

Home to home: A Purposeful Journey

Family Loss and Separation among Refugee Youth: Examining Post-migration Impacts and Program/Service Needs



Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services
Toronto
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Disclosure

This report contains the findings of the research project "Loss and protracted family separation among refugee children and youth: Examining post-migration impacts and service needs" conducted at Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services (Toronto) and funded by the Children and Youth Refugee Research Coalition (CYRRC) [SSHRC 895-2017-1009, for the period of March 15, 2017 to March 31, 2022].

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Land Acknowledgement

Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services acknowledge that we on the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishinabek, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. We also acknowledge that Toronto is covered by Treaty 13 with the Mississaugas of the Credit.

Introduction

Canada has become the home of several refugees who have left their home country due to reasons such as war, political issues, gender-based discrimination, issues with religion, financial struggle, and/or wanting to live a better life¹. In recent years, Canada has welcomed a number of refugees and continues to do so.

Around the world, youth 15 to 24 years old make about a third of the refugee population². Many refugee youth come to a new country with the experience of family loss and/or separation. This causes youth to feel helpless and struggle adjusting to life in a new country where many aspects of daily living are new. The health and settlement of refugee youth who have lost or been separated from family can be impacted by the different services and programs made available to them. Positive and negative aspects can influence their settlement, sense of belonging, and mental health. Although settlement can be difficult for refugee youth, they work hard and are positive towards building a brighter future for themselves.

This report focuses on the impact of family loss and separation on the well-being of refugee youth during settlement in Canada. It provides a look into the experiences of refugee youth, how they feel about their settlement, and the services and programs provided to them.



The study aimed to understand:

1. How does the experience of loss of or separation from one or more family members due to war, conflict, discrimination, or forced migration affect the settlement and well-being of refugee youth?
2. What kinds of services and supports impact the well-being of these refugee youth and their families?

1. Ali MA. "Children Alone, Seeking Refuge in Canada". *Refuge* 23.2 (2006): 68-80.
2. UNHCR. "High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges- Children on the Move". (2016). www.unhcr.org/583d8e597.pdf.

How was the research carried out?

Research was carried out in two methods. In the first method, a number of selected articles were analyzed to identify evidence focusing on the effect of family loss and separation on the well-being of refugee youth. In the second method, information was collected from 23 refugee youth between the ages of 16 and 24 years in Toronto through focus group discussions (FGDs). These youth have experienced family loss and separation and came to Canada without family. In addition, FGD's were used to collect information from 22 individuals who worked closely and provided programs/services to the refugee youth (service providers).



Youth in a focus group discussion like setting

Goals for this community report

This community report is written for refugee youth who have or are experiencing family loss and separation in their migration to Canada. This report looks at the experiences refugee youth face while being separated from family, with settlement in Canada, and with programs and services available/ not available in Canada.

Through looking at the journey of refugee youth, their settlement in Canada, and difficult times after their migration, a greater understanding of services and programs that refugee youth need can be seen. The experiences shared by refugee youth in regards to family loss and separation, and programs and services will help inform policy changes. Such policy changes can promote the wellbeing of refugee youth and help settling into their new lives in Canada.

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Why do refugee youth migrate?

Refugee youth leave their home countries due to reasons such as escaping from war, protecting themselves from violence, political unrest, to escape discrimination, and/or the desire to live a better life in a new country¹. In such cases, refugee youth often experience forced migration. In such cases, forced migration is caused by discrimination of their race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. Some youth mentioned that the death of a parent was also a reason for migration.

Apart from factors that pushed the youth from their home country, a few factors caused youth to want to migrate to Canada. Some youth wanted to follow their dreams of having a better future and overall life. For some they wanted to have further educational opportunities and/or wanted to be part of Canada's multi-cultural society.

How is their journey to Canada?

The journey was often not easy or predictable. A lot of refugee youth became highly vulnerable during the journey. In some instances, they needed to be hidden to protect themselves. In fact, due to exposure to vulnerable situations, male refugee youth were often chosen to make the dangerous journey. Migration was not one stop. Refugee youth often had to travel to many countries before reaching Canada.

Family loss and separation

a. A journey involving family loss and separation

The migration journey is not the same for everyone. Some refugee youth have to be separated from all or part of their family. Family loss and separation in some cases is not just due to leaving family behind in their home country. It is also due reasons such as political conflict and kidnappings. Most youth migrated alone and very few migrated with their full family to Canada. Some youth's family members live in different parts of the world. Youth could be separated from their family for many years if they travelled to Canada alone.

Refugee youth are also separated from friends who are like family to them. They are not only separated from friends from their home country but also friends they made in countries they stayed in during their migration to Canada.



Youth interacting with friends/peers
at APOJ art gallery

I had a lot of friends. And I [had] been attached to them and like, they become like my sister, my brother. So, it was hard. Like to wake up and [not] see them every day.

Refugee Youth

b. How does family loss and separation impact refugee youth?

Family loss and separation greatly effects the settlement process of refugee youth in Canada. Many feel pain and homesickness when thinking about when they will be able to see their family again or if family members were alive or not. Some youth stayed positive hoping they would one day meet them again.

These youth experience worsening mental health with loss and separation. Youth separated from their mothers for a long period of time had higher levels of anxiety and separation compared to those separated from their fathers³.

Reasons for migration such as negative experiences back home cause them to have high levels of mental stress with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and/or anxiety. Mental health issues were higher among refugee youth who experienced family loss and separation in comparison to those refugee youth migrated with family.

But we have to believe like someday we're [going to] leave them that's when you put this in your in your mind. It will be least painful ... You can say this is life you we have to do not attach to anybody...I become more stronger emotionally and physically.

Refugee Youth

c. How do Refugee Youth Cope with Family Loss and Separation?

Many of the refugee youth had found different methods to cope with the family loss and separation they experience during their migration and settlement in Canada. These methods stop youth from making negative decisions such as self-harm.

3. Suárez-Orozco C., *et al.* "Growing up in the shadows: The developmental implications of unauthorized status". *Harvard Educational Review* 81.3 (2011): 438–472. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.81.3.g23x203763783m75>.

Some coping mechanism used by refugee youth are:

Goal Setting: Working towards and staying focused on goals help decrease the sadness they feel. It provides them with a sense of hopefulness. It also keeps youth busy during periods of time when family members died or went missing. They keep busy by joining clubs, learning new languages, spending time with friends and, through recreational activities at school. These all provide them with the ability to socialize, and keep their minds off negativity.

Family, friends, peers and spirituality: Speaking to the right individual allows youth to feel support and decrease pain they were experiencing. Having no family support did not help with managing emotions. Youth use spirituality as a way to feel better after family loss and separation.



So this is my coping [mechanism] with everything I deal with it. I was putting my goals and my desires like front of my eyes every time I feel sad ... like sad or no hope because [with such a] mind setting its will be keep continue saying okay, you will achieve this goal...

Refugee Youth



Youth spending time with friends/peers
in the Youth Winter Program

I find it definitely helpful to talk about our feelings to someone close to us like family or friends. Because if I go through something that is very tough, I can't stop thinking about it unless I talk about it and just you know, let it go by this way.

Refugee Youth

When I'm upset or you know I'm sad, I usually just try to make myself busy, maybe go out and or join clubs or I don't know anything that like makes my day full.

Refugee Youth

How does the settlement process impact the well-being of refugee youth?

Settling in a new country with new people and a new environment can be difficult. Having no family can make it harder. Some of the issues they face include:

Struggling to adjust to new life in Canada

Some have trouble adjusting to Canadian laws, weather, costs of living, language, and the cultural differences in Canada. Winter time was hard for youth, especially those living in the shelter system.

Long process applying for refugee claimant status and late legal hearing

This affects the mental health of refugee youth and causes them to have depression. Late hearing processes impact youth's ability to settle and move onto new parts of their lives.

One thing I would say is if the hearing can happen sooner than later so instead of keeping them waiting for a date for like up to 2 years, if it can happen you know quicker than that, that would be great. I think that would help a lot of them, maybe their depression wouldn't get so bad and it wouldn't be so dragged out.

Service Provider

Reversed care

Holding the role of caregiver for parents and/or siblings back home or lived with them in Canada. This role adds stress to youth as it involves sending home money to provide financial support to parents and siblings.

Financial insecurity

Some youth have to support the financial needs of their family as well as costs for themselves. The need for a job quickly leads to youth taking up jobs with low pay, that are part-time, and temporary jobs. Low paying jobs contribute to not having enough money for food and issues in finding cheap housing.

Lack of affordable housing, shelter, good living conditions

A lot of youth live in shelters upon arrival to Canada. Finding an available shelter is difficult. Youth experience crowded situations with no personal space and support in shelters. Cultural foods are usually not provided in shelters. Houses are often too expensive for refugee youth.

Some shelters have a 100 beds in one room...the support they are receiving are very different. There is no support in the massive shelters.

Service Provider

Barriers to accessing education.

Education completed back home is often not accepted in Canada, forcing youth to repeat their studies. A few were not allowed in the education system because they were refugees. While some found adjusting to the Canadian school system hard, others were not sure about their education goals. This causes stress in youth.

All our clients are unaccompanied, [and] education is a big challenge. Some may have completed high school or some university and [were] frustrated to redo high school.

Service Provider

Language barriers

Having to speak and understand English made it hard to understand laws, take care of finances, and complete job and college/university applications. Youth also faced discrimination because of their ability to speak and understand English. This barrier caused communication difficult during settlement.

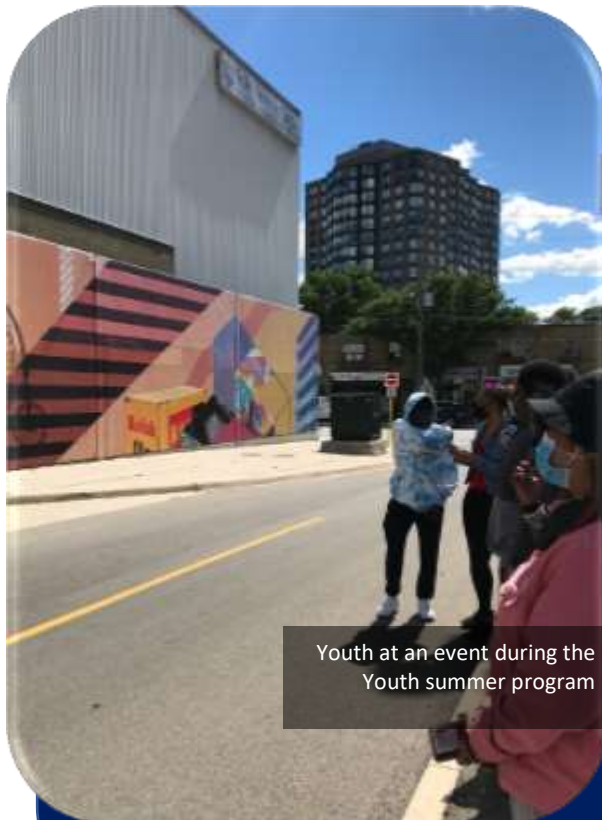
Social isolation

Feeling lonely without individuals of their age, family and friends cause youth to suffer during the settlement process.

Declining mental health

Mental health challenges come from experiences before, during, and after migration. Youth experience anxiety, depression, and PTSD. Entering into new life in Canada can cause youth to remember previous negative experiences. This could happen due to bad living conditions in shelters. Youth with low support, low resources, and poor language skills experience high levels of mental stress.

Mental health of refugee youth decreases when no programs for mental health issues are available. Youth avoid talking about mental health due to feelings of shame around it. This made them shy in asking for help.



... I thought of this as you were talking about the client who two days prior was great and then two days later was having a self-harm episode ... you can see the signs of depression and they will say to you specifically oh but don't worry about me I am not depressed because there's so much pressure to feel like they're in control and everything's okay and they're managing, reluctant like they're in my experience there's been a lot of reluctance to accept that there [are] mental health challenges.

Service Provider

Impact of programs and services in settlement

a. How do programs and services help settlement?

Refugee youth who have experienced family loss and separation need programs and services to help them with their settlement in Canada. Youth receive some help with available programs and services.

- Language services for refugee youth who found language as a barrier to their settlement in Canada. Community based organizations help youth through ESL classes, translation, and interpretation.
- Refugee youth think settlement services to be helpful. This service provides language training, teaches about the labour market, and connecting with different people.
- Mentorship programs allow refugee youth to form new relationships . Building new and supportive relationships is important especially for youth missing their family. These programs also let youth talk with mentors from their own cultures.



Youth at Asian Heritage month event

I was going to say one of the programs...I think the youth find extremely useful to come back [kind of] social isolation a lot of our clients are refugee claimants, so one of the things we offer that the youth are just like thank you so much it's been such a great experience is for the mentorship program.

Service Provider

The leadership program/advocacy group, gives the youth a platform to talk about what they are passionate about and feel heard. The youth call it their family.

Service Provider

- Leadership programs cause youth to speak to others about problems that are important. These programs provide workshops for youth to build confidence, make choices, and take decisions.
- Adjusting into life in Canada and taking on the role of caregiver causes changes in how refugee youth experience self-care. In self-care programs, youth take care of themselves, meet with friends, and build supportive relationships.
- Cultural and religious organisations provide support to refugee youth by making them feel that they are not alone in Canada and have a people from their own community around for support.

I have seen so they (refugee youth) support each other and connect with the culture and religion... [and] ethnic identity so they feel that we are here [with a sense of belonging].



Youth speaking at Asian Heritage month event

Service Provider

- Mental health workshops services offer support for refugee youth. In addition, workshops specific to refugee youth experiencing family loss and separation are needed as youth separated from family experience different paths in comparison to refugee youth with family. Programs for stress management are important as refugee youth experience high levels of stress from migration, and settling in a new country.



Youth at a in person summer program

[There is a need for mental health programs] being trauma informed and approach, having access to interpreters for people to get care in their languages and having an understanding of like the intersection of resettlement stressors and the migration system and mental health and how to you know utilize or really wrap around a holistic approach.

Service Provider

Refugee youth pass a path in terms of working through loss and separation is going to look really different from what their family process is with it... It is acknowledging the two very separate paths and even each family members' paths are going to take in terms of what the feeling of family loss and separation for each of them.

Service Provider

b. What challenges are experienced while accessing programs and services?

Although programs and services available to refugee youth in Canada are helpful in many ways, there are some issues. These issues effect settlement into the host country.

Lack of culturally sensitive services

Refugee youth have experiences with service providers who do not understand their situations. This is seen within the LGBTQ+ refugee youth community, as youth often experience issues such as being misgendered by health professionals.

Cultural sensitivity training has to take place. ... LGBTQ youth who have so much issues with being mis-gendered by their doctors, right? And that's like a huge prevalence...huge stigma.

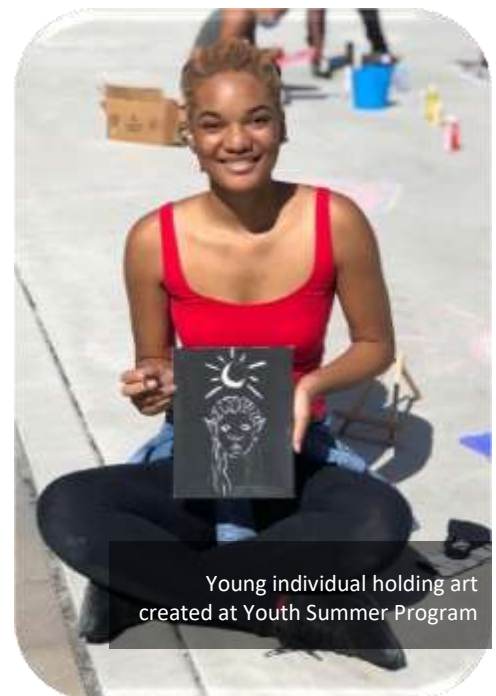
Service Provider

Barriers to using mental health services

Stigma/shame about mental health stops refugee youth from using mental health services. Youth do not talk about their mental health due to stigma. Plus, refugee youth found that services would tell youth to move on with their lives, focus on their new lives in Canada, and forgot about past negative experiences. The mental health needs of refugee youth are often ignored

Lack of affordable government programs

Settlement in Canada for refugee youth involves finding excellent government programs. However, there are challenges in finding programs that are affordable.



Young individual holding art created at Youth Summer Program

Systemic restraints [are] what I am seeing the most, particularly related to being a refugee claimant. So, as a refugee claimant there are very few resources available to you that are affordable or free...

Service Provider

Lack of helpful employment services

Many employment services focus on helping make resumes or prepare for job interviews. Although these are needed, youth feel that they do not connect them with or help them with finding jobs.

Lack of information about services

Some refugee youth do not use services that are available. Youth may not use these services because they do not have enough information about them. Youth are not aware of a number of services like recreational ones available to them due to poor information shared.

Time limitations

The lengthy process of accessing programs and services is as barrier. Furthermore, time limits for support services/sessions lead to youth not receiving enough help. These are due to funding restrictions.



Changes needed in policy and programs/services to help settlement

a. Overall recommendations for programs and services

Refugee youth said that current program and services are not fully helpful with settlement in Canada. Overall recommendations for services and programs are below.

- Service providers need to recognize and be sensitive towards trauma, LGBTQ+ issues, and sexual abuse among refugee youth
- Creation of specific programs/services focused on refugee youth with lost or separated family
- More information about programs/services should be given to youth
- Formation of support groups or programs for youth to talk and build relationships
- Offer resources/help to youth in their native languages and own communities
- Reduce costs or provide programs at no cost for refugee youth to help access of programs
- Create employment services that help with connecting youth with different people and finding job opportunities for youth

b. Policy recommendations

Essential changes/updates in current policies are required to help the settlement of refugee youth, especially those who have experienced family loss and separation. Discussions about experiences and opinions with refugee youth and service providers led to a number of policy recommendations listed below.



Education

Update of policies regarding Canadian educational credentials for refugee youth to stop youth from repeating education unnecessarily. Restructuring the education system to be sensitive towards the needs of refugee youth and take language barriers and status of refugee claimants as barriers to education.



Housing

Policy change towards bringing affordable housing to refugee youth is needed. Policy change in regard to shelter conditions is needed as change in mobility restriction, privacy issues, and living conditions need to be carried out to reduce

mental health strain. Investment towards refugee specific shelters would help with settlement in Canada.



Employment and finances

Investment in employment services to help youth find jobs, internships, and networking is needed. Government funding and support to financial help refugee youth who are sponsoring family members to Canada and are trying to settle into their new life.



Mental health services

Policy change in mental health services is much needed. Service providers should be trained with different ways of dealing with trauma experienced by youth. Plus, culturally sensitive mental health service delivery is needed to avoid discrimination experienced by refugee youth. Mental health services and immigration services should work together.



Family reunification

Policy change in making wait times in Canada for family reunification shorter. A need for services helping youth to identify ways to reunite with family they have been separated from. Change in Canadian immigration policies for sponsorship of family are needed to allow for the family of refugee youth to immigrate and reunite with them.



Court Hearing Process

Changes towards policies regarding accelerating court hearing processes are crucial for the settlement of refugee youth with family loss or separation.

A photograph of a city street scene. On the left, a building has a large mural on its side. The mural includes a bicycle wheel on the left, a yellow box with 'Kodak film' written on it in the center, and a colorful geometric pattern on the right. Above the mural, a sign on the building reads 'Bethel Avenue'. In the background, a tall brick apartment building is visible. In the foreground, two people are standing on the sidewalk. One person is wearing a light blue hoodie and dark pants, and the other is wearing a denim jacket and dark pants. A yellow line is painted on the asphalt road.

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