



# **THE IMPACT OF TOGETHER PROJECT WELCOME GROUPS ON GOVERNMENT-ASSISTED REFUGEE SOCIAL CAPITAL**

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*Together Project is a charitable initiative of MakeWay*

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## **FOREWARD**

The pandemic has brought considerable changes to immigrant and refugee services, resulting in increased potential for vulnerable clients to fall through the cracks. Government-Assisted Refugees within their first year in Canada are a group of significant concern.

Technology has never played such a determining role in the settlement and integration of newcomers to Canada. The COVID-19 pandemic has required us to shift service delivery online and simultaneously heightened inequities that exist in newcomers' access to and effective use of technology. These inequities, if not addressed, threaten to leave many newcomers behind resulting in further social exclusion and isolation. Studies consistently show that access to information is essential to newcomers' social inclusion and overall integration. Without access to and ability to use modern sources of information and social capital networks effectively, newcomers cannot make informed choices and decisions related to their settlement.

This research project aims at contributing to improved settlement outcomes for Government-Assisted Refugees (GARs) through the Welcome Group Program of Together Project, a charitable initiative of MakeWay. Together Project's mission is to connect refugee newcomers and Canadian volunteers to build stronger, more integrated communities. They match Welcome Groups of four or more volunteers with newly arrived refugees for social and integration support.

This research investigates a new approach to remote service delivery that is client-driven. The research demonstrated that GARs need access to technology and service providers to enable them to access information and services needed for their settlement through social capital networks. This was accomplished by enhancing their digital literacy skills and meeting them where they are online through the Together Project Welcome Group Program.

The research examined the experiences of 20 recently arrived GAR families as they settled and built social capital in their new communities. It confirms that more research is needed to investigate socio-economic, geographic and digital literacy-related barriers to accessing technology during the pandemic for newcomers.

Research results will inform the development, piloting and evaluation of a client centered service delivery approach that best meets refugees' needs, circumstances, and preferences through the social capital theory.

Together Project serves about 100 newcomer families annually, with 70% being refugees from various Arab countries. This report confirms that GAR participants depend on culturally relevant, face-to-face services, and experienced challenges accessing services remotely. The proposed project addresses many of the issues facing this demographic and offers a new approach to remote and/or hybrid service delivery that will be effective in improving settlement outcomes.



## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

*The Impact of Together Project Welcome Groups on GAR Social Capital* examines the effectiveness of Together Project’s “Welcome Group Program” model on building refugee social capital. Survey design was informed by the open-source survey from the Toronto Social Capital Study (2018), which draws upon the 2013 General Social Survey conducted by Statistics Canada to measure the social capital of Toronto citizens.

The Toronto Social Capital Study laid out several indices for measuring the dimensions of social capital that are relevant to this study; namely, “social trust,” “social networks,” and “neighbourhood support.” Within these primary dimensions of social capital, there are also sub-dimensions such as “group trust” or “bridging capital” that are explored in this report.

Our study replicated the Toronto Social Capital Study with Government-Assisted Refugees (GAR) participants from Together Project’s Welcome Group Program. Changes in GARs’ self-perception of access to social capital over time were measured using baseline and exit surveys. Focus groups with GARs and team leads were also used to gain a deeper understanding of the processes underlying these changes.

The study makes an important contribution to research focused on the integration and resettlement of refugees in Canada, in terms of:

- 1)** investigating the impact of the Welcome Group model on the social capital of refugee newcomers during COVID-19;
- 2)** contributing to best practices for other jurisdictions who are struggling to find the financial means to support refugees in large cities across Canada;
- 3)** providing similar sectors with an empirical basis for reviewing and building policies, initiatives, and investments around social capital that support and strengthen the newcomer community’s resettlement experience;
- 4)** identifying new areas of opportunity for addressing challenges and supporting positive change;
- 5)** raising awareness of the importance and benefits of social trust, social networks, and neighbourhood support, so that these are given a greater priority in policy development; and
- 6)** establishing a benchmark against which progress in the delivery of the Welcome Group program can be measured over time.

***With gratitude,***

***Shireen Salti, Principal Researcher***



## INTRODUCTION

### 1) *Who We Are*

**Together Project (a charitable initiative of MakeWay):** Together Project connects refugee newcomers and Canadians to build stronger, more integrated communities. They match Welcome Groups of four or more volunteers with newly arrived refugees for social and integration support.

**Toronto Foundation (Funder):** Toronto Foundation is a registered charity and home to 500+ community-minded philanthropists, existing to create a more fair and just society where everyone can thrive. Together with fundholders, they granted \$19M in 2019 to organizations in Toronto and across Canada. They are committed to listening, learning, and working in partnership with communities.

**Shireen Salti (Principal Researcher):** Shireen Salti is the Executive Director of the Canadian Arab Institute, where her strategic leadership is amplifying the voices and policy priorities of the Canadian Arab community. Shireen has volunteered for numerous organizations focused on the integration of refugees, including Together Project, as a cultural ambassador, to interpret for Arab GAR families and their Welcome Groups in Toronto. Shireen’s own lived experience is complemented by a Masters in Public Policy, Administration and Law and a Graduate Diploma in Judicial Administration from York University. These academic pursuits have fueled her passion for meaningful reform of the systems and policies meant to support the “Arab” experience in Canada — including newcomer resettlement, social capital, education, and labour market access. Shireen’s research focuses on the Syrian refugee integration experience, employment barriers facing Arab women and the impact of COVID-19 on racialized groups in Canada.

**Thon Malual (Quantitative Research Assistant):** Thon Malual is a graduate in Economics from York University. He works as a research assistant for York University Center for Refugees Studies (CRS) and Taxpayer Service Agent for the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA).

As an immigrant, Thon has a keen interest in understanding immigrants' challenges through the lens of data analysis that focuses on understanding the differences in integration between privately sponsored and government-sponsored refugees and the impact of gender variables on integration. He has worked on data analysis for programs studying immigrants and integration, such as Together Project and Syria Refugee Integration and Long-Term Health (SyRIA.lth) project.

**Dr. Michaela Hynie (Research Advisor, Professor, Faculty of Health, York University; Resident Faculty, Centre for Refugee Studies):** Dr. Hynie has a wide-ranging program of community engaged research — in Toronto, and around the world. Her work focuses on social determinants of health and the creation and evaluation of social inclusion interventions, with an emphasis on communities experiencing displacement.

### 2) *Project Overview*

Through the lens of social capital theory, this report aims to examine the integration trajectories of refugees from their own perspectives. Specifically, we explore how trust and social networks can play a role in facilitating a sense of social integration and the building of social capital among Government-Assisted Refugees (GARs) in Together Project’s “Welcome



Group Program.” The study’s qualitative and quantitative methods have enabled the examination of post-migration challenges experienced by GARs in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), generating unique recommendations grounded in relevant data for program and policy design.

This report has also been informed and inspired by the Toronto Social Capital Study (2018) — a research project conducted by the Toronto Foundation, in partnership with the Environics Institute. Their study used social capital as an important measure of how well residents are doing, as well as their ability to recover from setbacks and crises; however, it did not generate data on refugees specifically. We believe that this is an opportunity for further research in order to better understand the lived experiences of GARs living in the GTA.

We sourced GAR families through Together Project, with whom the author has worked closely — as both researcher and volunteer. Building on existing family matching programs, its “Welcome Group” model provides essential support for newcomers by matching them with a group of four Canadian volunteers (made up of a team lead and three team members) and, when necessary, a cultural ambassador who is fluent in English and the GAR family’s language. Developed in close partnership with COSTI Immigrant Services, it not only provides various settlement services, but also actively generates social capital, i.e., cultivating meaningful relationships between refugees and Canadian volunteers, which fills the gap that is needed for integration of GAR families in Canada. The Welcome Group program is grounded in the core principles of “trauma-informed care,” which focuses on trust, collaboration, personal agency, and empowerment. To support the needs of a recently arrived refugee, Together Project is committed to building trust and social connections with the GAR families, all the while respecting their preferences and choices.

Launched in 2017, Together Project’s Welcome Group Program connects Government-Assisted Refugees with four or more volunteers for six months of social and integration support. Together Project collaborates with established community agency partners, who refer their clients to the program based on their clients’ desire for social connections and integration support. Volunteers are interviewed, screened, trained, supported and evaluated to ensure that they provide newcomers with safe, effective social support. Each Welcome Group match is based on the unique priorities of a newcomer household, which may include learning English, understanding and accessing services, finding meaningful employment, accessing education and simply socializing, learning about Canada, and building relationships. Providing these social connections, in the form of a supportive volunteer Welcome Group can unlock some of the barriers newcomers face and address the root causes of their social isolation.

In response to the pandemic, volunteers began connecting remotely with newcomers via, text, phone or video platforms. Typically, newcomers meet once a week with volunteers over the six month match duration. Volunteer interpreters participate in matches as needed. Since 2017, Together Project has made over 215 matches between Welcome Groups and newcomer households, which have included 870 volunteer participants and 750 individual newcomers. Through these matches, Together Project’s Welcome Group Program drives impact in three interconnected ways: building newcomer social connections, supporting newcomer integration priorities, and amplifying community involvement in newcomer integration.



Newcomers are a major part of the success and prosperity of Canada, making our cities among the most vibrant and diverse in the world. However, the settlement process is not always simple, or smooth — Canada’s relatively open immigration policies do not guarantee successful integration, even with hard work and dedication. We thus recognize that integration is a mutual endeavour: as newcomers work hard to adapt to their new environment, Canadians must also actively welcome them into local communities.

That is why we are undertaking this study, to continue to promote the benefits of Canadians who step up to become cultural ambassadors on behalf of refugees and other newcomers. Volunteer support makes a considerable difference for GARs in many facets of their lives: from health care access and employment opportunities, to education and language acquisition.

### **3) *Advancing Research by the Toronto Foundation***

The Toronto Social Capital Study (2018) is a benchmark study on social capital that has construed its efforts as a “fact finding mission,” an initial step that “one might take when creating a map of where to go next” (p. 3).

The Toronto Social Capital Study was conducted to develop comprehensive research on social capital in Toronto; to document how the city is doing today, how it may be changing, and to identify areas of success and challenges. This research addresses such questions as:

To what extent do Torontonians feel connected to, and actively engage with, their neighbours and community organizations? How well do they trust others in their communities — those who are like themselves and those who are different? These questions matter because social trust and engagement are critical to a good quality of life, a healthy population, safe streets, and economic prosperity.

This study will make an important contribution to the future of Toronto in terms of:

- Providing all sectors with an empirical basis for reviewing and building policies, initiatives and investments that strengthen the city’s social capital resources in ways that enhance the broader community;
- Identifying new areas of opportunity for addressing challenges and supporting positive change;
- Raising awareness of the importance and benefits of social trust, social networks and neighbourhood support, so these are given a greater priority; and
- Establishing a benchmark against which progress can be measured over time. Partners and other organizations can build upon this study through follow-up surveys that may focus on specific target populations and/or areas of the city.

### **4) *Purpose & Impact***

The purpose of the present study is to measure changes in the social capital of GARs over the course of an intervention that seeks to understand their settlement experiences in the GTA and to document refugees’ and volunteers’ perspectives of the Together Project program’s effectiveness.

As per the Toronto Social Capital Study 2018, “social capital” is the term used to describe the vibrancy of social networks, and the extent to which there is trust and reciprocity within a



community and among individuals. It is the “lubricant” that makes it possible for societies to function, and for people to get along peacefully even when they have little in common.

In this report, we describe some of the benefits and challenges of building social capital through new social networks, in order to enhance the sense of belonging and connectedness among GARs overall. These challenges have been more pronounced with the social isolation required by the COVID-19 pandemic and thus may not capture the typical experiences of newcomer families, but the data is still relevant in showing how Welcome Groups support newcomers and act as social networks in navigating their settlement pathway.

In this report, we have collected testimony from both GARs and Team Leads from the Welcome Group Program over the period of September 2019 - April 2020, in order to highlight specific lessons gathered from firsthand experiences in service delivery. The global COVID-19 pandemic that began in Canada in March of 2020 meant that the research project methodology had to change and adapt to the needs of participants. The objectives and goals of the study remained the same — understanding how GAR families build social capital and assessing the effectiveness of the Welcome Group model during unprecedented times.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The growing number of refugees admitted to Canada in the last five years has necessitated additional research on the integration of refugees and the challenges they face during this process. Between the period of November 4, 2015 to December 30, 2020 there have been 73,000 Syrian refugees who have arrived in Canada (Government of Canada, 2019). The Syrian refugee resettlement response was a stark contrast to past efforts and responses to previous refugee cohorts. “Canada’s combined intake of refugees across all categories and source countries exceeds 30,000 for the first time since 2006, and surpasses 40,000 for the first time since 1992, which marks only the fifth such occasion since 1979” (El-Assal, 2016, p. 10). The response was at all levels of government. The Ontario government in particular created a *Syrian Refugee Resettlement Secretariat* and worked closely in collaboration with the municipal and federal governments to ensure seamless, coordinated, and appropriate support for the refugees who arrived in Ontario (The Government of Ontario, 2015). In addition to the governments’ overwhelming response, private sponsorship played a huge role in the Syrian refugee response initiative. Twice as many refugees were resettled through the private sponsorship program by non-profit organizations such as *Lifeline Syria* and many faith groups applied through churches, mosques, or synagogues. While the response initiatives to the Syrian refugee crisis have been more than galvanizing for Canadians, integration is key to ensuring those who have fled conflict can successfully resettle and integrate into Canadian society. Lessons learned from the influx of Syrian refugees may be useful in developing an informed approach to the settlement and integration of thousands of Afghan families in 2021-2022.

Canada’s integration strategy began to recognize integration as a mutual adjustment by both refugees and society in 2009 when it explicitly stated in the description of the ‘Integration Program’ the following:

*Canada’s approach to integration is one that encourages mutual accommodation and adjustment by both newcomers and the larger society. Newcomers’ understanding of and*





*respect for basic Canadian values, coupled with Canadians' understanding of and respect for the cultural diversity that newcomers bring to Canada, is fundamental to this approach. As well, the cooperation of government, stakeholders and other players, such as employers and volunteers, in providing newcomers with the support they need to realize the full benefits of immigration (CIC, 2010, a; Hyndman, 2011, p. 6).*

While integration is not explicitly defined in Canadian legislation and policy, Yu et al. (2007) contend that “most scholars and policy makers in Canada and elsewhere agree with the UK Home Office’s 2003 description of refugee ‘integration’ as a dynamic, multi-faceted two-way process which requires adaptation on the part of the refugees, but also the society of destination” (p. 17).

Until recently, Canada has been the only country in the world to host both privately sponsored refugees (PSRs) and Government-Assisted Refugees (GARs). This provides a remarkable opportunity to examine the most effective aspects of resettlement support in refugee integration (Hynie and Hyndman, 2016).

GARs are people who are recognized as refugees and have been resettled (or are in the process of resettling) from and receive financial support up to one year after arrival from the federal government and settlement support from service provider organizations. This support includes meeting refugees at the airport or ports of entry, providing temporary accommodation, helping refugees find permanent accommodation, offering basic household items, and providing a general orientation to life in Canada (Government of Canada, 2016a). GARs, like all permanent residents, are also offered free language-training classes in both French and English through federally and/or provincially funded programs (Government of Canada, 2016a). Refugees, regardless of sponsorship pathway, are also eligible for the Interim Federal Health Program (IFHP) which provides limited temporary taxpayer-funded coverage of health care benefits until provincial coverage is obtained, plus supplemental coverage similar to what is available for those on social assistance for the first year of settlement (Government of Canada, 2016a).

According to Janet Dench (Executive Director of the *Canadian Council for Refugees*), in the first years after arrival, PSRs — who often have advantageous family networks and higher levels of education — tend to fare better economically, as they are not selected for their vulnerability like the GARs (MetroNews, 2016). On the other hand, GARs are typically selected based on humanitarian need, which will often present social and educational challenges as they tend to take longer to establish themselves. In my interactions with many GAR families, I often hear that they meet government officials only during the early months of their settlement in the GTA. Organizations such as COSTI Immigrant Services and Together Project play a key role in the settlement of newcomers in Canada. For example, GARs in Toronto receive one year of settlement support provided by a dedicated caseworker from an organization like COSTI, who can improve their access to other community services and monitor their settlement process. However, GAR families tend to have less access to social capital than Privately Sponsored Refugees which makes them one of the most vulnerable groups in the Toronto area when it comes to long term integration.

Physical distancing policies that came into play during COVID created a new set of challenges for resettled refugees in that many of the services that they rely on were now being offered virtually. In a recent survey published by the ISSofBC, technology also is a factor in ensuring refugees have access to settlement services. “ 93% of respondents have access to a cell



phone with data and 97% have internet, only 37% have a computer at home. The lack of computer access is concerning given remote service delivery in education and settlement services” (ISSofBC, 2020, pg. 8).

In order to better understand the client needs and the integration trajectory of refugees in Toronto, this report will employ social capital theory to examine the ways in which GARs build social capital through the Together Project Welcome Group model and gain access to language learning through technology. It will also examine how they build trust in their new settings, and identify their needs during their early integration process.

Bourdieu (1985) is one of the first social theorists to discuss the concept of ‘social capital.’ He identifies social capital as “*the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network*” (p. 248). Bourdieu recognized that people must work at maintaining their social capital; social networks are not a natural given, but must be constructed and maintained through “*investment strategies oriented to the institutionalization of group relations, usable as a reliable source of other benefits*” (Portes, 1998, p. 4). The value of individual ties depends on the number of connections they can mobilize and the volume of different capitals possessed by each connection (Bourdieu, 1986). Many theorists have built on the research of Bourdieu and expanded the social capital thought to include assessments of different areas that influence social capital. According to Paxton (1999), in order for network ties to become social capital, a relationship must be formed between refugees and the host society based on *trust*. In this sense, Giddens (1990) makes the distinction between trust in specific individuals, versus trust in abstract institutions or groups of people. Lamba and Krahn (2003) quote Giddens’ explanation that “*refugees would need to place trust not only in family and friends, but also in the abstract notion of Canada’s humanitarian commitments and in the sponsorship and settlement services offered during the early phases of resettlement*” (p. 338).

Family support has been identified as one way of establishing bridging and bonding social capital for refugees. This in turn helps form friendships, marital prospects, employment opportunities, education information, access to accommodations, and financial aid (Gold & Kibria, 1993). It was also found that social capital is formed from resources “*such as employment information and aid with translation, hospitals training, centres, transport, and resettlement and welfare agencies*” (Lamba and Krahn, 2003, p. 338). In addition, Gold and Kibria (1993) found that refugees establish social capital through money and other resources from interconnected residential units pooled in order to cope with economic instabilities. Various forms of household labour such as child care, vehicle repair, and food preparation were also a part of the family network of aid received and given through social capital. It is interesting to see how social capital influences the type of networks and services GAR families access in the GTA in the context of a global health crisis.

Lamba and Krahn’s (2003) study concludes that refugee service providers need to take note of the range of ties that refugees choose to draw on during resettlement. In particular, they need to attend to network ties such as family and friends, host-volunteers, sponsors, religious groups, and community organizations — which can be used to make policies and programs that place greater emphasis on ensuring that refugees are matched with individuals that form bonding and bridging social capital when migrating to Canada.

Finally, “*refugee service providers should also be aware of the varying sources of support relied on by women and men, and by young and older refugees, and should develop their programs of assistance accordingly*” (Lamba and Krahn, 2003, p. 358). The value of ease of access to forms



of social capital varies by age and gender. Such characteristics differ in the ways youth and women integrate into mainstream society and pursue new educational, occupational, and residential opportunities. While this study did not explore how the building of social capital by GARs was influenced by age and gender demographics, it does provide recommendations for future explorations that can be made based on the methodology outlined below.

The term “trust” is used to analyze how GARs build social capital by placing trust in the “known” groups (bonding social capital such as: family, friends, co-ethnic groups, national groups, or religious groups) and in the “unknown” groups (bridging social capital such as: other ethnic or community groups, strangers; and linking capital such as: government and community organizations). In this sense, some GARs are found to be placing trust not only in family and friends, but also in the abstract notion of Canada’s humanitarian commitments through the participation of Together Project’s Welcome Group program and the settlement services that partner agencies offered during the early phases of resettlement.

Foundational literature on bridging and bonding social capital (Cantle 2005; Putnam 2000) argues that contact with predominantly bonding capital (i.e., co-ethnic, national, or religious groups) and lack of contact with bridging social capital (i.e, out-groups) is harmful to integration, and can lead to further social fragmentation (Cameron 2011; Putnam 2000). “Bonding” and “bridging” social capital were used as key concepts to examine how refugees form network ties and trust among volunteers, family and friends, while linking capital refers to trust in government, community organizations, and the larger host society as a whole.

There are various theoretical approaches to trust (Newton, Stolle, and Zmerli, 2018), particularly when it comes to generalized, social and political trust. In the literature, trust has been defined as *“the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest, and cooperative behaviour, based on commonly shared norms, on the part of other members of that community”* (Fukuyama, 1995, p. 1). Whereas bonding social capital reflects particularized trust in friends and family, bridging social capital arises from the prevalence of generalized trust in strangers and the larger community.

There is an important distinction to be made between “generalized trust” and “social and political trust” in the literature. For example, Newton et al. outline that *“while there is a modest relationship between social forms of trust and political forms of trust, research has not entirely disentangled the flow of causality between the two”* (2018, pg 1). Social trust in their article is referred to as trust that is essential for social cohesion, integration and stability, qualities that are especially crucial for multicultural societies with economic and migration growth such as Canada. The key takeaway here is that the literature on trust is expansive and this report mainly focuses on the social aspect of trust when it comes to integration as *“research shows that social trust is associated with health, happiness, prosperity, long life, and a sense of social belonging. It is said to be the glue that joins society together and the oil that facilitates its smooth operation”* (Newton et al., 2018, pg 3).

Social trust is important in the context of analyzing how newcomers build social capital, because most GAR participants were Arab refugees who had lived under serious government and political uprising prior to migration to Canada. This study explores this sense of social trust by GARs in the GTA when they first arrived and a year following arrival.

One important point in relation to social trust in the literature is that individuals tend to either trust or distrust across all fields of social activity whether they involve family, friends,



colleagues, strangers or political officials, although most will draw boundaries between close family and friends (particularized trust) and everyone else (Newton et al., 2018). This builds on the work of Giddens (1990) and Paxton (1999) who indicate that in order for network ties to become social capital, refugees would need to place ‘trust’ not only in family, friends, co-ethnic, national and religious groups, but also in government agencies, community organizations, and the larger community as a whole. Therefore, social trust must be developed across both bonding and bridging social capital for newcomers in order to acquire a journey of integration.

This overview of social capital and refugee integration in Canada provides an understanding of the multi-faceted and complex perspectives of how newcomers build social networks and trust and how it may impact the different experiences of GARs in the GTA.

## **METHODS**

### **1) Participants**

Participants were representatives of GAR families and Welcome Group Leads in the Greater Toronto Area who were participating in the Together Project initiative in the winter of 2019/2020. Participants were recruited through the gatekeeper —Together Project — during the period of September 2019 to April 2020, in the course of their on-boarding for the program.

Our study began with 20 participants, representing 20 families, at the baseline phase in September - December of 2019. Unfortunately, four families withdrew from the Together Project Welcome Group program due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, only 16 families remained at the exit phase in January - April of 2020.

GAR families were asked to nominate a respondent to complete two surveys delivered in-person and later by phone due to COVID-19: first as a baseline survey and second as an exit survey, six months later. We had planned to also do 6-month exit focus groups in person with five of the newcomer participants to extract experiential data and openly discuss whether their needs have been met by the welcome group. The COVID-19 pandemic compelled us to adjust these plans. Instead, remote focus group discussions were conducted online with 5 of the 16 GAR families at the end of their Welcome Group match over the phone. Surveys and focus group interviews were conducted in Arabic by the bilingual (English/Arabic) Principal Researcher.

The study initially aimed to interview the primary earner in each household; typically, targeted at the adult male in the family. Yet this strategy was not maintained throughout the research project, for two reasons: 1) in general, women were more responsive to requests for surveys, and 2) women were, in fact, often in charge of overseeing and planning their household finances. Moreover, the same person did not respond both times, despite our efforts.

An hour long virtual focus group discussion was also conducted with team leads at the end of the match, to understand how to improve the program from their perspective. The role of the Welcome Group lead is to manage communications on behalf of the entire volunteer group. The focus group was conducted in English with five Canadian volunteers that served GAR families during the period of September 2019- 2020.



## 2) Baseline Surveys

The baseline survey included socio-demographic information and key social capital questions based on the Toronto Social Capital Survey. These included questions about participants' sense of belonging to their neighbourhood, trust in local institutions and community members, the size and nature of their social networks, access to services and resources, participation in organizations and activities, and their general physical and mental health. The survey consisted of 50 questions in total and took approximately an hour to complete.

GARs were requested to fill out the informed consent form and survey prior to the first Welcome Group meeting. This initially took place at the GAR family household in Toronto and later on the phone due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 3) Exit Surveys

GARs were asked to complete the same survey 6 months later over the phone. The survey consisted of the same 50 questions as the baseline survey with the addition of a small number of questions assessing the impact of COVID-19 on their social and psychological well-being, and on the effectiveness of various forms of remote support during this time. The 16 GAR families who remained in the program participated in the exit survey. The original intention was to have the same respondent complete both the baseline and exit survey but unfortunately, this did not happen for several families. Thus, the data could not be analyzed as longitudinal data.

## 4) GAR Focus Group

Five GARs were invited to participate in a focus group discussion at the end of the study, which was up to a year following commencement of their participation in the program. Interview questions addressed motivations for joining the program, success and challenges of the program, and areas of greatest effectiveness. The interviews were held over Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The recorded focus group discussion was conducted in Arabic and then translated and transcribed into English and uploaded into a word document to be used to determine themes through thematic analysis.

## 5) Volunteer Focus Group

The purpose of conducting focus groups with volunteers was to understand the resettlement experience of GARs through the lens of volunteers. For example, *how have they helped the GAR family build social networks?*

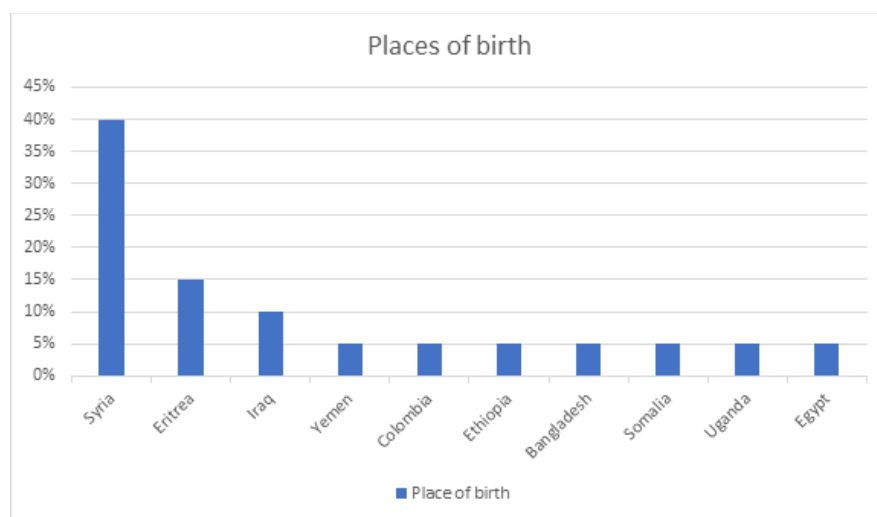
Participants were asked about any useful tips they have to improve the Welcome Group program, as well as explain a challenging and successful time in their role as volunteers dealing with newcomers. Participants were also asked about the effectiveness of the Welcome Group model in terms of creating opportunities for informal language learning, digital literacy, mitigating social isolation, increasing social networks, employment readiness or access to employment and health services, volunteer support, sense of belonging and the increase of trust and empathy in their own communities. Volunteers were interviewed over Zoom in English. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.



## FINDINGS

### 1) A snapshot of the demographic data of GAR participants

Socio-demographic data from the baseline survey indicated that nearly half of our participants (40%) were born in Syria. GARs born in Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, and Egypt comprised another (35%) of all participants. There were also participants from Bangladesh, Colombia, Ethiopia, and Uganda (one from each country). In terms of gender, the participants are nearly at parity: with 11 female GARs (55%) and nine male GARs (45%). Their average age was 44.25 years old, with the oldest participant being 71 and the youngest being 29.



**Figure 1: Place of Birth**

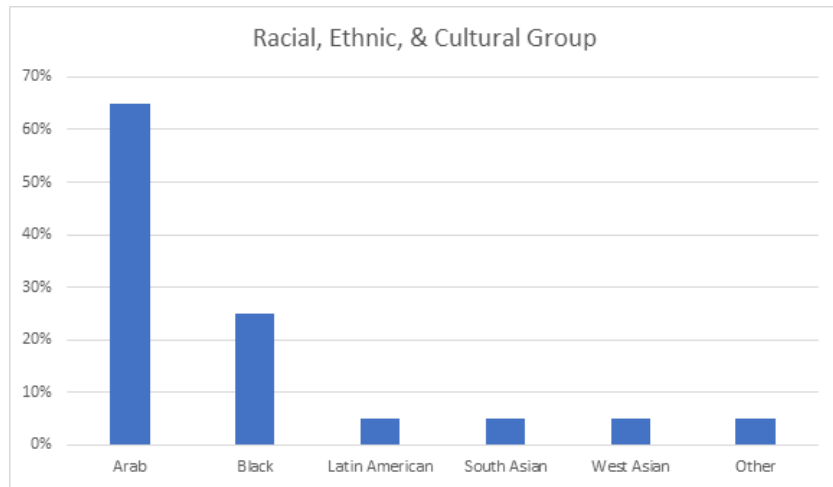
The majority of GARs (70%) in this study spoke Arabic as their mother tongue. The remaining participants spoke a variety of first languages, including Bengali, Oromo, and Tigrinya. Additionally, all of the GARs are recent arrivals to Canada: 18 of 20 GARs came in 2019, with the remaining two participants arriving in 2018.

**Table 1: Mother Tongue of GARs**

Mother tongue	Arabic	Spanish	Tigrinya	Oromo	Bengali	Somali	Luganda
Percentage	70%	5%	5%	5%	5%	5%	5%

More than half of the participants (65%) identified as belonging to the Arab cultural/ethnic/racial group. The second biggest group was Black, at 25%. Finally, there was representation from several other groups, including Latin American, South Asian, and West Asian (one per group). It is important to point out that there were racial ethnic self identification of Black and Arab dual identities.





**Figure 2: Racial/Ethnic/Cultural Group**

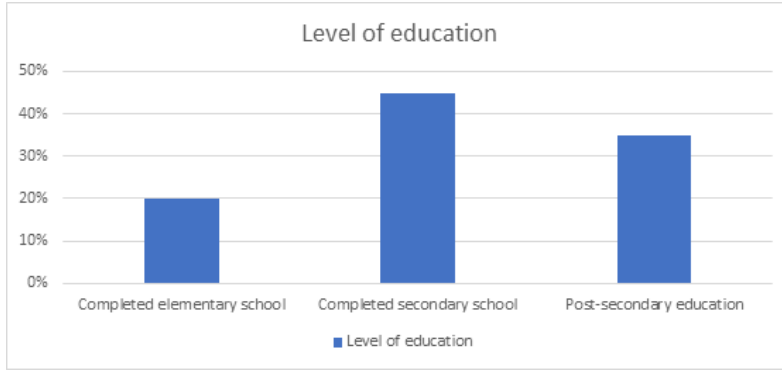
Approximately two-thirds of participants (65%) are married. Five GARs (25%) were “single and never married.” Only one GAR was divorced or separated, while one was widowed. The average number of people in each household totalled 5.15, with the largest household being 13 people, and only one participant living alone.

**Table 2: Religion for GARs**

Religion	Muslim	Christian non-denominational	Catholic/Roman Catholic	Hindu	Sabian Mandaean	TOTAL
Percentage	65%	15%	10%	5%	5%	20

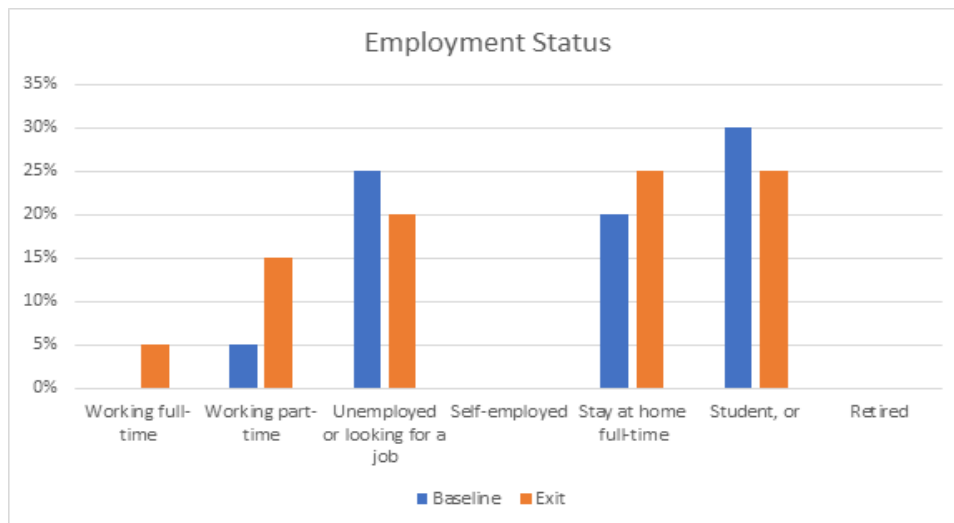
In terms of religious beliefs, nearly two-thirds (65%) of the GARs surveyed self-identified as Muslim. The next largest group was considerably smaller—Christian non-denominational, at 15%. Among the GARs, there were also two who identified as Catholic, one as Hindu, and one as Sabian Mandaean.





**Figure 3: Level of Education**

This group of GARs were fairly evenly distributed on the highest level of education, with 35% of participants identified as completing post-secondary education, 45% completing secondary school, and 20% completing elementary school. This represents a much more highly educated sample than most GARs in Canada, where 75% to 80% of refugees report less than secondary education (Government of Canada, 2019).



**Figure 4: Employment Status**

Despite the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on employment, it did not unduly affect this group of GARs, as most of the respondents were either unemployed or students.

**Table 4: Level of Income**

Level of income (2018)	Baseline
Under \$30,000	70%
\$30,000 to \$60,000	10%
No income	5%
Refuse/Cannot say	15%





The total annual income for GARs was on the lower end of the scale, with the majority of respondents (70%) making under \$30,000 per year. Only two GARs made between \$30,000-\$60,000, whereas one GAR made no income whatsoever.

**Table 5: Which of the following best describes your total household income at the present time?**

Household income	Baseline	Exit
Good enough for you and you can save from it	0%	0%
Just enough for you, so that you do not have major problems	30%	56%
Not enough for you and you are stretched	10%	31%
Not enough for you and you are having a hard time	35%	6%
Cannot say	5%	6%

For one survey question — which of the following best describes your total household income at the present time? — the results are striking. Although at the baseline evaluation, seven respondents (35%) indicated that their household income was “not enough for you and you are having a hard time,” only one GAR family remained in this category after the exit survey (6%). Notably, none of the GARs indicated that their household income was “good enough for you and you can save from it,” highlighting their difficulty in attaining completely stable finances during their settlement process.

### 1) An analysis of demographic data of GAR Participants

The snapshot of demographic data above at first glance tells us that this group of GAR participants has a variety of basic needs upon arrival in Canada such as language learning, education, employment, and income. For example, based on *Table 5*, it is obvious that the household income of most GAR participants is not enough to live a decent quality of life in Canada. The demographics above represent a large number of respondents that were also students with low income levels.

It is important to point out that 70% of GAR participants identified the Arabic language as their mother tongue and 65% identified themselves as Arab. As it stands, Arabs are the fastest growing immigrant population in Canada (Canadian Arab Institute, 2019). Based on the 2016 Canadian Census, there are a total of 947,820 persons in Canada who reported having an Arab ethnic origin. The Arab population in Canada has increased by ~34% since 2011 and by ~75% since 2006 (Canadian Arab Institute, 2019). This necessitates further research on the newcomer Arab experience in Canada and the systemic barriers they face to integrate into Canadian society.

Unemployment in general tends to be a big issue for the Arab population in Canada, even for those who land as economic migrants (Oommen, 2020). Of the people living in Canada and born in an Arab country, more than half have been admitted into Canada as economic



immigrants; almost 25% have been admitted into Canada as refugees (Canadian Arab Institute, 2019). Economic immigrants who tend to be highly educated also have a variety of challenges when it comes to integration such as the foreign credential problem (Salti, Morris, & Sultana, 2020).

This context setting of the Arab population in Canada is only meant to give a brief perspective of the Arab GAR experience. If economic migrants who are fluent in English and have a high level of education struggle to find employment, imagine the settlement outcomes of those who are recently arrived newcomers, such as GAR participants above, who do not speak English fluently and are mainly students with low income levels. This highlights the need for social networks that will allow this group to understand the Canadian system and how to access services that will support their integration journey.

While this report did not focus on the intersectionality of race and ethnicity, more research can be done to understand the challenges of GAR participants who hold multiple identities such as Arab and Black.

The findings below demonstrate the importance of social capital and the role the volunteers play in Together Project's Welcome Group model in assessing client needs. The next section presents an overview of how social trust was necessary for GARs to build social capital in the pandemic and access services such as language learning through technology support.

## EMERGING THEMES

### SOCIAL TRUST

#### ***"They provided anything I need to make me feel comfortable" - GAR participant in Together Project's Welcome Group program***

One of the emerging themes in this study highlighted how the Welcome Group model served as support for navigating other groups and organizations beyond family and close friendships from the same co-ethnic groups. For example, some GARs created a positive relationship with receiving society members who had volunteered through a church, bank, or virtual technology. These longer-term residents exposed GARs to both bonding and bridging social capital. For example, one GAR interviewee stated:

*GAR 1: 'A group from [COSTI], who are Canadian of course... They have an agreement with the Together Project. I am one of the people who did not face any problem. They connect with me all the time and provided all the conveniences. They provided anything I need to make me feel comfortable; I don't feel any difference between here and [Syria].*

*I: 'So what are the services that they gave you?'*

*GAR 1: 'Sending letters to the government, getting my health card, permanent resident card, address, opening a bank account and library account, signing me in this school... They took me shopping and to entertainment places, to make the kids happy.'*



I: 'Did you feel that these services and organizations are beneficial?'

GAR 1: 'Very much. I didn't feel a difference [between Canada and Syria]... I thought I was going to a country I did not know anything about; I did not know how people will treat me... Like if they will treat me in a good manner. But this group, they made me feel better than I felt in the Arab countries during transition period. Although I don't understand what they say, and we use Google translate sometimes, but they made me feel very comfortable.'

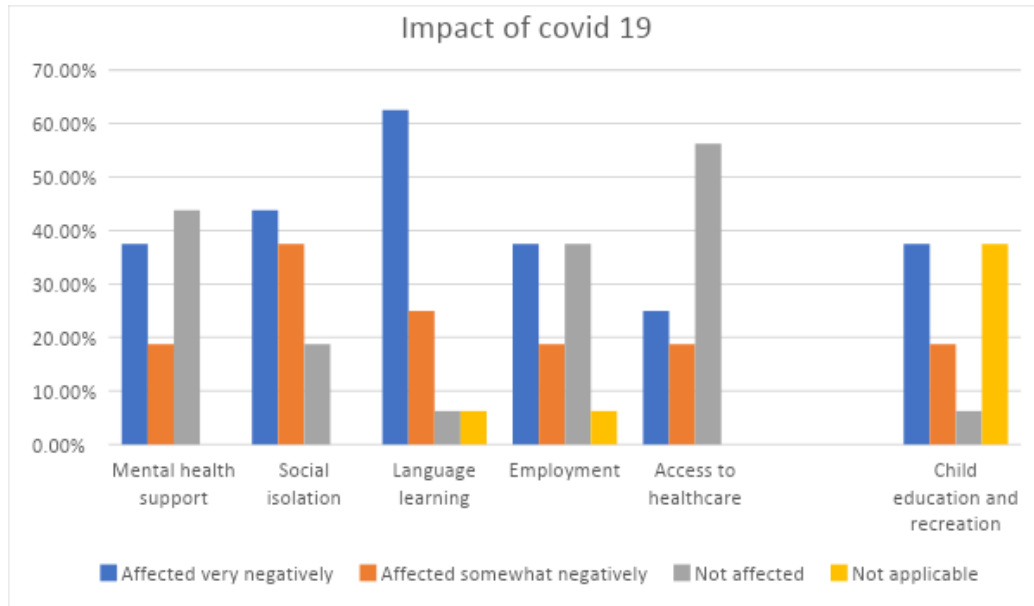
This suggests that trust was built by providing support to navigate systems and services and in this way, bridging capital (i.e. relationships and trust for outgroup members) was created through placing trust in relationships with outgroup members such as volunteers who are part of Together Project's Welcome Group program. It may also have led to greater trust in the institutions from which they were accessing services (linking capital). As mentioned above, linking capital refers to trust in government, community organizations, and the larger host society as a whole. Although there is no compelling evidence in this study that demonstrates the strength of linking capital, it is clear that placing trust in the "unknown" has led to feelings of inclusion in Canadian society, even when language was a challenge.

A majority of the refugees linked with host volunteers found these network ties useful enough to maintain them beyond the initial stages of resettlement. Host volunteers that are part of the Welcome Group program provide refugees with opportunities to practice and refine their English-language skills. Interaction with a host volunteer can also increase the range of knowledge and other skills required to interact successfully in the host society.

*TL 1: [The most important element of the Welcome Group] is having that trust with the family, where they understood that they had support. Coming to Canada, he felt defeated because he felt like he did not have an adequate support system. However, when he met us, he told us that he feels he has way more support, and wants to welcome us in his home whenever to learn the English language and Canada. Establishing that trust and support system — and allowing the family to know we are there not just as support workers, but as family members — was the greatest success.*

For most GARs, trust was found to be a crucial component of bridging social capital. While GARs had access to government services during the first 12 months of resettlement, Together Project's Welcome Group program was found to strengthen their knowledge and expand their social networks in Toronto (friends, family, religious groups, community organizations). By bringing refugees into mainstream public spaces such as libraries or digital technology, this model also helped refugees become familiar with daily routines and cultural values in their new home, such as diversity and multiculturalism.





**Figure 5: Impact of COVID-19 on GARs**

The team leads that were part of the Welcome Group model regularly assessed the GARs' needs throughout this research process that took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Just under two thirds (62.5%) of respondents said that language learning was affected very negatively during the pandemic, followed by social isolation (43.75%) and mental health support, childcare and employment (37.5%).

***“We got involved with the program because even with COVID-19 we are more isolated” - GAR participant of the Together Project***

GARs relied on the Welcome Group program of Together Project to learn how to resettle during the pandemic. Most GARs spoke of the importance of building social connections — even virtually — during the pandemic and how crucial it was for their resettlement process.

*GAR 2: We don't know anyone here. We don't even know the locations, places, and more, so we were encouraged to get involved in [Together Project] because even with COVID-19 we are more isolated. So we wanted them to show us new places in Canada or at least now tell us where to go and how to get around; what rules we have to follow in Canada, especially during the pandemic.*

The above example illustrates how refugee families “put trust in the unknown” even under unprecedented times with the pandemic. It is important to acknowledge that most women GARs interviewed felt this way. This suggests that individual characteristics play a role in the ways refugees integrate into mainstream society.

Trust sustained relationships beyond the initial stages of resettlement, leading to increased and enhanced opportunities such as language learning over time, and thus supporting successful integration. Empathy also influenced the trajectory of social inclusion. GARs reflected on the importance of having people that they trust and who understand their



language challenges in order to ‘feel comfortable’ and part of the community, which enhanced their settlement experience.

**“We established trust and communication to the point where they would take photos of bills and send them to us” - Together Project Volunteer**

Finally, navigating the financial system, including the payment of bills, can be a particularly difficult challenge to overcome for GARs. Advice in this area is difficult to provide without strong trust — due to privacy concerns and potential feelings of personal shame over lack of gainful employment. This is an area that the Welcome Group program has navigated successfully on an *ad hoc* basis, occasionally offering advice in a direct, intimate manner.

*TL 2: It took a sufficient amount of time to get a very thorough understanding of what their needs were. For example, they had issues with bill payments and not understanding them, and this was becoming a stress, so we established trust and communication to the point where they would take photos of bills and send them to us. So we could understand what’s going on and help them right away. They felt like they were a burden to us, but we assured them that we are here to help. This allowed them to communicate better and enabled us to understand what their priorities are.*

When asked how helpful remote social support was during the COVID-19 pandemic, GARs often chose the response “not applicable” pointing to the lack of formal support sought out during this time; particularly in “mental health support” and “employment.” The most helpful areas of remote social support were identified as “access to healthcare” and “language learning.” This further necessitates the need for GAR participants to have access to social capital that will help them access the healthcare system and learn the English language.

**Table 5: Remote social support during COVID-19**

	Very helpful	Mostly helpful	A little helpful	Not helpful	Not applicable
<b>Mental health support</b>	0%	0%	0%	7%	93%
<b>Social isolation</b>	13%	7%	27%	33%	20%
<b>Language learning</b>	33%	13%	33%	7%	13%
<b>Employment</b>	13%	7%	0%	0%	73%

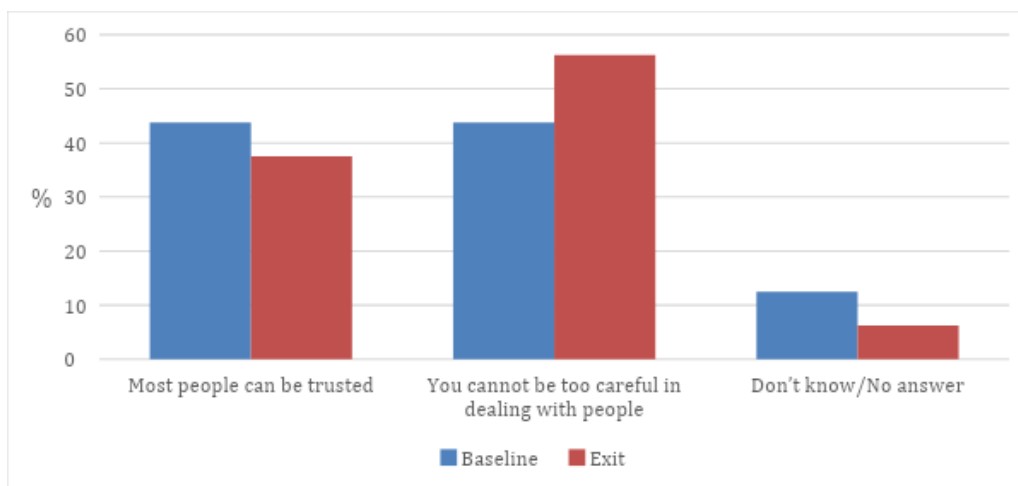


<b>Access to healthcare</b>	47%	13%	13%	7%	20%
<b>Child education and recreation</b>	7%	20%	20%	7%	47%
<b>Other (please describe below)</b>	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

**a) General trust**

General trust is the extent to which individuals trust other people overall.

The GARs in this study were asked 20 questions about trust in their neighbourhoods, government, and community at large. When asked generally whether most people can be trusted, participants’ responses were mixed. Although the baseline responses were equal between “most people can be trusted” (44%) and “you cannot be too careful in dealing with people” (44%), this changed negatively in the exit survey — with 38% indicating trust, and 56% mistrust.



**Figure 6: Generally speaking in Toronto, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you cannot be too careful in dealing with people?**

A second well-established indicator of general trust measures people’s confidence in recovering a lost wallet or purse containing \$200 from each of several types of individuals: a police officer, a neighbour, and a stranger.



**Table 7: If you lost a wallet or purse that contained \$200, how likely is it to be returned with the money in it if it was found by**

	Someone one who lives close by		A police officer		A stranger	
	Baseline	Exit	Baseline	Exit	Baseline	Exit
<b>Likely</b>	55%	62.25%	60%	87.5%	55%	62.5%
<b>Not at all likely</b>	10%	6.25%	10%	0%	15%	25%
<b>Cannot say</b>	5%	25%	5%	6.25%	5%	6.25%

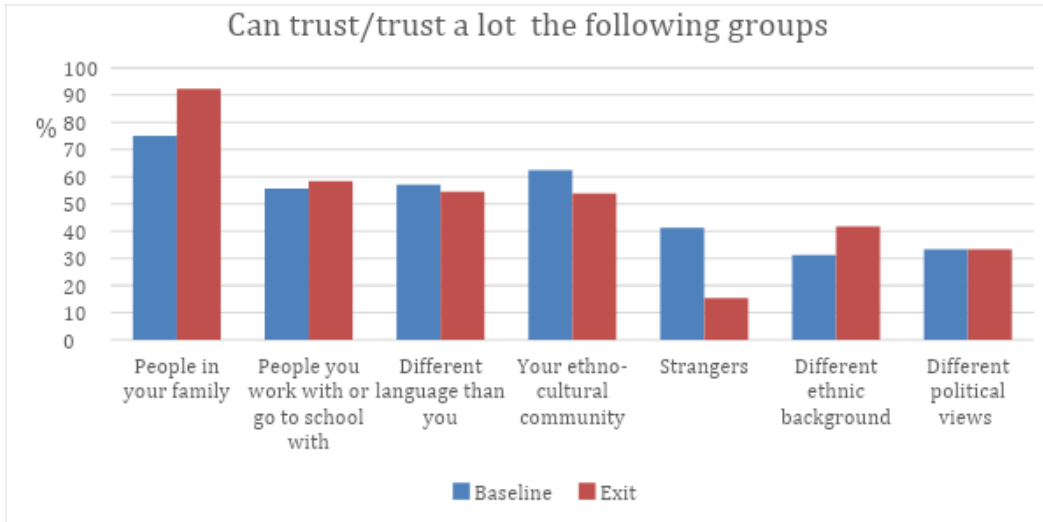
There was a consistent increase in the number of GARs indicating that they would trust someone who lives close by, a police officer and a stranger although these do not represent all of the same people at baseline and exit and so cannot be taken as an indication of change over time.

Whereas the GARs tended to trust Toronto police officers in returning the wallet (87.5%), there were far more mixed opinions about the other categories of locals and strangers.

**b) Group trust**

To dig further into GARs’ trust, we used a 5-point likert scale to ask them questions towards specific groups of people in Toronto. The following graph depicts only the affirmative responses (4-5), to identify which of the groups are trusted (as opposed to mistrusted). A more specific dimension of social trust is the degree to which individuals trust different groups of people, ranging from those very much like themselves (e.g., family, i.e., particularized trust) to those who are different (e.g., by language, ethnic background, political views, which represents generalized trust). The survey examined this dimension by measuring the degree of trust in each of seven types of groups.





**Figure 7: How much can you trust each of the following groups of people?**

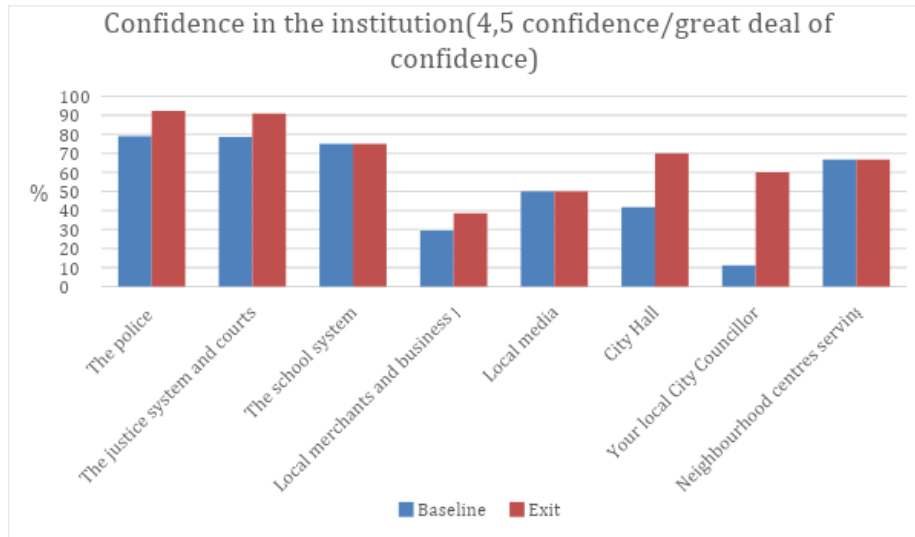
There are several interesting dynamics that emerged between the baseline and exit surveys. The percentage responding “people in your family” increased, whereas strangers were not trusted as much by the participants who responded at the six-month point during the exit survey. It seems as though the only fully trustworthy group is family members, with the lowest categories being “strangers,” “different political views,” and “very different ethnic background” which is consistent with other research on trust that finds that particularized trust is higher than trust of strangers and other community members (Newton et al.,2018),

**c) Confidence in local institutions**

Another dimension of trust, political trust, involves confidence in institutions that play essential roles in the functioning of local communities in terms of their economy, social development, safety and legal protections. The survey asked GAR participants the extent to which they have confidence in each of eight local institutions. In terms of their confidence in Canadian institutions, we used an identical 5-point likert scale to determine level of trust, recording only affirmative responses (4-5).







**Figure 8: Level of confidence in various Canadian institutions**

Confidence in institutions remained quite stable among respondents answering at baseline and those answering exit surveys. The most notable differences were seen in “city hall” and “your local City Councillor”. However, in each case, the majority of respondents at baseline did not provide any response for this item, suggesting that the low scores were reflecting a lack of familiarity rather than lack of trust in these particular institutions. More respondents provided responses at exit, and these responses were more favourable overall.

**d) Sense of belonging**

Another dimension of social trust is the extent to which people feel they belong in the community in which they live. For the GARs in this study, many of them have developed significant connections to their local community, fostering a sense of belonging during their settlement process. Although a larger proportion of GARs chose “somewhat strong” (50%) and “very strong” (31%) to describe their sense of belonging, it was weaker among those who answered the exit survey than those who responded at baseline.

**Table 8: Sense of Belonging to Local Community**

Sense of belonging to local community	Baseline	Exit
<b>Very strong</b>	53%	31%
<b>Somewhat strong</b>	40%	50%
<b>Somewhat weak</b>	7%	13%
<b>Very weak</b>	0%	0%



<b>Cannot say</b>	0%	6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>16</b>

**“We are there not just as support workers but as a family to the GAR participants” - Together Project Volunteer**

It was evident from the focus group discussions held that volunteers often aimed at providing a sense of belonging for their GAR families through different means of support. For example, volunteers understood that some GARs were not focused on finding employment, rather on their mental health. They emphasized the emotional support they provided to GAR participants. Volunteers reported ensuring GARs are supported with their ‘PTSD’. While not all volunteers held a background in educational psychology, often those who were just there to listen to GAR participants felt that they were of immense support to GARs mental health during the pandemic. Volunteers also found that supporting GAR participants was beneficial to themselves in that it allowed them to understand the challenges facing newcomers in Canada.

*TL 3: It is about **establishing trust with the family** and being their support system and allowing them to know that we are there not just there as support workers but as a family and that yielded us great success and I am very fortunate to have benefited from that experience.*

*TL 4: The government needs to know this. They were grateful they had a home. They lived in the mud in Lebanon in a tent a year before. So it was important to match up with the speed they want to go. He got a car loan from the dealership -- it was an absurd interest rate, we helped him get a visa with TD and until today they go to the same advisor we introduced him to... So it’s again that sense of community and that **establishment of rapport, trust and community** that established that sense of independence for him.*

Results from the four sub-dimensions of trust provides the basis for identifying where social trust is most and least present across GARs residing in the GTA. While the quantitative data on general trust, group trust, confidence in local institutions and sense of belonging are only descriptive, they still tell a story about the GARs’ sense of social trust over a six month period. Trust in groups was high among respondents at both time points, especially among family, police, justice systems and courts, the school system and city hall. It is important to point out that this sense of trust still occurred among these groups during a global health crisis where their needs were unmet, and their priorities were still being identified by volunteers and other networks.

In comparison to citizens of Toronto that were interviewed as part of the Toronto Social Capital Study in 2018, GARs were found to have more confidence in local institutions than Torontonians themselves. This is an interesting finding because refugees are sometimes viewed as distrusting of public institutions in Western societies. However, it may also reflect a



contrast effect, where they are comparing local institutions to what they recently experienced prior to migration.

In the Toronto Foundation Social Capital Study, social trust was found to be a matter of financial security, as well as race/culture and age. This report did not examine how social trust is influenced by levels of income and ethnicity, however, further research must explore the ways in which these factors play a role in the integration of GARs in Canada, especially in comparison to PSRs who have access to private sponsor groups.

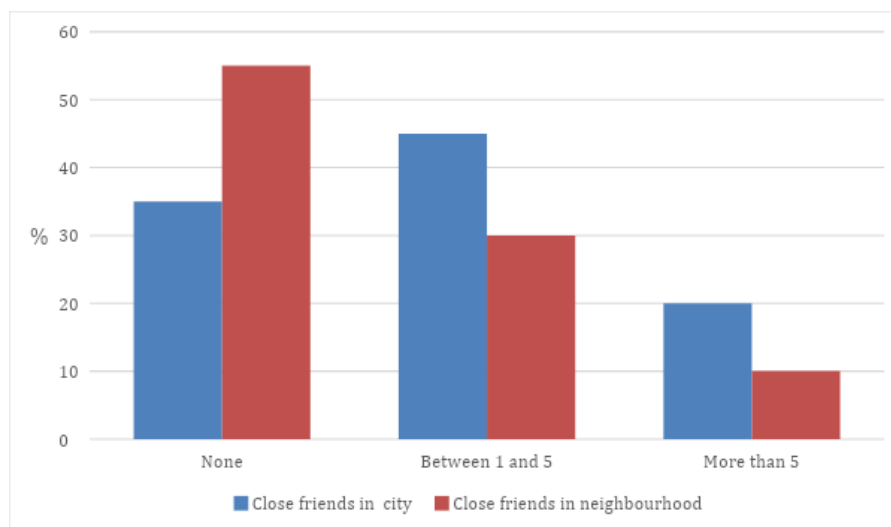
## SOCIAL NETWORKS

Social capital in networks is defined as “the presence and quality of social connections that individuals have with others, including family and friends” (Toronto Foundation, 2019, p. 29 ). The majority of GARs report having at least one family member or close friend in their lives — someone who they feel comfortable with and, importantly, can call on for help when necessary. In the section below, we learn that social networks is also another emerging theme that becomes a factor in how GARs proceed with language learning, digital literacy and access to services.

### ***“Social capital is the most important means of getting help for us” - GAR participant of the Together Project***

#### **a) Close friend connections**

Participants discussed the number of close friends in Toronto and their neighbourhood at baseline. The results demonstrated that the majority of GARs did not have access to close friends in their neighbourhoods. The baseline survey was administered during the beginning of the match with the Welcome Group volunteers. Many GARs lack bonding capital since arriving in Canada, with the majority (80%) having either “none” or “between 1-5” close friends. Additionally, proximity to these close friends was shown to be an issue. When asked, 55% of GARs indicated that no close friends lived in the same neighbourhood, whereas 30% indicated “between 1-5” friends did.



### Figure 9: Close friends in Toronto and neighbourhood at baseline

In the Toronto Foundation Social Capital Study, it was emphasized that by far the most important influence on social trust is knowing one's neighbours (2018, pg. 26). It was concerning to find that GARs lack access to close friends in their neighbourhood during the pandemic. However, Together Project's volunteers were found to be quite the support for GAR participants in this regard.

*GAR 3: One person [in our Welcome Group] spoke Arabic, so he was our translator and a soccer enthusiast. **We even ended up using his network** to get our kids a job at the local grocery store.*

*GAR 4: **Social capital is the most important means of getting help for us.** Telling us where to go, who to see, how to book appointments... and how to meet with others, to learn more about life in Canada.*

Extending social networks is one of the major benefits of getting involved with community initiatives like Together Project, for both newcomers and volunteers. Many of these community-oriented settlement services are not simply run by administrators, but active volunteers who connect with newcomers on a personal basis. If there are no family and friends in their new country, GARs must connect with and rely on the kindness of people who are essentially either administrators or strangers. Establishing a robust social network is an integral part of their settlement process, which can be supported through centralized planning for social capital development; typically, by government settlement programs and local community organizations.

In larger Canadian cities, newcomers often have the opportunity to connect with their diaspora, which can ease the initial stages of integrating into a new country. However, it is also important to form connections with people who are different from one's own background — a process which is referred to as “bridging capital.” In a city as diverse as Toronto, this has become a focus of how newcomers grow their social networks. The Toronto Social Capital Report has directly asked the question: “to what extent are residents ‘sticking with their own’ versus making connections across ethnic and other boundaries?”

The results of the Toronto Foundation study revealed that people in Toronto often have friends who are “like themselves, in terms of mother tongue, age group, sex, education level, and ethnic background” (2019, p. 28). Yet over the past five years, this has been changing, with many Toronto residents reporting 50% or more of recent friends being from different cultural backgrounds.

For GARs, basic connections in their social network are crucial for success upon arrival. For instance, knowing one's neighbours is important for accessing local support; particularly for those residents who report having no close family members or close friends. In Toronto, the people who are least likely to have close friends or family members “include those with the lowest levels of education and income, and those who live in the downtown core of the city” (p. 29). This very much applies to GAR participants upon their few years of arrival, and unsurprisingly during a global health crisis, that restricted newcomers from exploring their own neighbourhoods and building connections.



*GAR 5: Online or direct contact with the family... We want them to come and help us with language, as it is the biggest barrier we are facing in the country... To talk to them so that our tongue can get used to English. With COVID, things got delayed to be honest. We demand more support with language... of course, directions and locations in Toronto is good as well. More online support right now would help... We are scared to meet with anyone. My wife is pregnant so we have to be very cautious..*

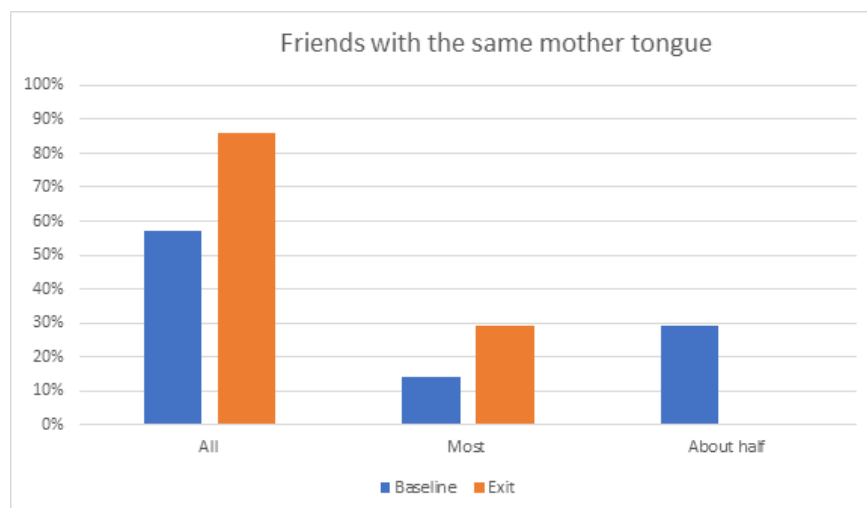
When discussing the personal networks of GARs, and their ability to rely on their connections, our participants were generally positive about the social network at their disposal, however, there is evidence that COVID-19 has changed the dynamic by which GARs are building social networks online to learn the English language and integrate in Canada.

**b) Friends bridging**

One of the commonly referenced aspects of social capital refers to the extent to which individuals form social networks with people who are like themselves (“bonding”) and with people who are different in some meaningful way, such as ethnic background, language and political views (“bridging”). This is an especially important dimension of social capital for newcomers in the GTA, given the current and expanding diversity of its population. Toronto is made up of many diverse groups, but to what extent do newcomers have meaningful interactions with one another and other groups?

The survey measured the extent of “bridging” among close friends, based on questions drawn from the 2013 General Social Survey. The survey asked residents to indicate the extent to which the friends they have been in contact with over the past month are similar or different from themselves in terms of each of five personal characteristics.

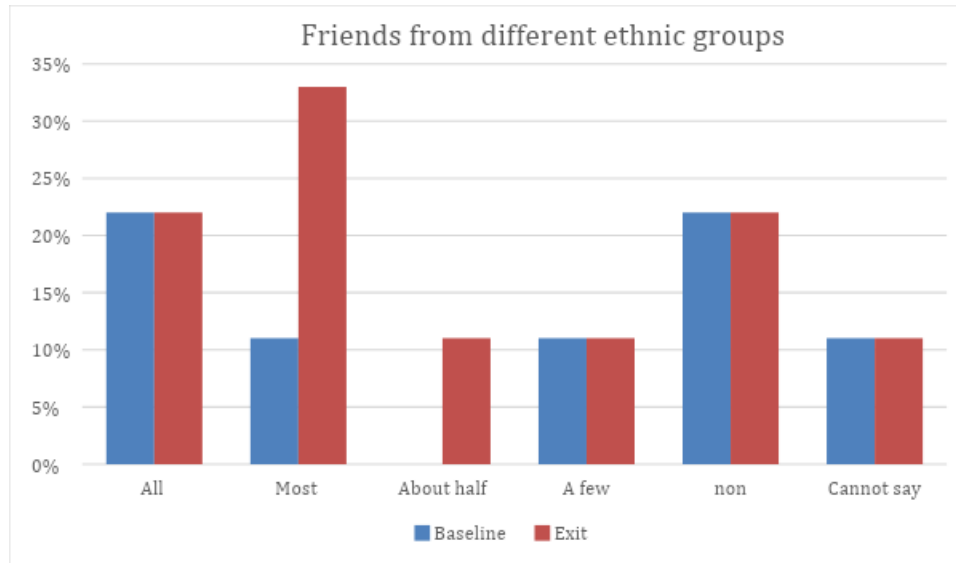
When asked about the demographics of all of their friends, many of them (87.5%) shared the same mother tongue as the participants.



**Figure 10: Friends with the same mother tongue**

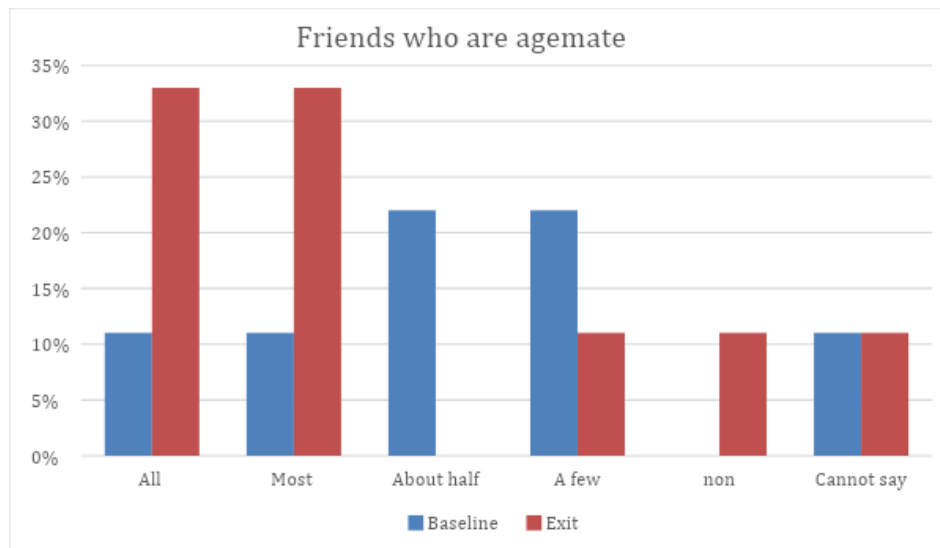


More of their friends belonged to an ethnic group that is “visibly different from yours” during the exit survey. Although we do not have the same individuals in the baseline and exit surveys and so cannot claim that this reflects an increase in the sample, this result does highlight the GAR ability to build bridging capital among groups outside of their community. Based on the literature and qualitative interviews, building both bonding and bridging social capital will lead to strong settlement outcomes.



**Figure 11: Friends from different ethnic groups**

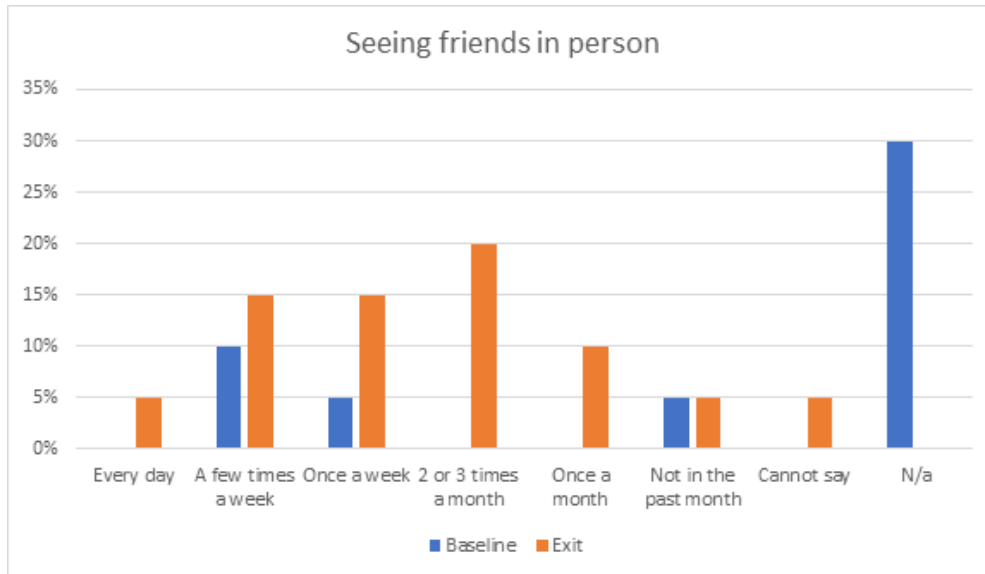
Most GARs spent time with friends around the same age as them: with 33% responding “all” and another 33% “most.” Education did not seem to be an overly determining factor in establishing friendships. Whereas 33% of GARs indicated that “all” friends were at roughly the same educational level, 44% also said “a few.” Results were similarly mixed for gender, with 44% of GARs saying that “all” friends are the same gender and 33% indicating “about half.”



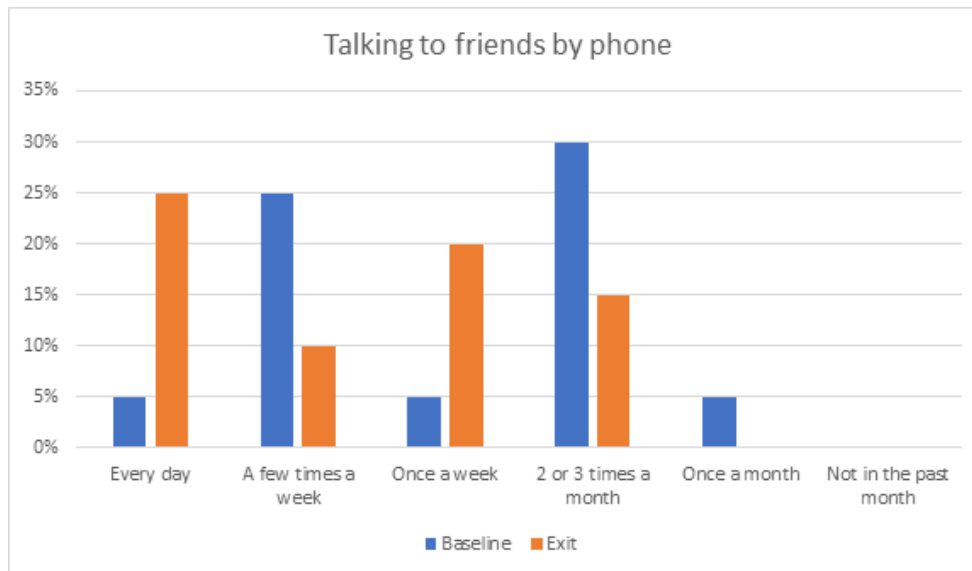
**Figure 12: Friends who are the same age**

**c) Type and frequency of connection**

How often did GAR participants see friends in person? It is likely that the COVID-19 pandemic is behind the high “not applicable” response at the baseline survey. However, talking on the phone everyday was reported by 5% of the sample at the beginning of their match and 25% at the end.



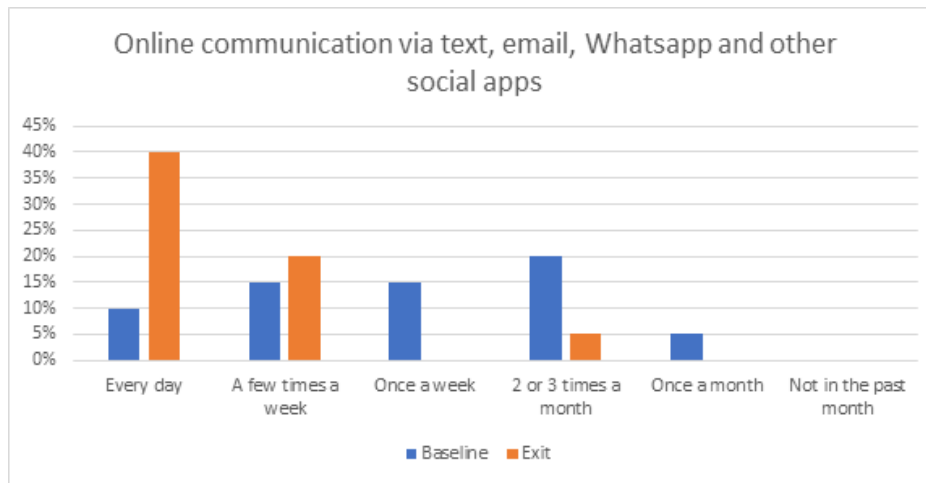
**Figure 13: Seeing close friends and relatives in person in the past month.**



**Figure 14: Talking with close friends and relatives on the phone in the past month.**



GARs were asked how often they saw or communicated with close friends and relatives, in the past month, through several different communication platforms. The results demonstrate a difference in ‘everyday’ response from 10% among those who responded at baseline to 40% among those who responded at exit.



**Figure 15: Communicating with close friends and relatives online (text, email, or apps) in the past month**

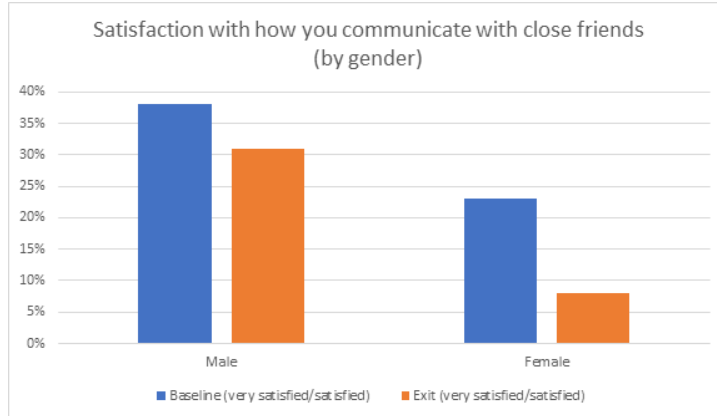
As we can see, the prevalence of telephone and online communication was different between those who responded at baseline and those who responded at exit. This may be due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, in terms of socially distanced communication becoming more widespread. Yet the rate of in-person visits was also somewhat higher among participants in exit surveys. This may reflect who stayed in the study or chose to answer this question, or it might demonstrate some new connections being generated among GARs and their close friends.

**d) Satisfaction with frequency of connection**

In terms of satisfaction with the frequency of communication with close friends and relatives, only 13 GARs responded to this question. The levels of satisfaction was lower for both men and women who responded at baseline and those who responded in the exit surveys.



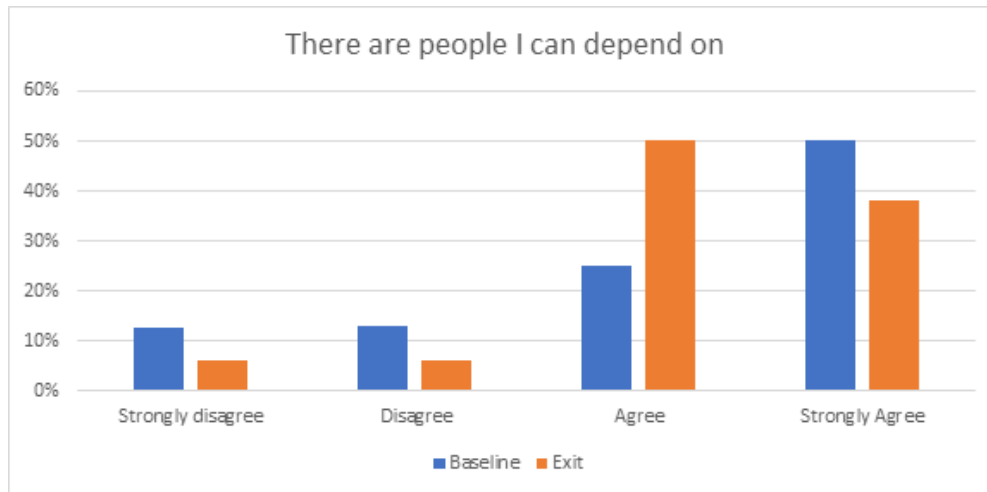




**Figure 16: Satisfaction with how often you communicate with your close friends and relatives, by gender**

**e) Dependency in social networks**

When asked about access to people that GARs can depend on, many participants ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that they could rely on people in their network. However, whereas the proportion of people stating that they “strongly agree” was lower at exit (50% versus 38%), the proportion of people stating that they “agree” was greater, (25% vs 50%). Similarly, when asked about “someone to turn to for guidance in times of stress,” GARs responded affirmatively: with 9 of 16 (56%) agreeing and 5 of 16 (31%) strongly agreeing.



**Figure 17: There are people I can depend on to help me if I really need it**

There seems to be a general understanding from the qualitative data that the more GARs communicated with volunteers as part of Together Project, the more they were able to build trust to share information and adapt, particularly on WhatsApp. This was the best method of communication for both GARs and volunteers.



*TL 5: I think initially we did have a lot of quantifiable ideas of what success would mean. We were told the family needed help with language the most. Just to clarify, the family had 11 children and they just had a newborn. They named him Justin; after our Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, because if it wasn't for him they wouldn't be here, they said. Going into this, the biggest challenge was connecting with all children but also ensuring we do not overstep our boundaries. Each child had a different personality. There's a sense of protection over them as well from their parents. **But the parents told us you made the place feel like home. The father says he found family in us and he messages us everyday in our WhatsApp group and shares stories of resilience with us.***

For instance, the Together Project volunteers often spend too much time in back-and-forths with newcomers to understand their immediate needs — continually creating additional, sometimes arduous communication requirements for GARs. This is an area that can be further strengthened by the Together Project administrators. Identifying the needs of GARs by volunteers during their first months of arrival was found to be an added stress for GARs who constantly had to explain their needs to multiple stakeholders (government, social worker, volunteers, etc.). One can imagine that emotional burden placed on GARs to retell their story and explain their needs to strangers, but this was also found to be a burden for some team leads.

*TL 6: **I think if we understood their needs earlier**— and who to outsource certain things to, so that we didn't lose time and equity — **we can hone in on the social piece more.***

*TL 7: We had a COSTI interpreter but she did not even realize the level of commitment needed because of the quantity of needs that our particular group had so **it is important to gather the RIGHT group of people to pre-plan who is best to meet those needs.***

*TL 8: **There was not enough time allocation in terms of assessing needs (primary and secondary).** We were focused on primary needs like housing and felt conflicted because we were not able to give attention to the son with his ESL classes.*

It was also particularly difficult for groups who were matched during COVID-19, as opposed to prior to the pandemic. Team Leads who were matched before the physical distancing policies came into place had the opportunity to establish trust with GAR families in person. Based on the GARs' reported dissatisfaction with online communication, we can understand that trust is easier to build in person over online when building relationships and navigating a new country.

This study's findings suggest that types of communication (online/in-person) plays a role in the building of trust among GARs in the GTA, thereafter becoming a factor for how they build bonding and bridging social capital. GARs had access to a wide range of social capital – friends, family, religious groups, community organizations and government agencies through online communication and access to technology through volunteers who often helped them get laptops and internet. It is recommended that having a mixed method of communication is necessary to build social trust and thereby establish social networks. It is also recommended that access to social networks like the Together Project volunteers are necessary for leveraging access to technology and providing digital literacy support as mentioned above.

## **NEIGHBOURHOOD SUPPORT**

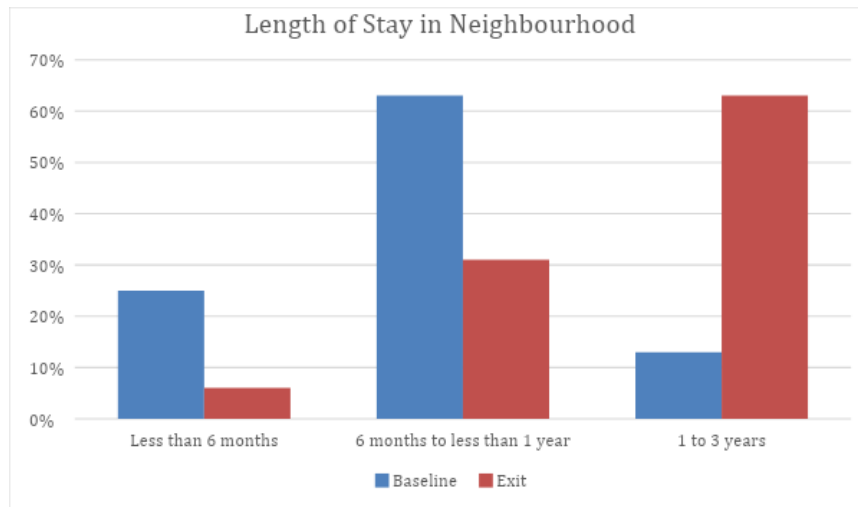


**“By far the most important influence on social trust is knowing one’s neighbours...” - Toronto Social Capital Study, Toronto Foundation, 2019**

In addition to the three primary dimensions of social capital, the study also addressed an additional emerging theme in the literature that influences social capital called neighbourhood support, which measures how residents view their neighbourhood as having supportive characteristics. Clear majorities of Torontonians are positive about the physical safety of their neighbourhood in terms of it providing safe places for children to play, and being a safe place to walk at night. Two-thirds agree that their neighbourhood is one where people are willing to help their neighbours according to the Toronto Foundation Report (2019, pg. 51).

At the same time opinions are divided on whether their neighbourhood is a “close knit” community, or a place where people share the same values. When these different aspects of neighbourhood support are considered as a whole, results are notably similar across the city, with comparatively few differences across income levels and neighbourhood areas.

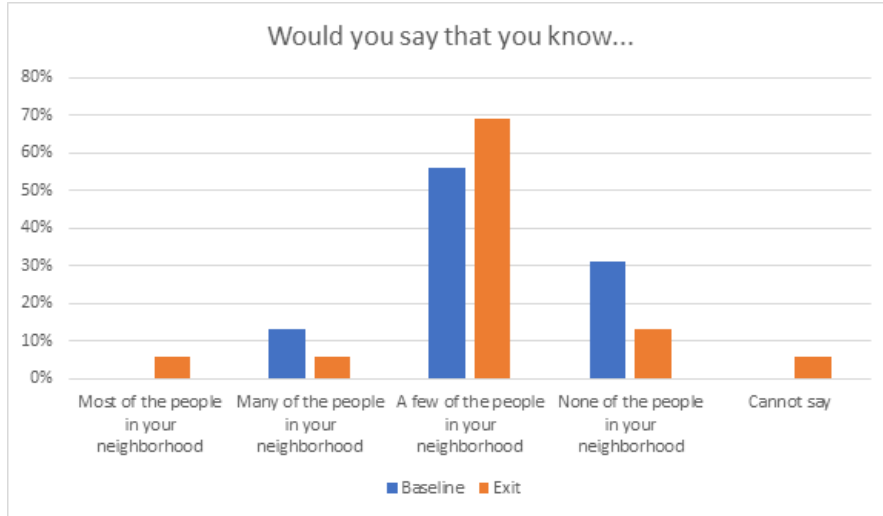
In terms of length of time in a neighbourhood, it seems as though many GARs have found some locational stability over the 6-month term of this study. At the exit survey, 10 of 16 GARs had lived in their neighbourhood for between 1 to 3 years. This indicates that participants have either found a stable home in Toronto over the short-term and/or simply could not afford to move to a better one.



**Figure 18: How long have you lived in this neighbourhood?**

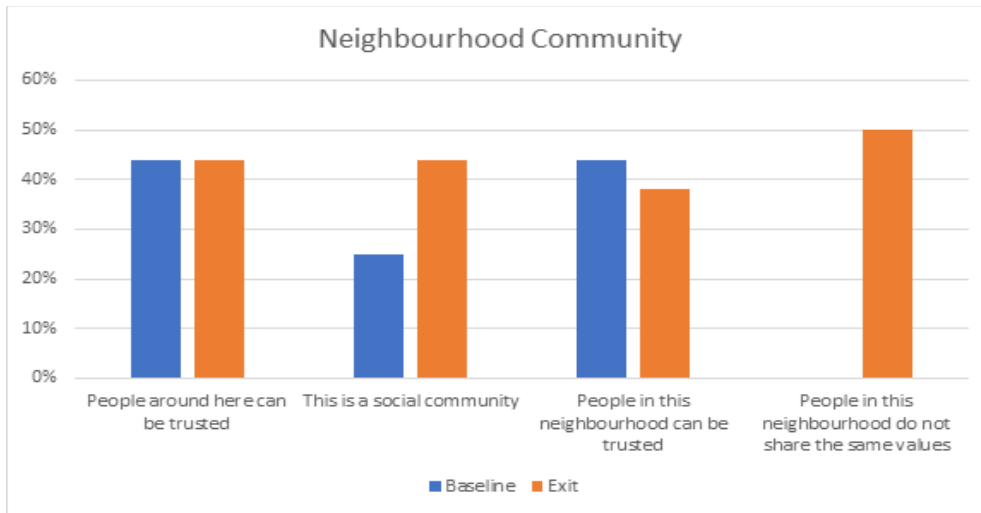
When asked whether they know a few of the people in their neighbourhoods, 58% of GAR participants said that they do at baseline and almost 70% by exit. This increase is generally positive with consideration to the global health crisis that may have restricted them from making more connections in their neighbourhoods.





**Figure 19: Who would you say that you know?**

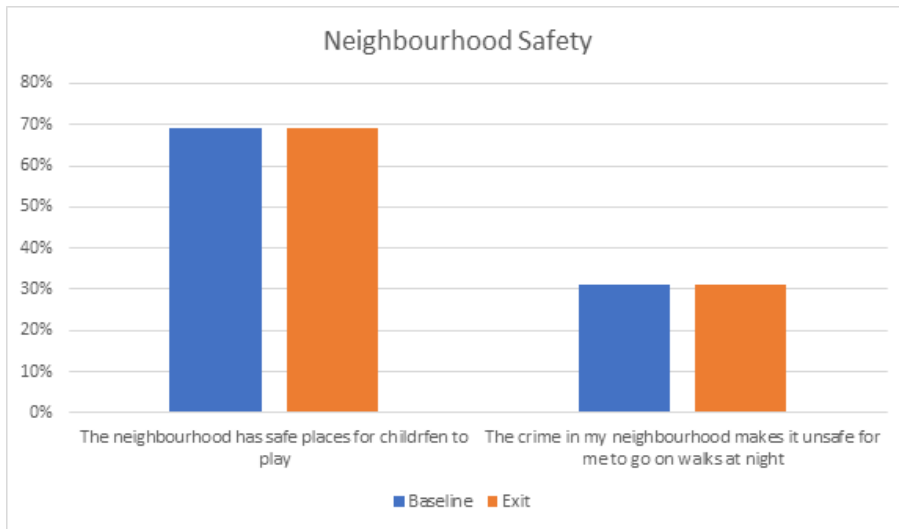
In terms of their opinions about the quality of their neighbourhoods, GARs were generally positive; however, although they often indicated that people were helpful and trustworthy, they did not necessarily believe that local people shared personal values. Respondents who said “agree” to people *not* sharing values skyrocketed, from zero in the baseline to eight GARs in the exit survey.



**Figure 20: Quality of neighbourhood community**

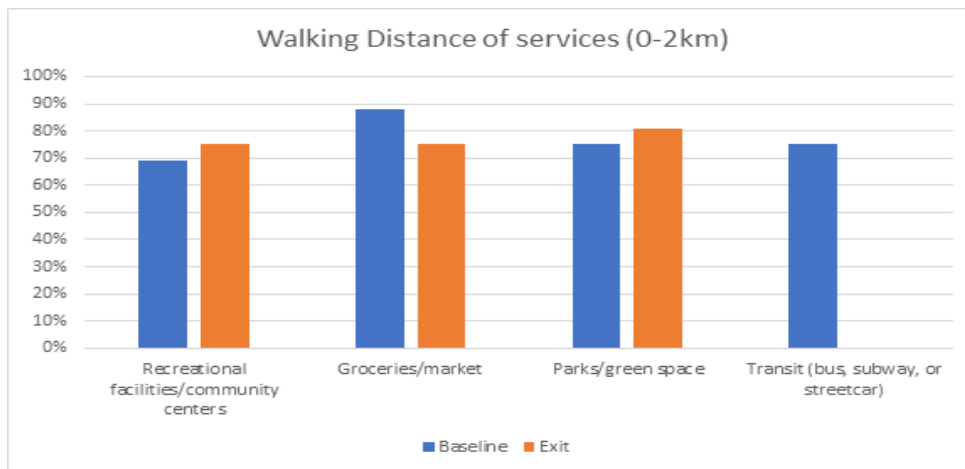
When considering the safety of their neighbourhoods, GARs were asked about playing areas for children and general crime at night. Although the participants generally believed that neighbourhoods had safe places for children to play (almost 70%), they were more mixed on opinions about the safety of walking at night — with similar responses at baseline and exit (30%) indicating that the neighbourhood is unsafe to go for walks at night.





**Figure 21: Neighbourhood safety**

The walkability of a neighbourhood can be vitally important for finding local support and accessing nearby services. When discussing their current housing, GARs were asked whether they were within easy walking distance (i.e., 0-2km) of several places, including places to shop, to engage in recreational activities, and transportation. As is apparent from Figure 22, below, the location of GARs’ homes were quite convenient. Overall, the surveyed GARs were mostly within walking distance of many key amenities. Respondents were between 12 to 14 (75%-88%) in the “yes” category for these questions in the exit surveys.

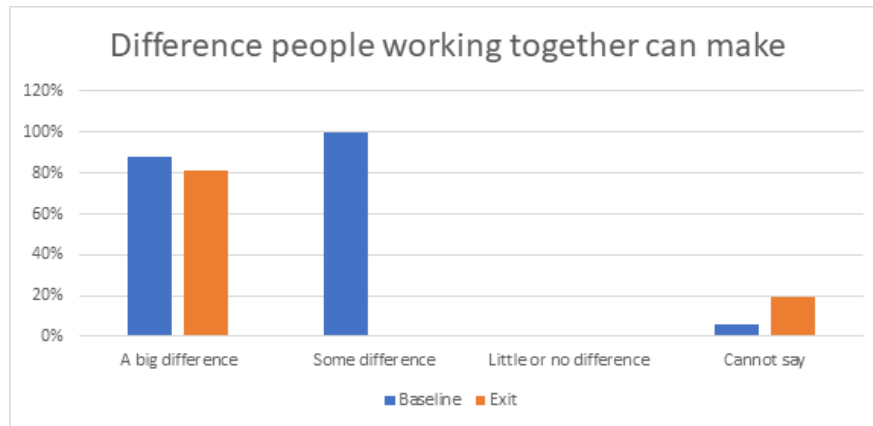


**Figure 22: Walking distance of services (0-2km)**

Finally, another aspect of neighbourhood support is the degree to which residents feel a sense of “local agency” in making a difference in their local community. A large majority of GARs believe that people working together as a group can make a big difference or at least some difference in effectively addressing the issues that affect them. When thinking about problems in local communities, the GARs overwhelmingly believed that collective efforts can make a

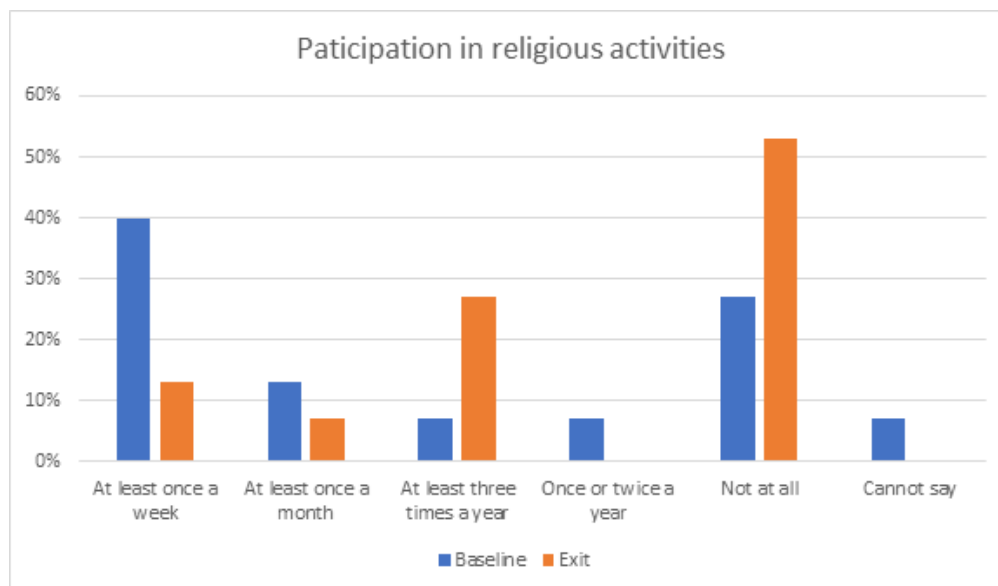


difference in solving them. Not a single GAR responded with “little or no difference” and 13 respondents (81%) indicated that it can make “a big difference.”



**Figure 23: How much of a difference do you believe people working together can make in solving problems?**

Finally, responses on attending religious services might be indicative of reduced activity in both religious and wider social networks in 2020 — not only among GARs, but across many segments of society due to the social distancing required by the COVID-19 pandemic. Whereas 40% of GARs participated in weekly religious activities at the baseline, only 13.3% of respondents reported this activity in exit surveys. It should be noted, however, that not all the participants were the same at baseline and exit, and it is possible that those who continued to attend religious services are the ones who did not respond to the exit survey.



**Figure 24: Participation in Religious Activities and Services**



Interestingly, there was no discussion of neighbourhood relationships in the qualitative data, suggesting that neighbourhoods were not a salient dimension of support. This may be because the focus of the qualitative questions was on relationships with the Welcome Group rather than neighbours or other social networks. However, the survey data suggests that the GARs in this program knew very few of their neighbours and thus, while they found the neighbourhood to be relatively safe and friendly, they did not actually draw support from it.



## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

### 1) MENTAL HEALTH & LANGUAGE LEARNING

- The most helpful areas of remote social support provided by the Welcome Group to newcomers were “access to healthcare” and “language learning.” This further highlights the benefit of GAR participants having access to social capital that will help them navigate the healthcare system and learn the English language.
- The team leads that were part of the Welcome Group model regularly assessed the GARs’ needs throughout this research process that took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Just under two thirds (62.5%) of respondents said that language learning was affected very negatively during the pandemic, followed by social isolation (43.75%) and mental health support, childcare and employment (37.5%).
- Host volunteers that are part of the Welcome Group program provide refugees with opportunities to practice and refine their English-language skills. Interaction with a host volunteer can also increase the range of knowledge and other skills required to interact successfully in the host society.
- While not all volunteers held a background in educational psychology, often those who were just there to listen to GAR participants felt that they were of immense support to GARs mental health during the pandemic. Volunteers also found that supporting GAR participants was beneficial to themselves in that it allowed them to understand the challenges facing newcomers in Canada.

### 2) SOCIAL NETWORKS

- The Together Project’s Welcome Group program was found to strengthen GARs’ knowledge and expand their social networks in Toronto (friends, family, religious groups, community organizations). By bringing refugees into mainstream public spaces such as libraries or digital technology, this model also helped refugees become familiar with daily routines and cultural values in their new home.
- Most GARs spoke of the importance of building social connections — even virtually — during the pandemic and how crucial it was for their resettlement process.
- Establishing a robust social network is an integral part of their settlement process, which can be supported through centralized planning for social capital development; typically, by government settlement programs and local community organizations.
- Access to social networks like the Together Project volunteers is necessary for leveraging access to technology and providing digital literacy support.

### 3) TRUST & COMMUNICATION

- GARs reflected on the importance of having people that they trust and who understand their language challenges in order to ‘feel comfortable’ and part of the community, which enhanced their settlement experience.
- GARs were found to have more trust in family over other groups such as “strangers,” “different political views,” and “very different ethnic background” which is consistent with other research on trust that finds that particularized





trust is higher than trust of strangers and other community members (Newton et al. ,2018).

- Trust in groups was high among respondents at both time points, especially among family, police, justice systems and courts, the school system and city hall. It is important to point out that this sense of trust still occurred among these groups during a global health crisis where their needs were unmet, and their priorities were still being identified by volunteers and other networks.
- GARs were found to have more confidence in local institutions than Toronto citizens themselves. This is an interesting finding because refugees are sometimes viewed as distrusting of public institutions in Western societies. However, it may also reflect a contrast effect, where they are comparing local institutions to what they recently experienced prior to migration.
- There seems to be a general understanding from the qualitative data that the more GARs communicated with volunteers as part of the Together Project, the more they were able to build trust to share information and adapt, particularly on WhatsApp. This was the best method of communication for both GARs and volunteers.
- This study's findings suggest that types of communication (online/in-person) plays a role in the building of trust among GARs in the GTA, thereafter becoming a factor for how they build bonding and bridging social capital. GARs had access to a wide range of social capital – friends, family, religious groups, community organizations and government agencies – via online communication and access to technology, which was often made possible by volunteers helping them acquire laptops and connect to the internet. It is recommended that having a mixed method of communication is necessary to build social trust and thereby establish social networks.

## NEXT STEPS

- Assessing the needs of GARs is a process that requires further clarification for both newcomers and volunteers. The Together Project volunteers often spend too much time in back-and-forths with newcomers to understand their immediate needs — continually creating additional, sometimes arduous communication requirements for GARs. This is an area that can be further strengthened by the Together Project administrators. Identifying the needs of GARs by volunteers during their first months of arrival was found to be an added stress for GARs who constantly had to explain their needs to multiple stakeholders (government, social worker, volunteers, etc.).
- Ensuring access to technology for GARs and providing some type of in-person support is still important post-pandemic. It was particularly difficult for groups who were matched during COVID-19, as opposed to prior to the pandemic. Team Leads who were matched before the physical distancing policies came into place had the opportunity to establish trust with GAR families in person. Based on the GARs' reported dissatisfaction with online communication, we can understand that trust is easier to build in person over online when building relationships and navigating a new country.
- Continued investment in access to technology for newcomers in Canada is crucial for their language learning, particularly during COVID-19.



## LIMITATIONS

- This study did not focus on the role of gender and age on the integration trajectories of refugees. However, future research should consider how men and women draw on different sources of support during resettlement. This information will be useful for refugee service providers to better assist program planning.
- In the Toronto Foundation Social Capital Study, social trust was found to be a matter of financial security, as well as race/culture and age. This report did not examine how social trust is influenced by levels of income and ethnicity, however, further research must explore the ways in which these factors play a role in the integration of GARs in Canada.

## CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted long-standing gaps in refugee integration. This unforeseeable event demonstrated how much the needs of GARs can be serviced in a more effective way through the building of social capital. Initiatives such as Together Project's Welcome Group program act as a solution to the many problems faced by GARs in the GTA as they relate to language learning, mental health support and digital literacy.

It is undeniable that the research took hold in an unprecedented time where the needs of all Canadian citizens were on the line when it came to healthcare, particularly racialized communities. This study demonstrates that GARs are some of the most vulnerable groups in the pandemic as their needs multiplied — access to healthcare, housing, employment, education and income are only the tip of the iceberg. They also had to learn the English language and seek access to technology, all the while prioritizing their mental health in an unfamiliar place with a lack of access to social capital.

The 20 GAR families surveyed and interviewed acted as an illustration for the moving parts of Together Project's Welcome Group program — how it operates on a small scale and how it can be embodied on a larger scale over a long-term period.

*What does this mean for refugee integration in Canada? What would happen if it was mandatory for all GARs in Canada to be matched with a group of trained volunteers that assisted them in their first year of arrival?*

The possibilities are endless when this program has the potential to become a national agenda that applies to different jurisdictions and can focus on embedding social capital in government's policy making frameworks.

The authors of the report moved along with the research process and had to adapt the methods of the study according to public health guidelines. GARs also moved along and aimed to adapt in their new home country with the help of Together Project's volunteers. The



volunteers often acted as guides to Canadian society and played a role in shaping the resettlement trajectory for GARs in the GTA. The volunteers that were selected to be part of the program were trained by Together Project. They demonstrate an example of how the host society meets refugees where they are and have a commitment to adaptation and flexibility throughout the program. They build social trust with GARs and share with them their knowledge and networks in Canadian society.

This program was found to genuinely improve access to services for newcomers as shown in the qualitative component of the study — volunteers helped GARs access technology and work on their language learning during their stay at home. Therefore, government programs and community organizations need to constantly ensure that actors (volunteer hosts, sponsors, language instructors, orientation providers, interpreters) are finding the optimal way to sustain trust and empathy, to nourish the building of social capital and facilitate social inclusion for refugees in the host society.

Throughout the pandemic, it was obvious that leveraging technologies that meet GARs' specific information and settlement needs as well as their social capital networks are crucial for their resettlement during their early years of arrival. This research investigates a new approach to remote service delivery that is client-driven. The research demonstrated that GARs' need access to technology and service providers must enable them to access information and services needed for their settlement through social capital networks.

In order to focus on the interests and needs of refugee newcomers as primary factors rather than the question of provision of adequate services for GARs, integration requires a shifting frame of thought, as it is more essential to society than short-term budget considerations. Canada is unique with its integration approach, and its private sponsorship program represents an aspect of civic participation rather than voluntary beneficence. Moreover, an agenda for sharing represents an invitation for joint participation to assist in the integration of GARs rather than a statement for services rendered. It signifies a challenge: one to which Canada as an innovator in sponsorship can and should aspire. It is within reach.

My analysis is simple: Social trust and social networks are major components of social capital that translate into better settlement outcomes for GARs in the GTA. Commitment on the part of both the refugees and the host society is needed. Integration must prevail in not only lauding stories of successful inclusion, but also humbly acknowledging areas of failure. Potential leaders, governments, community organizations, and the public are looking for an honest, credible effort to achieve a diverse and inclusive society. Personally, I would like the opportunity to prove that my integration story is one that can be achieved by many.



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