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Understanding Integration & Social Networks

What is Integration?

Integration is a dynamic process of adaptation between newcomers and host societies. Unlike in some comparable destination countries, Canada’s integration model is not synonymous with “assimilation”. Integration has been a hallmark of multiculturalism, has made our cities some of the world’s most vibrant, and helps ensure the intergenerational well-being of all Canadians. Integration failures can have long term consequences, particularly in cities. Many major European cities, for example, suffer from the political and socioeconomic consequences of weak integration. Canada has a mixed record between different groups of refugees; relatively open immigration policies do not guarantee successful integration.

Quantifying and measuring integration is complicated. Integration indexes are comprised of metrics around income levels, labour market participation, language skills, home ownership, health, residential segregation, and intergroup marriage. Qualitative measurements like political participation and social attitudes are equally important, but are more subjective and susceptible to changes in political climate.

There is no singular immigrant experience. Welcoming societies play a key role in determining its direction. A recent literature survey found that “actions and attitudes of non-immigrants can have a significant effect on immigrants’ opportunities in society.”¹ Integration is everyone’s responsibility.

How is Canada Doing?

Canada’s history of immigration and decades of official multiculturalism have meant we’ve done much better at integrating immigrants than many other comparable countries. Geography dictates that we are able to select who arrives and under what circumstances. This is particularly true of resettled refugees. The image of being “in control” contributes to Canadians’ generally positive view of immigration.

¹ Huddleston, Thomas. “Integration Indicators: The Difference between Monitoring Integration and Evaluating Policies.” In *Routledge Handbook of Immigration and Refugee Studies*, Anna Triandafyllidou (ed). New York: Routledge, 2016. P193.



There is room for improvement. The Migration Policy Index, an eight issue metric comprised of 167 indicators, ranks Canada 6th out of 38 participating countries.² Our weakest indicators are around education (65/100), health (49/100), and political participation (48/100). The latest available year, 2014, showed a decreased overall score of 68 / 100.

Government-Assisted Refugee newcomers in particular experience more social isolation and precarious housing. Canadian cities are experiencing less integration as a result of urban segregation. Grassroots organizations are important for developing integrated and welcoming communities.

Why Focus on Social Networks?

Social networks are comprised of the web of relationships and interactions between people. Social capital is the value people enjoy from social ties and recognized skills. We know from experience that social networks are a key resource when we encounter a challenging life situation. Resettled refugees, almost by definition, have been removed from the context of intergenerational social capital.

In a 2012 study of newcomers in Ontario, 62% of respondents cited employment as their primary concern. Subsequent challenges were listed as limited English, social isolation, housing, and accessing social activities. Weak knowledge of settlement and integration services was the main reason for lack of access.³ Access to social networks and help navigating bureaucracies can thus ameliorate challenges to integration. A 2014 government-commissioned study found that low social capital on arrival can be mitigated by social support, concluding that “social bonds are repeatedly found to be essential to successful integration [...] Fostering social connectivity should be a major focus of service provision.”⁴

Access to social networks is a simple, yet profound way to support resettled refugees. Rather than offering charity, the dynamic process of integration means your social network will change in unforeseen and enriching ways, at the same time as facilitating newcomers’ durable integration.

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² EU Member States, Australia, Iceland, Japan, South Korea, Norway, Switzerland, Turkey, and the USA. See <http://www.mipex.eu/canada>.

³ OCASI. 2012. “Making Ontario Home: A Study of Settlement and Integration Services for Immigrants and Refugees.” www.ocasi.org

⁴ Hyndman, Jennifer (with research assistance from Silvia D’Addario and Matt R. Stevens). 2014. “Refugee Research Synthesis 2009 - 2013.” A CERIS Report Submitted to Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Ottawa., p40.

