



# Understanding the experiences of Syrian refugee youth: A community-based study examining the barriers and successes faced by Syrian refugee youth in Ontario

March 31, 2017- Final Report



CENTRE FOR  
COMMUNITY  
BASED RESEARCH

This project was led by the Centre for Community Based Research, and funded by Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). Several organizations in Waterloo Region helped to guide this project by participating on the Steering Committee: the Waterloo Region District School Board, Muslim Social Services, Reception House Waterloo Region, the Kitchener-Waterloo Multicultural Centre, and the University of Waterloo.



Immigration, Refugees  
and Citizenship Canada

Immigration, Réfugiés  
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Hoda Al-Obaidi, Suhaila El-Batroukh, Saly Alkarmy, Boushrah Fanous, Harout Tatarian and Muhammed Emir Hellak



MUSLIM SOCIAL SERVICES



Reception House  
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# 1 INTRODUCTION

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The purpose of this project was to develop and conduct action-oriented, user-driven, participatory research in order to explore solutions with Syrian refugee youth regarding issues and challenges that are emerging as priority concerns.

We believe that Syrian refugee youth are well positioned to conduct research on issues that matter to them. With the right type of support and coaching they can work collaboratively to explore the issues that they are facing in their new home country, and then determine the solutions that are most likely to lead to their success. To this end, our study had three main objectives:

- To provide opportunities for Syrian refugee youth to identify research priorities related to their situations;
- To train and support Syrian refugee youth to conduct and analyze research with and relating to their peers; and,
- To identify possible solutions to the key challenges that Syrian refugee youth face when integrating into their new communities.

## 1.1 MAIN RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The main research questions were developed by Syrian refugee youth and those who have supported them in the past year. The questions are organized according to three priority areas that reflect the major challenges that Syrian youth face in Canada: school integration, family responsibilities, and mental health.

1. *School integration*: What challenges do Syrian refugee youth experience in their reception and social integration at school? How best can these challenges be overcome?
2. *Family responsibilities*: In what ways do family responsibilities affect Syrian refugee youth to integrate socially with their peers (compared to Canadian born youth)? How best can this be addressed?
3. *Mental health*: To what extent are Syrian refugee youth equipped to deal with the stress in their lives? How best can they be supported toward mental health?

# 2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

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## 2.1 COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH

For this study, we are following a community-based research (CBR) approach “...that involves active participation of stakeholders, those whose lives are affected by the issue being studied, in all phases of research for the purpose of producing useful results to make positive changes” (Nelson, Ochocka, Griffin & Lord, 1998, p.12). CBR can be characterized as “research with,” not “research on” people, which provides training and mentoring opportunities for community members and places a high value on experiential knowledge (Ochocka, Nelson & Janzen, 2005).

## 2.2 THREE PHASES

This research study was exploratory and inductive in nature. It involved three phases, each building on the previous phase. The main activity was to collect primary data through a series of focus groups within communities across Ontario. Ontario was chosen for three reasons: (1) logistical convenience (CCBR is located in Ontario, and was able to access a good cross-section of local participants despite the short timelines and budget restrictions); (2) high refugee numbers (nearly 25% of all Syrian refugees who arrived in Canada live in Ontario); and (3) existing relationships between CCBR and other settlement organizations in the community (which may increase the potential for sustaining future action beyond the study period). Secondary data was also collected via a document review, to give the study national reach.

*Phase I - Laying the Foundation (January):* During this initial phase, we established and held a meeting of the study Steering Committee. We also hired and trained a team of six Community Researchers and held weekly Research Team meetings to plan research tasks, clarify roles and responsibilities, and reflect on ongoing learnings. During Phase 1, the focus group protocols and document review template were also developed and initial outreach was made to community partners for participant recruitment.

*Phase II – Information Gathering and Analysis (February):* During Phase II, intensive data collection took place. The Research Team gathered data through focus groups in various locations including Waterloo Region, Windsor, London, Ottawa, and the Greater Toronto (GTA). The Research Team began to analyze data following the study's main research questions. A document review was also conducted during this phase.

*Phases III – Feedback and Action (March):* During Phase III, the Research Team completed data collection and analysis. In addition, the Research Team focused on validating research findings, developing innovative solutions, and organizing knowledge mobilization strategies. A draft report was written by the Research Team and reviewed by the Steering Committee and the funder (Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada – IRCC). In addition, a large community celebration was organized in partnership with the Waterloo Region Immigration Partnership and Reception House Waterloo Region. Research participants and interested other provided feedback on research findings and final model and solutions.

## 2.3 PROJECT TEAM

The Centre for Community Based Research (CCBR) provided overall leadership and coordination for this study. CCBR regularly builds capacity among community groups so they are equipped to successfully complete research projects. Throughout the project duration, CCBR provided ongoing support and training to the Research Team, and organized/facilitated Steering Committee meetings.

## 2.4 Research Team

The main role of the Research Team was to conduct research with excellence. Our Research Team consisted of 11 people: two Project Leads (one for the youth study, and one for the parent/older adult study), one Project Coordinator (coordinating both studies simultaneously), two Lead Community Researchers (one for the youth study, and one for the parent/older adult study), four additional Community Researchers (two for each study), and two Research Assistants (students on placement at CCBR; one undergraduate and one graduate-level). All members of the Research team were trained in



CBR, with an emphasis on how to conduct focus groups and individual interviews with Syrian newcomers, and how to summarize focus group/interview data. A picture of the Research Team is provided below.

Community Researchers hired for this project were fluent in Arabic and in English. The Researchers acted as ambassadors and agents of change among their peers, given their Syrian background and connections to other Syrian refugees in the local community. The primary role of the Community Researchers was to recruit study participants, conduct focus groups with other Syrian youth, write notes and develop summaries based on what they heard (translated into English), and participate in weekly Research Team meetings and monthly Steering Committee meetings. In Phase III (March), the Community Researchers were also responsible for assisting with data analysis, providing feedback on the draft final report, and leading discussions on findings at the community celebration.



**Research Team** (from left to right): Joanna Ochocka, Emir Hellak, Kyla English, Aleesha Jones-Blue, Rich Janzen, Huda Al-Obaidi, Boushrah Fanous, Saly Alkarmy, Yuting Kuo, Harout Tatarian. Missing: Suhaila El-Batroukh

## 2.5 STEERING COMMITTEE

In addition to the Research Team, a joint Steering Committee was developed to guide this study as well as the Syrian parent/senior study. The role of the Steering Committee was to ensure that both studies were as useful and relevant as possible to the local Syrian community and to their systems of supports. More specifically, the Steering Committee met once a month to monitor and provide input into the three research phases, providing critical feedback on the study processes and deliverables. The Steering Committee members assisted in the hiring of Community Researchers, in vetting data gathering tools and procedures (including sampling criteria, participant recruitment, consent forms, interview protocols and research ethics), and in planning the community celebration. The final meeting in March 2017 focused on discussing preliminary findings, reviewing the final report, discussing solutions and recommendations, and planning the community forum.

The cross-stakeholder Steering Committee consisted of 19 people, mostly members of local community service organizations and others involved with Syrian refugees. The Steering Committee is pictured below and a full list of members is provided in **Appendix A**.



**Steering Committee** (from left to right): Saly Alkarmy, Yuting Kuo, Aleesha Jones-Blue, Rich Janzen, Emir Hellak, Harout Tatarian, Joanna Ochocka, Eltag Elkhalfi, Katelyn Godin, Kyla English, Lynn Schulze, Huda Al-Obaidi, Suhaila El-Batroukh, Boushrah Fanous, Lisa Loiselle, Phyllis Martin Argueta, Thivja Sribaskaran. Missing: Mohamed Bendame, Iman Arab, Andrea Savu

## 2.6 METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

This project used two methods of data collection: focus groups and a document review. The combination of methods not only strengthened research rigour – offering both depth and breadth of understanding – but also improved data validation and trustworthiness (Patton, 2015).

### 2.6.1 Focus groups

We collected primary data through focus groups with a total of **75 Syrian refugee youth** in communities across Ontario who received a relatively high number of refugees from the Government-Assisted Refugee (GAR), Privately Sponsored Refugee (PSR), and Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) programs. The five cities where we conducted focus groups with youth included:

- Waterloo Region: 24 youth
- Ottawa: 5 youth
- Greater Toronto Area (GTA): 11 youth
- London: 8 youth
- Windsor: 27 youth

The primary recruitment strategy was through the networks of Community Researchers and Steering Committee members; we employed non-probability purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling to exceed our initial goal of 48-64 participants. To recruit youth from cities outside of Waterloo Region, one Steering Committee member – an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher in Waterloo – reached out to her network of ESL consultants in Windsor, London, and the GTA. From there, we were able to speak with school board representatives. However, only two public school boards (in Windsor and in London)



were able to respond to the short project timelines and organize focus groups for this study. In the absence of school board participation, we used the networks of CCBR and Steering Committee members to connect with representatives from other organizations, including the Multicultural Council of Windsor & Essex County (Windsor, ON), Peel Multicultural Council (Mississauga, ON), and the Muslim Resource Centre for Social Support and Integration (London, ON). These organizations were extremely helpful in coordinating additional focus groups with youth.

Data collection began in February and was completed in March. Focus groups in Waterloo Region, Ottawa, London, and the GTA were held face-to-face in secondary schools, community organizations, and other youth-friendly venues (e.g., Tim Hortons). Focus groups with youth from Windsor were held via Skype and teleconference.

All focus groups were conducted in Arabic by two Community Researchers. At the beginning of each focus group, participants received a copy of the study's Letter of Information and consent form (in Arabic and/or English). The consent form was read aloud by the Community Researchers, and signed by participants if they were comfortable providing a signature. In other cases, oral consent was received. For participants aged 15-16, consent to participate in a focus group was also received from parents. At the end of each focus group, the Community Researchers provided participants with an invitation to a community celebration where study results were shared and discussed. Participants were also provided with contact information for local supports, if needed (e.g., Muslim Social Services, other supports within their schools). The full focus group protocol for youth – including the questions, the sampling criteria, the Letters of Information, and the consent forms, is provided in **Appendix B**.

Most interviews were digitally recorded; however, in cases where participants were uncomfortable with the voice recorder, these devices were not used. The Community Researchers recorded detailed descriptive and analytical notes during or following each focus group. They also filled out a table for each participant, documenting various demographic variables (see **Appendix C**). All notes and digital recordings were stored on a password-protected computer server at CCBR.

It is important to note that unlike most reports with qualitative data, there are no direct quotes included. All focus groups were conducted in Arabic; given the project's short timeline and limited budget, we did not require the Community Researchers to transcribe and translate the recordings. Findings are based on the notes taken during focus groups as well as in-depth discussions with our Research Team and Steering Committee.

#### 2.6.2 Description of focus group participants

All youth we recruited for this study were between the ages of 15 to 20 years and lived in Waterloo Region or another city in Ontario (Windsor, London, Ottawa, and the GTA).

In total, we spoke with 43 males and 32 females. Participants identified as Christian (n=12) or Muslim (n=63), and were from a variety of different cities in Syria, including Aleppo, Daraa, Damascus, Homs, Hama, and Idlib. All arrived in Canada after December 2015; 60 were part of the Government Assisted Refugee (GAR) program, 14 were part of the PSR program, and one was part of the Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) program.

### 2.6.3 Document review

To supplement the primary data collected in local communities, we collected secondary data through a document review. This data added a breadth of understanding at the national level in answering the three main research questions. The document review served to ground the focus group data into the broader Syrian refugee youth experience across Canada.

Members of the Research Team reviewed scholarly sources (e.g., journal articles) and non-scholarly sources (e.g., agency documents/websites, media reports). Given the recent nature of the Syrian refugee crisis and the typical time lag in producing academic articles, non-scholarly sources provided the bulk of secondary data. Each document was reviewed and summarized according to the main research questions, taking care to include an audit trail connecting written summaries to document sources. It also allowed us to triangulate focus group data with Syrian refugee youth perspectives from other jurisdictions, including youth outside of Ontario.

### 2.6.4 Data analysis

The Community Researchers organized their focus group and interview notes according to the study's main research questions. The Project Coordinator then combined all notes in order to develop main categories and themes based on primary and secondary data sources. The major themes were reviewed by the Research Team and arranged in order of strength. Themes were then verified by Steering Committee members and later by participants at the community celebration. We used triangulation (i.e., involving more than one person in data analysis) to reduce the potential bias that may result when a single person conducts analysis (Patton, 2015).

### 2.6.5 Community celebration

A community celebration was held on Saturday March 25, 2017, at Kitchener City Hall (1- 5 pm), in collaboration with the Waterloo Region Immigration Partnership and Reception House Waterloo Region. The celebration brought together over 500 people, including Syrian refugees (youth and others), service providers, and other community members. Local service providers and representatives of all four levels of government (federal, provincial, regional, municipal) at the event reflected on the settlement and integration efforts in Waterloo Region over the past year. Several Syrian musical and dance groups performed, and there was free food, activities for children, and information booths from local settlement services.

At the end of the community celebration, the Research Team presented research findings to a subgroup of over 80 people, including Syrian refugee youth and their families, many of whom had participated in this study. The community celebration represented an ideal convening moment for Syrian refugee youth and interested others to reflect on study findings and to provide feedback on suggested models and interventions. The key challenges faced by Syrian refugee youth were publicly heard and legitimized. The invitation developed for the community celebration can be found in **Appendix D**, and a public announcement can be found online [here](#). Pictures from the Community Forum can be found in **Appendix E**.

## 2.7 BACKGROUND ON SYRIAN REFUGEES

Between November 4, 2015 and January 29, 2017, Canada has accepted 40,081 Syrian refugees, including GARs, PSRs and BVORs, into 350 welcoming communities. Approximately 40% of these refugees (16,445) have resettled in Ontario, of which 50% (8,175) are under the age of 18 years.

Owing in part to the young age profile of Syrian refugees in Ontario, approximately 57% have less than a secondary education, and an additional 23% have no education (IRCC, 2017). Roughly half of the Syrian newcomer youth in Ontario are female, and over half arrived in Canada with large families of five or more people (IRCC, 2017). In Ontario, the overwhelming majority of Syrian refugees speak Arabic as their primary language (either standard or Syrian Arabic). Only about 10% of Syrian refugees could speak some English upon arrival in Canada (Friscolanti, 2016).

### 2.7.1 Current services/supports for refugee youth in Waterloo Region and across Ontario

There are various levels of services and supports for refugee youth across the province. These include government-, community-, and school-level supports, as well as faith-based organizations.

Government-level supports are wide-ranging and include those related to housing, employment and mental health, as well as targeted programming for youth. Each GAR family is paired with a case worker during their first year in Canada to help acquaint them with Canadian practices, and support them to find housing, employment, and language training.

Community-level supports including counseling, access to settlement counsellors, food hamper programs, and language training. For example, the Kitchener-Waterloo Multicultural Centre offers transportation (e.g., bus tickets) to refugees for travel to appointments or meetings, recreation program subsidies, information regarding childcare, and a one-on-one English conversation/tutoring program.

Schools represent an import source of services and supports for refugee youth, including *English as a Second Language* (ESL) and *English Literacy Development* (ELD) language training, career and employment counselling, and extra-curricular programs. Extra-curricular programs are often student-initiated and have social and language benefits. Further, many schools in Ontario have trained public health nurses, social workers, and mental health support workers on staff to support students' physical and mental health.

Several faith-based organizations have also supported Syrian newcomers in their community through fundraisers, social events, English conversation circles, and advocacy work.

### 2.7.2 Background on social innovation

We understand that the overarching goal for this project is to study and assess new and alternative ways of supporting the integration of Syrian refugees in Canada. This is about innovative inventions that must be grounded in the Syrian refugee experiences as well as in the perspectives of other stakeholders that are currently involved in supporting the settlement process of Syrian refugees. We value the Government of Canada's approach of seeking improvements, engaging new partners, and developing forward-looking strategies to improve program efficiency and newcomer outcomes. Clearly, there is a need for a creative mix of ideas, partners and resources in building adequate solutions and settlement supports for Syrian refugees in our country.

The concept of social innovation has been in circulation since the 1960s, but it is only within the last decade that it has grown in popularity (Tansey 2011). Social innovation stresses the novel application of ideas to the betterment of society (Westley 2008), and provides new ways of approaching persistent problems faced by society that are “more effective, efficient, sustainable, or just than existing solutions and for which the value created accrues primarily to society as a whole rather than private individuals” (Phillis, 2008, p. 13). The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation (2016) defines social innovation as new ideas, products, services, institutions and relationships, offering fresh approaches to overcoming pressing societal challenges. While there may not be consensus on a universal definition for social innovation, there is agreement that a focus on the transformative systemic change is what differentiates social innovation from other forms of innovation (Volynets 2015).

Community-based research (CBR) holds strong potential for social innovation. CBR is about the engagement of diverse partners in the co-creation and co-mobilization of knowledge in such a way that advances a joint understanding of societal issues and that informs the development of responsive policy and practice. The expected longer-term goal of CBR is *more societal issues being innovatively addressed through research* (Ochocka and Janzen 2014). This system-level orientation intersects with the discourse of “social innovation”. Globally, a CBR approach is being seen as a catalyst for social innovation, for public policy improvements, for solving complex community issues, and for promoting democracy in which local knowledge is valued in building local solutions. This approach stresses the role of research as not only to create knowledge but to move the knowledge from research to action, through the active involvement of a range of community partners. A CBR approach improves the chances of research findings being used by community members and service providers, and empowers communities by involving people who are marginalized toward collective individual and community changes (Kemmis and McTaggart 2005).

### 3 RESEARCH FINDINGS

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Research findings were presented to members of the Syrian refugee community at a community celebration held on March 25, 2017 in Kitchener, Ontario. Attendees had this opportunity to provide feedback on the research findings and proposed solutions.

#### 3.1 SUCCESSES

During the focus groups, youth described many positive experiences related to their resettlement in Canada. They also shared stories on how they successfully tackled some of the challenges they have faced so far. These successes are grouped into the three study priority areas: school integration, family responsibilities, and mental health.

##### 3.1.1 School integration

*The 18 hour trip from Jordan to Canada felt like hell. Leaving everything and everyone behind was very hard. But the moment my feet touched to Canadian ground, I realized that this is going to be my new life. A chance not everyone will have. Away from pain and fear. I didn't mind the cold weather nor the new language. These things are so simple compared to what we have been through back home. Now after a year, I have learned the language and I am going to school and I have a part-time job. Every day I wake and thank God for being one of the luckiest refugees who ended up in Canada, the best country in the world.*

*– Harout Tatarian, Community Researcher*

Several youth described having high expectations for the quality of education they would receive in Canada, and said that these expectations have been met or exceeded. The youth were optimistic about

their education and career prospects in Canada. This finding is in accordance with other research that indicates that many Syrian newcomer youth have dreams for careers in Canada, and did not have such aspirations in Syria (Friscolanti, 2016). The youth expressed that teachers, school administrators, and Settlement Workers within the schools treat them with kindness and respect, and that they feel safe at school. One focus group participant explained that he feels comforted by the fact that all people are expected to follow the law in Canada, with no exceptions (e.g., including powerful people who have connections to government officials, or rich people who could use money to bribe). He indicated that this makes him feel safer and equal to everyone else.

While the focus group youth all attend schools in mid- or large-sized Canadian cities, research in other jurisdictions suggests that in smaller towns, teachers are able to work more closely with newcomer students (given smaller class sizes) and develop better relationships with parents (Pruss, 2017). Forming a positive relationship between teachers, school administrators and parents is critical for making newcomer students feel safe and comfortable, particularly for younger students (Ireland, 2016).

Many participants described that their English language has improved immensely since arriving in Canada. Many youth actively sought opportunities to be exposed to English outside of school, such as by listening to music and participating in extra-curricular programs. Most participants agreed that their English has improved most significantly through talking with their Anglophone peers. Participants expressed pride at being able to identify their progress in English speaking and comprehension.

Most of the youth expressed eagerness to befriend their Canadian-born peers. Several youth stated that they preferred to attend a school and classes with fewer Syrian students. This would help them to improve their language skills and to learn more about different cultures in Canada. Reports across Canada have provided examples of Syrian newcomers changing schools in order to be surrounded by fewer Arabic-speaking peers and more immersed in the English language and Canadian culture (Almasri, 2017). Other research has identified that Syrian newcomer youth living in smaller communities are more likely to encounter classmates (both Canadian and newcomers) outside of school, which helps to build friendships (Pruss, 2016).

However, many focus group participants (particularly in Kitchener-Waterloo and Toronto) reported that they also appreciate having a large Syrian community in their city. Many expressed that they enjoyed their ESL classes because it was comforting to be around students with similar life experiences. Focus group participants described that it is easy to form friendships with other immigrants, particularly other Syrians, which has also been noted elsewhere (e.g., Almasri, 2017; Uechi, 2016). Some participants reported that talking to other Syrians was helpful for them in dealing with the culture shock.

### 3.1.2 Family responsibilities

Most participants indicated that their parents are supportive of their English skill development. They stated that their parents encouraged them to improve their language skills through actions like watching online English language tutorials together, encouraging them to study, supporting their friendships with Canadian youth, and waking them up early for school.

### 3.1.3 Mental health

Many participants described hanging out in community spaces, including local parks, community centres, and athletic facilities. Reports from other jurisdictions in Canada have identified that recreation and



sports facilities and programs are important for helping Syrian refugee youth to make friends, feel more connected to the community, increase confidence and sense of belonging, and set goals (Puddicombe, 2016). Community engagement and social connectedness support good mental health and prevent foreseeable challenges before they manifest as mental health issues (Gierveld, Tilburg, & Dykstra, 2016; Wilkinson & Marmot, 2003).

## 3.2 Identified Barriers

Participating youth identified many barriers that they have encountered since arriving in Canada, particularly in relation to the study priority themes. Many youth also described general barriers that they have encountered relating to settlement in Canada. Most of these barriers are similar to those cited by other groups of refugees that have resettled in Canada.

### 3.2.1 School integration: education

Newcomer youth often face anxiety with the prospect of returning to formal school. Some Syrian newcomer youth in Canada went to school in Syria or refugee camps elsewhere, but standards for education were inconsistent or non-existent, and many youth were not exposed to a concrete curriculum (Rolfsen, 2016). For example, at one school in Kitchener-Waterloo, there are several (70+) students at the beginning levels of ELD, and some students are illiterate, unable to hold a pencil or orient a book. These challenges with literacy are perhaps unsurprising, given that Syrian newcomer youth have been out of school for an average of three years (with many who have never attended school) (Rolfsen, 2016).

Language is a significant challenge for newcomer youth and their families. For some, it took months to enrol in school after arriving in Canada, in part because most were required to have permanent housing first. Many participants described having expectations that they would learn English quickly (e.g., gain fluency within a year), and feel frustrated that it is taking longer than expected. Some participants also described language barriers in the classroom. For example, some youth described not understanding what their teachers were saying and not realizing that they have assigned homework. Youth commented that it is particularly difficult to learn English from teachers that speak with an accent.

Some participants found the mainstream (i.e., not ESL/ELD) classes too difficult due to language barriers and were tempted to drop these courses. Youth expressed a desire for someone to help them understand the material, but said that their teachers cannot always give them extra attention (even if they want to) because of demands from the rest of the class. Youth reported other challenges with their teachers and with school administration, including feeling as though they are treated the same as their classmates that are fluent in English when they ask for help. Youth reported wanting more control over their course selections, stating that school guidance councillors sometimes make changes to their schedules without consulting them first. In addition, Syrian newcomers from other regions of Canada have reported frustrations with teachers having lower expectations of them, compared to their peers (Uechi, 2016).

Consistent with other Canadian research (Uechi, 2016), youth described challenges and a lack of support in transitioning from secondary school to post-secondary training or employment. Many youth described frustrations with the 21-year age cap on attending secondary schools (i.e., before having to attend adult school). Reports have stated that Syrian newcomers who attended secondary school prior to moving to Canada have experienced challenges with Canadian schools recognizing and accepting their past credits. This has presented challenges for youth trying to apply for college or university (Uechi, 2016). Youth

remarked that the prospect of having to repeat years in school (i.e., to make up these course credits) is a frustration and a challenge.

Finally, youth and school teachers in Waterloo Region expressed concern over the fact that IRCC funding for Settlement Workers within high schools has recently been cut. As they explained, these Settlement Workers play a vital role in helping Syrian refugee and other newcomer youth to integrate successfully. Settlement Workers at Waterloo Collegiate Institute, for example, were heavily involved in developing and running programs such as Newcomer Orientation Week, a three-day program at the end of August for refugee and immigrant newcomers to the school.

### 3.2.2 School integration: Social connections

Youth have expressed some frustrations with being segregated from Canadian students and surrounded by Syrian and other ESL/ELD youth at school. Youth feel that it would be easier for them to learn English and make friends if they were surrounded mostly by English-speaking peers, similar to reports from other Canadian sources (e.g., CBC News, 2017).

While many youth described feeling comfortable with other Syrian youth, they recognized that relying on friendships with other newcomers (i.e., rather than forming new friendships with Canadian-born individuals) is a barrier to integrating into Canadian society in the long-term. In addition, some of the older focus group participants said that they must be careful how they act around other Syrians in the community who know their parents. They explained that they can act more 'freely' when they are with Canadians.

Many youth reported difficulties with making friends with Canadian youth in school, which is consistent with reports of Syrian newcomer youth from elsewhere in Canada (Uechi, 2016). Likewise, other reports have demonstrated that Syrian newcomers in their twenties find it difficult to form friendships in adult schools, since many of their classmates are significantly older (Uechi, 2016). Some of the newcomer youth in the focus groups were not attending school at the time of the study, but reported similar social challenges.

### 3.2.3 School integration: Cultural differences

The youth described being uncomfortable with some of the differences between Syrian and Canadian cultures (e.g., how some teenagers will kiss at school, how some females dress, how Canadians have dogs as pets, etc.). Likewise, there are reports of Syrian newcomers being reminded of conflict in their home country by very innocuous things in Canada (e.g., thinking a fire drill was an air raid, fireworks reminding them of bombs) (Craggs, 2016; Haberstroh, 2016).

The youth described some challenges practicing their faith in school. For example, Muslim people often pray five times, and go to mosque on Fridays, which in Syria, is enabled by individuals having the day off school and work. However, youth in the focus groups explained that they are unable to go to mosque on Fridays as they are required to be in class, that it is difficult for them to pray because prayer time coincides with class time, and that there is no room for them to pray at school.

Several youth in this and other studies voiced concerns that Canadians have misunderstandings about their culture and Islam, which makes it more difficult for them to feel accepted by their peers (Uechi, 2016). For example, one female participant in this study stated that her classmates do not understand her

hijab and she contemplated not wearing it to school. While none of the participants expressed personal experiences with bullying and/or racism, Syrian newcomer youth in other regions of Canada have reported these types of incidences with their Canadian-born peers (Pruss, 2017).

### 3.2.4 Family responsibilities: Dealing with parents' expectations

Many youth described feeling a sense of guilt and pressure from their parents. They indicated that their parents remind them that they “came here for them” and made sacrifices to enable their children to have a better life. Some of the youth worried that they would disappoint their parents.

The youth described their parents' apprehensions around their children's friends in Canada. Some of the youth explained that their parents are not comfortable with their children being friends with other children who speak English, because the parents themselves cannot speak English. Some youth explained that their parents do not actively encourage them to improve their English. On the other hand, other youth said that their parents do not want them spending much time with other Arabs or Syrian refugees because they think they can be a negative influence. This is an important challenge for youth, as they tend to gravitate towards their own people anyway, since they have more in common and can communicate with them fluently.

Many youth described a desire for their parents to become more independent. Some youth described difficulty convincing their parents that moving out of the family house is not a reflection of disrespect, and is common for young adults to do in Canada. Youth also wanted to be financially independent from their parents. Some reflected on frustrations about their families not being able to help them with important matters, such as learning English or other subjects.

Many of the youth described challenges with sharing Canadian culture and practices with their parents. Some youth indicated that their parents do not always believe them when they talk about things in Canada, thinking that their children are ‘playing them’. Many females described frustration with being treated more cautiously than their male counterparts. For example, some of the females described having to convince their parents that it is safe for girls to be out of the house in the evening in Canada, unlike Syria. In addition, several of the youth expressed a desire to volunteer, but said that their parents did not see the merit of volunteering and would rather they just go to school and come home.

### 3.2.5 Family responsibilities: Taking on new roles

Many youth described that adjusting to life in Canada has been easier for them than for their parents (e.g., in terms of language, employment, adapting to cultural differences, etc.), consistent with other reports across the country (CBC News, 2016). Some youth also indicated that their parents have made it difficult for them to adapt to their new life in Canada. For example, one youth described how his mother is frustrated with having to do housework here (as she had a maid in Syria), and he must constantly remind her that they are starting a new life in Canada and she needs to adjust accordingly.

Youth identified challenging shifts in family dynamics and responsibilities. For example, many youth have assumed the role of translator. Some youth described having to go to all of their parents' appointments with them and having to help teach them English. In addition, many youth said it was uncomfortable and not helpful to communicate cultural differences to their parents. Other examples of new responsibilities include doing shopping, taking care of siblings, and driving family members to work/school.

Some youth explained that their parents are stressed about money and are trying to save to buy a house. Some youth that are employed stated that they give up to half of their earnings to their parents to help with rent or other daily expenses. Others stated that their parents are not used to Canadian customs regarding money. For example, one youth said that his father is anxious about using debit/credit cards, and instead pays for everything in cash.

Given these new roles, many youth described feeling as though their parents are now very dependent on them. Some of the youth explained that their parents' problems become their problems; many focus group discussions revolved around the parents' challenges. Participants in the parent/older adult study, as well as past research (e.g., Ochocka & Janzen, 2008) have noted a change in their relationship with their children.

However, other youth stated that their new roles are manageable and have small downsides (e.g., less time for homework), while others indicated that their role in their family has changed very little since arriving in Canada.

### 3.2.6 Mental health

Mental health is a new concept for many youth; they feel emotions but often they don't know how to address them. Many of the youth are dealing with mental and physical health issues, both their own and those of family members. For example, some youth described having to care for parents or siblings with depression and physical disabilities, as a result of the war.

Some youth indicated that when they initially arrived in Canada, they were in a "honeymoon stage" and felt excited and optimistic about the opportunity for a new start. However, with time, they described feeling isolated, lonely, and not having people to talk to about their feelings. Some youth expressed that they are not comfortable speaking with older people, who they feel cannot relate to them. Others felt that talking about their struggles with others (e.g., a counsellor or therapist) would not change anything, discouraging them further from seeking support.

Youth stated that mental health services are uncommon in Syria, and the Western concept of talking to a therapist or counsellor is new to them. This finding is consistent with other research that has identified stigma as a key barrier that prevents Syrian newcomer youth from seeking support (Harris, 2016). The youth expressed that they do not know what types of support are available for them or their families related to mental and sometimes physical health.

Another major challenge for youth is the stress associated with missing and worrying about family back in Syria, which is consistent with the findings from the parent/older adult study, as well as past research (e.g., Ochocka & Janzen, 2008). The youth expressed feelings of homesickness, and some wished that they could visit their hometown once more. Other studies have identified that many Syrian youth (particularly older males) described feelings of guilt for leaving their country (Hoath, 2016).

### 3.2.7 General challenges

The youth described several general challenges that made it more difficult to adjust to their new life in Canada. Some of the youth expected that life would be much easier in Canada, and expressed that they and their families are working hard to integrate into their new communities. Many of the youth indicated that the cold weather in winter is a challenge, particularly when relying on public transportation for

travel. Some of the youth described shortcomings of the support services offered to them, including few translation services in the community and being assigned case workers that work with several families and have limited time with each. Some youth expressed that access to a case worker for one year was insufficient, and that they needed more time to understand the system. Others felt that the financial support they receive from the government is not enough, given the high costs of living in Canada (e.g., rent, car insurance, and transportation).

### 3.3 Proposed Solutions

The youth indicated what types of supports they feel may help to overcome some of the barriers they have faced since their arrival in Canada relating to the study priority areas.

#### 3.3.1 Education and school integration

Some youth described frustration with the age cap of 21 years for enrolling in secondary school. ESL/ELD teachers in Ontario and Manitoba have advocated for removing this age cap, arguing that adult learning centres (for those over the age of 21) do not allow students to take other courses (e.g., mathematics, geography, science) until they reach at least a level 8 English level. Adult ESL classes are also not designed for individuals with low literacy levels and/or significant gaps in their education (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2017).

Some youth suggested that training be developed for high school teachers and guidance counsellors, on how to work respectfully with newcomer students and be empathetic. Youth expressed a desire for teachers to focus on the strengths that they bring to the classroom, rather than the challenges. Reports from elsewhere in Canada have shown that this type of strength-based approach creates a more positive learning environment for both students and teachers (Ireland, 2016). Youth and school teachers in Waterloo Region have also expressed a desire for IRCC to continue funding Settlement Worker positions within school settings.

Youth desire more opportunities to engage with Canadian-born students, in order to make friends, improve their English language skills, and provide their peers with a better illustration of their country and culture. Some youth indicate that they want the option of being integrated into more mainstream classes, as opposed to being isolated in ESL/ELD classes for over half of the school day. However, several youth also indicated that they wanted to work with a mentor who had a shared experience of being a newcomer in Canada.

Youth expressed a desire to be engaged in extra-curricular clubs, activities, and social events, rather than only engaging with Canadian-born students in academic settings. More opportunities to express themselves and educate others through various media were mentioned. In addition, many youth stated that they have a strong interest in volunteering to integrate into their communities, make friends, improve their language skills, and gain job skills. Finally, many youth also wished for additional career counselling and information on how to successfully transition from secondary school to post-secondary education or employment.

#### 3.3.2 Family responsibilities

Youth participants felt that their parents would benefit from cultural education/training (e.g., on the differences between Syrian and Canadian cultures, and the importance of volunteering and engaging in



social/community events). The youth did not feel comfortable filling this role, and felt that this training would be best coming from someone outside of the family, such as older immigrants or past newcomers.

### 3.3.3 Mental health

The participants described numerous strategies they would like to see in order to address and improve mental health within their community. They expressed a desire to express themselves through various media, including writing, presentations, and art. Others indicated that they wanted more opportunities to participate in sport, as a means of feeling better about themselves and their situation. Some participants described a desire to begin a fundraising campaign to raise and send funds to Syria.

Some youth stated that they would like to hear inspirational speeches in school and community events to help them feel motivated and optimistic about their opportunities in Canada. Lastly, many youth thought they would benefit from additional peer support as a means of talking about their feelings and frustrations.

## 4 NEXT STEPS

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### 4.1 Recommendations Moving Forward

There are a number of recommendations for models, approaches and programs to reduce the challenges identified by youth in this study. These recommendations derive from focus groups discussions, consultations with Community Researchers and Steering Committee members, and research findings that emerged from the document review.

There are five general principles that apply to and/or are reflected in the recommended interventions:

- i. All interventions should strive to engage Syrian newcomers in the contexts they are already familiar with, as opposed to expecting them to seek out supports in new contexts. As such, each of the recommended interventions reflects the importance of community, whether this be a physical space or social context. This principle is likely to result in interventions with greater and more equitable engagement among Syrian newcomers.
- ii. We recommend supporting a mix of formal and informal supports to engage a wide variety of Syrian newcomer youth, enable interventions to be complementary and comprehensive, and yield greater positive outcomes.
- iii. All interventions should be appropriate and potentially beneficial for youth in general, not just Syrian newcomer youth. While we expect that Syrian newcomer youth would particularly benefit from these interventions (i.e., since they address many of the specific challenges they have faced since arriving in Canada), these interventions can and should engage Canadian students and other newcomers as well.
- iv. We strongly suggest using a community development approach, while also adapting traditional therapeutic methods, to build a more resilience-based way of working with Syrian youth. Having an advisory board or steering group that ensures Syrian youth, parents and teachers are directly involved in designing and delivering the interventions will ensure that this approach builds capacity and resiliency among all involved.

- v. Employing rigorous community-based evaluation studies will be instrumental in shaping interventions and identifying the impact of these interventions in practice. For example, process evaluations would identify the people who are actively participating in a program or not engaged in a particular intervention, as well as the aspects of a program that are working well or not working well. Conversely, an outcome evaluation would capture the benefits and/or limitations of participating in a program. A developmental evaluation would shape the interventions as they are being implemented.

We have grouped all recommended models, approaches, and programs into four themes: school-based programs, sport and leisure activities, career exploration and training, and mental health supports. The first three themes largely comprise primary prevention-oriented interventions (i.e., proactive initiatives that seek to prevent foreseeable challenges before they have manifested), while the fourth theme describes secondary and tertiary prevention efforts (i.e., initiatives striving to address existing challenges).

#### 4.1.1 School-based programs

Schools represent an important social and educational context for youth, and are an optimal setting for programs and practices to facilitate successful settlement of Syrian newcomer youths in Canada. Although we understand that education is a provincial responsibility, school integration programs could be sponsored federally and/or jointly between provincial and federal jurisdictions. These interventions could include creative arts programs, host friendship programs, and reforms within existing school-based literacy and language supports.

##### *Creative arts programs*

Creative arts programs enable students to express themselves through various media, including drama, music, and fine arts. These programs can take many forms. They may take place during school hours (e.g., as part of a drama class) or during extra-curricular time (e.g., during lunch breaks or after school), and can be student-led or driven by partnerships with external arts-oriented community groups.

Creative arts programs could help raise awareness about the unique stresses that high school-aged Syrian youth face and how they can be better supported. These programs can provide a forum for Syrian youth to share their experiences, aspirations, and stories through the performing arts in order to promote understanding and to foster dialogue with their peers. Many youth in this study described that participation in after-school creative arts programs was helpful in easing their transition into life in Canada (e.g., through making new friends and giving them an opportunity to practice their English outside of class). Further, some youth indicated that creative expression (e.g., drawing, painting, writing) was an effective means of coping with stress and loneliness. Reports from other regions of Canada have identified that arts programs are beneficial for encouraging students to open up about their emotions and past experiences (e.g., Issa, 2016). Prior research shows that participation in group visual arts activity can foster a sense of belonging (Parr, 2006; Skudrzyk, 2009), stimulate new social interactions (Askins & Pain, 2011), and facilitate building resilience (Aumann & Hart, 2009).

An example of a successful student-led after-school program in Waterloo Region is *Crossing Borders*. This grassroots program is largely student-driven and engages a wide variety of boys and girls, including many immigrant youth, and is supported and supervised by a committed teacher. Within this after-school program, students discuss some of the pressing issues that occur in their school and present these issues

through various media (e.g., theatrical presentations, rap, slideshows, workshops) in the school and within the community. This type of program could be replicated in other schools across the country.

Another example of an enriching creative arts program was the partnership between the professional theatre group, The MT Space - Multicultural Theatre of Waterloo Region, and one high school, Waterloo Collegiate Institute. Within this program, MT Space staff worked with interested immigrant/refugee students to develop unique scripts (based both on students' personal experiences as well as past research) during class time and to provide direction in producing a 15-minute play. Following the theatre performance, students, teachers or other school staff (comprised of professional counselors) facilitated an interactive "de-briefing" with audience members. The purpose of these discussions was to analyze and reflect upon the expressed emotions evoked by the performance. The educational component is very strong in this work. Students learn about themselves through the issues and topics that they explore. By presenting these topics to their peers and teachers they feel empowered. The Canadian students are also informed and forced to talk about integration and school behaviours. Possible issues or topics addressed by theatre productions could be determined by the students. Some topics include:

- Difficulties "fitting in" to high school culture
- Bullying, peer pressure, conflict resolution, ant-racism, homophobia, islamophobia
- Trauma and stress of escaping war and violence
- Employment, underemployment of parents
- Parent child role reversal
- Home – school culture conflict
- Unwelcoming school culture or climate
- Gaps in education and lack of English fluency
- Mental Health: isolation, loneliness, depression
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#### *Host friendship programs*

Host friendship programs represent another type of program that can help to engage Syrian refugee youth within their school communities and with their peers. Within these programs, refugee youth are paired with a Canadian peer, and the collective Syrian-Canadian youth dyads represent a large peer network of support, which may connect through physical or virtual means (e.g., through social media). Host friendship programs can be supplemented by other types of initiatives, such as conversation circles where youth have an opportunity for language and literacy supports offered in group settings. These programs enable newcomer youth to practice their English in a social, supportive, and comfortable environment and meet friends. These programs can be held after-school or during breaks in the school day, and should involve training Canadian students to serve as conversation facilitators.

#### *Reforms within existing school-based literacy and language supports*

Many Syrian youth are illiterate with low educational achievements. One policy-oriented intervention to support Syrian newcomer youths' language training is to remove the age cap of 21 years for participation in secondary school ESL/ELD classes. Likewise, older youth in adult schools are likely to benefit from the availability of ELD programs, which are not currently offered in these institutions and would enable youth to improve their literacy while learning about other school subjects. However, we recognize that education is a provincial responsibility under the Canadian Constitution, and is therefore beyond the scope of the federal role in settlement.

#### 4.1.2 Sports and leisure activities

There is great potential to engage Syrian newcomer youth in the community through various sports and leisure activities, such as sports match-up programs and family-centred events. These activities may take place in various settings such as community centres, neighbourhoods, and recreational spaces.

##### *Sports match-up programs*

Many of the youth in this study indicated a passion for sports and other physical activities, which represent an opportunity for them to foster relationships with their peers, feel like they are a part of a community, and improve their physical and mental health. One strategy to facilitate Syrian newcomers' participation in community- or school-based sporting activities is through "sports match-ups", in which a newcomer is matched with a Canadian peer on their team. The two youth pair up for travel to practices and games, which can ease the newcomer youths' anxiety around arriving alone while facilitating friendship between youth with similar interests.

##### *Family-centred events*

A strong theme that emerged from both the Syrian youth and adult focus groups was the importance of engaging in events and activities as a family. Youth expressed that they would like to be active and help their parents to connect with others in their community. Regular family-oriented activities in neighbourhoods would reduce social isolation and allow for active involvement of Syrian and other families. Family-centred events may include neighbourhood barbeques or porch parties, local multicultural festivals, and school-based events. See the parent/older adult report ('Exploring the pathways to social isolation: A community-based study with Syrian refugee parents and older adults in Waterloo Region') for more information and examples.

#### 4.1.3 Career exploration and training supports

Youth in this study described some confusion and anxiety about post-secondary education and employment, suggesting that there is a need for improvements in the type and accessibility of career exploration and training supports. We have identified four feasible interventions to address this challenge: mentorship programs, trained personnel to support youth in preparing for their post-secondary training or employment, volunteer-related supports, and youth-friendly Job Search Workshops.

##### *Mentorship programs*

Mentorships programs represent opportunities for newcomer youth to develop their skill sets, while providing valuable contacts for later longer-term employment. These programs are likely to be beneficial in familiarizing Syrian newcomer youth with workplace culture, practices, and contacts. In addition, mentors can help newcomer youth form a greater sense of identity and belonging, which will help them to "succeed in the face of adversity" and make positive lifestyle choices (Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009, p. 425).

##### *Trained personnel to support youth in preparing for their post-secondary education or employment*

The youth who participated in focus groups expressed a desire to have trusted, trained, and sensitive professionals within their schools that they could consult with for advice regarding post-secondary

training or employment. While most secondary schools have one or more guidance counsellors available for such consultations, it is unclear how and when these discussions are initiated. We recommend that guidance counsellors take a proactive approach by developing a trusting relationship with Syrian refugee youth soon after their enrolment within the school. The counsellor should meet with the student, explain their role, and get to know the student's interests, aptitudes, and aspirations in order to get a sense of potential career paths for which they will be well suited.

Grad Coaches represent another type of school personnel that can aid in preparing youth for their futures. This role is often more informal than a guidance counsellor, and involves a "Coach" (usually a young adult) working with a group of students throughout their secondary school career to ensure they are progressing well with courses, selecting appropriate courses needed for graduation, and planning next steps. The Grad Coach would support students beyond their educational pathways as well, by getting to know them on a personal level and helping them to access sport, leisure, and volunteer opportunities. A unique example utilizing a Grad Coach can be found in the [Four Directions program](#) for Indigenous high-school students in Northern Ontario's Keewatin-Patricia District School Board. The Grad Coaches in this program support Indigenous students from grade nine through to graduation, by providing them with holistic relational and educational supports as well as a dedicated space in the school where students can study, relax, and socialize with their peers.

#### *Volunteer-related supports*

Volunteering represents an important opportunity for Syrian newcomer youth to be engaged in their communities, make friends, and learn practical skills including language development. Several resources exist to support newcomer youths' volunteer activities, including online repositories of local volunteer opportunities (accessible through Volunteer Canada's webpage, <https://volunteer.ca/>) and information kits for volunteer organizations as well as newcomers wishing to volunteer. Two examples include the Volunteer Canada's *Building Blocks for Newcomers* guide on volunteering (<https://volunteer.ca/content/building-blocks-newcomers-volunteering-newcomer%E2%80%99s-guide-volunteering>) and the Kitchener-Waterloo Multicultural Centre's *Volunteering Eh!* toolkit (<http://volunteeringeh.huzidesigns.com/Tool%20Kit/main.html>). Community-based organizations, such as the Volunteer Action Centre, could also facilitate the opportunities for youth to volunteer.

#### *Youth-friendly Job Search Workshops and resources*

There are numerous existing resources to help prepare Syrian newcomer youth for employment prospects, including online training websites. For example, *New Youth* (<http://www.newyouth.ca>) is a federally-supported youth-oriented online resource for newcomers that includes information on preparing cover letters, finding summer employment, and preparing for college/university. This type of skill development can also take place in schools (e.g., through trained guidance counsellors or at career fairs) or other community settings. There are other job search tools for adults that could be adapted for younger populations. For example, the Government of Ontario has implemented *Job Search Workshops for Newcomers to Ontario*, which represents an excellent resource to assist new and recent immigrants to Canada in their job search. Given that this infrastructure already exists, we expect that efforts to tailor this program to a youth audience across the province would increase its impact even further. In addition, youth need personal experience in post-secondary school settings and in employment settings. Programs similar to *Open House*, *Meet a Prof*, and *Bring Your Child to Work* facilitate personal experiences with school and employment settings and should be organized for refugee youth.



#### 4.1.4 Mental health supports

In addition to strong primary mental health care to support newcomers who have experienced trauma, numerous additional supports would be useful for promoting mental health. Four interesting models for supporting newcomer youths' mental health include system navigators, art-based therapies, peer support circles, and youth-led CBR research projects.

##### *System Navigators*

The mental health system is complex. Understanding mental health services and supports, and accessing supports that are culturally appropriate, is difficult for refugee youth. System Navigators - perhaps trained representatives from the Syrian community – could be hired to help youth and their corresponding community members in navigating through the mental health system (and the health system as a whole). System Navigators could also act as community leaders to increase the competency of Canadian Health Care Professionals to become more sensitive and aware of cultural differences among cultures.

##### *Art-based therapies*

Arts-based therapies represent another feasible means of encouraging Syrian newcomer youth to express their feelings. Within these therapies, youth can use various media and skills such as photography, painting, drawings, or poetry to communicate their challenges and emotions. Recent evaluation research on art therapy with Syrian refugee youth has identified that art therapy is effective at significantly reducing youths' trauma, depression, and anxiety symptoms (Ugurlu, Akca, & Acarturk, 2016).

##### *Peer support circles*

Peer support includes a supportive relationship between people who have lived experience in common. Trained youth facilitators can support other newcomers emotionally and socially within individual or group settings. The benefit of this approach is that youth that are struggling with mental health or other challenges – like many of our focus group participants – are more likely to seek the support of a peer, as they feel more comfortable talking with someone that they can relate to.

##### *Youth-led community-based research projects*

Youth want to study their situations, issues and priorities when living in Canada. Action-oriented and participatory studies are needed for youth to be active and engaged and to learn practical skills that are useful in their every-day lives. Youth-led projects about their experiences of marginalization, integration and social justice can act as a “consciousness rising” exercise for other students, staff, teachers, and local communities. We strongly recommend a community-based approach to foster resilience and capacity building. The resilience paradigm views health as a reflexive process of adaptation to physical, cultural, and mental stressors. It involves three aspects: belonging, learning, and strengthening core self (Hart & Heaver, 2015) and includes a “joined-up” approach between home, school, and community (with caring adults). Recent cutting edge socio-ecological approaches to resilience emphasize individuals' capacity to navigate and negotiate their social, cultural, and physical resources whilst challenging systematic factors that contribute to their adversity conditions (Hart & Heaver, 2015). We recommend that the federal government invest in community-based interventions and research studies for their effects to be fully realized.

*My experience as a researcher with The Centre for Community Based Research (CCBR) has been one of the best learning opportunities in my life. Moving to Canada as a refugee myself, from Iraq, played a very big role in shaping my new life three years ago. After experiencing what it means to be a refugee all I wanted to do is help others who will go through the same things I went through. Even though each refugee has a unique different experience, I know that we all share a feeling that is hard to describe. Therefore I truly believe that when a refugee helps another it has a special meaning and that is what CCBR allowed me to accomplish. This project gave me the chance to work with passionate, hard-working and caring people who want to create a better community. I have been very lucky to be able to work on this project where every second of this job has been a unique learning experience that has helped me grow as a human. I am very thankful for all the learning, relationships and every moment I got to spend working on this project as it has been a very rich experience.*

*-Hoda Al'Obaidi*

## 4.2 Knowledge Sharing and Mobilization

The Research Team presented the major findings of this study to research participants, members of the Syrian newcomer community, and other study stakeholders at the community forum on March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2017 in Kitchener, Ontario. The presentation slides are posted on CCBR's website and the final report will be disseminated to all participants, to the funder (IRCC), to the organizations and agencies involved in organizing focus groups, and to the Steering Committee members. We will continue to foster relationships with IRCC and relevant policy makers to inform and develop initiatives to address the barriers identified in this study and to continue to support Syrian newcomers' transition into their new lives in Canada.

## 4.3 Lessons Learned

After conducting the focus groups, the youth Community Researchers wrote notes about their experience with data collection. These notes revealed many important lessons on conducting research with refugee youth.

The Community Researchers identified some factors that helped to facilitate the focus groups effectively. They employed numerous strategies to increase participants' comfort, such as holding the focus groups in informal settings (e.g., cafés), using ice breaker activities, and emphasizing that there were no negative consequences to participating (e.g., that what they say in the focus group will not threaten their family's reputation or status in Canada). The Community Researchers informed participants that this is a federal government-sponsored study and that the government wants to hear about their experiences, positive and negative. The Community Researchers noted that dividing the groups by gender did not seem to affect the quality or candour of the discussion; in most cases, mixed male-female groups seem to work just as well as single-gender groups.

The Community Researchers also noted some challenges in conducting the focus groups. They indicated that in most focus groups, it was difficult to engage participants in discussion. Often one participant would answer and the rest would simply agree rather than contributing something new to the discussion.

As such, the researchers occasionally opted to go around the circle, asking each person a question, rather than relying on group discussion. The researchers also noted that some youth were uncomfortable with signing the consent form and having their voices recorded.

Some of the youth disclosed very urgent personal matters with the Community Researchers (e.g., disclosing that family members need help with physical/mental conditions). In such cases, the researchers provided these individuals with contact information for local services/supports, and were encouraged to debrief and speak with the Project Leads or the Project Coordinator whenever they would like, through various means (e.g., text, email, phone call, face-to-face). The Project Leads and Project Coordinator engaged in ongoing communication with the Community Researchers throughout the project duration.

## 5 CONCLUSION

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This report summarized the findings and recommendations that emerged through a community-based research project with Syrian refugee youth in Ontario. The purpose of this project was to identify the barriers that Syrian refugee youth face at school, in the community, and at home, and to develop solutions to address these barriers in the future.

Throughout this project, we worked with six Community Researchers who conducted focus groups with 75 Syrian refugee youth in Waterloo Region and four other areas of Ontario (the Greater Toronto Area, Ottawa, London, and Windsor). Through this experience, the Community Researchers were able to give voice to the concerns of their fellow Syrian newcomers and to contribute to the development of relevant and meaningful innovations. The Community Researchers also identified many important lessons about how to conduct research with refugees and other newcomer populations. As a final action piece to the project, we gathered over 80 Syrian newcomers and other community members to discuss findings and possible solutions. This project was especially valuable to the Community Researchers as they gained confidence in their skills and abilities, earned valuable Canadian work experience, and built upon their personal and professional networks.

Waterloo Region has been supporting refugees and immigrants for several decades, and the recent influx of Syrian refugees has intensified this community effort. Over the past year, many organizations and groups within the community have worked hard to create opportunities for Syrian newcomer youth to thrive. As a community, we are anxious to continue these efforts and to pursue the solutions outlined in this report. We look forward to IRCC delivering on its promise to create new and alternative ways to support the successful settlement and integration of Syrian newcomers in Canada.

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## 7 APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Steering Committee members

Name + Position	Role	Research Team (parent study)	Steering Committee
Joanna Ochocka (Director, CCBR)	Project Lead (parent + older adult study)	√	√
Rich Janzen (Director, CCBR)	Project Lead (youth study)	√	
Kyla English (Researcher, CCBR)	Project Coordinator	√	√
Huda Al'Obaidi (CCBR)	Lead Community Researcher (youth study)		√
Harout Tatarian (CCBR)	Community Researcher (youth study)		√
Boushrah Fanous (CCBR)	Community Researcher (youth study)		√
Suhaila El-Batroukh (CCBR)	Lead Community Researcher (parent + older adult study)	√	√
Saly Alkarmy (CCBR)	Community Researcher (parent + older adult study)	√	√
Muhammed Emir Hellak (CCBR)	Community Researcher (parent + older adult study)	√	√
Mohamed Bendame (Muslim Association of Canada)	Steering Committee Member		√
Iman Arab (Settlement Worker, Muslim Social Services KW)	Steering Committee Member		√
Eltag Elkhaila (Case Worker, KW Multicultural Centre)	Steering Committee Member		√
Lynn Schulze (Teacher, WRDSB)	Steering Committee Member		√
Phyllis Martin Argueta (Teacher, WRDSB)	Steering Committee Member		√
Lisa Loiselle (Associate Director of Research, MAREP, University of Waterloo)	Steering Committee Member		√
Thivja Sribaskaran (Student, University of Waterloo)	Steering Committee Member		√
Andrea Savu (Manager, Reception House)	Steering Committee Member		√
Katelyn Godin (CCBR)	Steering Committee Member		√
Aleesha Jones-Blue (SDS Student, University of Waterloo)	Research Assistant	√	√
Yuting Kuo (MSW Student, Wilfrid Laurier University)	Research Assistant	√	√

## Appendix B: Focus group protocol for Syrian refugee youth study

### Questions

*Introduce yourself, the role you play as a community researcher, as well as the purpose of the study and the consent form.*

- 1) Please tell us your name and a little bit about yourself and your family.
  - a. How old are you? Do you go to school? What grade? Do you work or volunteer? Where? For how long?
  - b. Do you live with your family? How many people? Do you have younger/older siblings? How old are they?
- 2) Please tell us a little bit about your experience in Canada so far.
  - a. When did you come to Canada? Was Kitchener Waterloo the first place you lived when you moved to Canada?
  - b. What's your favourite thing about living in Kitchener Waterloo?
  - c. What are the top three challenges that you have faced so far?
  - d. Is your transition to life in Canada as you had imagined?
- 3) Could you please tell us about your experience with school so far?
  - a. What have you enjoyed about school?
  - b. What don't you like about school? Have you faced any challenges? If so, what are they?
  - c. Are there many other Syrian students at your school? Does having other Syrian youth at school help with your adjustment? Why or why not?
  - d. Is there anything that *you* could do, to help make your experience at school better?
  - e. Is there anything else that others could do, to help make your experience at school better?
- 4) Could you please tell us about your life at home with your family?
  - a. What are your responsibilities at home? Are there certain chores or jobs that you are responsible for? How do you feel about these responsibilities?
  - b. How has your family helped you to adapt to life in Canada?
  - c. Have you faced any challenges at home with your family? If so, what are they?
  - d. Is there anything that could help make your experience at home better?
- 5) Coming to a new country can be stressful and full of struggles. You have already mentioned some stresses that you've faced in Canada. Are there any others that *you* – or other Syrian youth – have experienced?
  - a. Do you or other Syrian youth that you know have people to turn to for support?
  - b. What would help you or other Syrian youth to better deal with these stresses?

*End by thanking them, and telling them about the **community forum** entitled 'Our Home, Your Home' on March 25, 2017 (1-3 pm, Kitchener City Hall). **Please give all participants a copy of the flyer.***

## Information About This Study

- This study is being conducted by the Centre for Community Based Research.
- This study is funded by the Government of Canada (Citizenship, Refugees, and Immigration Canada).
- The purpose of this study is to **explore challenges that Syrian refugee youth face**.
- This study will also explore possible solutions of what can be done to help Syrian youth connect with people and places in the community.
- In this study we will talk to about 48 to 64 Syrian youth. We will talk to them in small groups.
- The information that we gather in this study will be summarized in a final report. All participants will receive a copy of the final report.
- The study will also be shared at a community celebration on **Saturday March 25, 2017** at Kitchener City Hall (1-3 pm). Anyone is invited to attend.

## Consent form

- In this study, you will be asked questions about the challenges that you and other Syrian youth face. You will also be asked about how we can create a more supportive community together.
- When we talk about this study, your name will not be used. We will not use your name in the final report, or in any presentation.
- When the focus group is over, please do not talk about what was said.
- Being part of this focus group is voluntary. That means you can leave whenever you want. It also means you can refuse to answer a question if you choose. We will not tell anyone if you choose to participate or not.
- If talking today upsets you, we can connect you with someone who can help.
- If you are 16 years of age or less, we will need a parent to sign this consent form.

Participant name: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Date:

Parent name: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Parent signature:

## Sampling + Recruitment Strategy

### Selection Criteria

All youth *must* be:

- Between the ages of 15-20 years
- Living in Waterloo, Toronto, or other cities in Ontario (e.g., Hamilton, London, Ottawa, Peterborough, Windsor)

We would also like to have a diverse range of:

- Gender (equal number of male and female participants)
- English language capacity
- GAR and PSR
- Religious & cultural identity
- Hometown in Syria
- Length of stay in Canada

### Telephone Script

Hello. My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I am working as a Community Researcher with an organization called the Centre for Community Based Research. We are conducting a study to explore the challenges that Syrian youth are facing in Canada, what can be done to address these challenges. We are talking to many Syrian youth in Southern Ontario about this. I would like to invite you to a focus group for this study on (date) and (time). It will happen at (location). Would you like to come? If you would like, I can email you a letter with more information about this study.

### Appendix C: Youth tracking form

\*One form filled out per focus group, with Community Researchers' names and date at the top.

Person	Gender	Age	Hometown in Syria	Religious/ cultural identity	Date of arrival in Canada	GAR or PSR or blended	English language level
1							
2							
3							
4							
5							
6							
7							
8							



Appendix D: Invitation to the community celebration



## Appendix E: Pictures from the community celebration



Attendees watch a presentation at Kitchener City Hall. Photo courtesy of Kyla English.



CCBR presenting research findings to participants and other community members. Photo courtesy of Kyla English.





Youth point to the most popular recommendation to reduce social isolation: family reunification. Photo courtesy of Rich Janzen.



Research participants and other community members watch a presentation of research findings by CCBR. Photo courtesy of Rich Janzen.