POLICY BRIEF

Towards a Unified Model of Refugee Resettlement

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INTRODUCTION

Canada sees itself as a "global leader" in refugee resettlement. Its widely lauded Private Sponsorship of Refugees program is promoted internationally, especially through the Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative (GRSI)[1], and several countries are considering using it as model.[2] However, Canada has created a two-tier system where the most vulnerable refugees – those referred by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) – often receive less comprehensive resettlement support than those sponsored by private groups[3]. As a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Status of Refugees, Canada is obligated to resettle refugees from troubled parts of the world. Its citizens may assist the state in meeting its obligation but cannot substitute for the state's role.

This Policy Brief argues that these issues can be addressed, at least partially, by offering *all* refugees key elements of resettlement support jointly by the state and its citizens.

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1   GRSI is a joint initiative of the Government of Canada, United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), the Open Society Foundation, the Giustra Foundation and the University of Ottawa.
2   As identified in studies by Hyndman et al., 2016; Phillimore & Dorling, 2020; Tan, 2021.
3   See Alfred, 2018; Hynie et al, 2019.

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OVERVIEW

Brief history of refugee resettlement programs in Canada

The UNHCR refers people who have fled their countries for fear of persecution to other countries for resettlement. Canada's department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) admits an approved number of those who are eligible as Government Assisted Refugees (GARs). In addition, the 1976 Immigration Act created the legal framework for groups of individuals and civil society organizations to be able to select refugees they wished to assist as Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSRs).

Following the Vietnam war, civil society groups lobbied the government to admit more refugees than Canada had initially agreed to resettle. This led to the extensive use of the PSR program to resettle more refugees, over and above the number initially authorized by the government. Since then, both government and private sponsorships have been used to resettle refugees in Canada.

Today, there are three different refugee programs, each with different support systems:

1. GARs receive income support from the federal government and settlement assistance through federally contracted, non-governmental Service Providing Organizations (SPOs) for up to a year. After that GARs qualify for provincial/municipal income support if they are not self-sufficient, and continued settlement and language training support from SPOs.

2. PSRs receive financial aid and settlement assistance by their private sponsors[4] for a minimum of a year, which is sometimes complemented by information and referral support by SPOs. PSRs are also eligible for federally funded language training.

3. A third category, the Blended Visa-Office Referred (BVOR) program was created in 2013 for refugees referred by UNHCR and selected by IRCC for

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4   Private sponsors consist of religious institutions that are Sponsorship Agreement Holders (SAH), community groups associated with an SAH, or a group of five persons (Kaida et al., 2020). They can select persons they wish to sponsor, as long as the refugees meet regulatory criteria (Reynolds & Clark-Kazak, 2019).

consideration by potential private sponsors. BVORs' income support for the first year is equally shared by the government and the sponsoring group, while other settlement support is the sponsoring group's responsibility. SPOs may also provide some complementary settlement services including language training. [5]

Strengths and weaknesses of current programs

An evaluation of refugee resettlement programs was conducted by IRCC in 2016, based on data from the 2010-2014 period (i.e. before the 2015-2016 surge from Syria). It reported that:

· approval rates were higher and processing time was much faster for GARs than PSRs

· income support and time allocated for provision of services, including housing, for GARs was insufficient

· GARs had lower rates of employment and employment income than PSRs, and higher reliance on social welfare after their first year in Canada

· the PSR program needed closer monitoring

· the BVOR program needed greater clarity regarding eligibility, roles, and responsibilities.

The report made a number of recommendations, which were all accepted by IRCC. Their implementation and outcomes, however, have not been clear. The recommendations included the following:

· more support be provided to GARs

· the criteria for BVOR selection be clearly articulated and strategies for increasing intake be promoted

· private sponsors be made aware of supports provided by the government and SPOs

· timely decisions be made about PSR intake

· governance structures and coordination among settlement programs be improved, and

· additional support to IRCC staff, private sponsors and SPOs be provided to help resettle refugees.

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5   See Labman, 2016 and Labman & Pearlman, 2018

POLICY BRIEF

Economic outcomes

Some studies which compared economic outcomes of refugees found that PSRs earn more than other refugee groups. Other studies claimed that although PSRs are employed sooner than GARs, differences in their income levels are modest, and decline over time.[6] These differences may also be attributed more to their prior attributes rather than the refugee program. For example, the IRCC Syrian Outcomes Report 2019 stated that, in the Syrian case, 29% of GARs had no prior formal education, while this was true of only 15% of PSRs; and 18% of PSRs had a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 1% of GARs.

Social and settlement supports

Other studies noted that the socio-emotional supports offered to PSRs not only met their social needs but enhanced their social, economic and political capital and also fostered a sense of belonging to Canada.[7] According to the Rapid Impact Evaluation of the Syrian Refugee Initiative conducted in 2016 by IRCC, PSRs were more likely to indicate that their immediate needs were met, and reported receiving more help to resettle compared to GARs, despite less use of SPO services. According to the IRCC's Syrian Outcomes Report of June 2019, while 53% of GARs used settlement services offered by SPOs, only 36% of PSRs did. Although the funding relationship between sponsors and the sponsored family normally ends after one year, in many cases the social relationships endure well beyond that period.

Family reunification

While the PSR program is promoted as a highly successful model for refugee resettlement, it has also been criticized for being used predominantly for family reunification.[8] Specific figures for refugees 'known' or 'unknown' to their sponsors prior to their arrival are not available. However, it is widley assumed that most refugees arriving in the decades following the influx of Indochinese in 1979-1982 were sponsored by family and friends through the PSR. A study commissioned by IRCC reported that 62% of surveyed PSRs claimed

they were sponsored by a family member.[9]

Although the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA) of 2002 allows Canadian citizens and permanent residents to sponsor some relatives through the Family Class category, a very narrow definition of 'family' (spouses, dependent children, parents, and grandparents), the income level to qualify as a sponsor, and the required long-term financial commitment, are challenging criteria to meet. The PSR program allows sponsors to name any person or family they would like to sponsor as long as they have sufficient funds and commitment to support them for only one year.

Studies have shown that separation from loved ones is a great source of distress for refugee families.[10] Many scholars argue that the state should use a broader definition of family to include those who are socio-economically and emotionally interdependent. Recently arrived PSRs have often persuaded their sponsors, who may or may not be related to them, to further sponsor their loved ones left behind, which is an opportunity GARs do not have.[11]

In summary, PSRs receive more comprehensive support from their sponsors than GARs and can leverage their close relationships with their sponsors to achieve family reunification, which the latter cannot.

ANALYSIS

Canada's refugee policies yield to the political landscape of the day, shifting between those who are more likely to contribute to the economy to those who are the most vulnerable. In 2015, after a decade of a Conservative government, the newly elected Liberal government was keen to reclaim Canada's humanitarian commitments and international engagement. It launched Operation Syrian Refugees to quickly resettle 25,000 Syrian refugees. All three levels of government, non-governmental agencies, and members of the civil society collectively exceeded this target within a few months. As a result, the number of refugees in all three categories reached an unprecedented level. Since then, the number of GARs

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6   See Agrawal et al. 2019; Hynie, et al., 2018; Kaida et al. 2020; Labman & Pearlman, 2018 and note that the BVOR category was largely ignored in these studies because it mixes the two major streams, which makes it difficult to disaggregate effects of either, and its number remains quite small.

7   See Drolet and Moorthi, 2018; Hanley et al. 2018

8   See Lehr & Dyck, 2020; Morris et al., 2021; Hyndman et al., 2021; Labman, 2016.

9   See Jedwab, J., 2018

10   See Morris et al., 2021

11   See Hyndman et al., 2021; Macklin et al., 2018; Morris et al., 2021

POLICY BRIEF

and BVORs has stabilized around pre-2015 levels but the number of PSRs has doubled (See Figure 1).

The graph in Figure 1. shows that annual targets for refugee intake will increase in the next few years; PSRs will far exceed GARs; and the BVOR category will remain relatively small. This raises the question of whether "additionality" is still being honoured as a basic principle of the PSR program. In other words, whether the program will supplement the state's efforts or will the state shift much of its responsibility for refugee resettlement to private sponsors. This trend makes the emergence of a two-tier system all the more concerning. In the context of increasing PSR arrivals, how do we ensure that the GARs and PSRs receive similar settlement supports?
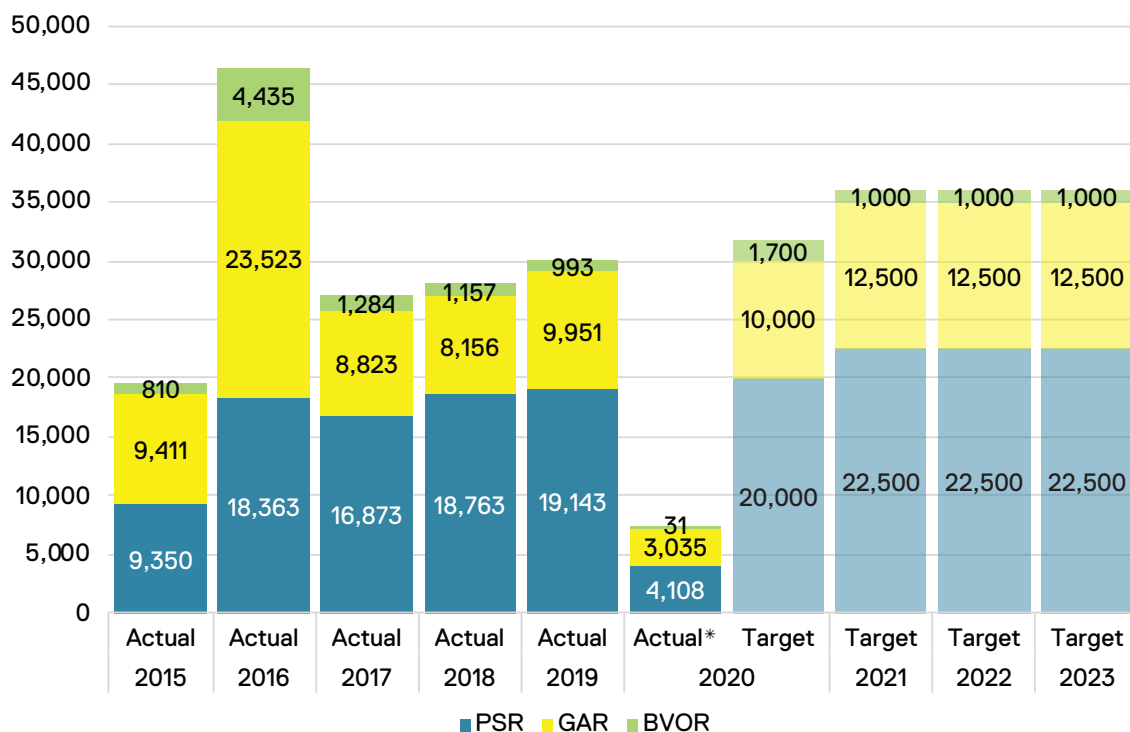
What refugees need to help them succeed

Many factors impact newcomer integration. While each newcomer and accompanying family members have different requirements, the kind of support they receive upon their arrival can greatly impact their settlement. As some studies have suggested pre-existing differences are amplified by the kind of support refugees receive upon arrival.[12]

Because of the interrelationship of different aspects of integration (from finding a home and job, locating a school and health services, to participating in community activities), refugees need a comprehensive set of settlement supports, including financial assistance, information and advice, socio-emotional sustenance, and facilitation of networks. A family-

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12 See Hynie et al. (2019)

Figure 1

Resettled Refugees to Canada
(Annual Totals)

	PSR	GAR	BVOR
Actual 2015	9,350	9,411	810
Actual 2016	18,363	23,523	4,435
Actual 2017	16,873	8,823	1,284
Actual 2018	18,763	8,156	1,157
Actual 2019	19,143	9,951	993
Actual* 2020	4,108	3,035	31
Target 2021	20,000	10,000	1,700
Target 2022	22,500	12,500	1,000
Target 2023	22,500	12,500	1,000
Target 2024	22,500	12,500	1,000

* Numbers represent data recorded from Jan. to Oct. 2020, when refugee arrivals were impacted by COVID-19. Source IRCC.

focused approach works better because of the interdependence of family members and the recognition of their different needs.[13]

Building trusting relationships takes time, consistent effort and multiple interactions in various contexts. Refugees need connections with those with whom they share a language, culture and life experiences. They also need connections with those who have greater social capital and familiarity with the dominant culture, which they can draw upon through direct contact.[14] As another scholar states, "Direct personal contact between refugees and ordinary Canadians can be magical for all involved and leads to cross-cultural learning, respect, friendship and real two-way integration."[15]

Settlement supports

Service Providing Organizations have a wealth of organizational knowledge and experienced staff to provide supports, such as interpretation services, information about government services and benefits, and how to access community resources. They are aware of different community organizations, including those that focus on particular ethnic or religious groups. They are familiar with resources that many refugees may need, and the procedures needed to access them. However, SPOs are also bound by their own regulations. For example, they cannot use real estate agents to find housing for refugees or act as guarantors on a lease agreement, which restricts the refugees' housing options. Their staff are not autonomous actors[16] but are assigned by their employers to provide specific services. Their performance – which affects their future funding – is measured by the number of clients served.[17]

This makes it difficult for employees to offer additional time or services based on perceived needs of those they serve. Staff in SPOs are often newcomers themselves:[18] they are well-positioned to offer understanding and empathy but not necessarily the social capital and networks that well-established Canadians, acting as private sponsors, can.[19]

Settlement supports provided by private sponsors are framed by their perception of the sponsored family's needs and their own capacity.[20] They may not be aware of all the services and benefits available to refugees. Private sponsors usually form teams and offer flexible support to only one family at a time. Socio-emotional support tailored to the family's needs is a strong feature of this relationship. Refugee families describe their sponsors 'like family', signaling consistency, intimacy, and multi-faceted connections that outlast the formal one-year sponsorship commitment. Furthermore, private sponsors are often affluent, highly educated, older women who have lived in Canada for many years. PSRs benefit from a direct, relatively long-term relationship with members of 'mainstream' society, which is difficult to forge without the latter's specific commitment to contribute to a particular refugee family's resettlement.[21] In their recent study Ali et al. (2021) found that while PSRs had formed strong socio-emotional bonds with members of their sponsorship teams, they could not, on their own, easily establish social relations with those with whom they did not share a language, culture or religious affiliation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Strategies for better outcomes

In summary, Canada's refugee resettlement programs give a distinct advantage to PSRs, who tend to arrive with higher levels of education, language facility in English or French, and work experience. They benefit from a relatively longer-term relationship with members of the 'mainstream' society; they can draw on their sponsors' socio-economic resources; they receive assistance that is flexible, based on their needs, and is family-focused. Some are sponsored by groups which include their relatives or friends already in Canada. However, PSRs may not have sufficient access to information about refugee-specific services or ethno-specific community resources and are heavily dependent on sponsors who can dictate the terms of their engagement. GARs, on the other hand, are selected for their vulnerability and therefore have greater need for settlement assistance. Yet they may

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13 See Ali et al 2019
14 See Ali et al 2021
15 See Alboim, N. 2016
16 See Senthanar et al., 2019
17 See Praznik & Shields, 2018
18 See Türegun, 2013
19 See Haugen et al., 2020; Macklin et al., 2020

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20 See Ali et al 2021
21 See Macklin et al., 2020; Kyriakides et al., 2019

not receive the comprehensive wrap-around support available to PSRs because of the structural differences in how the GAR and PSR programs are delivered. To reduce these differences, the following measures are proposed:

1. All refugees should have access to both the expertise of the settlement sector SPOs and to supports provided by groups of private individuals.

2. The settlement sector should initiate collaborative relationships with Sponsorship Agreement Holders (SAHs), their affiliated groups, and local community sponsor groups, in order to ensure that all sponsor groups are aware of the services provided by SPOs and have a dedicated settlement worker assigned to them.

3. The collaboration between the SPOs and sponsorship groups should also be reciprocal, so that every GAR family is linked to a sponsor group to provide personalized supports that cannot be provided by SPO staff. (However, income support would continue to be provided by SPOs). This would increase sponsors' capacity to assist the PSR family that they sponsor. It would help one more refugee family to make a direct connection with people who have lived here longer, and connect the GAR and PSR families with each other, expanding their networks and providing mutual support.

4. These collaborations described in recommendations 2 and 3 could be formalized through agreements that define the roles and responsibilities of all parties.

5. SPOs should assign a staff member to settling a specific number of GAR individuals or families for at least the first year of their resettlement period. The assigned person should work as a case-worker providing multi-faceted supports to these refugee families. This should include linking them to governmental and community resources and facilitating relationship-building between them and their community sponsors.

6. SPOs should be funded by the federal government for this work. Their performance should be assessed by the outcomes achieved for the refugee families they serve in categories such as employment, housing, education, health, community participation, while taking into account the refugees' starting points and the value added by the agency. SPOs should also be funded for the recruitment of, and support to, community sponsors to help settle GAR refugee families.

7. SAHs, corporations, and other civil society groups should be encouraged to contribute their time, funds, skills, and networks to facilitate refugees' resettlement. It should be an ongoing initiative of the federal government, sponsorship organizations, and SPOs to raise public awareness of refugee issues and how individuals and groups can actively participate in refugee resettlement activities.

8. Data should be systematically collected by IRCC to assess how many named refugees in the PSR category are identified and supported by family members in Canada. Without this data the claim that the program is being used for family reunification can neither be verified nor challenged. Refugees sponsored for family reunification purposes should constitute a separate category with a separate, additional allocation of spaces.

9. IRCC should consider the establishment of a Refugee Family Reunification program which would allow for a broader definition of family (including siblings, adult children, nephews and nieces, for example) and a commitment to financially support sponsored family members for one year. The funding necessary to submit a sponsorship application could be raised from a variety of sources. All refugee categories should be eligible to sponsor their family members. This may leave more spaces available for the matching of private sponsors with UNHCR- referred vulnerable refugees.

10. When selecting refugees abroad as GARs or PSRs, all efforts should be made to keep extended families together. This shift may lead to the arrival of larger clusters of refugees, in the first instance, who can provide socio-emotional-economic support to each other, and may result in less need for subsequent family reunification. As long as all members are eligible for status as refugees, they should be allowed to travel and settle together.

CONCLUSION

The current refugee resettlement programs in Canada have offered greater resettlement assistance to those with greater advantages. Societies and states that claim democratic principles should offer additional support to those who need it most, rather than reinforce differences between the two. The above recommendations would lead to a system of settlement assistance, that allows all refugees to benefit from both the expertise of SPOs and the networks of community sponsors.

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POLICY BRIEF

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