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# Immigrant & Refugee Mental Health

Statistics Canada reports that each year Canada accepts approximately 225,000 immigrants. Of these, about 20,000 are refugees. In 2001, the proportion of foreign-born Canadians was the highest in 70 years. The visible minority population has increased three-fold since 1981. There were more than 200 ethnic groups reported in Canada as of 2001.

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## SCOPE OF THE ISSUE

- Factors which negatively influence adjustment include: a drop in socio-economic status following migration; inability to speak the language of the host country; separation from family; lack of friendly reception by the host population; lack of ethnocultural community to provide support; a traumatic experience prior to migration; and family, migrating during adolescence or after the age of 65.
- Immigrants may have suffered natural and man-made disasters including war, torture or repression. Those who have experience torture are at particular risk for mental health problems.
- The mental health of immigrants and refugees is similar to Canadians with the exception of higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder. Most refugees experienced persecution and torture in their home countries and have been separated from family members for significant periods even before arriving in Canada.
- Those who need mental health services may be reluctant to seek help due to the stigma attached to mental illness and cultural and linguistic barriers.
- Adolescents face challenges integrating past trauma and defining new identity within and between two cultures. Newcomer youth were twice as likely to suffer from depression than individuals aged thirty-five and older. Statistics on suicide are consistent in portraying the young as distressed and vulnerable.
- Women and seniors may face a loss of independence and social support structures.
- The federal and provincial devolution of responsibilities have left cash-strapped municipalities cutting English as a Second Language and settlement programs, further limiting community participation and economic opportunity.
- Discrimination negatively impacts mental health and limits employment access. Foreign-trained professionals have difficulty having their education and skills accredited resulting in under-employment. Thirty per cent of immigrant families with children are living below the poverty line.
- Refugee claims take up to five years to process, leaving thousands of refugees in legal limbo causing long-term mental health concerns for refugees living with uncertainty.

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## FEDERAL ACTION

Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) was established in 1993 to link immigration services with citizenship registration, to promote the unique ideals all Canadians share and to help build a stronger Canada. The emphasis of CIC's settlement programs is to assist newcomers to make optimal use of the services that are available to the public in all provinces and territories.

**Support to immigrant-serving organizations** – CIC funds hundreds of organizations that help newcomers settle into life in Canada. Many of them represent a number of different types of multicultural agencies and associations, so they can help in several ways. They may provide language training, or assist in locating jobs and housing. They may also provide support for women, children, and families who are dealing with domestic violence. Many of these organizations provide services in the client's first language, which may be helpful in the first few months. Key settlement programs include:

**ISAP (Immigrant Settlement and Adaptation Program)** – This program is designed to help new immigrants with immediate needs by referring them to economic, social, health, cultural, educational and recreational facilities; and by providing:

- information and orientation on banking, shopping, managing a household, etc.;
- interpretation or translation services when necessary;
- para-professional counselling; and,
- employment-related services.

**LINC (Language Instruction for Newcomers)** – The objective of the LINC program is to provide language training to adult newcomers so that they can learn to speak one of Canada's official languages. The LINC curriculum is designed to include information and orientation for newcomers so that they can learn about Canada and the Canadian way of life. The program is designed to be flexible, to provide transportation and childminding assistance, as required, to ensure equitable access to all immigrants, men and women, whether working outside of the home or not. The program is offered in cooperation with provincial governments, school boards, community colleges, and immigrant and community organizations.

**Host Program** – The Host program is designed to: match newcomers with a volunteer familiar with Canadian ways; help newcomers overcome the stress of moving to a new country; help them learn about available services and how to use them; help them practice English or French; help them develop contacts in their employment field; and help them participate in community activities. In return, the host-volunteers make new friends, learn about the newcomers' culture and strengthen community life.

**Resettlement Assistance Program** – Resettlement assistance is provided to individuals selected abroad, admitted to Canada as government-assisted refugees. Funds are available to assist with, for example, locating accommodation, acquiring basic household items, and ensuring that ongoing support is available if necessary.

## COMMUNITY RESPONSE

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In a 1996 policy statement, CMHA National recommended that:

- Settlement services in Canada should become an integrated service. There needs to be coordination between the provincial and federal governments. Services and information should be provided pre-immigration and post-immigration to facilitate the acculturation process.
- All immigrants and refugees should have equal access to official language education, regardless of whether or not they intend to enter the workplace.
- Cross-cultural training especially in, medicine, nursing, social work, psychology, and psychiatry are essential in post secondary programs.
- All levels of governments, corporations, and agencies should work towards zero tolerance of racism and racist activity. Public education should be carried out regarding racism and its affects on the people.

*In addition:*

- Public policy groups such the Maytree Foundation and the Caledon Institute call for reform of the immigrant and refugee services to better reflect local needs, issues and concerns.
- The Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture fosters a medical network that includes experienced physicians, psychiatrists and other medical specialists to assess, treat and refer victims of torture. As well, they provide a variety of support and integration services .
- Community-based, ethnoculturally-specific services such as Across Boundaries and Hong Fook (of Toronto) respond to the unique mental health needs of the ethnoracial community.

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