

Supporting Newcomer Seniors in Canada: Key Considerations for Inclusive Programming

Introduction

Supporting the well-being of newcomer seniors in Canada requires a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted challenges they face. This learning note will provide an overview of such challenges and in turn, offer key considerations for inclusive programming that will support newcomer seniors as they navigate their way through their settlement and integration journey, paying particular attention to how various systems interact to shape their experiences.

Data Snapshot on Newcomer Seniors (65+) in Canada

- Immigrants comprise 30% of the population aged 65 or older, compared with 23% of the total population.
- Senior immigrants are most likely to be sponsored under the family reunification program to support their families.
- 63% of newcomer seniors (5 years or less in Canada) reported they were **unable to speak either English or French**.
- Newcomer racialized seniors report **higher levels of poor mental health** than their Canadian-born counterparts.

1. Social Isolation

Social isolation is commonly defined as “low quantity and quality of contact with others... [involving] few social contacts and few social roles, as well as the absence of mutually rewarding relationships.”¹ The prevalence of social isolation in Canada has become a prominent concern because of the larger impacts on health and well-being.

Despite the need for research on social isolation at the intersection of various identity groups, it is currently limited. The literature that does exist points to an increased association between loneliness, immigration status, and age.² Identifying social isolation among immigrant seniors is a challenge in and of itself, often unseen by government agencies, communities, and even families.³ Several adjustment factors contribute to the social isolation of newcomer seniors, including: unfamiliarity with the host country, language barriers, limited access to transportation, burden of childcare and domestic work, and dependency on children for financial needs.⁴

2. Economic (In)Security

Research points to insufficient income as a significant challenge faced by newcomer seniors, with over 50% living in chronic low-income, in stark contrast to the 2% rate observed among their Canadian-born counterparts.⁵ The risk of poverty is compounded by several intersecting identity characteristics, including race, gender, language capability, immigration status, and geographic location. The lack of state support for newcomer seniors plays a large role in the difference in income levels between immigrants and non-immigrants; without state support, economic, social, and cultural vulnerability falls on the shoulders of kin. Additionally, employment programs in settlement services are rarely tailored for newcomer seniors, further isolating them from participating in the labour market.⁶

3. Health and Well-Being

The increased rates of newcomer seniors living in poverty can contribute to poorer health, both perceived health status and chronic diseases. The health status of newcomer seniors is impacted by several factors, including but not limited to:⁷

- Chronic low economic conditions
- Language challenges
- Family conflicts
- Abuse
- Low levels of social support and integration
- Lack of appropriate settlement services that provide tailored health care services.

The health challenges faced by newcomer seniors, arising from both personal and systemic factors, are further complicated by the broader systemic disadvantages experienced by newcomers within the healthcare system. Supporting newcomer seniors as they adapt to a new healthcare system must be prioritized.

4. Access to Services

Newcomer seniors encounter several challenges when accessing services, such as:

- **Language proficiency** heavily influences newcomer seniors' settlement experience. Language barriers can lead to social isolation and dependency on family members for translation and transportation.⁸ Senior women newcomers often face additional childcare responsibilities, further impacting their ability to develop their language skills.⁹
- **Geographic barriers** especially impact newcomer seniors located in the outer city and rural areas. Mobility issues as well inconsistent, costly, and unavailable transportation limit seniors' access to services.

Key Recommendations

- Facilitate community support/kinship activities for newcomer seniors, including opportunities for seniors to develop their language skills outside of a classroom setting and to encourage socialization.
- Provide tailored services for newcomer seniors in the areas of employment and health, targeting the unique challenges and needs they face.
- Use Community Health Ambassadors to help seniors navigate the healthcare system, including access to translation/interpretation support and transportation.

Works Cited

1. Keefe, J., Andew, M., Fancey, P., & Hall, M. (2006). Final Report: A Profile of Social Isolation in Canada. https://www.health.gov.bc.ca/library/publications/year/2006/keefe_social_isolation_final_report_may_2006.pdf
2. Islam, M.K. & Gilmour, H. (202
3. Johnson, S., Bacsu, J., McIntosh, T., Jeffrey, B., & Novik, N. (2021). Competing challenges for immigrant seniors: Social isolation and the pandemic. *Healthcare Management Forum*, 34(5): 266-271.
4. Mandell, N., Borrás, J. & Phonepraseuth, J. (2018). Recent Canadian Immigrant Seniors: A Literature Review of Settlement Experiences and Services. *CERIS*.
5. Picot & Lu 2017
6. Mandell et al.
7. Mandell et al.
8. Bauer, E. (2013). Reconstructing moral identities in memories of childhood language brokering experiences. *International Migration*, 51(5): 205-218.
9. Mandell et al.