

Discrimination is associated with health disparities among racialized older Canadians

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Although Canada receives thousands of refugees each year, there has been little research on their health as they age. A new study published recently in the *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*

found that the vast majority of older refugees living in Canada report being in good physical health (82%). These results are comparable to both their immigrant peers and those who were born in Canada.

"Many refugees experience torture and physical hardships in their country of origin, which may have long-term health consequences," said first author, Alyssa MacAlpine, a recent graduate of the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work (FIFSW) at the University of Toronto. "With this in mind, the high percentage of older refugees reporting good physical health in Canada is positive news and underlines the protective role that Canada's universal health care system may have on enhancing the physical health of refugees."

Less positive is the study's findings that racialized immigrants were less likely to report being in [good health](#) compared to white immigrants and [white individuals](#) born in Canada.

"It's only when we looked at the intersection of race and [immigrant](#) status that we found health disparities," said co-author Professor Usha George, Academic Director, Ryerson Centre for Immigration and Settlement.

White Canadian-born individuals and white immigrants were 35% more likely to report being in good health compared to racialized immigrants.

"These findings indicate that racialized immigrants in Canada are at a health disadvantage," George said.

Experiences of discrimination may contribute to these health differences. Racialized Canadians were significantly more likely to report that they had experienced at least one incident of discrimination in the previous 5 years compared to non-racialized Canadians (32% vs 19%, respectively).

"Those who said they had not experienced any form of discrimination in the past five years had 69% higher odds of reporting good health compared to their peers who had experienced discrimination," said co-author Karen Kobayashi, Professor in the Department of Sociology and a Research Fellow at the Institute on Aging & Lifelong Health at the University of Victoria.

Physical health was linked to a number of other social factors as well. For example, being involved in at least one [social group](#) or organization in the past year, believing that most people can be trusted, having a confidant, and being married or living common law were all associated with greater odds of reporting good health.

"These findings speak to the importance of reducing social isolation among aging populations in Canada to support better health outcomes," said senior author, Esme Fuller-Thomson, a professor at FIFSW and director of the Institute for Life Course & Aging at the University of Toronto. "We found that racialized individuals were less likely than white individuals to be involved in social groups or associations, which suggests the need for more community-based services to support socialization opportunities."

Other factors that increased the odds of poorer health included being less educated (e.g., a high school diploma or less) and having a household income under \$50,000 per year.

"Future research is needed to determine if interventions to improve [social support](#) and lower discrimination not only improve quality of life but also lead to better [health](#) among racialized older adults," said George.

The study used data from the 27th General Social Survey, a nationally representative Canadian survey conducted by Statistics Canada in 2013. Of the 9011 respondents age 55 and older, 6777 were white individuals

born in Canada, 44 were racialized individuals born in Canada, 104 were white refugees, 110 were racialized refugees, 1277 were white immigrants, and 699 were racialized immigrants. The study used cross-sectional observational data and therefore causality cannot be determined.

More information: Alyssa A. McAlpine et al, Physical Health of Older Canadians: Do Intersections Between Immigrant and Refugee Status, Racialized Status, and Socioeconomic Position Matter?, *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/00914150211065408](https://doi.org/10.1177/00914150211065408)

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