

OCASI
Ontario Council of
Agencies Serving
Immigrants

Measuring what
counts:
Priorities and
research needs for
the immigrant and
refugee-serving
sector in Ontario

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Prosperity 2015 National Conference:
Responding to a Changing Immigration
Environment

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About OCASI

OCASI represents the collective voice of immigrant and refugee-serving organizations in Ontario, and we have over 230 member agencies across the province.

Our member agencies provide a range of services, including settlement, language training, employment, skills training, health and mental health, legal services, housing, violence prevention, family counselling; and specialized services for women, youth, seniors, LGBT, and people with disabilities.

Defining relevant research for the sector

The immigrant and refugee serving sector in Ontario undertakes a wide range of services and initiatives, and research plays an important role to inform these activities. Evidence-based programming ensures that the right types of services and interventions are delivered to bring the greatest impact. In addition to programming, research also facilitates evidence-based policy advocacy work.

Research on immigrants and refugees is useful for the sector in Ontario when it identifies relevant factors, such as (1) long-term and short-term trends and policy impacts; (2) under-served groups; (3) policy gaps/challenges in program implementation; and (4) useful recommendations, including promising approaches and best practices.

It is difficult to prioritize the research needs of the immigrant and refugee-serving sector in Ontario. The needs change over time and depend on different circumstances. The list that I'm about to present is by no means exhaustive, but reflects important research areas that are currently important to the sector. The following four areas stand out (in no particular order).

1. Express Entry: New Economic Immigrants and their Service Needs
2. Refugee Claimants and their Trajectories
3. Racialized Immigrants and Refugees
4. Other Underserved Groups

1. Express Entry: New Economic Immigrants and their Service Needs

Express Entry is a new system for processing applications from skilled foreign workers who are interested in moving to Canada (some of you might have attended the workshop on Express Entry yesterday, so I will not go into much detail). The system was launched in January 2015 and can be used in 4 existing programs: (1) the Federal Skilled Worker Program, (2) the Federal Skilled Trades Program, (3) the Canadian Experience Class, and (4) a portion of the Provincial Nominee Programs. It aims at improving processing times for permanent residence and facilitating jobs for candidates even before they arrive in Canada.

The Express Entry system introduced several changes on how economic immigrants are selected. The main changes include linking employers to a pool of potential immigrants, from which only candidates in the highest ranks are requested to submit an application. The previous points-based system was altered in such a way that, for example, young and single applicants are given priority in the new Comprehensive Ranking System (or, in other words, married applicants are no longer given additional points). In addition, points are no longer given to applicants for their social/family ties in Canada.

Even with the best of intentions, a points-based (non-arbitrary) selection system such as the Express Entry can have unintended consequences, because potential applicants worldwide do not have the same opportunities to meet the required criteria. Peoples' capabilities are distributed unequally in the world; hence, the pool of immigrants globally is often biased.

For example, some groups have consistently less socio-economic and political opportunities in many countries of the Global South. Women in particular are often restricted by social norms. They are less likely to go to school and pursue higher education. They often do not have property rights. These social norms have economic implications for women since they are less likely to get employed outside the home or receive the same salary as men. In short, women from the Global South might be less likely to meet the necessary points under the Express Entry system and be successful in their application. Speculation about this potential demographic shift dominated discussion in the settlement sector in 2015.

It is therefore important to examine whether there are unintended consequences under the new Express Entry system. Does the new system change the face of Canada, and Ontario? How so? Another crucial question relates to whether the new cohort of economic immigrants has new service needs, and if so, the extent to which settlement agencies are prepared to address those needs.

2. Refugee Claimants and their Trajectories

In 2012, Bill C-31 (the Protecting Canada's Immigration System Act) introduced changes to the refugee determination process by significantly shortening timelines. A two-tiered system was also instituted through the introduction of a Designated Countries of Origin list. There is currently a knowledge gap on the trajectories of refugee claimants and how they navigate the immigration system, particularly the complex claims process. Research in this area would thus fill the knowledge gap and inform refugee service providers on how best to support refugees and claimants.

Research on vulnerable groups of refugees and claimants is even more needed. As Ontario is one of the primary destinations of LGBT refugees in Canada¹, the trajectory of LGBT refugee claimants deserves particular attention.

Envisioning Global LGBT Human Rights – a five-year research project with which OCASI collaborated – recently produced a report on the predicament of LGBT refugees and claimants, how the refugee determination process was a stressful experience for them, and how they encountered obstacles in accessing services before, during and after the refugee determination process. Refugees lacked adequate access to settlement services, such as housing, employment, access to healthcare, mental health services and counselling, that are sensitive to, and aware of the unique issues that LGBT refugees face. The study recommended further research on LGBT refugees and intersections of identities, and this would be an important area of interest for the refugee and immigrant serving sector in Ontario.

3. Racialized Immigrants and Refugees

As you know, the racialized population in Canada is geographically concentrated in Ontario, as more than half (54%) of the racialized population lives in this province. Racialized people live disproportionately in poverty: racialized persons formed 16% of the total population in Canada,ⁱⁱ but 32% of all persons living in poverty. Most racialized persons (52%) who live in poverty are in Ontario. Almost all racialized persons living in poverty are first generation immigrants, which indicates the challenges racialized immigrants face in settling in Canada.ⁱⁱⁱ

While such disaggregated data has improved our understanding of the disproportionate poverty of racialized people and immigrants (and the recent reinstatement of the mandatory long-form census is expected to provide more updated and reliable data), a key area of research would be to further explain the underlying factors of such disparity and to identify best practices in poverty reduction that the immigrant and refugee serving sector can adopt.

Research on employment would certainly be a priority for the sector, especially in light of reducing poverty and promoting prosperity. OCASI's 2012 research, *Making Ontario Home*, based on a survey of over 2,500 newcomers to Ontario, found that employment is the number one challenge for immigrants.^{iv} Recent studies have shown an increase in precarious and low-wage work, and vulnerability of migrant workers and workers without immigration status.^v For racialized women recent immigrants in particular, employment tends to be precarious, low-paying, with fewer benefits, and less likely to be protected by union membership.^{vi}

These findings tell us that there is still a long way to go for the successful socio-economic integration of certain groups of immigrants. Further research is needed in this area, including on the many interventions that are required for:

- regulatory bodies to improve accreditation practices,
- employers to improve hiring and retention practices,
- government to introduce incentives through the tax system for employers,
- Immigrant and Refugee-Serving agencies to engage employers and to provide the necessary employment supports, just as much as immigrants are required to improve skills where and when necessary.^{vii}

4. Other Underserved Groups

There are other underserved groups that merit particular attention.

- Francophone immigrants, for example, face major challenges in trying to get a job in the primarily Anglo labour market outside of Quebec. Unilingual French speakers in Ontario are most disadvantaged.
- There's also a growing number of population with no immigration status, including racialized aging men with precarious immigration status. This is a population that requires attention.
- Finally, research on the challenges and resilience of immigrants and refugees with disability is limited and badly needed.

In short, these are all research priorities for immigrant and refugee serving sectors in Ontario. Measuring what counts starts by studying underserved groups and making useful recommendations for the sector.

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- ⁱⁱ Block, Sheila and Galabuzi, G.E. (2011). Canada's Colour Coded Labour Market: the gap for racialized workers. Toronto: The Wellesley Institute.
- ⁱⁱⁱ National Council of Welfare (2012). Poverty Profile: Special Edition. Retrieved from: http://www.esdc.gc.ca/eng/communities/reports/poverty_profile/snapshot.pdf
- ^{iv} OCASI (2012). Making Ontario Home 2012: A study of settlement and integration services for immigrants and refugees. Retrieved from: http://www.ocasi.org/downloads/OCASI_MOH_ENGLISH.pdf
- ^v McMaster University and United Way Toronto (2013). It's More Than Poverty: Employment precarity and household well-being. Retrieved from: <https://pepsouwt.files.wordpress.com/2013/02/its-more-than-poverty-feb-2013.pdf>
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- ^{vii} Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (2015). Presentation by Debbie Douglas on Economic Prosperity of Immigrants to the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration on March 26. Retrieved from: http://ocasi.org/sites/default/files/OCASI_Economic-Prosperity_to_CIMM_March-26-2015.pdf