

Poverty in BC: Perspectives of immigrants and refugees in Abbotsford

Introduction:

The Community Connections Program (part of the Multicultural and Immigrant Integration Services department) at Abbotsford Community Services provides support to immigrant and refugee newcomers through conversation circles, life skills courses, topical workshops, special events, and a volunteer matching program. The focus group discussion on *Reducing Poverty in BC* took place at one of our weekly conversation circles. Participants received advance notice about the topic. ACS provided both interpretation (Arabic and Punjabi) and childcare support for the session.

Participants came from a wide variety of backgrounds and economic levels. Over half of the participants came to Canada as refugees, and several arrived quite recently. Gender representation was balanced, and while participants ranged in age from 19-60, no immigrant or refugee seniors attended. While the participants started and finished the evening together, the main discussion took place in four small groups (each including a facilitator and a note-taker, and two groups including interpreters). All participants received a \$25 grocery store gift card as recognition for their time and contributions.

Session details:

- Date: June 13, 2018: 7-9pm
- Community: Abbotsford
- Location: Abbotsford Community Services (2420 Montrose Ave)
- # of Participants: 13
- # of Organizations: 1

About the Participants:

- Country of origin
 - o Peru (1)
 - o South Sudan (1)
 - o South Korea (2)
 - o Eritrea (1)
 - o India (2)
 - o Iraq (4)
 - o Burma (1)
 - o Ukraine (1)
- Gender:
 - o Male: 5
 - o Female: 8
- Age range:
 - o 19-64: 13

- 65+: 0
- Immigration status:
 - Refugees (GAR or PSR): 7
 - Economic immigrants: 3
 - Family class immigrants: 1
 - Temporary foreign workers: 2
- Length of time in Canada:
 - < 1 year: 4
 - 1-3 yrs: 6
 - 3-5 yrs: 2
 - 5+ yrs: 1

About the findings:

Tell us about the types of insights and feedback received to the following questions:

- What are the issues facing you and people living in poverty right now?
- What would address these issues and help you or others out of poverty?

Issues:

The immigrant and refugee newcomers who participated in the ACS focus group identified a variety of issues relating to poverty. Some are concerns that may also be experienced by Canadian-born individuals, but others are specific to the immigrant experience. These issues include:

- **Housing:**
 - High rental costs and lack of affordable housing
 - This challenge was mentioned over and over again in the groups.
 - Because costs of living are so high in the Vancouver area, people are moving from Vancouver to Surrey, and now to Abbotsford—driving up prices everywhere.
 - Finding an apartment or townhouse through BC Housing is also challenging and involves a long wait list.
 - Large immigrant families are found living in very small housing units, as it is all they can afford
 - While none of the participants were experiencing homelessness, they have observed homelessness in the community
- **Childcare:**
 - Daycare costs are high, and parents working minimum-wage jobs cannot afford childcare
 - According to one participant, “I can’t afford to work.”
 - Like the housing problem, childcare was repeatedly raised as a concern among participants.
- **Employment:**
 - Participants reflected that many of the jobs that are accessible to newcomers are minimum-wage positions, and they do not pay enough to support their families.

- Immigrants and refugees who came to Canada with professional degrees and experience often have a challenges finding work in their field (lack of credential recognition or low English language skills); as a result, they end up having to take entry-level, minimum-wage jobs
- Often, professional immigrants do not realize the time and expense required to upgrade or obtain Canadian equivalency for their credentials before they immigrate
- **Health care:**
 - While participants appreciated the health care support provided, they noted that some care is not covered (ie. dental work; optometry).
- **Transportation:**
 - High gas prices
 - High cost of vehicle and insurance
- **Food:**
 - Groceries are expensive
 - Stigma for some ethnic groups around accepting help from the local Food Bank
- **Education:**
 - Participants commented numerous times on the need for education as a means for escaping poverty; however, they also shared how challenging it is to try to save for their children's education while paying bills and expenses on minimum-wage jobs
- **Addictions:**
 - Individuals who have a difficult life look for relief, and sometimes turn to alcohol or drugs, leading to a struggle with addiction
 - Participants noted a link between poverty and drug use; proposed that drug use comes first
 - In India, dealers give drugs for free in order to get people hooked
 - Fentanyl overdose epidemic: even drugs like marijuana are laced; it is cheap and is flooding the market
- **Social poverty**
 - Participants emphasized that poverty is not just financial; it is also social
 - Immigrants and refugees often lose their social networks and connections when they come to Canada, making it harder to find friends and network to find employment
 - Participants found it difficult to meet neighbours and expressed that everyone in Canada seems so busy
 - Lack of transportation (no car) leads to isolation
 - Without close family around to support newcomers, they rely on government support
 - Social isolation can lead to mental health problems
- **Lack of knowledge of the Canadian system**
 - Low English language levels and a lack of knowledge of the Canadian system can cause financial hardships for newcomers
 - One participant shared how her husband, who works a minimum-wage job, was excited to learn that he had dental coverage. The family of 7 went to the dentist for cleanings and fillings, only to receive a \$600 bill afterwards. Surprised, they asked what happened—and found out that the dental coverage was not comprehensive. This

situation illustrates how complicated the Canadian system can be, particularly for those who are new to Canada

- **Concerns specific to temporary foreign workers (TFWs, or temporary foreign workers):**
 - o Individuals with closed work permits can only work for the employer that brought them to Canada; this opens the door to labour rights violations (ie. paid less than minimum wage)
 - o TFWs can be afraid to raise employment standards concerns due to fear of being sent home; companies can take advantage of these workers
 - o Some commodities (eg. gas) are cheaper in the US, but individuals with work permits are not able to cross the border to the US
- **Unexpected expenses relating to immigration**
 - o Participants spoke about the challenges of finding funds to pay to translate documents from their first language to English (ie. degrees and certifications)
 - o Another challenge, particularly for low-income immigrant families, is the high cost attached to the citizenship application (\$630 for adults, and \$100 for children); in addition, applicants must prove English language competency, and IELTS/CELP language tests cost between \$250-300+.
- **Addictions**
 - o Participants noted that addictions can often be a result of poverty
 - o Individuals experiencing life challenges look for a means of relief and may turn to alcohol or drugs, and then become addicted
 - o Challenge of overdose crisis (fentanyl); even drugs like marijuana can be laced
 - o One participant noted that in their home country, dealers give drugs to new customers for free in order to get them hooked

Participants also expressed that refugees often come to Canada with nothing, and must start over completely. Their experience can therefore be quite different than that of economic immigrants, though they can still share common issues. Participants were divided on whether newcomers to Canada experience higher poverty rates than Canadian-born residents, with some saying the rates were similar, and others believing the frequency is higher among newcomers.

Many participants expressed that while Canadians experience poverty, the conditions in their home country were significantly worse (particularly for those who experienced war and displacement).

Possible Solutions

Solutions and Actions That Can Make a Difference

- (a) Looking at the list of issues and solutions generated, what types of solutions did the individuals who participated in your meeting identify as most important to them?

Participants identified a number of solutions that can make an impact on reducing poverty. These include:

- Education as a means of breaking the cycle of poverty
- Need for low-income housing: government needs to build big apartments

- Job creation: building the apartments
- Strict rules on how to treat the housing (if tenants are damaging the unit, they need to move out)
- English classes so that newcomers can move forward
- Minimum wage vs. living wage: while some participants believed an increase in the minimum wage would benefit those struggling with poverty, numerous others expressed that minimum wage increases make little to no difference, and a living wage is needed
- Monitoring of work sites to ensure businesses are following employment standards (especially with companies that hire immigrants and TFWs)
- Food Bank
- Local religious organisations (ie. churches and Gurdwaras)
 - Community members can receive meals at the temple three times each day
- Employment insurance and income assistance
- MSP: no monthly payment for low-income households
- Incentive programs for people who donate (tax receipts, discounts)
- Volunteering; participants noted that Canadian people really like to help
- Work together with local businesses (eg. Costco: option for shoppers to buy in bulk, but donate part of product to help those in poverty)
- Taxes for big businesses and high income earners; middle-income individuals are taxed enough

(b) What emerged as the top 3 solutions or ideas based on the conversations and the individual priority setting?

- While participants spend time selecting the three top solutions or ideas as priorities to address poverty, a number of reoccurring themes did emerge. These included:
 - Education: participants agreed that in Canada, if they and their children can access education, opportunities will be available and they will be able to escape poverty
 - There is a need for more low-income housing, including units that can accommodate large families
 - Canada needs to have a better system to recognize the educational background and work experience of skilled immigrants and refugees; that many of these newcomers are underemployed, working in low-paying jobs
 - There is a need for a livable wage

Conclusion

Participants expressed much appreciation to the Canadian government for the efforts that have been taken to address challenges of poverty. For many, the situation was much worse in their home country. Still, some individuals expressed shock and sadness, upon their arrival, when they discovered that even in Canada people suffer from homelessness. Participants acknowledged that both Canadian-born individuals and newcomers can struggle with poverty, and while there are some aspects of the struggle

that are shared, others are unique to the immigrant and refugee experience. Participants were careful to note that poverty should not be strictly looked at in financial terms, but also in social terms, and the effect that social poverty can have on an individual's life.

Contact information

Questions about this report can be directed to:

Andrea Loewen

Community Connections Coordinator

Abbotsford Community Services

andrea.loewen@abbotsfordcommunityservices.com

Ph: 604-217-3055