

Newcomer, Refugee, and Immigrant Youth's Experience with COVID-19

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WHAT THE RESEARCH IS ABOUT

OVERVIEW: This study surveyed 244 refugee and immigrant youth in Windsor, Ontario, to understand their mental health and wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study also looked at the association between youth's academic persistence and the supportiveness of their school environment.

OBJECTIVE:

- To explore the degree that assimilation and acculturation, food insecurity, resilience, and social connection affected the mental health of newcomer youth during COVID-19.
- To explore whether newcomer youth's academic persistence varied by the perceived supportiveness of their school environment.

RESEARCH JUSTIFICATION: Research shows that negative health outcomes increased during the COVID-19 pandemic and were linked to age, immigration status, and being financially impacted by COVID-19. However, there is limited research on the experiences of immigrant and refugee youth. Windsor, Ontario, was chosen as a case study because it was designated for the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) and has a higher percentage of immigrant and refugee population than the national average.

HOW THE DATA WAS OBTAINED

The research team surveyed 244 refugee and immigrant youth newcomers who attended the YMCA of South-Western Ontario for orientation and referral. Participants were surveyed by telephone, mostly in Arabic. The majority of participants (60.2%) were under the age of 19. Among these, 64.3% were government-assisted refugees, 11.1% were privately sponsored

refugees, 3.7% were family immigrants, 6.1% were economic immigrants, and 14.8% were another type of refugee. The majority (77%) had been in Canada for less than four years, with an average length of residency being 3.3 years. There were slightly more female (56.2%) than male (43.8%) respondents.

Indicators of mental health problems include the frequency that respondents felt sad, stressed, confused, isolated, helpless, nervous, hopeless, or depressed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Social connection was measured by the number of siblings participants reported. Multivariate analysis was used to evaluate the relationship between mental health and variables of acculturation, assimilation, food insecurity, resilience, and social connection. Multivariate analysis was then used to evaluate the relationship between youth's academic persistence and their perceptions of teacher support and students' openness to diversity.

WHAT THE STUDY FOUND

Mental Health & COVID-19:

- Food insecurity and a longer length of residency in Canada increased mental health problems.
- Food insecurity had the strongest impact on newcomer youth's mental health.
- Resilience was the second most important predictor of mental health, protecting youth against the isolation, loneliness, powerlessness, and feelings of depression that emerge from COVID-19 anxieties and social distancing directives. Resilience included youth's ability to adapt and change, cope in stressful situations, achieve goals, problem solve, focus under pressure, not give up, and not be discouraged by failure.
- The number of siblings youth had (an indicator of social connectedness) also decreased youth's mental health problems.

Academic Persistence & School Environment:

- Newcomer youth displayed higher academic persistence when they perceived that their teachers supported them, believed in them, and encouraged them.
- Newcomer youth were more likely to persist in school when they perceived that their classmates were interested in knowing more about their country of origin, respected them, and interacted with them.
- Newcomer youth's educational success depended on a school environment that encouraged diversity and inter-group relations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The significance of food insecurity in this study suggests that policy makers must prioritize adequate social assistance levels and living wage policies to ensure that everyone is food secure.
- Immigration policies that remove barriers for family reunification would be instrumental in helping build resilience in newcomer families by maximizing social support and minimizing isolation.
- Community partners should be consulted and welcomed into schools to reinforce the diversity of the communities from which newcomer youth come.
- School boards should consult with community partners to identify best practices for creating a culturally aware and competent school environment.

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ABOUT CYRRC

The Child and Youth Refugee Research Coalition (CYRRC) is a network of researchers, service providers, and government partners working together to produce and share research that facilitates the integration of young refugees and their families in Canada and beyond.

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Child and Youth Refugee Research Coalition.

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