



Outcomes of Family Separation in Refugee Resettlement in Canada

What this research is about

Since 2015, Canada has admitted 45,000 Syrian refugees as permanent residents under the Syrian Refugee Resettlement Initiative, through private and government sponsorship. Many arrived without their intact extended households because of immigration restrictions and financial obstacles. This led to negative impacts on their wellbeing, such as frustration and loneliness, and the loss of caregiving and emotional support. Many refugees urgently sought to reunite with family members left behind, but even years later, they are still separated from their loved ones. This study aimed to examine how these families navigate policy constraints over time by finding ways to achieve family reunification.

What the researchers did

During 2016 and 2021, the researchers conducted interviews with 145 Syrian mothers and teenagers from 52 households resettled in the Greater Toronto Area. The interviews occurred at three key points: a) shortly after resettlement; b) one year later, following the end of financial support ("month 13"); and c) during the COVID-19 pandemic, a period of significant uncertainty.

Most participants arrived during the earliest Syrian Refugee Resettlement Initiative landings in 2016–2017, with one family member arriving earlier. Approximately 55% of the participants were government-assisted refugees, while others were privately sponsored, resettled through the Blended Visa Office-Referred Program, or entered as asylumseekers.

All interviews with Syrian mothers were in Arabic, then transcribed and translated into English. Interviews with Syrian teenagers used a mix of English and Arabic. The interview topics covered

What you need to know

Under the Canadian immigration policy, many Syrian families were forced to leave behind their extended family members to qualify for resettlement. Although they made urgent efforts to reunite with loved ones, this study found that most families remained separated due to barriers imposed by the state. A smaller number of families were able to achieve partial reunification through private sponsorship. Another small but potentially growing group pursued what the authors termed "next-generation reunification" by arranging transnational marriages between their older children and extended kin abroad. This study highlights how resettlement unfolds over time and the impact of prolonged family separation.

challenges in Canada, communication with family abroad, reflections on time in Syria and transition countries before settling in Canada, and experiences with time and future aspirations.

What the researchers found

The researchers identified three reunification outcomes of prolonged family separation:

1. Unresolved protracted separation:

The researchers found that 41 out of the 52 households experienced what they termed "unresolved protracted separation." Under the Canadian immigration policy, the definition of family is restricted to the nuclear family structure, consisting of parents and their children. As a result, many Syrian families were forced to leave behind extended family members to qualify for

resettlement. Despite the constraints they faced, many participants actively sought to reunite with their loved ones by following official procedures and advocating within the system. Yet, most participants were unable to bring their extended family members to Canada, either because the applications were rejected or are still in progress despite lengthy periods of administrative waiting.

2. **Negotiated reunification:** The researchers found that 9 out of the 52 households achieved what they called “negotiated reunification.” In these cases, participants adapted to the constraints of the resettlement system by leveraging policy opportunities. Most notably, they used the private sponsorship stream to bring extended family members to Canada. For instance, one participant used his human capital and social connections to present a compelling case to his church, which ultimately agreed to sponsor his sibling’s family. These efforts illustrate how some families were able to negotiate opportunities from within the system, despite significant financial and bureaucratic barriers.
3. **Next-generation reunification:** The researchers found that 2 out of 52 households pursued what they termed “next-generation reunification.” In these cases, as their teenagers reached adulthood, families arranged transnational marriages with extended kin abroad. These marriages created new, indirect pathways for family reunification, allowing relatives left behind to join the resettled family in Canada.

How you can use this research

From a policy perspective, this study highlights the need for more inclusive and accessible reunification pathways. These pathways should address the financial and administrative burdens for refugees. Expanding private sponsorship programs or offering government-supported pathways for extended family reunification could reduce some of the inequities refugees face. Future policies should also work to reduce the structural burdens placed on refugees, such as out-of-pocket financial costs, which place an even greater strain on already vulnerable families.

About the researchers

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Citation

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Research Snapshot by Patrick Chi Kai Lam

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