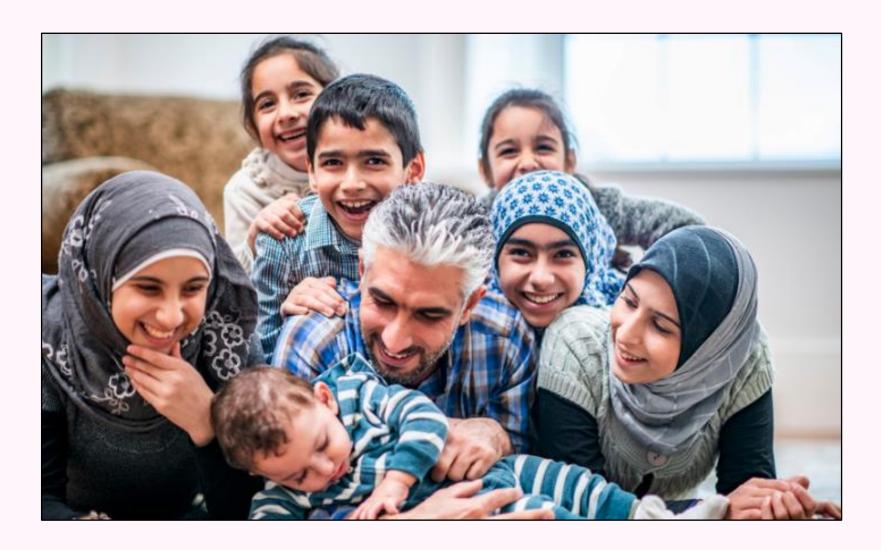# Are BC's settlement service agencies meeting the needs of Middle Eastern refugees?

Background and Purpose

Between April 2023 to April 2024, British Columbia became home to approximately 17,000 refugees and refugee claimants (hereafter referred to as just refugees). Many of these refugees come from the Middle East, namely Syria, Iran, and Afghanistan. Refugees are serviced by various independent settlement service nonprofits, the largest of these being the Immigrant Services Society of British Columbia (ISSofBC). There is very little research, however on how effective settlement services are, let alone within a Canadian context and especially so for this specific population. Research thus far has generally been around exploring service user experiences with agency specific services, usually employment programs[1]. There has been a couple of literature reviews also attempting to also gain an understanding of the efficacy of settlement services as a whole[2], and a critical analysis of IRCC's funding model of Canadian settlement service agencies.[3] Due to the current state of the literature not being in alignment with the patterns we are seeing with IRCC and the growing amount of asylum seekers from this region, the author aims to identify if the current model of settlement services is actually meeting the needs of the largest growing group of newcomers to BC.

Research Question

How effective are ISSofBC's settlement service programs for middle eastern asylum seekers?

Theoretical Framework

The author approached this research with an exploratory and post positivist paradigm. This allowed for a full acceptance of the varying realities of the research participants, while also searching for common patterns, themes, trends, and quantitative proofs of efficacy within settlement service provision. The exploratory nature of this study also allowed for a wider scope of findings, and was reflective of the current literature, as no standardized tool exists for assessing the efficacy of settlement service programs.

Systems theory and client centered theory helped inform this research. Systems theory emphasizes the importance of micro and macro "ecosystems" and how they affect our lives. In this context, the author was interested in how settlement service agencies (in the meso/exosystem) would affect service users microsystem, ie, not only themselves but the other components of their immediate lives such as their families, religious groups etc. Additionally, client centered theory echoes the epistemologies previously mentioned, in that clients are the ultimate experts of their own lives, and that social service programs as a whole should constantly be evaluated and evolve to fit what its service users themselves say they need from the service.

Methodology

This is a mixed methods study. The author will primarily focus on semi structured interviews with service users/providers, and will supplement this with monetary data pulled from various sources.

Sampling:
Population: Any refugee/refugee claimant from the MENA region who is currently using, or has used ISSofBC services in the past 3 years
Sampling method: Quota sampling. The author will look at the different sections of ISSofBC (settlement one on one services, group/community engagement services, employment etc.) and sample proportionate to the number of people serviced in each service basket
Sample size: 1-5% of service users in each service basket
Recruitment: Emails soliciting participation in the study will be sent out to the population, provided they have already consented to receive promotional emails from ISSofBC in the past. Settlement workers, teachers, employment counsellors etc. to verbally advise their clients. Flyers to be posted around ISSofBC offices.

Data Collection:
Data will be collected via audio recordings and notes of interviews. One member of the research team will conduct the interview while another member takes notes. Interviews will take place in the language and location of choice for the interviewee. Translators will translate live during the interview, and the author will show the translator their notes at the end of the session to make sure everything was translated correctly.

Interviews:
Interviews with current service users will be focused on their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and hopes from settlement services, as well as attempting to elicit any negative experiences thus far with settlement services. Interviews will include "miracle questions" such as *if you could change anything about the services you are receiving, what would it be?* Interviews with ex service users will include much of the same, however, will include more reflective aspects such as *"do you feel differently about settlement services now vs when you were receiving the services?"* ISSofBC staff will be divided up into front line, middle management, and executives. Front line staff interviews would be primarily focused on thoughts around which programs are working, what feedback do they get from clients etc. For middle management, the author would follow the above model, but add in questions regarding changes they have seen in the organization/staff they manage. For executives, interviews would primarily focus on miracle questions such as *"if funding wasn't an issue, what would the ideal settlement service agency look like"* Additionally, the research team would collaborate with the executive team to understand how ISSofBC assesses program efficacy and outcomes internally. This framework would then be adapted into the interview questions for non-executive participants.

Quantitative: The financial data for this study will be pulled from AITP and FOIPPA requests, as well as CRA data. This data will be used to explore potential correlations between participant satisfaction outcomes and program funding models. Additionally, the researchers will attempt to compare the funding model against other similar agencies to see any major or obvious structural differences in funding. They will also attempt to discern the average "cost per user" for each program, and compare it to the "ideal outcome" and "average outcome" for each user. For employment based programs, an "economic value" portion could be added to see how much clients income increased in proportion to the service. The research team will ideally include a consultant, auditor, or other professional familiar with this type of analysis.

Data Analysis: Qualitive data analysis to be via thematic analysis via inductive coding (interviews). Themes to be drawn after coding interviews, research team to root coding process in value based coding method. Quantitative data analysis will use descriptive data analysis to gain a simple working understanding of funding and how it relates to program efficacy.

Ethics

There are a few ethical issues to consider for this research. Participants may feel retraumatized by the interview, especially if they have had traumatic/high stress experiences associated with the western "interview" (ex. their refugee interview). This will be mitigated by having counsellors available to participants, and allowing to choose the language, location, and gender identity of the author/translator, within the limitations of staffing. The research team anticipates some participants might not fully understand the author and their role, and that they are a separate entity from ISSofBC. The research team will ensure confidentiality and its limits are established before the start of the interview and within the consent letters. They will also ensure that the participants know that only the lead researcher has access to raw data, and the answers form the clients will be anonymized. Instructions on how to withdraw data from being included in study will also be written in consent forms and explained in person. Consent forms will be printed in the most common languages spoken by this population. Physical/electronic data is to be stored electronically on a password protected folder and deleted after 7 years.

Limitations

Due to the research only being done at one agency, and because of the use of non probability sampling, we cannot generalize the results of the study. Additionally, because this study largely relies on participants memory, there may be some misremembering of events. Furthermore, there is a small risk that participants from either party may alter or skew their answers to match what they think the researchers want to hear, or give bad faith answers.

Knowledge Mobilization

Associating the research with fun is key for knowledge dissemination in this context. For the agency, having townhalls before starting where staff can guess the findings of the study (with prizes at the end of the study) will increase engagement and interest. Sharing our research with community hubs such as the mosque, would help findings reach this population. For this study, however, it is vital that it also reaches the people who can actually make systemic change to settlement service agencies – that is IRCC and municipal/provincial government bodies. Having an end of study celebration/gathering with traditional foods from a middle eastern country, and inviting MLAs, MPs, community members/agencies that have overlap of clients with ISSofBC to share results would be a effective way to disseminate research. Finally, if participants are up for it, they will be invited to share at the celebration and speak directly on their experiences.
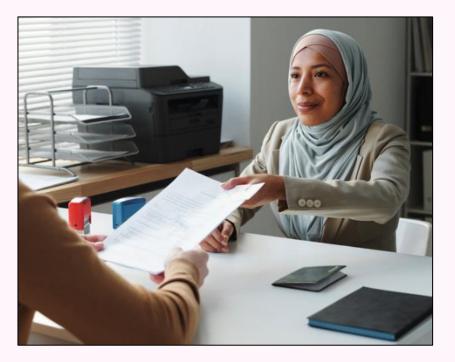
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Neda Samarbaf-Zadeh
Bachelor of Social Work

DOUGLAS