



SPOTLIGHT ON

THE WELL-BEING OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH WHO ARE NEWCOMERS TO NOVA SCOTIA

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WHY WE NEED TO FOCUS OUR ATTENTION ON THIS POPULATION

Nova Scotia celebrated the arrival of a record-breaking 7,580 new permanent residents in 2019.¹ Initiatives such as the federal government's Provincial Nominee Program and the Atlantic Pilot Program have attracted skilled individuals and their families to Nova Scotia. This trend is likely to continue as federal and provincial targets for growth remain ambitious.²

Settling in a new country adds layers of complexity to life and directly influences the well-being of children and youth. Although all families share many of the same stressors, newcomer families may face additional – and significant – challenges. These include trauma, loss, culture shock, new societal expectations, racism, discrimination, and poverty.

Understanding the needs of newcomer families in Nova Scotia is vital in our ongoing efforts to make life better for all children and youth.

THE EXPERIENCE OF NEWCOMERS TO NOVA SCOTIA

Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) with the Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia (ISANS) Early Childhood Education Centre work with children ages six months to 13 years. ECEs have observed that well-being for many newcomer families is initially tied to basic needs such as housing, finances, and health. As families establish these foundations, they may grapple with psychosocial and cultural changes. Families must navigate new healthcare, education, and transportation systems. They may have also been separated from family and friends in other areas of the world through their resettlement journeys.



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This, coupled with differences in language and communication, can leave newcomers feeling particularly isolated.

As families move from survival to integration, their definition of well-being may expand. In some cases, they may begin to encounter cultural tensions and face racial discrimination or xenophobia.

Depending on their country of origin, newcomers may experience the healthy immigrant effect: they arrive healthier than the Canadian-born population but experience declining health over time.³ This could be the result of changing access to fresh, nutritious foods; limited capacity to grow food; less physical activity; increased stress; and few social supports. Other newcomers, particularly those with a refugee background or those seeking asylum, may experience negative health outcomes because of impaired or limited access to healthcare in refugee camps and other temporary dwellings. After arriving in Canada, newcomers may face barriers to healthcare due to a lack of linguistic interpreters, difficulty navigating the health system, and limited health insurance.⁷

The age of children and youth upon arrival also influences well-being. Older children can inadvertently take on parental roles for younger

siblings and act as interpreters for their parents. This added responsibility may compromise their mental health and childhood experiences. Older children can have a harder time learning a new language, and some school-aged children report experiencing bullying, racism, and discrimination.

MIGRATION JOURNEY AND RESETTLEMENT

The journey from a country of origin to Canada is a shared experience that impacts the health and well-being of newcomers. It is vital to recognize the unique experience of refugee children and youth. After fleeing their home country, individuals traveling as refugees spend time in at least one transit country where they endure a lengthy, stressful, and uncertain process to be granted refugee status and to be identified for settlement.⁴

Refugees may have varying levels of community support. When families arrive as part of a large group or are joining an already-settled large community of shared ethnicity or culture, there is often added support in contrast to those who arrive in smaller groups or as individuals. Groups arriving in large numbers can be positively impacted by tremendous community support and existing communities play a huge role in helping to integrate families and their





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children into a new home. For some, however, there may be periods of social isolation while they build a new support network.

CAREGIVER TRAUMA AND MENTAL HEALTH

Trauma experienced before and during the immigration journey can affect a caregiver's capacity to assess safety, regulate their emotions, and build secure attachment with their children. This may lead to insecure caregiver-child-attachment relationships and poor mental health, even after arrival in a safe country. When past trauma is not resolved, it remains present and can be compounded by homesickness, extreme loneliness, and worry for their country. Even for children born in the new country, parental trauma may be transmitted across generations.

Newcomers who have fled countries experiencing systemic violence by government or who have concerns about their precarious migration status in Canada may hesitate to trust government institutions, thereby impacting their access to services. Leaving a child with a babysitter or at a daycare for the first time is a daunting experience for most Canadian parents. Newcomers who have experienced state-sanctioned trauma may experience heightened anxiety around this separation from

their children. The potential impact of previous trauma and distrust on access to public services may be increased. Newcomers may lack knowledge about what services are available, how to access and navigate these services, and how to ask for interpretation services to address language barriers. They may be unaware that many services are free of charge and fear additional costs. All these factors combined may increase caregiver stress and limit families' access to important health services and other community supports for children and youth.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT THE WELL-BEING OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH NEW TO NOVA SCOTIA

There are limited data that reflect the well-being of newcomer children and youth in Nova Scotia. In the *2018-2019 Student Success Survey*, 9 percent of 54,004 students identified as first-generation Canadians.⁵ The survey, which captures self-reported outcomes in a variety of areas, provides a window into experiences for newcomer children and youth. Indeed, first-generation Canadian children and youth in grades 4 to 10 provided more positive responses on average than their peers. For example, these students were least likely to miss school. These data provide a foundation for some optimism but must be interpreted with caution recognizing that cultural interpretation



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of a such a survey may be impacted by factors like language and experience.

A major area of concern for many newcomer families is poverty. The 2016 Canadian census provides the most recent available data identifying poverty rates by distinct groups of children. These data demonstrate that a shocking one in every two new immigrant children live in poverty compared to approximately one in five non-immigrant children.⁶ Data from the Nova Scotia Department of Community Services also point to a significant over-representation of newcomer families with children who must access income assistance.

There are several potential factors that may impact this greater degree of poverty. Immigrants frequently face more challenges in obtaining employment and higher-paid jobs. These challenges include language barriers, access to child care, and lack of credential recognition. Some newcomers may spend their first year struggling to find a job while spending precious savings on the basics of living. Many are ultimately forced to take on a lower-paid job than they are qualified for. Unemployment and underemployment further contribute to the trauma experienced by adult caregivers compounding potential mental health challenges for other adults, children, and youth in the family.

STEPS FORWARD

Much work is needed to better understand the status of well-being for newcomer children and youth in Nova Scotia. Policy and program changes implemented now, however, could enhance the well-being of children and youth new to the province.

Addressing poverty

A comprehensive child poverty reduction strategy could lift all children and youth out of poverty, including those from newcomer families. For example, indexing tax benefits and credit programs to inflation, such as with the Nova Scotia child benefit, can provide incomes commensurate with existing living expenses. It is important to ensure that immigration policies prioritize family reunification to help strengthen families and offer culturally safe and accessible mental healthcare services as well as universally accessible interpretation services for all essential community and government-provided health and social services.

Reassessing Public Service Delivery

If organizations responsible for delivering a public service, such as government, health services, family courts, and schools, adopt a trauma-informed approach to how they deliver services, this would mitigate re-traumatization. Referral processes are often complex and lengthy for newcomer families



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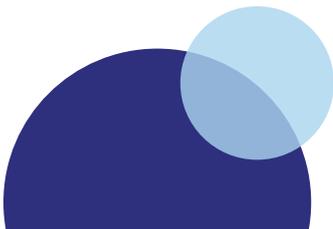
attempting to access services directly (for example, leaving a message in a language in which they are not fluent or registering online). Services should be easily accessible and culturally appropriate.⁷

Affordable Housing

There is a need to invest in affordable housing for larger newcomer families.⁸ This might include revisions to tenancy laws to provide homes that can accommodate larger families or raise the

maximum number of people permitted in a home. Revising these laws will reduce family stress. As noted elsewhere in this data profile, investing in the development of a culturally safe, affordable, and quality early-learning and child-care system beyond the pre-primary program will help children up to two years – those most vulnerable to poverty and its subsequent long-term poor health outcomes

The time to act is now. For all of our children.



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