

# Overview of the assessment of the resettlement of Syrian refugees in Gatineau

## Executive Summary

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## Highlights

### Background

The Syrian conflict that began in 2011 has resulted in a massive flow of forced displacement. In response to one of the worst migration crises of our time, the Government of Canada launched Operation Syrian Refugee in late 2015. Like many Canadian cities, Gatineau has welcomed a significant number of Syrian refugees since 2016. By the end of 2020, 664 refugees had been resettled in Gatineau through the government sponsorship program and the private sponsorship program, which allows groups of individuals and non-profit organizations to sponsor refugees. These are two separate programs with their own selection and support processes.

### Objectives

This study, which began in 2019, examines the resettlement of Syrian refugees and the factors that helped or hindered their resilience and integration. We look at the mobilization and coordination of actors involved in the resettlement of refugees in Gatineau, the support that families received in the context of their sponsorship, their satisfaction with this, as well as the difficulties they encountered. We then look at the state of their settlement and the problems they have encountered in the area of francization and employment. Finally, we present some results on the retention of refugees in Gatineau and on their settlement plans for Canada.

### Findings

The arrival of the Syrians was an opportunity for the City of Gatineau and front-line resettlement workers to experiment with a structured resettlement consultation process. This exercise allowed each of the stakeholders to assert their importance and to better take their place in the architecture of the support services offered to newcomers to Gatineau. The Ville de Gatineau's Sommet du vivre-ensemble held in April 2018 is one of the outcomes and has itself led to the recent creation of a Gatineau living-together and immigration roundtable. There is therefore every reason to believe that the City of Gatineau will be well prepared to welcome the next waves of immigrants.

Our results first established that privately sponsored refugees (PSRs) and government sponsored refugees (GSRs) had different profiles upon arrival due to different selection criteria. The GSRs had larger families to support while having less knowledge of Canada's official languages and less education, especially for women. Second, our results showed that PSRs had much closer contact with their sponsors and this resulted in more sustained support in multiple areas. PSRs also experienced fewer problems with their sponsorship and were much more satisfied with their sponsorship than GSRs. Reasons for this included their lower needs, the limited mandate of the organizations designated by the government to accompany GSRs, in this case Accueil Parrainage Outaouais (APO), and the fact that APO is a small organization. The

sometimes high expectations of the refugees, their war-fuelled mistrust of the government and their lack of knowledge of the Canadian welfare state system also play a role. Given the quality of the support offered by private sponsorship, the government was right to rely on the capacity of private sponsorship during the Syrian refugee crisis, but it is unfortunate that it subsequently closed the floodgates.

It is unfortunate that the twinning program, which has existed for many years at APO, was not better utilized for GARs, especially since so many people wanted to help and volunteered for various tasks. Indeed, civil society was instrumental in welcoming and supporting Syrian refugees by enhancing the support services offered by APO and targeting those refugees most in need.

Our results clearly indicate that in the context considered here, GARs were doubly disadvantaged: the obstacles they had to overcome to rebuild their lives were greater because of their profile, while their accompaniment was much less sustained compared to PSRs. This should have resulted in a much more successful integration, and indeed it is what we observe.

About 20% of the refugees are reluctant to take francization training, mainly because they do not see the relevance of investing their efforts in learning French rather than English, a language with which they are more familiar and which is widely used in the region and in the country. It also appears that mothers of large families and particularly of preschool children are less inclined to take francization courses. They have problems finding a daycare service and when they do, they have to deal with arduous bus rides, not to mention the anxiety of leaving their children far from them, with strangers in a country they do not yet know.

Refugees who undertake francization training are dissatisfied with their experience, particularly those with young children and those with very little schooling. The former have difficulty balancing full-time studies and family and, as a result, meeting attendance requirements. The latter are mentally exhausted by the end of the morning and have great difficulty maintaining their attention in the afternoon. At the end of their training, which many dropped out of, many refugees report that they learned very little, especially those with little formal education. They wished that the courses were less academic and more focused on practice in authentic contexts. In addition, several students report that they moved up to a higher level even when they did not feel they had improved.

Those with low levels of education face the greatest challenges in entering the workforce. They are less likely to take steps to find a job, face more barriers when they do, have more difficulty taking advantage of the job pool in Ottawa, and ultimately are less likely to be employed. PSRs with low levels of education fare almost as well as their more educated counterparts, most likely because of the ongoing support they received through their sponsorship.

The first and foremost challenge that all refugees face in entering the workforce is language. The men are eager to start working, but the francization courses they take do not allow them

to acquire enough language skills to be functional in French. Some get around the French language barrier by working in environments where Arabic is spoken, mainly in the food and restaurant sector. But in doing so, they compromise the maintenance and improvement of their French language skills and are confined to jobs where their skills are not valued. Another finding is that refugees rely heavily on their social network to find a job and rarely reach out to available employment services. By relying primarily on their social network, refugees often find themselves working in low French-speaking environments and in jobs that are not related to their past work experience and skills. Finally, not all refugees are aware of the risks and disadvantages of illegal work.

Despite the challenges posed by the French language and the attractiveness of Ottawa, the city of Gatineau has been able to retain Syrian refugees in a proportion very similar to that observed for all refugees in other Canadian cities.

There is no doubt that the Canadian government's Operation Syrian Refugee Program has been largely successful from the point of view of refugees resettled in Gatineau. Almost all of them intend to stay in Canada, feel a strong sense of belonging to Canada, and are very appreciative of their new life here.

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## Dissemination of study results

Several knowledge transfer tools have been designed and are available on the [principal investigator's website](#):

- [Bilan de la réinstallation des réfugiés syriens à Gatineau](#)
- [Video capsule presenting the highlights of the report in French](#)
- Video capsule presenting the highlights of the report in Arabic (available soon)
- [Highlights of the report in French](#)
- [Highlights and recommendations of the report in Arabic](#)
- [Résumé de recherche de l'IRMU - Bilan de la réinstallation des réfugiés syriens à Gatineau - Le rôle du contexte local et des ressources](#)
- [BMRC Research digest - Assessment of the resettlement of Syrian refugees in Gatineau - The role of the local context and resources](#)

## Second Phase of the study

This research will begin a second phase in the late fall of 2021 in order to follow the evolution of the francization and integration into the labour market of Syrian refugees in Gatineau.

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