centres, cannot be changed, other aspects can be improved. Additionally, not everyone identifies small populations and large distances from urban centres as liabilities or challenges, rather for some, these are positive aspects of living outside of major cities. There are many reasons why people want to live in rural places. The way in which issues and challenges associated with diversity, distance, and density are framed plays a significant role in how rural resettlement and integration is understood. For example, one study found that asking why migrants chose to stay in a community, rather than why they leave, may offer a better understanding of the reasons why people chose to stay and build their lives in certain places (Nguyen, 2020). Considering rural life through an asset-based paradigm across policymaking in this area, while also recognizing the challenges, may offer a way forward to both foster a more nuanced understanding of rural resettlement but also help effect and model change moving forward (Flora et al., 2018)

4.2 Clarifying Expectations for Sponsors and Volunteers

Clarifying expectations around the role of sponsors and volunteers in resettlement would be helpful for everyone, especially sponsors and refugees living in rural places. Abu-Laban et al. (2001) contend that sponsors and refugees would benefit from having more information about their respective roles, stating that “over time the sponsors and the refugees made adjustments to each other, but much of the confusion might have been alleviated had both groups had an understanding of the boundaries of their roles and some basic awareness of each other’s cultural norms” (p.52). Supporting realistic expectations for sponsor commitment may require providing more government services and training in rural places in order to reduce the burden on sponsors and to reduce the potential for conflict between volunteers and refugees—some of which can be attributed to burnout. For example, Derwing and Mulder (2003) argue that new sponsors need ongoing support, including on-site/in-person training and support. As a whole, private sponsorship, especially in rural and smaller communities with limited access to settlement and other services, places significant time and resource burdens on sponsors. If a sponsorship fails, there are too few structures and resources in place to support refugees. In this context, clarifying expectations for sponsors—through training or other programming—and promoting sponsorship as a partnership between sponsors and refugees must include additional supports in place to: (a) help and reduce the burden on sponsors, and (b) ensure that newcomers are supported even if the sponsorship fails (Hyndman et al., 2016, p.16).

4.3 Improving and Expanding Settlement Services

Access to settlement services outside of major urban centres is inadequate and needs to be addressed. While the majority of refugees in rural places are privately sponsored, research argues that these refugees also need access to settlement supports. Agrawal and Zeitouny (2017) contend that “PSRs also require

settlement services; they cannot be left entirely to the resources (or lack thereof) of private sponsors, as the settlement experiences among PSRs is quite diverse” (p. 2) Additionally, as governments invest in pilot projects to shift settlement away from large urban centres, they need to be simultaneously investing in the infrastructure and services that these spaces need in order to do settlement well (Government of Canada, n.d.). While all governments play a role in providing settlement services to newcomers, as the largest funder of settlement services in Canada, Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) has a particularly important role to play.

The research identifies a number of recommendations for the federal government, and IRCC specifically. Moving forward, federal policymakers and IRCC should consider:

- lowering the barriers for organizations in smaller and rural areas to apply for IRCC funding, and providing greater feedback on why applications are successful or not (Dennler, 2022);
- funding virtual services to supplement in-person services (such as language learning) (Lam, 2019);
- expanding access to settlement services beyond refugees to include temporary foreign workers and residents, and naturalized citizens who make up a significant portion of newcomers in smaller communities (Dennler, 2022);
- improving online search tools with information about settlement service providers (Dennler, 2022); and,
- expanding pathways for family reunification as keeping extended families together can provide crucial support to newcomers in rural areas with limited services and may support the long-term settlement of newcomers in rural places (Derwing & Mulder 2003, p.235).

There are many creative ways to address gaps in settlement service provision, from providing regional hubs, to arranging transportation to existing services, to travelling services. Before exploring these opportunities, including the ones outlined above, the need for improved and expanded settlement services needs to be recognized and a strategy created to “facilitate the establishment of settlement services in small and rural communities” (Dennler, 2022, p.25).

4.4 Involving Provincial and Territorial Governments to Address Service Gaps

Provincial and territorial governments have an important role to play in addressing service gaps in rural areas, including limited access to public transportation, healthcare and childcare services, and affordable housing options. It is important that service gaps and infrastructure limitations are not solely addressed through a reliance on volunteers and the social capital of private sponsors. Common recommendations to address some of these challenges in rural and smaller places include (a) developing a one-stop shop or location for information about newcomer programs and services, (b) expanding language training options, (c) improving access to affordable housing and public transportation, (d) educating and supporting employers to hire more newcomers, and (e) creating opportunities for intercultural dialogue between newcomers and long term residents (Esses & Carter, 2019). Investments in infrastructure in small and rural communities will support

community vitality, growth, and the retention of immigrants and refugees (Dennler, 2022; Gilhooly & Lee, 2017). Provincial and territorial governments often supplement settlement service funding beyond what is offered by the federal government, and this work could be better coordinated with local and federal immigration stakeholders (Dennler, 2022). Among existing services and organizations, at all levels of government, research demonstrates that there is a “need for better information sharing between all actors and organizations involved in the settlement process both within organizations and across organizations domestically and internationally” (Abid, 2020, p.5).

4.5 Promoting Welcoming Communities and Involving Municipal Governments

There are a number of actions that smaller and rural places can take to support refugees and sponsors, create welcoming communities, and enhance integration efforts. When newcomers and other residents build mutual relationships, everyone benefits. Some ways to build inter-community relationships include intentional community leadership (supporting newcomers through municipal policy and staff training), reducing system barriers for newcomers (fostering community outreach and sharing, and creative learning opportunities for language learning and other skills), building relationships (organizing festivals, training volunteers, and inviting newcomers to community organizations such as recreational sports) and developing robust support systems (fostering inclusive faith communities, offering settlement services, and organizing with multicultural associations; Caldwell et al., 2017; Rural Ontario Institute, 2017). While welcome and community engagement can vary across urban–rural contexts, what stands out in smaller places is the lack of anonymity and the need to move beyond initial welcoming efforts to meaningfully include newcomers in community life (Kyriakides et al., 2020). Communities need to go beyond vague statements of welcome and initial welcoming activities to address unwelcoming attitudes, racism, and micro-aggressions. Real welcome means ensuring that newcomers feel a sense of belonging, and not merely tolerance, in their new community (Lam, 2021, p.9).

Municipalities play a significant role in the integration and support of all immigrants (Federation of Canadian Municipalities, 2015–2016; Garcea, 2016). Importantly, municipalities invest in critical infrastructure and services that support growth and the retention of newcomers, such as public transportation. Municipal leaders can and have fostered welcoming spaces by leading local conversations about immigration, supporting local settlement services, and working with other levels of government to address challenges such as racism and xenophobia (Dennler, 2022). Thus, municipalities are part of successful immigration. Yet, “municipalities are neither mandated nor funded to provide immigrant support services, but out of necessity and in recognition of the value new immigrants bring to communities, municipalities are integrating immigrant needs into their budgets and service plans” (Cappe, 2011, p.2). Municipalities are the first line of support for immigrants, yet they have limited decision-making influence on immigration and settlement policies in Canada (Drolet & Teixeira, 2022). Formally involving and collaborating with municipalities, especially smaller municipalities, would help them become greater partners in refugee settlement.

5.0 Conclusion

While the above recommendations offer important policy options for governments and decision-makers across federal, provincial, and local contexts, the complexities of rural life are not always recognized or addressed, thus limiting the utility and implementation potential of some of the recommendations put forward. We argue that there is a bureaucratic misalignment between the recommendations made, with refugees ‘in mind’ but often without the complexities of rurality at the same time. Across much of the literature, rurality is simply considered as a geographic location, rather than a complex context made up of historical, cultural, and socio-economic challenges (Bertolini, 2019; Moazzami, 2015). The challenges that refugees are facing in rural and smaller communities are largely the same challenges that all rural residents face. In a policy context, this means that simply addressing one issue, such as increasing access to settlement services in a rural place may not, on its own, facilitate increased resettlement and enhanced integration outcomes. Rather, policies targeting rural resettlement need to consider the complexities of rurality and challenges associated with life in places with smaller populations, limited diversity, significant outmigration, older and aging populations, infrastructure and economic limitations, and/or varying remoteness.

Often policy recommendations concerning rural refugee resettlement do not recognize the broader rural context and the challenges inherent in rural living for all residents in those communities. For example, in response to the need for essential infrastructure to support newcomers, one study contended that smaller communities should:

Invest in critical infrastructure that will support growth and retention in small and rural communities. Immigrants, like other residents, benefit from robust infrastructure in the areas of transportation, health care, child care, and high-speed Internet. A number of communities that would like to attract new immigrants are struggling to do so due to limited housing stock, high housing prices, and difficulty accessing other critical infrastructure. (Denkler, 2022, p.27)

While acknowledging the role that local infrastructure plays in refugee resettlement and integration is important, this recommendation is problematic in the context of rural and smaller communities that lack the fiscal capacity to provide residents, including immigrants, the infrastructure that is needed. The Federation for Canadian Municipalities (2019) states that:

with limited fiscal capacity, rural governments face formidable challenges providing the infrastructure that’s needed to build the communities of the future. Municipalities shoulder 60 per cent of Canada’s public infrastructure, with access to just eight–10 cents of each tax dollar. This fuels a fiscal squeeze that peaks in rural communities with lower ratepayer densities and continuing youth out-migration. (p.2)

Thus, policymakers and governments looking to facilitate and/or support rural resettlement must recognize the challenges that rural and smaller municipalities face. There are distinct challenges and realities associated with life in rural places, and simply implementing urban policies in rural places, through a ‘one-size fits all approach’ will not often work. Rather, facilitating successful resettlement in rural places through policy making requires adopting a rural lens and potentially partnering with rural experts, organizations, and researchers to advise on the rural implications of policies designed by, largely, urban-based policymakers.

Additionally, supporting rural and smaller communities through policies that facilitate the successful attraction and retention of newcomers not only benefits rural residents, communities, and refugees. Rural places are essential to the preservation of human life in rural and urban contexts, as rural peoples and places produce the food, provide the natural resources, and replenish natural water systems that we all rely on (Elmqvist et al., 2013; Jean, 2003). Thus, addressing the gaps and urban biases in Canadian policies focused on refugee resettlement and integration has the potential to benefit all Canadians.

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