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The Social Networks, Social Support and Social Capital of Syrian Refugees Privately Sponsored to Settle in Montreal: Indications for Employment and Housing During Their Early Experiences of Integration

Abstract

Beginning in 2015, Canada undertook an exceptional undertaking of sponsoring of more than 40,000 Syrian refugees to resettle in Canada. As the excitement of their initial arrivals dissipates, it is important to consider their longer-term settlement and integration in their new communities. This article offers a portrait and analysis of how Syrian refugees sponsored to Montreal are able to create social networks and access social support in order to build social capital for employment and housing purposes. Part of a larger, three-province, 4-year longitudinal study, here we report on the first wave of survey data collected from 626 Privately-Sponsored Refugees living in Quebec. We report on their family support and friendships, as well as the ways that these social connections helped them in terms of employment and housing. Differences in terms of age, gender and time in Canada are analyzed. We find strong evidence of bonding social capital among recently resettled Syrians in Montreal, and growing bridging capital.

Keywords: Syrian refugees, private sponsorship of refugees, Quebec, social capital, employment, housing.

Résumé

Depuis 2015, le Canada est engagé dans un processus exceptionnel de parrainage de plus de 40,000 réfugiés syriens réinstallés au Canada. Alors que l'enthousiasme initial suscité par leur arrivée se dissipe, il est important d'examiner leur installation et leur intégration à long terme au sein de leurs nouvelles communautés. Cet article offre un portrait et une analyse de la manière dont les réfugiés syriens établis à Montréal réussissent à créer des réseaux sociaux et à accéder à l'appui social afin de pouvoir développer du capital social pour les fins de l'emploi et du logement. Faisant partie d'un projet longitudinal de 4 ans dans 3 provinces, ici nous partageons une partie des résultats de la première vague de données provenant de 626 réfugiés parrainés par la collectivité et vivant au Québec. Nous décrivons leur réseau de soutien familial et social et comment ces connections sociales les ont aidé à accéder à l'emploi et au logement. Les différences en termes d'âge, de genre et de résidences au Canada sont analysés. Nous observons une forte présence du capital social de liaison (bonding) parmi les réfugiés syriens installés dans la région de Montréal, et l'émergence du capital social de transition (bridging).

Mots clés : Réfugiés syriens, parrainage des réfugiés par le secteur privé, Québec, capital social, emploi, logement.

Introduction

It has long been documented in the literature that social networks have profound influence on the lives of refugees (Koser 1997). Such networks influence the decisions refugees make about when to leave their home countries and where to target as a destination for asylum (Koser and Pinkerton 2002). Once arrived in the destination country, social networks are key sources of information and advice about: acquiring refugee status (Lee and Brotman 2011); housing (Ives et al. 2014; Sherrell and ISSS 2009; Walsh et al. 2016); employment (Beaman 2011; Lamba 2008; Potocky-Tripodi 2004; Williams 2006); and healthcare (Campbell 2012; Szreter and Woolcock 2004;), among other things. On an emotional level, social networks are important in terms of refugee sense of wellbeing and health (Kingsbury 2017; McMichael and Manderson 2004). Finally, the type of social network one possesses – particularly whether one has bonding, bridging and/or linking contacts (Putnam 1995; Ryan et al. 2008) – can make a big difference in terms of the type of information, resources and support a person can access through their network.

For the more than 40,000 Syrian refugees sponsored to resettle in Canada since 2015, we can assume that their social networks – and the social capital that results – matter. Given the exceptional effort – state, community and individual – that went into the recent resettlement of Syrian refugees, there has been a high interest in documenting the experience. As the articles in this journal issue attest, much research has been undertaken with the newly arrived Syrian community. Here, we share the results of the first wave of survey data collected from the 626 privately-sponsored individuals living in Montreal as part of a larger, three-province, 4-year longitudinal study funded by the Canadian Institute for Health Research (CIHR 2017-2021).[1] Our aim is to offer a portrait of the type and quality of social networks possessed by recently arrived Syrian refugees. We explore to what extent these networks seem to be contributing to people's access to employment and housing, and also to their sense of belonging in their new communities and their sense of being welcomed to Canada. We have found that, in this early stage of Syrians' integration into Canadian society, there is strong evidence of bonding networks that are mobilized to find housing, employment and provide emotional support, but bridging and linking networks are in the early stages of development.

The article begins with a review of the literature related to social support, social networks and social capital in the lives of resettled refugees. We then contextualize our study, offering a description of the Quebec policy and practice context into which Syrian refugees are integrating and which provides the backdrop for the development of informal social networks, social support and social capital which are the focus of this article. We describe our methods before sharing our results, again along the same themes of social networks, social support, and social capital for the purposes of employment and housing. We conclude with a discussion of the relative strength of Syrians' access to bonding and bridging social capital, and considerations for service providers wanting to support Syrians' and other refugees' ability to strengthen such connections as their time in Canada goes on.

Social Support, Social Networks and Social Capital: A Conceptual Framework

In this current analysis, we draw on the literature surrounding the contribution of social support, social networks and social capital – or the lack of it – in the lives of migrants in general and, where possible, resettled refugees in particular. We begin by defining the concepts, before looking at the ways in which refugees' access to these resources affects their decisions around migration and, later, their experiences in terms of employment, housing and sense of belonging.

Social support is important to both individual and collective wellbeing (Simich et al. 2005; Wilkinson and Marmot 2003) and social networks are an important source of such support (Kingsbury 2017; Simich et al. 2003; Wen and Hanley 2016). Furthermore, these social networks can be mobilized into social capital, allowing individuals and collectives to access resources and pursue their goals (Cattell 2001; Lamba and Krahn 2003; Zetter, Griffiths and Sigona 2005).

The **social networks** we are concerned with begin with families, extending to friends, peers, acquaintances and professional contacts. The concept of social network implies relationships between these different people, relationships that can have both a positive and negative influence on the people involved. Social networks should be analyzed along such lines as geography (local, national, transnational), gender, religion, race and class (Mouw et al. 2014; Pittaway, Bartolomei and Doney 2016; Ryan et al. 2008; Wang and Handy 2014). Ryan et al. (2008), in particular, emphasize that one should not assume that simply because an individual shares certain characteristics with others (e.g., ethnicity, gender and neighbourhood) that they are necessarily "networked" with them or able to draw on a given connection for social support or social capital. And, specifically with regard to Syrian refugees, it has been noted that, for most Syrians, the idea of social networking would be limited to

dense and overlapping circles of family and friends (Stevens 2016). Given the difficult political situation in Syria, and the underdeveloped public services, there was little trust in those outside one's immediate circle and little reason to turn to the state or NGOs for support.

For the purposes of this article, we adopt the definition of **social support** proposed by Stewart and Lagille (2000), subsequently adopted by many Canadian and international migration researchers (Gladden 2012; Simich et al. 2005; Stewart et al. 2008; Walker et al. 2015): the "interaction with family members, friends, peers and… professionals that communicate information, esteem, practical, or emotional help" (Stewart and Lagille 2000, 5). Note that having access to some form of social network is necessary to access social support but that social support does not necessarily bring an individual beyond their current situation, in the way that is implied by accessing social capital. As well, the concept of social support is highly cultural, underlining the importance of trying to understand it from the perspective of the population with which one is working (Stewart et al. 2008).

The concept of **social capital** is widely used in migration research. Putnam (1995) considered social capital to be an interaction between individuals and social networks, a reciprocity, and a level of trust established by such networks. Social capital implies a set of direct and indirect resources produced by social networks, based on trust, within family, friends, and community members (Coleman 1988). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has provided the following definition of social capital: "networks, together with shared norms, values, and understandings that facilitate cooperation within or among groups" (Côté and Healy 2001).

Studies have identified three types of social capital. The first is bonding social capital, which Putnam (1995) described as being personal and based on protection, referring to relationships between members of a network who are somehow similar to each other, such as family and friends. The second type is bridging social capital, which refers to relationships between individuals who do not necessarily belong to a homogeneous group or correspond to one another in age, economic status, or education; instead they are brought together by other bonds, such as work relationships or shared knowledge. The third type is linking social capital, which is based on individuals' relationships with institutions and various types of organizations, such as governmental and non-governmental institutions, political parties, and corporations. This latter category is the weakest type of network or link, despite having, with bridging type, the highest output value and providing the necessary space for developing new ideas, values, and expectations (Gittell and Vidal 1998; Putnam 1995; Szreter and Woolcock 2004; Woolcock and Narayan 2000). Nasr and Hilal (2007) argued that the benefits one derives from social capital depend on a number of fac-

tors, such as gender, age, and social status; or other variables such as education, nationality, and religion. Individual factors that motivate individuals to invest in social capital, such as income, education, gender, social status, number of children, personal experiences, and values, vary from person to person (Christoforou 2011; Halman and Luijkx 2006).

Previous studies on social capital among refugees in Canada have found that refugees rely on both family and ethnic group networks for their settlement. Fifteen years ago, Lamba and Krahn (2003) conducted a survey with many parallels to this study that questioned 525 refugees about their social networks and how they mobilize these networks into social capital to provide "much-needed support and assistance when refugees are faced with financial, employment, personal, or health problems" (335). These Canadian findings are backed up by Cheung and Phillimore in the recent UK context who found a strong link between newly arrived refugees' social capital and their access to the labour market. They also found that "length of residency and language competency broaden one's social network" (2014, 591). Moreover, studies have found that connections with religious organizations, co-ethnic associations and even sports clubs contribute to building social capital and can have a positive impact on refugees' accessing the labour market (Cheung and Phillimore 2014; Spaaij 2012). However, given the structure of the labour market, when refugees' networks (and therefore their social capital) is limited to newcomers in the same situation as them (bonding capital), these connections may not overcome the devaluation of their human capital, leading them to be trapped in underemployment and precarious work conditions (Allen 2009; Lamba 2008). The good news, however, is it seems that developing strong bonding capital with one's co-ethnic community can be an important building block to newcomers' development of bridging capital (Nannestad, Lind Haase Svendsen and Tinggaard Svendsen 2008).

There is comparatively less information about social capital and its relation to refugee housing in Canada, but indications are that the effect of social networks and the resulting social capital are very similar. Contacts with settlement agencies, religious and co-ethnic networks bring help with finding housing, indicating that social networks do play a key role in refugees' access to the housing market and decisions around locales of residence (Cheung and Phillimore 2014; Sherrell and ISSS 2009) but affordability and poor employment situations make it difficult for many newly arrived refugees to attain adequate housing (Sherrell and ISSS 2009). Several studies have documented, however, that while co-ethnic networks are an important way to access housing for precarious status newcomers, being limited to one's co-ethnic community for information and connections (whether due to language limitations, fear of authorities or simply lack of knowledge) made one vulnerable to exploitation in housing (Ives et al. 2014; Walsh et al. 2016).

Context of the Study: Refugee Resettlement in Quebec Via Private Sponsorship

In order to understand the experiences of Syrian refugees sponsored to resettle in Montreal, it is important to understand the unique context of immigration in the province of Quebec. The Quebec provincial government has a special Accord with the federal government, in place since 1991, that gives it the power to select immigrants (including resettled refugees) according to the interests of the province. Although there is quite a bit of debate about what constitutes the legitimate interests of the province (Piché 2017), in terms of economic immigration, this has meant a focus on French-speaking professionals. In terms of resettled refugees, the origin of those selected is influenced by the existing communities in the province, but it also means that the settlement services offered to resettled refugees are defined by the province. Here, we offer an overview of the way in which Immigration Quebec (Ministère de l'immigration, la diversité et l'inclusion – MIDI) organized the reception of Syrian refugees before presenting the services and initiatives organized by the Montreal community settlement sector and ethno-specific organizations.

Private sponsorship of Syrians in Quebec

Between November 2015 and July 2017, there were 9805 Syrians sponsored to settle in Quebec. Most (66 percent) settled in the Metropolitan region of Montreal (6445 people), but there were small numbers who settled in smaller cities such as Trois-Rivières (1605), Quebec City (445) Gatineau (440) and Sherbrooke (380) (IRCC 2017b). Of particular note, the vast majority (79 percent) of the Syrians coming to Quebec were privately sponsored by religious institutions, community organizations and groups of 2 to 5 individuals. In Montreal, 89 percent of resettled refugees were privately sponsored (IRCC 2017b). This is in contrast to the rest of the country where the proportions were opposite, with 65 percent of Syrian refugees entering the country as government-assisted refugees (GARs) versus 22 percent being privately sponsored (PSRs) and 13 percent Blended-Visa Overseas Refugees (IRCC 2017a, 2017b).[2]

The high rate of private sponsorship in Quebec is a reflection of the fact that, prior to the conflict in Syria, Quebec was already the Canadian province with the highest population of Syrian origin (in the 2011 National Household Survey, 44% of all Syrians in Canada resided in Quebec and over 95% of these lived in Montreal). The 17,990 Syrians living in Quebec in 2011 were typically first- or second-generation immigrants who came for primarily economic or education reasons, not as refugees. Those who settled in Quebec prior to the recent wave of refugees were most often Christian (71%), highly educated (76% with post-secondary degrees) and with high

rates of employment. They had high levels of English/French bilingualism (67%) and 55% of workers were using primarily French in their workplace (Al Mhamied 2016; StatsCan 2011), all of which indicate that the community enjoyed a high level of integration. Quebec Syrians had high concentrations of study and employment in the fields of architecture, engineering and related technologies, business, management, public administration careers and health (Al Mhamied 2016; StatsCan 2011).

When the war in Syria began, and long before the Liberal government's 2015 commitment to sponsor 25,000 Syrians, members of this community began organizing through their churches and ethnic organizations to begin sponsoring family and other community members to come to Quebec. More extensive extra-familial networks involving neighbours, co-workers and employers, and other community members were constructed, and were ready to submit sponsorship applications. These many formal and informal social networks were extremely valuable, by providing much-needed support and assistance when Syrian refugees arrived and when faced with financial, employment, personal, or health problems. So when the Liberals announced their ambitious plan, MIDI already had thousands of PSR applications in its pipeline who would be assessed according to a number of factors including: overseas recognition as Convention refugees; connections to family or friends in Canada; language abilities; work experience; and level of education. Of particular interest were the following:

> …personal qualities (flexibility, social skills, vitality, initiative, perseverance, level-headedness, self-confidence, maturity and motivation) are demonstrated through the refugees' previous experiences in their country of origin or in the country of first asylum, as well as through the responsibilities that they have undertaken within their community or through obtaining employment when possible. (MIDI 2016)

Rather than look for new applicants, they simply began accepting the PSR applications already being put forward by the Syrian community. With a backdrop of a dispute with the federal government about the need for additional funds were they to accept more GARS (CBC 2015), MIDI did accept 2305 GARs (IRCC 2017b), but the predominant private sponsorship in Quebec makes the population and the dynamics unique within Canada. Also of note, the Quebec government did not put any barriers to single men being sponsored as refugees, despite the November 2015 terrorist attack in Paris causing the premier to assert that resettlement was proceeding while making Quebecers' security a priority.

Provincial and municipal government reception of the Syrian refugees

As in other parts of Canada, several different ministries of the provincial government collaborated with Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) to

optimize the reception and settlement of Syrian refugees, whether in terms of the airport reception centre at the height of arrivals, financial support, or access to education and employment. MIDI took the lead in coordinating measures to adapt and ramp up existing procedures for the arrival of refugees. Prior to the first arrivals, MIDI engaged in a number of consultations with key actors who would participate in the welcoming, settlement and integration of resettled refugees (MIDI 2017). After people's arrival at the airport, they were transferred to a reception centre staffed by public and community sector employees (many of whom were Arab and Arabic-speaking themselves, but also including interpreters for all services), where newly arrived Syrians were processed for their official papers (immigration documents, Medicare cards, Social Insurance Numbers), offered medical screening for emergency cases and given basic information and warm clothes (if necessary) before they were brought to their new homes. If they did not have housing already secured by their sponsor or their settlement agency, a hotel room was offered for the first few days. Upon arrival, all Syrian refugees received an appointment to meet a nurse and a social worker within the first 72 hours after their arrival at one of the two refugee clinics created for that purpose. The purpose of these mandatory visits was to assess whether there were any urgent medical or psychological issues that needed follow-up. There were also Syrians whose first landing was in Montreal, where they spent a few days hosted by the Quebec apparatus, before moving on to their final destination in another part of Canada.

A broad range of government ministries were mobilized in the resettlement effort. Retraite Québec (Retirement Quebec, the ministry responsible for family allowances), for example, implemented "exceptional" measures to assure that Syrian families' applications for their monthly family allowance would be processed rapidly (Retraite Quebec 2017), as a way to supplement the financial support they would be receiving in their first year from either private sponsors or from the Quebec social assistance program for GARs (MIDI 2017). Emploi-Québec encouraged local employers to take advantage of their PRIIME program (a subsidy for the hiring of immigrant and visible minority workers) to hire Syrians in their first jobs in Canada (Emploi-Québec 2017).

In order to ease children's integration into schools, the Quebec Ministry of Education (Ministère de l'éducation et de l'enseignement supérieur) implemented a number of "intercultural education" programs, offered to both students and teachers, as well as "school cultural activities" (Éducation Québec 2017). While Montreal schools are already diverse and used to welcoming newcomer students, the large numbers from a single country, arriving in such a short time, and many children having had traumatic experiences and education interruptions, introduced new challenges in terms of integration in schools (MIDI 2017).

Finally, the Quebec Ministry of Health was mobilized upon Syrians' arrival to offer immediate medical care, if necessary, and screen for potential physical and mental health problems needing follow-up. Supplemental funding was provided and specific clinics mandated to provide care (MIDI 2017; MSSS 2015). As in other parts of the country (Hansen, Maidment and Ahmad 2016), expectations of high immediate health demands were not met and the temporary clinics were quickly disbanded in favour of referrals to existing clinics, with professionals used to working with refugee populations (e.g., Pottie et al. 2016).

The Cities of Montreal and Laval were also active in preparing for the arrival of sponsored Syrian refugees. Both cities created committees to coordinate the integration of Syrian refugees by supporting neighbourhood, ethno-social and community groups, as well as adjusting their public services.

Community contributions to social networking and social support

Individuals, ethnic organizations, religious institutions and community organizations were all mobilized to support Syrian refugees as individuals and families. In 2016, in particular, there was a great groundswell of action to provide direct settlement services, but also opportunities to develop social networks and receive social support.

Direct settlement services

Beyond the initial welcome (and the Welcome Centre), the types of settlement services were not much different for sponsored Syrian refugees as compared to other resettled refugees. The Montreal settlement sector is well organized to provide such services; the challenge was rather the large number of refugees arriving simultaneously. Typical settlement services involve some material support, access to French classes, housing search, orientation for healthcare and children's education, and employment services.

In order to make the initial transition period easier, MIDI provided newcomers with a list of organizations helping Syrian refugees by providing clothes, furniture and household goods. A small number of settlement organizations were granted specific budgets to support the arrival of Syrians, but all settlement agencies in Montreal would be able to offer information related to language courses, housing, employment, health, and other social activities. And most settlement agencies in Montreal would be able to provide these services in Arabic, French and English – or to access interpreters.

Specific initiatives for Syrians were also organized. For example, one organization developed a targeted professional development program and support navigating the Montreal job market, tailored to Syrian professionals. An immigrant workers' centre organized outreach and popular education in Arabic about labour

rights. Another project focused on the mental health challenges of the Syrian community, readying service providers in a range of sectors to address the difficulties faced by a population having experienced war and displacement. A tenant organization provided a workshop with the goal of raising awareness among Syrian refugees about their housing rights and their relationship with the landlord. These are just a few examples of the dozens of initiatives across the city that went beyond the already substantial capacity to offer settlement services.

Finally, several of the religious institutions involved in private sponsorship developed new, and sometimes informal, initiatives to provide direct settlement services such as support for families and youth, employment programs, translation, psychosocial programs, and legal support.

Social networking and social support

In this paper, however, we are concerned with social networks, social support and social capital. So here, we review the many initiatives that were developed to increase these things among the recently arrived Syrians. Efforts were made to connect Syrians to the existing Syrian community in Montreal, but also to link them to other Montrealers.

To begin, there were efforts to increase cultural understanding between Syrians and their new host community. Montreal professionals and interested community members were offered information and training to better understand the Syrian culture and the recent experiences of the people arriving in Montreal. Many community organizations also offered social activities and workshops to introduce Syrians to Montreal and Quebec culture, aiming to increase refugees' capacity to integrate into the community and strengthen the social bonds within the communities. Syrian ethnic organizations also took steps to help Syrian refugees integrate into the community, organizing many social events to help Syrians discover their new city and introduce Quebecois to the newcomers. The goal was to ease the transition period and help Syrian refugees to adapt, especially to places such as public parks and other well-loved Montreal public spaces.

Religious institutions were also prominent actors in the efforts to create social networks and offer social supports. An Armenian religious organization, responsible for the sponsorship of a large proportion of those who came to Montreal, created a network of solidarity and support within the community. They invited their members to participate in traditional and cultural activities, where individuals can meet and support each other. Churches organized workshops with the police department in order to help Syrian refugees understand what to do if they ever had interactions with them, and also with the public transit authority to help them know how the transportation system in the city works. For Muslim Syrians, mosques organized

many activities with established Muslim communities in Montreal, especially for women who were facing language difficulties. Mosques provided humanitarian support, often opening their doors on Saturday and Sunday to host Syrian families and provide meals, where Syrian families and other Muslim communities could meet and exchange experiences. Syrian ethnic organizations offered workshops on various topics, such as family relationships, parenting, family support – challenging issues as people are getting used to their new situation. For example, a group of Syrian students in Montreal took the responsibility to assist Syrian refugees with social integration, language difficulties and helping those who wanted to access the educational system to apply to universities.

There were also initiatives that actively sought to bring Syrians together with the broader Montreal community. A church-based organization in downtown Montreal has been especially active in organizing activities such as apple picking, musical activities, as well as interfaith events to connect Syrians with each other and with the local community. The organization also runs a summer day camp where they offered free spots for Syrian children to be able to integrate and connect their families with each other. Another organization developed an exchange where Syrian women and other women from the local community would come together for cooking, while other community organizations in Montreal offer "twinning programs," matching newly arrived refugees to Montrealers to learn about each other's experiences firsthand and to create bonds of friendship, exchange and solidarity.

Finally, Syrian refugees also received informal support by community members, those who were volunteering, donating furniture and materials such as food, clothes and toys – and simply being good neighbours and new friends. Many individuals were seeking out Syrian refugees to support them, asking community members to identify Syrian families in need. This opened the door to developing personal relationships, thereby expanding refugees' social ties with other community members. With time, these individuals sometimes helped Syrian refugees access services, register in French courses, seek health care and all manner of other concerns.

This strong community and social service infrastructure, while not accessed to its fullest by all newly arrived refugees, nevertheless provides the backdrop for the more personal, informal networks, support and social capital that form the focus of this article.

Methodology

In this article, we are presenting a sub-set of the first wave of results from the Montreal site of a larger project, *Refugee Integration and Long-Term Health Outcomes in Canada*.[3] This 3-province (Quebec, Ontario, British Columbia), 6-site (Montreal,

Toronto, Kitchener-Waterloo, Windsor, Vancouver and Okanagan), 4-year longitudinal study was funded by the Canadian Institute for Health Research (CIHR). The study compares how Canada's two main refugee resettlement programs – Government-Assisted Refugees (GARs) and Privately-Sponsored Refugees (PSRs) – support long-term social integration pathways for refugees, as well as the impact of these pathways on physical and mental health. The study aims to contribute to the improvement of refugee settlement services and policies, and ultimately to the health and well-being of refugees through an increased understanding of what leads to successful integration outcomes.

The study design centres on survey data to be collected annually for four years (2017-2021) from resettled Syrian adult refugees who arrived between January 2015 and April 2017. The first questionnaire is expected to be the longest (291 questions), due to the need to collect basic demographic and background information in the first year. In subsequent years, the survey will be shorter, following through with certain themes and also having a particular focus for that particular year (for example, asking about employment in Years 2 and 4). In Years 2 and 4, the project will also conduct focus groups with a sub-sample of survey participants to validate our understanding of the quantitative data and deepen our understanding of particular themes.

The first wave of survey data collection was conducted from April to July 2017. We were successful in reaching a minimum of 10 percent of all sponsored Syrian refugees who arrived in each site during this timeframe. In addition, we took a household approach, interviewing all eligible and willing adults within a household. Apart from allowing us to eventually study potential household effects, this also allowed us to have an excellent range of participants of different genders, ages and daily occupations. In Quebec, we far surpassed our goal of 375 participants, reaching a total of 697 adults or approximately 19 percent of all the adult Syrian refugees sponsored to resettle in Quebec during our target timeframe.

Participants were recruited in a variety of ways. Without access to a sampling frame of sponsored refugees, we relied on three main strategies: (1) outreach to the members and service-users of refugee-focused ethnic and community organizations; (2) community advertisement through Facebook, attendance at Syrian community events with flyers, leaving flyers in public places frequented by Syrian refugees; (3) word of mouth through social networks. Over the course of our recruitment, we kept track of the profiles of those recruited to adjust our recruitment strategies if it seemed that particular profiles of participants were being over- or under-represented. Ultimately, although not a representative sample, our sample is very close in profile to the overall population of sponsored refugees to Quebec in terms of gender, religion and age.

A team of five research assistants who spoke Arabic as their first language and who were familiar with the newly arrived Syrian refugee community conducted the surveys. Three of them were Syrian newcomers themselves, although none had arrived as sponsored refugees. Once potential participants were screened, a member of the team would meet them at a location of their convenience (usually at their home, but also in their French schools, coffee shops or at the university) to conduct the survey in Arabic. Interviews lasted an hour on average, and all willing adult members of a household were interviewed. The research assistants took field notes about the context of the interview and any stories participants told that were not covered in the survey, qualitative data that were later compiled and analyzed using NVIVO. Survey answers were recorded using a tablet application and submitted directly to a central database housed at York University. Responses were compiled and analyzed using SPSS.

Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of our privately sponsored participants.

We can see that the PSRs who came to the Montreal region had certain things in common with the pre-existing Syrian community, particularly in terms of religion, a high level of education and some of the same areas of employment. As well, we can see that the age range of the PSRs is similar to that of the pre-existing community (more older people than in the rest of Canada), that many of the adults did not have minor children and that families with minors most often only had two children. All of these factors reflect that the PSRs were extended family and community members of people already living in Quebec, sharing similar religious and class backgrounds.

Results: Social Networks, Social Support, and Social Capital Among Recent Syrian Privately Sponsored Refugees

Here we present the results of our survey around three main themes: (1) the social networks of Syrian refugees, mostly in terms of their connections to family, friends and community in Canada; (2) their sense of social support, in terms of having people they can turn to with questions or with problems; and (3) their mobilization of these relationships as social capital to access housing and employment.

As mentioned earlier the majority of Syrian refugees who settled in Quebec were privately sponsored refugees (79%), with a high proportion of the GARS being settled outside the Montreal region. Our sample reflects the reality of these numbers with 84% of the 697 Syrian refugees in our sample having been sponsored by religious or community organizations, and 6% were sponsored by group of 2-5. Because of the high percentage of PSRs, and because of the differences in their pro-

TABLE 1. Demographics summary

Total number of participants	626	
Age groups		
18-25 yrs	101	16%
26-30 yrs	65	10%
31-50 yrs	274	44%
51-64 yrs	129	21%
65+ yrs	57	9%
Gender		
Male	288	46%
Female	337	54%
Religion		
Muslim	52	8%
Christian	568	91%
Ethnicity		
Arab	451	72%
Armenian	133	21%
Other	41	7%
Type of sponsorship (as percentage of all 697 Montreal participants)		
Privately sponsored refugee (PSR) by an organization or religious institution	587	84%
Privately sponsored refugee (PSR) by a Group (2-5 people)	42	6%
Household size		
1 person	31	5%
2 people	83	14%
3 people	193	32%
4 people	161	27%
5 people	77	13%
6 people	38	6%
More than 6 people	21	3%
Adults with minor children		
Adults with no minor children	135	34%
Adults with 1 minor child	70	17%
Adults with 2 minor children	153	38%
Adults with 3 minor children	30	7%
Adults with 4-5 minor children	13	4%

TABLE 1. Demographics summary (continued)

Total number of participants	626	
Educational level		
None	6	1%
Elementary school (up to grade 9)	127	20%
High school (up to grade 12)	176	28%
Trade certificate/College diploma	110	18%
Undergraduate university degree	138	22%
Graduate or professional university degree	69	11%
Speak English		
Good – Excellent	210	33%
Fair	182	29%
Poor – Very poor	136	22%
Not at all	95	15%
Speak French		
Good - Excellent	123	20%
Fair	226	36%
Poor – Very poor	202	33%
Not at all	70	11%
Most common previous occupations		
Did not work in Syria	151	24%
Field of trade and economy	66	11%
Field of industry	22	4%
Field of health and medicine	50	8%
Field of education	85	14%
Field of engineering	33	5%
Craftmanship	61	10%
Office employee	26	4%
Other	86	14%

file such as age, marital status, family size, and their experience, we limit our analysis in this article to PSRs. While our data indicates that GARs have different experiences than PSRs, our analysis of their experience is preliminary and beyond the scope of this article.

Social networks of Syrian refugees in Montreal

In this section, we share our findings related to whether our participants have family members in Canada, whether they have friends in the city, whether their friends are Syrian or from other ethnic communities and whether they have a sense of belonging in their new home.[3]

Family in Canada

Our data shows that most PSRs have relatives in Canada, however 18% of PSRs reported having zero relatives in Canada. Figure 1 demonstrates the findings. Having family nearby can be an important source of social support, help with things like caregiving and (as we will see further on) referrals for housing and employment. In the context of the ongoing conflict in Syria, however, family in Canada are out of potential danger in Syria. However, those without family are an important group; being without any close contact with relatives can lead to stress and isolation. They may also have great concern for family members who remained in Syria or in a precarious situation in the surrounding countries.

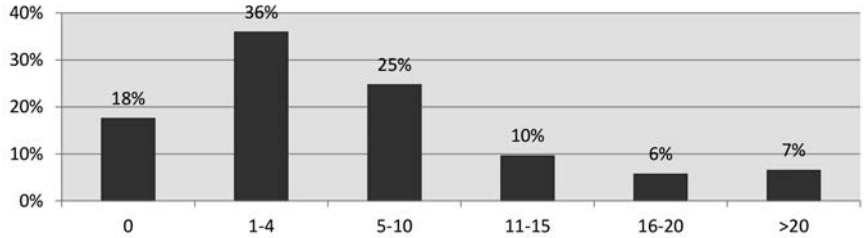

Fig. 1. Number of relatives (not counting spouse and children) – PSR (N=615)

Friendships in Canada

As another indication of social networks, we had a series of questions about friendships. When we asked about the number of people in Montreal they would call friends, 68% of the participants confirmed that they have four or more friends (Figure 2). As seen in Figure 3, unsurprisingly, we can observe that those who have been in Canada for over a year have more friends than those who have yet to complete their first year in Canada.

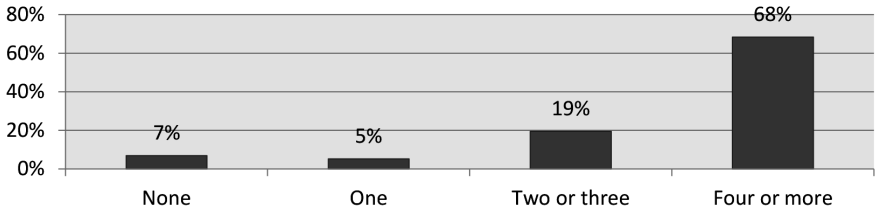

Fig. 2. Number of friends – PSR (N=626)

In terms of gender, Figure 3 shows little variation for men and women's declared number of friends. Men have a slight higher percentage in terms of not having any friends at all, which is contradictory to the literature where immigrant women are usually more isolated (Casimiro, Hancock and Northcote 2007; Hurtado-de-Mendoza et al. 2014). A majority of both women and men (69% and 68%) reported having more than four friends, whereas 8% of men and 6% of women have no friends.

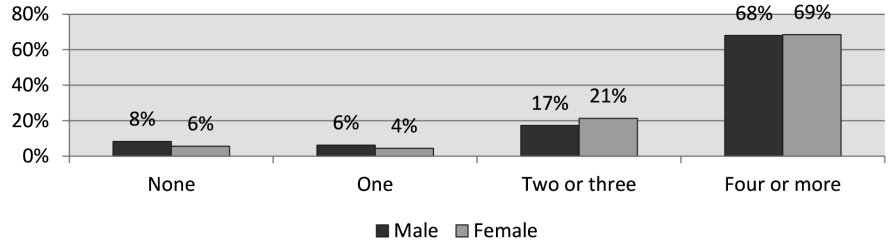

Fig. 3. Number of friends by gender – PSR (N=625)

Age is another factor that plays into the likelihood of having friends, and how many. Of note, participants over 65 years old were the most likely to be friendless (16%) and, of those who do have friends, they tend to have fewer than other age groups (Figure 4).

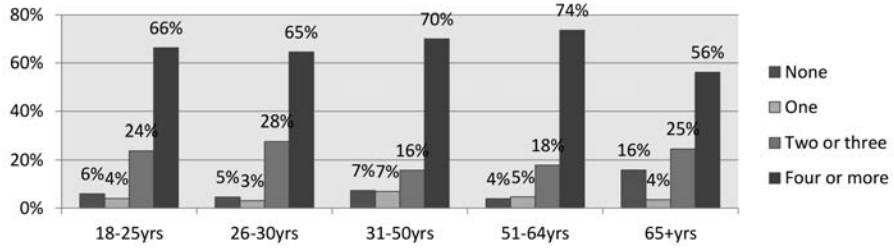

Fig. 4. Friends by age group – PSR (N=626)

It is also helpful to consider the number of friendships with any member of a household perspective; while a single individual may not have outside friendships, they may still benefit from the friendships and networks of other household member. Nearly every household has Syrian friends outside the home (98%), compared to 91% of individuals. In addition, 62% of households have friends from other ethnic communities, significantly more than the 38% of individuals with non-Syrian friends. We have noticed that the participants who have better language abilities either in English or in French have, overall, higher percentages of having friends from other ethnic communities. We have also noticed that 65% of our sample have visited religious institutions since their arrival, which could be another place where people made new connections and friendships.

Sense of belonging

The participants showed a strong sense of belonging to the city they live in and to their ethnic community living in the city (63%) with a bit less attachment to their neighbourhood (52%) (Figure 5).

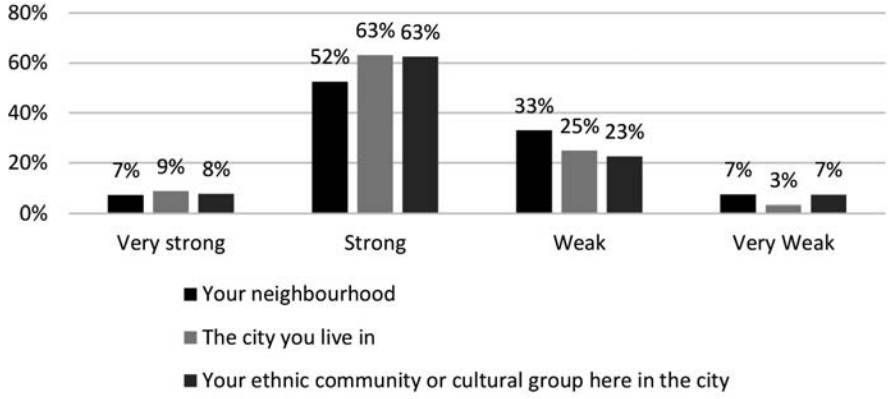

Fig. 5. How would you describe your sense of belonging to: (N=619)

Syrians who arrived in the Montreal region settled mainly, typically with the aid or on the recommendation of their private sponsor or sponsorship organizations, in Laval, Ville Saint-Laurent and Ahuntsic-Cartierville, neighbourhoods that all have an important presence of Arab communities and whose housing prices are within the Montreal average. Most of the participants find that Canadians are welcoming and accepting and that Canadians treat them with respect.

Quality of social support relationships available to resettled Syrians in Montreal

Here, we go beyond the simple existence of social connections and networks to ask our participants about the quality of these relationships. Are they emotionally close? Do they have frequent interactions? In other words, do they have social support?

Less than a quarter (24%) of PSRs had people they can rely on and trust when they have problems or when they feel they need support. Indeed, only 27% of the participants said that they have four or more emotionally close friends at the same time.

Younger Syrians, particularly those between the ages of 18 and 30 years reported having very few friends they are emotionally close to, with 26% of 18-25 year olds and 38% of 26-30 year olds reporting no close friends, as compared to those 51 years and older who seem to have more close friends than younger ones (Figure 6).

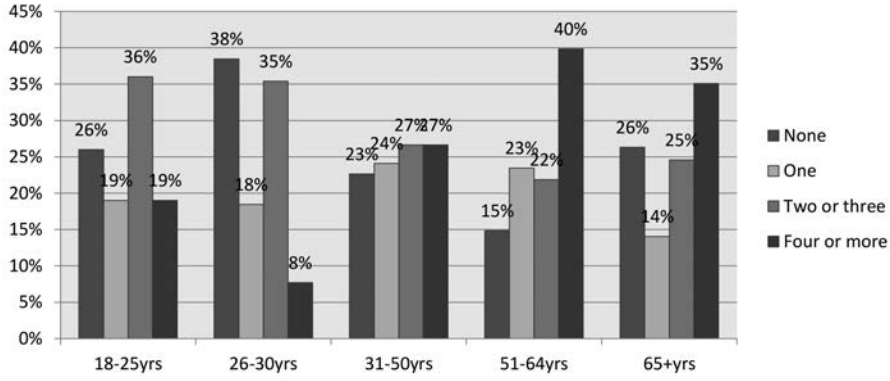

Fig. 6. Number of friends in this city you feel emotionally close to by age group (N=624)

Thus, although younger Syrians report having a greater number of friends, the quality of these friendships seems poorer than those of older Syrians. Also, the number of close friendships (i.e., emotional closeness) does not differ significantly according to gender.

We noticed also that the level of interactions with their friends from the same ethnic community is quite high as 70% of the participants have talked to their friends by phone and 62% have seen them at least once a week (Figure 7).

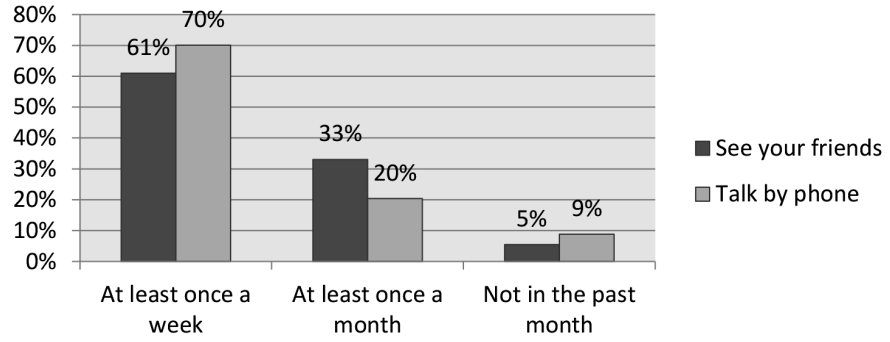

Fig. 7. Number of times you saw or talked by phone to your friends from your ethnic community (N=565)

And if we look at participants' self-assessment of their overall mental health, we see that those with no close friends are more likely to report poor or fair mental health, while those with four or more friends are more likely to report excellent mental health (Figure 8).

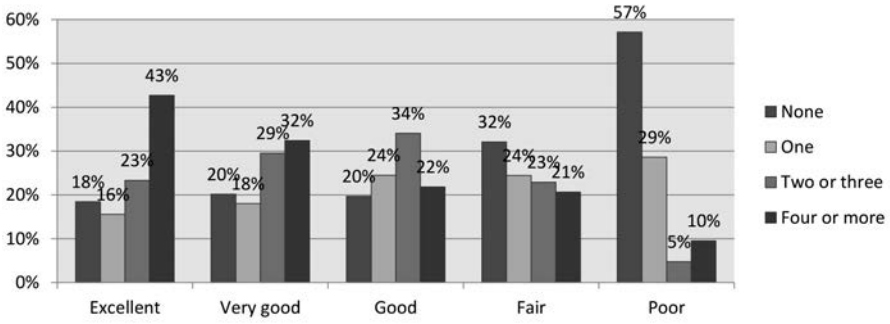

Fig. 8. Self-Assessment of mental health depending on the number of close friends in the city (N=623)

Mobilization of social capital to access employment and housing

Our data indicates that, in this early stage of their settlement, family and friend networks were heavily mobilized as bonding social capital in terms of settlement support for employment and housing.

Employment

In terms of employment, only 30% (N=189) of the participants are currently employed. However, 70% of the participants are enrolled in French classes, which could give a clear idea of their daily occupation. Among those who work, the majority received help from Syrian or Arab friends (35%) or family (23%) to find a job. Some participants were able to find jobs on their own without anyone's help (21%).

Those participants who were 31 to 64 years old have mainly counted on the support of their Syrian friends to find their jobs. Those who are under 31 have counted more on their families and themselves to find jobs (Figure 9). Men counted on friends from their community and their family a bit more than women; however, women had slightly more important support from friends from outside their ethnic community (5%) compared to men (2%).

Housing

When it came to housing, most of the participants counted on their family (56%) and their friends (20%) to find their current housing. Although not all members of the same family received support to find housing, the support provided to one member of the family was enough to ensure support for the whole family.

Noteworthy is the fact that 29% of the participants who lived alone are 51 years or older and expressed during the interview that they used to live alone in Syria and wanted to keep their independent life after moving to Canada, because living with their married children was overwhelming for them. Some younger people came alone to Canada and lived on their own as well.

Discussion

Overall, our results provide good news for the initial stages of settlement and show that the recently arrived have good social networks and few are completely socially isolated. This translates into access to basic emotional social support for most of our participants. This is true, to varying degrees, across age and gender lines. We observed noteworthy variations in how these networks and connections are mobilized in terms of social capital and there are observations to make in terms of bonding, bridging and linking social capital.

The strongest social capital available to the recently resettled Syrians in our study is, by far, bonding capital, a situation that echoes earlier studies with other groups of refugees in Canada (Lamba and Krahn 2003) and more recent studies in the UK and Australia (Allen 2009; Cheung and Phillimore 2014). Our participants have access to broad family networks and Syrian friends who they are meeting through religious services, French classes and Syrian social events. Such spaces allowed newly arrived refugees to establish trust with other community members, considered a crucial building block to expanding social networks, but also to get introduced to the resources they can have access to in the city. Our participants rely strongly on these family and friends for support, information, and access to employment and housing, two of the most important elements of successful integration. Our visits to family homes and responses to survey questions suggest there is a lot of mutual aid within the community, as has been documented in other studies on housing (Ives et al. 2014; Walsh et al. 2016). However, language barriers, difficulty using public transportation (when living in suburbs or having to travel with small children), and cultural approaches to networks (i.e., distrust of strangers and authority figures) can limit people's opportunities to meet and get to know people from outside their circle of family and ethno-specific friends. As well, most of their Syrian friends and family also came to Canada recently, so they share our participants' profiles, lacking knowledge of local resources and friends outside of their immediate circles as well. Such bonding connections are very important to well-being but are limited in terms of accessing new information, resources or opportunities (Lamba 2008; Wen and Hanley 2016).

Our results show that, as suggested in other studies (Nannestad et al. 2008), participants are beginning to move beyond a strong base of bonding capital to access bridging capital, making friends with non-Syrians, who can give them access to different social networks and therefore different information, resources and opportunities. There are some differences in who is accessing non-Syrian friends, with language classes being the main source of such friendships in the early period of settlement. This bridging capital was, however, less of a factor in finding employment

than we expected, and we note that few people reported making non-Syrian friends at work. On a positive note, greater length of stay in Canada was associated with more access to non-Syrian friends, and it will be interesting to examine the evolution of these relationships in future waves of our study.

Finally, although we have not presented the data here and it is beyond the scope of this article, our participants reported very little linking capital (with government or community institutions) in terms of being helpful in regards to either social support or settlement help. The exception is connection to religious institutions, as reported above. We know, however, that there is a lot going on in terms of activities and services for Syrians, as presented above, and that many people are accessing them. This is a topic for future exploration and to follow over time.

Conclusion

The results of our study highlight, as described by Stewart et al. (2008), that the forming of social support is strongly cultural. Many of our participants asserted that it is not part of their culture to ask for help outside of their immediate circle of family and friends. Asking for help is feared to make one more vulnerable because strangers and authority figures could be dangerous in Syria but also because, culturally, Syrians are used to counting on themselves with the inexistence of community groups or the difference in the role they play. Consequently, and based on past experiences, many unknown community members, public services and community organizations here in Canada were suspicious to some participants.

Conversely, in Syria, family and trusted friends was considered to be sufficient – or at least safe. Yet here, in Montreal and in Canada, making broader connections can make the difference in terms of accessing better employment, housing and social opportunities – without causing danger. Therefore, many of our participants are exploring a shift in their very concept of "social network".

For service providers, therefore, there is a need to provide education on the role of public services and community groups, promoting the concept of such services as a right or an entitlement. Without a connection to more formal sources of information, recently arrived Syrians may miss out on social services and benefits that could really improve their quality of life. We see, however, that there is a high degree of mutual aid and information-sharing within the community, so it can be helpful to train community knowledge brokers (local champions, community leaders) to spread the news and to engage in outreach. Service providers should not wait for Syrian refugees to come to ask for help; seeking information from formal sources is simply not their habit.

Practices need to also be adjusted to the specific needs of the community, while recognizing the heterogeneity within the community in terms of level of education, class, health status, family concerns, experience of the war and in secondary countries, local connections and language ability. As Syrians continue on their journey of integration in their new society, we will surely see an evolution of their access to and mobilization of social capital.

Notes

1. This research was funded by a Canadian Institutes of Health Research Project Grant to Hynie et al. (2016-2021) entitled *Refugee integration and long-term health outcomes in Canada.*

2. The Blended Visa Overseas Refugee (BVOR) program does not apply within Quebec. Any BVOR refugees in the province would have landed elsewhere and moved to Quebec subsequently.

3. One shortcoming of our study is the lack of detailed information regarding Syrian refugees' use of social media to create and maintain connections. Our fieldwork indicates it is a very important tool, and we hope to collect data on this topic in future waves of the survey.

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