How to promote inclusion for newcomers?

Evidence Brief

Background

Almost one-quarter (23%) of people living in Canada were born outside the country and from 2016 to 2021, more than 200,000 refugees were admitted as permanent residents (Statistics Canada, 2022). These individuals, herein referred to as "newcomers", are known to face a variety of challenges before, during, and after their moves to Canada (Segal & Mayadas, 2005). These challenges include barriers to social inclusion (Yohani et al., 2019), which has been identified as a risk factor for suicide within this population (Aran et al., 2023). Experiences of isolation arise from a variety of factors, including absence of people who share the same cultural identity, language barriers that make new social connections difficult, the absence of family and friends from one's home community, and systematic exclusion caused by ethnocentric and racist attitudes (Ahmad et al., 2021; Crooks et al., 2020; Dodd et al., 2021; Yohani et al., 2019). To overcome these barriers, tailored interventions and supports are likely needed (Caidi & Allard, 2005).

Purpose

The purpose of this evidence brief is to explore evidence exploring strategies to enhance social inclusion among newcomers. In doing so, we recognize that this population is exceptionally diverse, and includes economic immigrants, immigrants sponsored by family, refugees, as well as others (Statistics Canada, 2022). Further, not all immigrants from other countries face the same barriers to inclusion. In particular, immigrants with different cultural traditions and spoken languages are particularly vulnerable (De Jong Gierveld, 2015). These various circumstances likely play a significant role in the experiences of newcomers. As such, we acknowledge that there are no one-size-fits-all solutions and continued ongoing community consultations are needed. Nevertheless, it is valuable to consider the broad principles that communities can work within in order to understand what can be done to improve social inclusion of newcomers.

Evidence from Existing Studies

Social inclusion describes the processes by which diversity is embraced and celebrated, people from diverse backgrounds are acknowledged for the contributions they offer society, and in which all people feel respected and supported by their communities (Dodd et al., 2021). To promote inclusion of newcomers, a wide variety of potential interventions have developed – with the most common being (1) befriending interventions designed to build relationships at the individual, (2) shared-identity interventions, which are designed to build and strengthen newcomer communities and ethnic enclaves, and (3) intercultural interventions that are designed to build ties across ethnic groups and the mainstream culture of the country in which they live (Salway et al., 2020).

At the individual level, befriending interventions play an important role of providing support and inclusion (Balaam et al., 2021). Social network studies have shown that people are more likely to befriend others who are the same generation of immigrant as they are (McMillan, 2019) – suggesting that building relationships across people with a shared experience of immigrant can be a potentially efficacious approach. As well, befriending can help people connect across cultures and breakdown barriers to connection (Askins et al., 2016).

Within ethnic enclaves, communities can develop culturally safe spaces that allow for genuine connections within and across cultures (Dodd et al., 2021). These spaces often arise at specific cultural sites or areas where migrant populations are served. Examples of such spaces include, religious or cultural sites related to newcomer's country of origin, language and migration support service organizations, and ethnic neighbourhoods where a large proportion of the population share a country of origin (Yohani et al., 2019). One study found that Black African youth specifically highlighted safe spaces, empowerment initiatives, and support through social networks as it is important to their sense of inclusion (Zaami, 2020). Culture-specific community organizations (Drolet & Moorthi, 2018) and ethnic enclaves (Lam et al., 2022) are therefore a critical assets to support newcomers – particularly those who are racialized as visible minorities. Creating and funding these spaces can help newcomers recover from the social and economic losses experienced as a result of their relocation (Pottie et al., 2005). Policies – such as those that restrict migration of family units for economic work – can also be changed (Basok & George, 2020). Communities can also support communal living arrangements, which may be especially helpful in creating community for smaller migrant groups (Ho, 2022). Regardless of how these safe spaces emerge, the connections made at these sites can increase overall well-being of newcomers (Yohani et al., 2019). As such, culture brokers who work to build relationships within and across communities can play an important role in promoting the social health of migrants by helping them navigate culture, access services, and find belonging (Yohani et al., 2019).

Finally, supporting newcomers also requires engagement with and from the broader community of the host country. For example, Madibbo (2020) highlights situations in which even if individuals are integrated into their local ethnic communities, they may face social exclusion from outside of their communities (Madibbo, 2020). This includes anti-Black racism, racial profiling by the police, or discrimination in the workplace (Madibbo, 2020). Service providers, including educators, must therefore be trained and prepared to support the inclusion of young newcomers (Dodd et al., 2021). Community services, such as libraries, should also be prepared and equipped to support newcomers – especially given studies showing the extent to which these services are utilized by newcomers (Grossman et al., 2021). Similarly, support from peers is crucial for newcomer youths' development of a sense of belonging, social inclusion, and new relationships, as well as improving their mental health and resilience (Oxman-Martinez & Choi, 2014; Sirin et al., 2013; Teja & Schonert-Reichl, 2013). For example, Guo et al. (2019) interviewed Syrian refugee children and parents to better understand their perspectives on school integration. They found that the refugee children's social isolation was due to the struggle to make friends with their classmates, bullying and racism, and discrimination from their teachers (Guo et al., 2019). Crooks et al. (2020) endorsed these findings as they saw that the participants' sense of belonging in schools was significantly reduced by persistent bullying and racism from both classmates and teachers (Crooks et al., 2020). Their findings illustrated the importance of peer relationships and inclusion being determinants of well-being in newcomer students (Crooks et al., 2020). Programs can also help systematize the integration

of newcomers. For example, community sports programs provide natural opportunities to build social bonds and a sense of shared identity, promote inclusion, and facilitate language development (Frisby, 2011; Rich et al., 2015). Policies also can help support newcomers. For example, workplace policies can help prevent and address experiences of discrimination (Basok & George, 2020; Selvanandan & Reid 2021).

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Case Study: "Perspectives of older Tamil immigrants on social inclusion: A concept mapping study in Canada"

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Ahmad et al.'s (2021) main objective was to explore factors that helped immigrants feel socially included, specifically older Tamil immigrants from Sri Lanka. Concept mapping was completed by 27 Tamil immigrants over the age of 55 in a group setting (Ahmad et al., 2021). Concept mapping is where participants organize their ideas into conceptual maps therefore, sorting, rating, and interpretation sessions were conducted on the 72 ideas the participants generated, and seven categories were identified. These included; services for employment and settlement, financial independence, medical system and senior care, adaptation and integration, family harmony, cultural interaction and feeling of security, and social interaction (Ahmad et al., 2021). Along with the first three categories, participants emphasized community-based programs built upon community engagement and policy-level interventions (Ahmad et al., 2021). Moreover, participants highlighted connections created in their early settlement, such as employment and social inclusion (Ahmad et al., 2021). Social networking, trust building, civic engagement, inclusion and social cohesion were also emphasized by participants (Ahmad et al., 2021). Overall, findings from the study illustrated the importance of multi-level and multi-sectorial interventions to increase the social inclusion of older Tamil immigrants (Ahmad et al., 2021).

Analyses from the Canadian Social Connection Survey

Recognizing the key role that discrimination may play in shaping social wellbeing among migrants, we used data from the 2021 Canadian Social Connection Survey to examine the relationship between discrimination and social well-being in a sub-cohort of participants who moved to Canada in the past 10 years (n = 314). Controlling for age, gender, ethnicity, and household income, higher Everyday Discrimination Scale Scores were associated with higher DeJong Loneliness Scale Scores (p < 0.0001). Meanwhile, newcomers who reported higher Social Support reported less discrimination (p = 0.002) – a finding which replicates those of previous studies showing that friendships can play a protective role against discrimination and its adverse consequences (Samara et al., 2020). These findings highlight how creating safe environments and promoting social support can prevent loneliness for newcomers.

Discussion

Evidence from the existing literature highlights that newcomers are at risk for loneliness and social isolation and highlights the need to build community cohesion within ethnic communities, facilitate inclusion in the broader community, address systematic and structural racism and

ethnocentrism, eliminate language barriers, and celebrate the diversity offered by newcomers. These efforts are especially important for seniors, young people, recent migrants, those who migrated without their families, undocumented workers, and others who may face multiple discrimination (e.g., 2SLGBTQ newcomers; Johnson et al., 2021; Negi et al., 2021). While we recognize that there are a variety of systematic barriers to providing social support, including limited resources and limited mandate, these services are nevertheless critical to supporting the health of newcomers and their communities (Simich et al., 2005). To support the expansion of these resources, more research is needed on the migrant experience in order to understand how to best support the vibrancy of ethnic communities, while also brokering connections into the broader mainstream community. In particular, longitudinal studies examining processes of social inclusion for migrants is needed in order to understand how experiences of social inclusion evolve as people become integrated into their communities. Such studies must leverage community-based participatory research methods to ensure they are conducted respectfully and capture the specific experiences of the diverse category of people labeled as "newcomers."

Conclusion

We recommend a multifaceted approach to improving social inclusion for refugees, migrants, and newcomers in Canada that both celebrates and builds cohesive ethnic communities, while also providing opportunities for social inclusion within the broader culture. This can include community, school-based, and work-related interventions that strengthen the sense of belonging of newcomers in their new homes.