

Immigrant parents, refugees face greater mental health challenges; Kids' learning at risk

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Canadian immigrant parents, refugees, women and minorities are at greater risk of mental health issues and socioeconomic challenges, with

their children more likely to suffer learning setbacks before kindergarten, a pair of studies by researchers at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto have shown.

Research findings come as the Canadian government prepares to release its 2018 immigration policy- which it says will boost the economy and help refugees.

The initial study - the first of its kind in Canada - Emotional Problems Amongst Recent Immigrants and Parenting Status, published in Public Library of Science's journal *PLOS One*, shows [parents](#) who are new to Canada have higher rates of depression and emotional problems than new Canadian non-parents. This finding is particularly strong among immigrants who were single, female or refugees.

In the second study, School Readiness Amongst Urban Canadian Families, published in the American Psychological Association's *Journal of Educational Psychology*, the children of many Canadian immigrant families were found to be behind their peers in learning and development before kindergarten. This included early reading and math knowledge, attention, and social skills.

Researchers say this is often because many recent [immigrant parents](#) are socioeconomically disadvantaged compared to the rest of the population. Many struggle to provide their children with learning opportunities before they reach school-age.

'Particularly vulnerable'

"When we look at the results of these two studies together, we can see that immigrant families are particularly vulnerable," said Dr. Dillon Browne, who led the studies during his PhD at OISE.

"Not only are the parents at higher risk for mental health issues and financial challenges, but their kids' learning development is impacted before they have even reached the classroom - this could have long-term implications," he continued. "These studies show that it's important to look at how we as a society can better support new Canadian families."

Dr. Jennifer Jenkins, Chair of Early Child Development and Education at the Atkinson Centre at OISE, said, "As a society, it is imperative that every child and every [family](#) has the opportunity to grow and thrive. This cannot happen unless there is equal opportunity for economic stability and mental health."

Depression, emotional state of Canadian immigrant parents studied

In the first study, researchers tracked the self-reported rates of emotional and [mental health issues](#) of 7,000 immigrants across Canada during their first four years in the country. Results showed Canadian immigrants had a high rate of [emotional problems](#), with one-in-three reporting significant challenges by their second year in the country. These rates were even higher among immigrants who were parents.

"When we saw the impact on parents in particular, it prompted us to dig further - we needed to see how their kids were doing," said Dr. Browne.

At risk: Immigrant kids in Toronto

In their second study, researchers followed 500 immigrant and non-immigrant families in the Greater Toronto Area from the time a child was born until they entered school.

Results show that two-thirds of the struggling families were headed by [immigrant](#) parents living in poverty, whose children who were behind in social, emotional and academic skills by the time they began

kindergarten.

"In other words, there were gaps in learning before children entered school due to the family's living circumstances after arriving in Canada" said Dr. Browne.

"One reason is families struggle to provide their children with enrichment and learning opportunities in the early years. Another reason is parents become stressed by economic and employment challenges and struggle to create a household environment that promotes learning," he continued.

Researchers say this pattern holds for many urban immigrants in Canada. Ultimately, they say, it's a matter of economic opportunity for new Canadians.

Rise in refugees

These findings are particularly important given the recent spike in refugees in the country. Study authors say they hope the Canadian government, which will release its 2018 immigration plan on Nov. 1, takes notice.

"Policies need to facilitate socioeconomic success and mental health following arrival in Canada, given the effects of poverty and stress on early learning, and the effects of early learning on society," said Dr. Browne.

In short, researchers say immigration policies need to consider the following - which are necessary for new immigrants to thrive:

- Parenting supports that promote healthy parent-child relationships and child development across the early years

- Access to childcare - particularly high-quality childcare that significantly exposes children to English/French during periods of rapid language growth
- Culturally sensitive [mental health](#) services for children and families that have undergone trauma before, during and after migration
- Opportunities for family economic success including initiatives that reduce barriers to employment and income supplements

The study team hopes to see a government response that involves increased spending for early learning, childcare, and family supports amongst families who have recently arrived.

Recognizing this research comes as the government's plan is announced, Dr. Browne says, "We hope this research will impact future policy decisions so that the right supports are put in place to help foster healthy family resettlement and, ultimately, the success of the nation."

More information: Dillon T. Browne et al. Emotional problems among recent immigrants and parenting status: Findings from a national longitudinal study of immigrants in Canada, *PLOS ONE* (2017). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0175023](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0175023)

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