

# Supporting Newcomer Youth in Canada: Considerations for Inclusive Programming

## Introduction

Canada has one of the highest rates of immigration and acceptance of refugees in the world<sup>1</sup>, with the greatest number of newcomers to the country being children and youth.<sup>2</sup> Often, newcomer families' choice to come to Canada is driven by a desire to provide a better life and future for their children.<sup>3</sup> Ensuring the successful integration of newcomer youth requires understanding the multiple, compounded challenges that newcomer youth face throughout their settlement journey. As such, the focus of this discussion will be on identifying key considerations for designing inclusive and effective programs to support the diverse experiences of newcomer youth in Canada.

### 1. Mental Health

Newcomer youth face many unique stressors throughout their settlement journey. While the resiliency and strength of newcomer youth must not be understated,<sup>4</sup> it is important to recognize how challenges such as, family separation, language barriers, acculturation, unwelcoming schools and communities, and stigma can significantly impact the mental health of newcomer youth. Research points to

several barriers that newcomer youth face in accessing mental health services:<sup>5</sup>

- **Lack of trust and breach of confidentiality** influence the likelihood of newcomer youth reaching out for help, unsure of whether their safety will be guaranteed.
- **Cultural beliefs about mental health** can play a role in newcomer youth accessing help, especially when there is certain stigma or taboo surrounding mental health conversations within the community.
- **Language barriers** create difficulties in asking for help, but also in articulating the specific needs that newcomer youth have.

### 2. Physical Health

Research shows that exposure to routine physical activity is associated with higher levels of self-esteem as well as a mechanism for reducing stress in youth.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, involvement in sports can lead to the development of social skills, relationships, and connectedness.<sup>7</sup> This is especially important for newcomer youth that face difficulties in adjusting to new social groups and norms, often leading to feelings of exclusion and isolation.

#### Spotlight on Youth Homelessness in Canada

- **Youth under 24** represent the **fastest growing** portion of Canada's homeless population.
- **Racialized, immigrant, and newcomer youth** are over-represented in the 'hidden homeless' population.
- **Family conflict** and **income instability** are the main reasons why **newcomer youth** entered a situation of homelessness.
- Age, gender, race, sexual orientation, language and cultural barriers, lack of status, personal ties and history in Canada interact to situate **newcomer youth as among the most vulnerable of homeless youth.**

### 3. Differences among Newcomer Youth

Studies consistently highlight the importance of recognizing the differences among newcomer youth at the intersections of gender, ethnicity, age, and status.<sup>8</sup> Gender and racial differences are notable in educational attainment, earning gaps, and marginalization of newcomer youth. Family and community responsibilities are also impacted by both gender and immigration status; childcare commitments tend to fall on girls, and refugee youth often take on roles as “interpreters, service navigators, and caretakers for their families.”<sup>9</sup> While these responsibilities highlight the strength of newcomer youth, they can also create barriers for employment and impact educational and personal development.<sup>10</sup> Research shows that newcomer youth also experience discrimination within the service system due to their intersecting identities, especially in the following areas:<sup>11</sup>

- Housing
- Justice system
- Employment
- Service providers

## Key Recommendations

- Engage meaningfully with newcomer youth when developing and evaluating policies and services.
- Provide newcomer youth with resources and activities that can support and grow their social networks.
- Adopt a family-centered approach to youth services, especially in the areas of education, settlement, and mental health.

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