

# Supporting the Mental Health of Newcomers in Canada: Key Insights and Recommendations for Programming

## Introduction

Newcomers can face several obstacles throughout their settlement journey that can impact their mental health. While we cannot underscore the resiliency of newcomers as they adapt to new lives in Canada, it is important to recognize how systemic factors can disproportionately impact the mental health of newcomers. Therefore, the focus of this discussion will be on identifying key insights and challenges that newcomers experience in relation to their mental health and provide recommendations for how programs and services can support the mental health of newcomers in Canada.

### 1. Social Determinants of Mental Health

Research suggests that immigrants, refugees, ethno-cultural and racialized groups face higher exposure to known social factors that can negatively impact mental health.<sup>1</sup> For example, newcomers are more likely to face economic instability, to live in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, and to be more socially isolated than their Canadian-born counterparts.<sup>2</sup> Some argue that the settlement journey itself is a social determinant of health.<sup>3</sup> Pre-migration factors, such as violence and trauma, and post-migration factors, such as acculturation and family separation, have been found to be associated with higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression among newcomers.

### 2. Immediate Concerns Impacting the Mental Health of Newcomers

A 2023 study<sup>4</sup> found that newcomers to Canada are facing **increased mental health challenges** in relation to three main areas:

- **Food Security:** “I am financially concerned about sufficiently providing healthy food for my family.”

#### Data Spotlight on Food Security for Immigrants and Non-Immigrants

- **57% of Newcomers** (5 years or less in Canada) are concerned about providing food for their families
- **51% of Immigrants** (6–15 years in Canada) are concerned about providing food for their families
- **31% of non-Immigrants** are concerned about providing food for their families

- **Housing:** “I am concerned about making rent/mortgage payments.”

#### Data Spotlight on Housing Challenges for Immigrants and Non-Immigrants

*Concerned on a scale of 1–10 (lowest–highest)*

- **39% of Newcomers** (5 years or less in Canada) are highly concerned about securing housing (8 or higher)
- **34% of Immigrants** (6–15 years in Canada) are highly concerned about securing housing (8 or higher)
- **22% of non-Immigrants** are highly concerned about securing housing (8 or higher)

- **Social Support:** “I have people I can count on.”

#### Data Spotlight on Social Support among Immigrants and Non-Immigrants

- **34% of Newcomers** (5 years or less in Canada) never or only sometimes have people in their life to count on, compared to **37% who always** have people to count on.
- **20% of non-Immigrants** never or only sometimes have people in their life to count on, compared to **52% who always** have people to count on.

### 3. Barriers to Care

Research points to several barriers newcomers face when accessing care for mental health concerns. At the **structural level**, barriers include inadequate funding and services; complex systems; cultural tensions; and lack of prevention and early identification. At the **provider-level**, barriers include lack of representation, cultural competency, and mental health knowledge; staff shortages and burnout. At the **individual and family-level**, barriers include the prioritization of settlement needs; stigma, fear, and a high threshold in reaching out for help.<sup>5</sup>

## Key Recommendations

- Engage directly with newcomers to understand their needs and preferences for support.
- Provide family-centered and culturally responsive approaches to dealing with mental health concerns.
- Prioritize mental health promotion and prevention, not just after-the-fact services.
- Provide integrated care, paying particular attention to how intersections of social factors can impact the mental health of newcomers.
- Equip staff with the knowledge and skills to help a diverse range of newcomers that may require different types of mental health support.

## Works Cited

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