Starting out in smaller communities may be better for refugee populations

New research shows Syrian refugees report higher satisfaction in first year of settlement when in smaller Albertan communities

By Katie Willis on August 22, 2019

Syrian refugees report higher satisfaction with settlement services and community when spending their first year of settlement in a smaller community, according to a new study conducted by the University of Alberta’s School of Urban and Regional Planning.

The research compared experiences of refugees from Syria who were settled in Edmonton to those in Lethbridge. Results suggest that smaller communities were more creative, nimble, and efficient in settling newcomers in their first year, with Syrian refugees in Lethbridge reporting higher satisfaction with both the community at large and the specific aid services offered.

“It seems that smaller urban centres, such as Lethbridge, can better serve refugees in the short term,” explained Sandeep Agrawal, lead author and professor in the Department of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences. “Their small size helps agencies, officials, and individuals to come together much more quickly and can also be creative in their service delivery.”

The effect, however, may not extend past the first few years of settlement. The study also suggests that larger cities, such as Edmonton, may have more success in settling newcomers in the long-term, with better access to complementary, non-government supports, more diverse job prospects, and a larger volunteer base from which to draw.

While further research is required to determine long-term success of refugees in different cities, Agrawal also calls for a more robust approach to assessing the number of refugees settled in different municipalities across Canada.

“Our government agencies would be well served to conduct critical analyses before determining the number of refugees destined to various urban centres across the country,” said Agrawal. “The ratio of newcomer numbers to the capacity of service infrastructure present matters because it largely determines the efficacy of settlement services—regardless of the size of the urban centre.”

Agrawal is the director of the School of Urban and Regional Planning. This research builds upon Agrawal’s existing work examining the experiences of Syrian refugees in Canada. The study, “Does Community Size Matter in the Settlement Process? The Experience of Syrian Refugees in Lethbridge in Alberta, Canada,” is under review for publication in the Journal of International Migration and Integration.

Source: Faculty of Science