



Transportation barriers to Syrian newcomer participation and settlement in Durham region



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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the effects of inaccessibility on Syrian refugees in Durham Region, a municipality abutting the City of Toronto. The transport and social exclusion framework is applied to determine whether transport poverty leads to inaccessibility, and how this impacts participation in daily activities and the wellbeing of recently landed refugees. A mixed methodological approach consisting of focus groups, survey data collection, and accessibility analysis provides a thorough and valid depiction of the topics investigated. The findings clearly depict evidence of subjective inaccessibility and its negative impact on participation in social and discretionary activities. At the same time, inaccessibility was not determined to be effecting participation rates in many mandatory activities such as daily English language classes or childcare-related tasks. Most of the respondents overwhelmingly felt that their transportation situation was having a strong negative impact on several dimensions of wellbeing, including loneliness and sadness. Despite the strong subjective and emotional responses to perceived inaccessibility, GIS-based accessibility scores show that the survey respondents had higher levels of objectively-measured access to destinations when compared to the broader population of Durham Region, indicating the importance of qualitative assessments of perceived access. Overall, the research confirms the validity of the transport and social exclusion framework and its usefulness in understanding participation and settlement outcomes among refugee migrants within a suburban, North American context.

1. Introduction

In the wake of the Syrian civil war and its consequent refugee crisis, the Government of Canada resettled approximately 40,000 Syrian refugees in 2016. Despite having extensive support mechanisms, transportation will be critical to helping Syrian refugees access services and successfully integrate into Canadian society. New arrivals are often reliant on others, including their sponsors, for assistance with transportation for both their social and practical needs. Without access to their own automobile, newcomers are often more reliant on public transportation, but the cost and time required to travel by transit can be prohibitive (Lo et al., 2011; Smart, 2015). For refugees settled in suburban and rural areas, where public transportation is limited, their potential isolation and disadvantage is heightened, we hypothesize that the lack of access to transportation results in decreased participation in

settlement services, language training, and employment opportunities, all of which support refugee settlement in Canada.

The goal of this research is to understand the effects of inaccessibility and transportation barriers on recent refugees' participation in daily activities. Our particular objectives are to:

- Identify whether Syrian refugee newcomers to Durham Region suffer from transportation inaccessibility.
- Discover whether inaccessibility acts as a barrier to participation in daily activities.
- Understand how inaccessibility affects wellbeing.

We achieve these objectives by combining quantitative travel behaviour research with qualitative focus groups of recent refugees. Though refugees are settling across Canada in a wide array of urban and

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rural contexts, Durham Region, east of Toronto in Southern Ontario, provides a useful case as a largely suburban and rural region with transportation issues that will have similarities to many other settlement regions across Canada and the United States.

Our study is couched in the transport and social exclusion theoretical framework which posits that socioeconomic and transport disadvantages can jointly constraint access to and participation in the activities constituting “normal” daily life. The framework is more fully described in the next section, but it is important to note that the novel aspects of this study stem from the relative dearth of research that has applied this framework to migrant, and especially refugee populations. We find that the barriers impacting other socioeconomically disadvantaged groups are magnified within this population – lack of resources, language, income, climate, etc. all serve to increase the barriers for refugees. Moreover, our study is focused on a smaller urban centre – looking at this location magnifies the barriers simply because it is not a major urban centre with a multitude of services and transportation resources and options. These socioeconomic and geographical factors highlight the potential novelty and importance of the work, and differentiate it from similar studies that focus on other population groups.

This research is conducted in partnership with academic researchers at two universities and the research team at Community Development Council Durham (CDCD), the major provider of newcomer settlement services in the Region. CDCD have identified transportation issues as a priority area for successful settlement of refugees. This research will allow us to gauge the necessity for improved policies regarding the urban and suburban contexts of refugee settlement, transportation-related barriers to participation, and assistance programs aimed at increasing the independent travel capabilities of refugees during the settlement process.

2. Literature review

2.1. Refugee and immigrant travel behavior

The transportation literature is rife with work regarding immigrant transportation, particularly with respect to differences in travel behaviour between immigrants and non-immigrants. However, there are relatively few examples of research that directly focus on the transportation issues of resettled refugees. The most recent and relevant paper reported on a survey of multinational refugees that settled in Vermont in the period of 2001–2012 which found a low degree of refugee satisfaction with public transit in the region (1/3rd the rate of the general population) (Bose, 2014). Similarly, the study showed a large degree of dissonance between desired and achieved transportation patterns. For example, the refugee population was more likely to walk (16%) and take transit (57%), despite having low levels of desire for using those modes, 5% and 11%, respectively. Overwhelmingly, the refugees surveyed had a strong preference for car travel (81%), and a low level of car use (23.8%) compared to both their desires and the average level of car use in the region.

While there is a dearth of knowledge regarding refugee travel patterns, the transportation situation facing refugees can be partially informed by the findings in the literature that relate to recent immigrants more generally. The research points to a pattern of persistent transport disadvantage among recent migrants. For example, using descriptive analysis of panel data in the United States, Klein and Smart (2017) found that recent immigrants were more likely than the general population to make quick transitions into and out of car ownership, and were less likely than others to own a car at any given point of time. This points to evidence of transport precarity, whereby immigrants are unable to rely on a consistent set of mobility tools to achieve their demand for daily activity participation.

The lack of consistent availability of cars found by Klein and Smart may be responsible for a slew of other findings in the literature regarding differences between immigrant and non-immigrant travel

behaviour. For example, Blumenberg and Smart (2014) find that immigrants are far more likely to rely on social connections and car-pooling to achieve their transportation needs. Smart (2015) finds that immigrants are more likely to walk and cycle. Lastly, Lo et al. (2011) find that immigrants were more likely to use transit for both work and non-work activities in the urban context of Toronto, ON, and that that this heightened level of transit dependence was not moderated by distance of residence to Toronto's downtown core.

The above studies clearly point to differentiated travel and activity patterns for immigrants. These differences notwithstanding, it is found that dissimilarities largely evaporate over the first five years of a newcomer's arrival as social and financial capital builds, and behaviors assimilate to the dominant mobility cultures in the region (Tal and Handy, 2010). If we are to truly understand the full scale of the transportation barriers to refugee activity participation, it is therefore crucial to measure their transport and activity patterns shortly after arrival with targeted data collection, as is done in the research described in this paper.

2.2. The transport and social exclusion framework

The transport and social exclusion theoretical framework informs and guides this research project (Social Exclusion Unit, 2003). Social exclusion is most straightforwardly understood as the “...inability [for an individual] to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to the majority of people in a society” (Levitas et al., 2007, pg. 9). Beyond barriers to immigrant participation that have been commonly identified within the literature, such as language (Pottie et al., 2008), discrimination (Wilkinson, 2002), or knowledge gaps (Yu et al., 2007), lack of access to transportation – both public and private – is a significant barrier to reaching services and finding employment (Parks, 2004). Studies of transport-related social exclusion (Social Exclusion Unit, 2003) have provided a framework that identifies the importance of independent travel in accessing social, health, and employment services among at-risk populations. Lucas (2012) describes this framework by positing that social exclusion can occur when transport disadvantages (e.g. no access to car, poor transit provision, lack of nearby destinations) combine with socioeconomic disadvantages (e.g. low income, language barriers, low social capital, low insurability) to result in inaccessibility (i.e. lack of ability to travel to key destinations). This lack of accessibility is then posited to limit opportunities for and occurrences of activity participation, further entrenching disenfranchisement and marginalization of the transport poor and negatively impacting wellbeing.

It follows that for new refugee arrivals in Canada, many of whom are transport and socioeconomically disadvantaged, the inability to travel to key destinations may directly limit their ability to participate in a wide range of fundamental activities necessary for settlement, therefore putting the settlement outcome at risk. This could impact the political integration (Bloemraad, 2006), employment (Lamba, 2003), and health outcomes (Beiser, 2005; Newbold, 2009) of the incoming wave of Syrian refugees.

Previous research has demonstrated a clear conceptual link between transportation and participation among the general population (Farber and Páez, 2011), particularly among groups at risk of social exclusion (Spinney et al., 2009). The largest treatment of transport related social exclusion in Canada came from a Human Resources and Social Development Canada research report that is now nearly ten years old (Páez et al., 2009). This project used large-scale travel surveys and econometric models of travel behaviour to identify the disparities in accessibility and participation among low-income, elderly, and lone-parent families (Farber et al., 2011; Páez and Farber, 2012; Roorda et al., 2010). The findings from this research identify large disparities in access and participation across population groups. However, one of the most important things that we learned was that more nuanced, qualitative explanations were necessary to determine whether participation

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