



# Safe Employment Integration of Recent Immigrants and Refugees

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## Abstract

This study examined the employment preparation and work experiences of recent immigrants and refugees in Ontario, Canada, to determine key resource needs and opportunities related to safe work integration. In-depth interviews were conducted with 22 service providers, program developers, and policy-makers from the immigration and employment fields. Eighteen focus groups were held with 110 recent immigrants and refugees who were looking for work or who had recently found work. An exploratory qualitative approach was used to collect and analyze the data. First jobs were often characterized by precarity and poor working conditions. Most recent immigrants and refugees had little knowledge about their rights at work and were not sure what to do when mistreated or were asked to do something unsafe at work. The settlement and employment programs that included occupational health and safety information were not systematic and were hindered by a lack of consistent funding and diffusion of responsibility. We identify optimal points in the settlement process where information can be provided, and some of the roles that can be played most effectively by service agencies, regulatory bodies, and employers.

**Keywords** Occupational health and safety · Employment · Immigrants · Refugees

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## Safe Employment Integration of Recent Immigrants and Refugees

Since 2015, Canada has accepted close to 300,000 permanent immigrants yearly (Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada 2018a). Of all provinces and territories, Ontario accepts the greatest share of immigrants (37.3%). As of January 2017, 40,000 Syrian refugees settled in Canada with the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) being a key destination (Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada 2017). This is in addition to the intake of other refugees and immigrants. Part of settlement and integration involves helping recent immigrants and refugees find work and become financially solvent. However, this process can be challenging. Many newcomers have difficulty finding good quality jobs because their credentials are not recognized (Sweetman et al. 2015; Chen et al. 2010; Reid 2012; LaRochelle-Côté and Hango 2016), they have few social networks (George et al. 2012; Schellenberg and Maheux 2007), lack work experience in the country of arrival (Smith and Mustard 2010), and do not have full proficiency in English or French (Premji et al. 2008; Warman et al. 2015; Ferrer et al. 2006; Premji and Smith 2013).

Many recent immigrants and refugees end up in “survival jobs” (Buzdugan and Halli 2009; Creese and Wiebe 2012). These jobs are concentrated in non-unionized industries, are more likely to be part-time or temporary, and lack employer-sponsored benefits such as pension plans and health insurance (Smith et al. 2009; Nevitte and Kanji 2003; Smith and Mustard 2010). Compared with Canadian-born workers, recent immigrants and refugees are more likely to do shift work and work in physically demanding jobs, and less likely to receive training (Smith and Mustard 2009). These conditions are known to expose workers to a higher risk of injury (Smith and Mustard 2010; Underhill and Quinlan 2011). Systemic racism and language barriers also make getting good quality jobs more difficult (Kosny et al. 2017; Oreopoulos and Dechief 2012). Refugees often end up in the most precarious work situations. Refugees enter Canada to escape the humanitarian crisis and receive some governmental support for a period after their arrival. The vast majority eventually look for work and enter the labor market. However, many may not have had an opportunity to prepare to come to Canada and important work-related documents and credentials may be lost in the migration process (Krahn et al. 2000).

While employers have a responsibility to train workers and put measures in place to keep them safe, recent immigrants and refugees may not always receive or understand training or be aware of their rights (Caidi and Allard 2005). In July 2014, the province of Ontario introduced mandatory occupational health and safety (OHS) awareness training for workers and supervisors. However, a study by Lay and colleagues found that, compared with Canadian-born workers, fewer recent immigrants and refugees know about or have received this training (Lay et al. 2018). They may not seek this information from employers or raise safety issues because they do not know the hazards in their workplaces (Kosny et al. 2012) or worry about losing their jobs and fear other reprisals (Hoppe 2011; Premji and Lewchuk 2014). Lack of adequate training and knowledge of health and safety and worker rights may put immigrants and refugees in a vulnerable position (Kosny et al. 2012). In a recent review of the studies that examined injury among immigrant workers in Canada, Kazi et al. (2018) concluded that, in addition to hazardous jobs and language difficulties, lack of information and training, and occupational mismatch were key factors related to work injuries.

While many provincial and federal “welcome materials” and settlement programs focus on helping newcomers find work (Thomas 2015; Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada 2018b; Cukier et al. 2010), few offer guidance on employment rights, employer responsibilities, and how to stay safe at work (Kosny and Lifshen 2012). We know very little about how recent immigrants and refugees prepare for employment, the types of resources that are needed to protect them at work or which groups are well-positioned to deliver these resources. Being equipped with knowledge of worker rights, employer health and safety responsibilities, and how to perform jobs safely can reduce injury risk (Expert Advisory Panel on Occupational Health and Safety 2010) and improve the safety of newcomer workers.

The purpose of this study was to examine the work-integration process of recent immigrants and refugees in Ontario and determine key training and resource needs and opportunities related to safely integrating recent immigrants and refugees into the Canadian labor market. Specifically, our goal was to understand newcomers’ experiences of looking for work, the quality of their first jobs, and the kind of programs and resources they access in preparation to enter the workforce, particularly regarding OHS or employment standards.

## Methods

An exploratory qualitative research approach was used to collect and analyze the data. We examined newcomers’ integration into the workforce and how various individual and systemic factors shaped those experiences. Through interviews and focus groups, we also considered how the processes of integration were related to occupational health and safety. The research protocol was approved by the University of Toronto Ethics Review Board. In the reporting of findings, some minor details were removed from quotes to preserve participant anonymity.

## Recruitment and Sampling

**Key Informant Interviews** Key informants (service providers, program developers, and policy-makers) were recruited through settlement organizations in Ontario and by contacting policy bodies in the labor and immigration fields.

Settlement agencies in Ontario provide a wide range of programs and services to immigrants and refugees that help with their integration into Canadian life. These programs and services include finding housing, interpretation and translation, counseling, legal assistance, referral and information services, language training, skill development, and employment support. Pre-employment programs help newcomers with job search, resume writing, workplace-related language training, interview preparation, and orientation to Canadian workplace culture. Settlement agency service providers also connect newcomers with potential Canadian employers through internships, mentorship programs, and job placement support.

Settlement agencies in Ontario receive funding support from the Federal Government of Canada (Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada) as well as the Province of Ontario, municipalities, and established foundations (e.g., United Way). Generally, settlement organizations design the programs for immigrants and refugees

based on needs assessments and government priorities at the federal and provincial level, and settlement workers deliver these programs. Settlement agencies sign a funding agreement with the funding bodies and have contractual obligations regarding the delivery of these services and programs. Funding bodies can have built in requirements for who can access the services and programs that they fund. For example, refugee claimants and non-permanent residents are not eligible for federally funded resettlement services. The outcomes and success of these programs are monitored and evaluated by the funding bodies based on the contractual agreements (Eakin 2001).

The research team's pre-existing contacts (e.g., professional networks, research partners) were used to make initial inquiries, with the aim of identifying individuals who might participate as key informants. Referred individuals were then sent a recruitment e-mail that briefly explained the study objectives along with a study information letter providing study details, including privacy and confidentiality issues. Interested individuals were invited to participate in an interview.

**Focus Groups** Focus group participants were recruited through settlement organizations and community groups that help recent immigrants and refugees in the GTA, Eastern Ontario, and Northern Ontario. Recruitment for focus group participants was aimed at identifying immigrants and refugees from different countries and immigration streams. Settlement organizations publicized study information provided by the researchers. Recruitment materials for Syrian refugees were translated into Arabic by peer researchers. Individuals interested in participating in focus groups were asked to provide their contact information using a sign-up sheet or to contact the researchers directly. All potential participants received a study information letter explaining the details of the study along with privacy and confidentiality information.

Recruitment continued until a diversity of participants was achieved and continued until saturation of concepts was reached and no new themes were forthcoming.

## Procedure and Participants

**Key Informant Interviews** One-on-one key informant interviews were conducted with 22 service providers, program developers, and policy-makers. Service providers and program developers were employed by the settlement organizations that provided language and pre-employment programming. Service providers worked as employment counselors, job coaches and employment specialists providing language, and employment support to newcomers. Program developers described their role as comprising of program design, research, and the monitoring and evaluation of programming for newcomers.

Policy-makers described their role as determining funding and program priorities, the evaluation of trends in employment or OHS, and the monitoring of funding agreements.

Service provider and program developer interviews focused on current programming, opportunities for and barriers to including worker rights and OHS resources into existing programs, and possible approaches to integrating these resources into service delivery. Policy-maker interviews focused on understanding how current funding and policy arrangements shape the newcomer and refugee employment preparation process and the benefits and challenges of greater settlement sector involvement in the dissemination of work, health, and safety information to newcomers.

Interviews were held in person or via telephone, depending on the participant's location and preference. In-person interviews took place in a private room in the community/settlement organization. Written consent was obtained from all participants prior to the start of the interview. Each interview lasted approximately 1 h and was audio recorded.

**Focus Groups** Eighteen focus groups (13 in English and five in Arabic) were conducted with recent immigrants and refugees who were looking for work or who had work experience in Canada. In total, 110 recent immigrants and refugees participated in focus groups. Focus group questions focused on the employment preparation process with the aim of understanding where newcomers access work-related resources and support, their knowledge of rights and responsibilities related to employment and safety at work, and their experiences in their first jobs.

Four peer researchers who speak Arabic were recruited to facilitate focus groups with Syrian refugees. Peer researchers attended two training sessions on ethics, recruitment, and focus group facilitation delivered by the members of the research team. All focus groups took place in private rooms in the community/settlement organizations. Focus groups included four to ten participants and lasted 1 to 1½ h. All participants signed an informed consent form. Facilitators were on hand to answer questions about the study and the consent form.

Fifty-five percent of the participants were women. The participants came from a variety of regions including South Asia, South America and the Caribbean, and Europe. More than half came from the Middle East (54%). Participants were distributed among a range of age groups, with close to half (43%) being under the age of 35. Out of 92 participants who reported their immigration stream of entry, 25% were economic immigrants (including spouses of principal applicants), 35% were humanitarian refugees, and 9% were family members, other than the spouse to the principal applicant. Most of the participants (70%) had been in Canada for less than 3 years. And most participants (73%) had some university training and before coming to Canada had professional experience in the fields of engineering, education, skilled trade, business, or health.

## Data Analysis

All focus groups and interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Arabic focus groups were translated and transcribed by peer researchers. A research team member who has proficiency in Arabic also reviewed the translated focus group transcripts to ensure fidelity between the recordings and transcription.

A thematic content analysis was used to organize data systematically and to identify, analyze, and report themes (Braun and Clarke 2006). The transcripts were entered into NVivo (qualitative data analysis software) for data storage and organization (NVivo 2017). Interview data and focus group data were analyzed separately. In the first phase of coding, three researchers read a sample of the interview and focus group transcripts and established a preliminary list of codes. Once the preliminary coding list was discussed among the research team, a coding manual was developed that included a definition for each code and an explanation for how its content would apply to the

research objectives. The transcripts were then coded in two rounds by researchers. Once the first round of coding was applied, the coded text was sent to the second reviewer to add additional codes or to identify and discuss sections that may have been miscoded.

The content assigned to each code was later reviewed to identify themes, patterns, gaps, and contradictions in data. Common themes and concepts across codes that captured key insights were identified. Any discrepancies in coding or interpretative differences were discussed and resolved in team meetings. The constant comparative method was used to understand how newcomers come to understand their rights and where there are gaps in resources and training.

## Findings

### Looking for Work

Almost every focus group participant reported great difficulty finding employment. Language barriers, a lack of local experience, and the requirement for Canadian credentials were described as key obstacles to finding a good quality job.

“But, even if you have experience in your country ... I have more than 12 years’ experience in work. I worked in [Middle East country] and I also worked in [Country in Western Asia]. Whenever I go and apply for a job, they told me, you should have Canadian experience. How can I obtain it if I am a newcomer?” (GTA, FG #10)<sup>1</sup>

Barriers such as language were felt more acutely by refugees who tended to have more difficulty communicating in English. However, almost all participants reported that not having English as a first language was a problem when it came to writing resumes and in interviews. Similarly, the lack of extensive social networks in the newcomers’ field of employment contributed to the difficulty of finding work. Participants described sending numerous resumes to employers without success.

Participants noted that there was an expectation that they have Canadian experience, even in jobs where this seemed irrelevant. One participant, for example, described being asked for Canadian experience when applying for a dishwashing job. Another talked about being asked for Canadian experience to do sewing work. Such experiences led to newcomers feeling dejected and “worthless.”

“I have had quite a bit of interviews. Most of them have been unsuccessful. The interviewing person will seem to have a problem believing my experiences and abilities. They will ask for Canadian experience. That seems to be a big thing. On account of that, you’re not as valuable.” (GTA, FG #11)

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<sup>1</sup> FG, focus group; GTA, Greater Toronto Area

Most participants had come to Canada expecting to work in their fields, only to realize that the credentials from their home country were not recognized. For participants who had arrived in Canada as refugees, an added difficulty was that transcripts and credentials from their home country were difficult to access or had been destroyed. This left them in a difficult position—accepting a job that was far below their qualifications and education or spending time (sometimes months or years) and money on retraining. Often, retraining was perceived as a means to find a decent job in their field.

Participants also spoke about the need to send funds to their home country or save money to sponsor other family members. If they were receiving income support from the government or a sponsorship group, the amount was often inadequate, especially in expensive cities like Toronto. While refugees receive income support during the first year in Canada and settlement organizations often tailored their employment programs to newcomers who had some language training (and had been in Canada for at least a few months), most participants in our study reported looking for work almost immediately upon arrival. They felt pressure to find work to have greater financial security for their families. Many did not want to depend on “charity” and instead wanted to become economically self-sufficient.

“I know somebody, on disability or welfare [...] but I don’t like this kind of life [...] I want to continue my experience in Canada. I want to start a job seriously, to get to pay tax. Many things...if I have a job, I can rent condominium one bedroom for myself. [...] I don’t need any offer from government, just I need, I want, job.” (GTA, FG #13)

Race, gender, and age also shaped participants’ experiences finding work. For example, a number of participants suggested that a key barrier to finding work or getting their credentials recognized was the color of their skin. There was some suggestion that employer demand for Canadian experience or credentials was in fact a manifestation of racism. Similarly, some participants felt that it was no coincidence that the immigrants who ended up in the worst quality jobs were people of color “For me, I’m a coloured woman, everywhere you go, the first thing they look at is your colour. Before even they take the interview.” (GTA, FG #11).

Gender could also influence the process of finding work. Women described a lack of daycare, as well as, care-giving responsibilities that limited the types of programs they accessed and jobs they were able to secure. Further, some key informants suggested immigrant women from certain cultures were not interested in paid work and, in some instances, this belief appeared to lead to a gender bias in employment-related programming that tended to reinforce this belief. For example, one organization held work and health workshops only for immigrant men.

Some older participants also described the challenges they experienced finding work because they had difficulty learning the language. Also, many of these workers held senior positions in their home countries and when this experience or their education was not recognized, they were faced with working in jobs far below their skill or training.

## Strategies for Entering the Canadian Labor Market

Given the difficulty of finding work, participants described a number of strategies for trying to enter the Canadian labor market. These included volunteer work; participating in employment programs offered by settlement organizations; using family, cultural, and community connections to find jobs; and accepting poor quality, survival jobs to gain Canadian experience and financial solvency.

**Volunteer Labor** Participants described being encouraged by service providers to participate in volunteer activities. Some participants also believed that doing unpaid labor for a potential employer or settlement agency would lead to paid employment. At the very least, it would provide the opportunity to practice language skills and gain Canadian work experience. However, a number of participants reported being disillusioned with volunteering. The volunteer job was rarely in the newcomers' professional field and, as a result, did not provide the sort of experience that would lead to the type of work newcomers hoped to find. Although in some cases volunteer jobs did provide some opportunity to practice language skills, for other newcomers, it meant leaving formal language training. Volunteering also sometimes extended for long periods of time or required considerable time commitments (many hours a day) leaving little time to search for paid work and taking time away from family obligations.

“It’s helpful, yes, but it’s eight hours per day [...] and you’re exhausted and you are out of your home and leaving your kids and your responsibilities. What is the return? No tokens. No nothing.” (GTA, FG #9)

**Settlement Organizations** Many newcomers participated in programs developed by settlement agencies that connected them to employers. Some settlement organizations sought to find employers (or were approached by employers) to hire newcomers. Employers participating in these programs received incentives for hiring a recent immigrant, for example, a wage subsidy for a period of time. Both service providers and newcomers described being grateful for the employment connections, as these were a way of gaining a foothold in the labor market. However, jobs provided by these employers were often manual, low-paying jobs.

A number of service providers noted that while they appreciated having these employer connections, there had been instances where employers did not follow rules set out in labor contracts or treated workers poorly.

“[Recent immigrants] end up in unsafe situations. Depending on how desperate their situation is, it can be very exploitative [...] there are employers who essentially subcontract out work rather than paying employment insurance and benefits, etc. They just call their employees independent contractors, like cleaners, for instance, make them buy all the equipment themselves, usually from the company hiring them, and then leave them with nothing if anything happens.



So, that's becoming an increasing trend as well that we've seen." (Key Informant, Service Provider, P08)

Service providers noted that in these instances they were put in a difficult position because they wanted to help and support the worker (their client) but also wanted to maintain a good relationship with the employer. Some service providers spoke positively about the relationship they had with employers, but it was noted that the jobs provided were not sustainable and employers sometimes fired workers as soon as the incentive or subsidy stopped. This issue also came up in some focus groups.

Service providers mentioned reporting the number of job placements to funders but noted that they did not know what happened to newcomers once they entered these jobs—for example, whether they continued working or found other, higher quality jobs. As one key informant described:

R: "Yeah, and that's the part that we are not good at yet... we put people through a pre-employment program or training and we can count the number of people that might get employment after that. We don't do a lot of follow up at all to see if three months after perhaps the training now has really yielded them a job, but we don't know that and we'll never know that because we don't follow up with them."

M: "What's the barrier to following up, why do you think you don't follow up?"

R: "We don't, we don't right now have any mechanism to do that and we haven't asked the service providers to do that." (Key informant, Policy maker, P15)

With the overwhelming workload in these employment agencies and based on the activities incentivized by the funding model, service providers found themselves placing newcomers in the first available job without inquiring about the quality of that work.

**Family, Cultural, and Community Connections** Many participants who had found jobs in Canada described finding them through family, cultural, or community connections. For example, participants spoke about finding work through other newcomers, friends, distant relatives, or through their place of worship. Participants also described finding work by tapping into members of their ethnic community or found work through temp agencies that hired members of their ethnic or cultural community.

Although these avenues seemed to be more effective for finding work than cold calling or sending out resumes, they had some drawbacks. While there was a perception from service providers that securing work through networks would lead to better work, jobs found through these networks were still typically precarious, of poor quality, and with low pay.

R: "I did two months of dishwashing, but not with a SIN number, I worked under-the-table. They paid \$10, but they gave me no rest. Work, work, work, work, work. I had headaches, so I stopped and went again to school."

M: "How did you find this job?"

R: “My friend, I think he made more money sometimes. I think so. Because I can’t change the cheque, after I gave to him the cheque, that time, he took \$40 and they gave for others, \$10. I work, work, but no money.” (GTA, FG #11)

In other instances, jobs were in small businesses run by other newcomers, and a number of service providers questioned whether these small business owners knew about or were concerned about their obligations when it came to employment standards, training, and health and safety.

“In the construction industry...the newcomers come in, the sectors that they’re going to, are the sectors where the greatest OHS risk takes place. It’s the sector where it’s predominantly the smaller employer, so that employer profile is important to understand. They don’t know, they’re ignorant, they don’t care, and there’s very little consequence if they actually do it [provide health and safety training]. How do you bring about change, given those four factors?” (Key informant, Service Provider, P01)

Work secured through personal networks also meant that the newcomer could end up in an environment where they almost exclusively spoke their native language. Yet many newcomers noted that one goal of finding work, beyond income, was to immerse themselves in an English-speaking environment in order to improve their language skills. Finally, some described instances when finding work through cultural or family networks had undesired consequences. One participant, for example, described feeling like she could not speak up because her employer was someone from her home country:

“I think that this [chemical liquid] is not good for me, because all the time I have a runny nose, I cough and I sneeze. I think it’s [chemical liquid], and I need to tell the manager that this one is not good for me. And then she told me if you say that, maybe you’re going to lose your job. Because she said I need you to do [it]...And so it’s very hard for me, because she’s from my country. I know her in my country, we have a tradition. You have to respect somebody if she’s older than you.... So, I have to respect her, but sometimes she abuse(s) [me].” (GTA, FG #13)

In these cases, securing work through family or cultural networks left newcomers vulnerable to exploitation and resulted in circumstances that were difficult to navigate. Workers in these situations were typically grateful for finding work, but at the same time, personal connections and tradition made it difficult to speak up when they were mistreated.

### **First Jobs**

Among participants with work experience in Canada, first jobs were often “survival jobs,” characterized by low pay, precarity and poor working conditions. Participants described jobs that were temporary, where they worked with hazardous materials and received minimal job-related or health and safety training. While there were some

participants who had jobs where they had positive experiences and received information about their rights, this was the exception, not the norm. Some participants described working for “cash only” and being paid less than their Canadian-born counterparts. When workers were injured or hurt, they described being reprimanded or told to leave the workplace. Workers who became injured had little to no knowledge about workers’ compensation.

“I work in factory. After I came here maybe for three months or four months, I was working in that, picking the package, the cartons, and keeping in the skids. And I told my supervisor it is very heavy, and the job without people. I am just one. And now I have a problem in my back. I feel that I can’t bend myself. He told me, remember, if you will go now, I will send a report against you to the temporary agency and I will tell them that you have a problem in your back...they will not call you again for any kind of job. And maybe they will cancel your file.” (GTA, FG #9)

For many newcomers in our study, the jobs that they first did in Canada were completely new to them. They were not accustomed to the work environment and had no training in the tasks they were asked to perform.

“We are not used for that kind of work. We don’t even know how to do it. We came with education then we would look for work that is appropriate for us and not work in a kitchen or in a restaurant or I don’t know what. We are not used to that kind of work...we find it very hard.” (GTA, Arabic FG #18)

In addition, many also did not have strong English-language skills. This made the reported lack of job-related and OHS training particularly troubling.

Participants rarely reported receiving comprehensive health and safety training from employers or elsewhere and most had limited knowledge of employment standards. The worker below described his work experience with training:

“In a hotel? No. I’ve been in four hotels. Four. Not one of them I’ve ever been in, never in no orientation they say, this is what you do, this is what you bring to work, this is what you never do.” (GTA, FG #11)

There was a degree of confusion regarding what was meant by various health and safety concepts introduced in focus groups. For example, when asked about their *rights* as a worker, some newcomers instead listed their responsibilities in the workplace, such as the work tasks they were expected to complete during their jobs. In some instances, participants simply described signing a contract that outlined their responsibilities when asked about their health and safety training.

M: “You know when you were saying that with some of the training, did you ever receive any kind of materials that sort of told you about your rights or what to do if you’re injured? Anything around that?”

R1: “At the beginning they give a bunch of papers.”

R2: “A contract.”

R1: “Yeah, they give so many papers and we have to sign it. In my case, they give and we need to sign all of the papers before we come to work.” (Northern Ontario, FG #5)

Workplace health and safety was at times taken to mean measures to protect clients or customers instead of the worker her or himself. For example, one participant discussed getting a Safe Food Handling Certificate (which focuses only on food and customer safety). Another participant who was a personal support worker discussed getting training on preventing falls and injury; however, when pressed for details, it became clear this training only focused on the safety of her elderly clients. Finally, a few workers described receiving WHMIS (Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System) training and doing the mandatory awareness training. However, the detailed recollection of material covered by this training was limited.

**Speaking up at Work...or Not** Given some of the work conditions described by participants, we wanted to know how newcomers dealt with situations where they were asked to do something unsafe or when they encountered poor working conditions. For those participants who had not yet found work in Canada, many felt confident that if they were mistreated or if they encountered poor working conditions, they would speak up or refuse to do anything that would put them in danger. However, participants who were or had been employed in Canada tended to have a different perspective. When these newcomers were mistreated in the workplace, they typically were not sure what to do. Some, driven by necessity, put up with poor treatment. When things got too bad or when they were injured, the solution was to simply leave the workplace.

M: “Did the people do anything when you fell down?”

R: “Yeah, my manager at the work are there. But, they don’t help. Then, I went home and three or four days rested. But, I didn’t go to the hospital, because I don’t understand how to explain to the doctor.... So much, language is problem. Before, I couldn’t understand. I’m looking just the face.”

M: “Your supervisor called you to come back? But, they didn’t do anything else?”

R: “No.”

M: “And then you didn’t go [back to work].”

R: “No.” (GTA, FG #12)

Speaking up when asked to do something unsafe or when experiencing mistreatment was made more difficult by some of the circumstances described above—complicated relationships, financial insecurity, and precarity in the labor market. One participant, for example, described his reluctance to speak up after an experience working through a temporary work agency:

“Yes, I complained. If you are working for the agency, they give you many notes in a paper. If you want to complain, complain [to] us. Don’t talk to anyone. If somebody raises his voice... don’t take any reaction, just call us.... They will do just one thing. They will remove you from the list. They don’t give more help.” (GTA, FG #9)

In addition, most participants had little knowledge about their rights at work or the responsibilities of their employer. One participant, for example, described being perplexed when her employer called, angry that she had “cost him money.” She had been injured at work and, when her pain persisted, she visited a doctor. When asked by the doctor about her injury she mentioned it had happened at work and this resulted in the doctor contacting the workers’ compensation board.

“The manager scold me, why you are going to hospital? What do you say when the doctors ask you, your arm injured in my workplace? And when hiring, they give me five days full time working. When I am injured, I come back and I was in my work, they give me two days in the week. And I’m stuck, because it doesn’t make sense for me, two days.” (GTA, FG #13)

The employer was upset that the worker had set a workers’ compensation claim in motion and this resulted in the worker’s hours being cut. The worker did not know that by saying she was hurt at work this would happen. Most newcomers in the study did not know anything about the workers’ compensation process.

Newcomers who had been looking for work for several months or those who had ended up in survival jobs often expressed anxiety, disillusion, frustration, and a loss of hope. This was the case particularly for immigrants with high levels of education and training who often had an expectation that they would eventually find a job in their field. For the workers in these survival jobs, one barrier to speaking up was the knowledge that finding work was exceedingly difficult and, if they were laid off or fired, they would not easily find another job:

“No one would say anything (if they were asked to do something dangerous) because they wouldn’t want to lose their jobs. If it was easy to find another job then one would. But if you have spent like 4 or 5 months looking for work then (you) would stick to this job no matter what.” (GTA, Arabic FG #18)

### **Preparation for Entering the Work Force Safely**

Given that many participants in this study were working in precarious, poor quality jobs, we wanted to understand whether they had received any resources, training, or materials that would help protect them at work. Due to our recruitment strategy, most participants in the study had participated in some type of employment-related workshop or program at a community group or settlement agency. Typically, this programming involved help with job searches, resume building, cultural competency training, and networking. Rarely did these programs include formal employment standards or OHS curricula. The following type of exchange was common in focus groups:

M: “So, you said you never received any information about [health and safety]. Did you receive any information about your rights as a worker, like what you’re entitled to?”

R: “No.”

R: “No.”

R: “No.” (GTA, FG #13)

Service providers did discuss examples of programs that addressed health and safety either in their organizations or in other community agencies. The programs they described tended to be one-off workshops, often focused on particular occupational groups (e.g., engineering or construction):

“No, [it’s not systematic] but when we do the workshop, if we’re doing (it) for Syrian refugees, we talk about it [health and safety] in general ... Chemical-based only, but we do say that every employer is supposed to have had health and safety training. If they don’t, you have to come and talk to us before you join the job so that we can give you some basic, basic ideas about what you can ask. We do a lot of pictures, a lot of visuals. [...] We’ve done four workshops in that. We do talk about health and safety, but it’s only done, so far, for the guys...” (Key informant, Service pProvider, P17)

Some service providers felt that OHS programming was not something they were comfortable providing. They did not have extensive knowledge of this area and were not sure they could provide clients with accurate information.

“We’re not trained on those types of things. It might be an idea for us to bring in somebody to talk about it every couple of months or something. That might be something else that we could offer, but I don’t believe that part of that is in our mandate. [...] So, if it was me, I would refer people to Employment Ontario, give them the phone number if they’re having issues like that. But as for training on it, there are no programs that are offered here for that.” (Key informant, Service Provider, P09)

Services were largely newcomer driven, meaning programming was designed around client demand. Newcomers rarely asked for information related to OHS or employment standards and this was one reason given for not developing these programs. Service providers described a demand for programs in other areas of settlement (education, health, etc.) and these were viewed as a priority.

“... you have competing workshops (for service providers) on offer so the participant can make their choice based on what’s important for them. There has been very little take-up of the workers’ health and safety or human rights types of workshops. I don’t think it’s because they think it’s unimportant, but it’s because there are other priorities that are far more urgent, things like violence against women prevention and access to social assistance for low income clients. There is only so much that you can do within a certain timeframe so almost always it’s one of the last priorities. It doesn’t always get picked.” (Key informant, Service pProvider, P15)

When clients did come to them with work-related concerns about pay or being asked to do something unsafe, service providers said they tried to help them, but also depended on other external resources such as the Ministry of Labour website and Welcome to Canada or Ontario guides. Service providers also noted that resource constraints prevented them from developing programming that was far-reaching or systematic. Often, programming related to employment standards or OHS was developed on their own time without dedicated federal or provincial funding. Many service providers noted that they did not have the financial or human resources to provide comprehensive programming. This seemed to contribute to the piecemeal nature of the programs that were in place.

Finally, some service providers assumed that employment standards or OHS programming was something that newcomers would get elsewhere, for example, through their employer. Several key informants noted that it was the employer's responsibility to provide their workers with training and information. However, many also understood that there were employers who were not fulfilling their responsibility in this regard.

## Discussion

This study focused on the experiences of newcomers and other key informants who were service providers, program developers, and policy-makers to gain insight into the labor market experiences of newcomers and how to prepare them to safely integrate into the labor market. We found that there were many similarities between the reported experiences of recent immigrants and refugees with respect to looking for work, accessing health and safety resources, and first jobs. Many newcomers, anxious for financial stability and eager to gain Canadian work experience, ended up in jobs they have never done before. These types of survival jobs were often precarious and hazardous. Yet newcomer participants in this study knew little about their rights in the workplace and many reported not having received a job or OHS training. Because they had such difficulty finding work and did not want to lose a job once they have found one, newcomers were reluctant to speak up when asked to do something unsafe or when working conditions are poor. The fact that many newcomers depended on members of their community to find work also made it more difficult to raise workplace issues, as this was socially awkward and culturally inappropriate in some instances. Although ethnic and cultural connections can help with access to employment, research suggests that jobs found within ethnic communities can result in lower wages and limited skill development and upward mobility (Lamba and Krahn 2003). Workers in these situations can also face poor working conditions and be exploited due to cultural dynamics and power differentials between themselves and the employer (Wahlbeck 2007; Velayutham 2013).

This "perfect storm" of circumstances may make recent immigrants and refugees particularly vulnerable to poor working conditions and work injury. It is possible that many newcomers start work in Canada without knowing anything about their rights, without receiving a job or OHS training, and with little knowledge about what to do if they encounter dangerous working conditions or become injured.

The settlement sector provides a range of settlement and integration programs to newcomers, including programs that prepare newcomers for employment. One entry

point for health and safety programming can be an initial discussion about employment standards as newcomers may be interested in learning about minimum wage, hours of work, and overtime regulation. Also, many newcomers in our study were looking for work shortly after arrival in Canada. There is a need to develop programming that can be integrated into entry-level language training. Ideally, this programming can be repeated as newcomers become more proficient in English. The one benefit of integrating occupational health resources into settlement programming is that it allows newcomers to raise issues with service providers, for example, about their rights and the responsibilities of their employers, without worrying about losing their jobs. This trusted relationship can be leveraged to help newcomers understand their rights and recognize potential workplace hazards. However, there are a number of barriers that may stand in the way. As noted, service providers may not always have a great deal of knowledge about these topics themselves. Gaining such knowledge requires an investment of time and resources. Yet, many service providers described organizations as being precariously funded and stretched. Short term, precarious funding to organizations encourages one-off programming without a wide reach (Creese 2006; Scott 2003; Mukhtar et al. 2016). Service providers also noted that there was virtually no funding for any follow-up activities, meaning that once a newcomer was referred to a different program or found work, there was no way to track long-term outcomes. As a result, little is known about the quality of jobs that newcomers get, or whether they stay in those jobs in the long term. Sustained funding is needed to help train service providers, to have staff available to run regular workshops (or another programming), and to identify external organizations with expertise in worker protection that could provide programming within the settlement sector. In this study, organizations that had introduced programming related to worker rights or health and safety typically had a champion in the organization—someone who was both knowledgeable and invested in providing these resources to newcomers. A champion is also needed at a system level. If one policy body or ministry played the role of coordinating health and safety programming for newcomers, it is possible that this programming would be more systematic and better integrated among all the groups and organizations that have contact with newcomers.

Although Canada has programs to attract highly educated immigrants into fields where there are employment shortages, many materials aimed at newcomers do not provide a realistic depiction of the type of work recent newcomers are likely to find. Many participants in this study were disillusioned because they had not found jobs that fully used their skills and recognized their experience and education. Providing more realistic labor market information and employment guidance prior to arrival in Canada could help newcomers to adjust their expectations (George and Chaze 2009; Banerjee and Phan 2014). A mismatch between education and occupation can also have consequences for workplace health and safety. Research suggests that the mismatch between education and occupational skill requirements (i.e., overqualification) is associated with risk of a work injury (Premji and Smith 2013), as well as long-term adverse implications related to declining mental health and wellbeing (Aronsson and Göransson 1999; Chen et al. 2010). Finding themselves performing unfamiliar tasks, many newcomers may not adequately understand the workplace hazards they face. Information on worker rights and health and safety could also be integrated into pre-arrival immigration programs to better prepare newcomers for their first jobs in Canada.



Although receiving OHS training through settlement programming can help newcomers enter the labor market with greater awareness of their rights, it is equally—if not more—important to ensure that newcomers receive OHS and task-specific training in their workplaces. Under Ontario's Occupational Health Safety Act, the employer has the greatest responsibilities with respect to health and safety and must both inform workers of and protect workers from hazards. The Ontario Ministry of Labour requires mandatory occupational health and safety awareness training for all Ontario workers. However, in our study, many newcomer participants ended up in jobs where they did not get information or training on health and safety, something that has been corroborated by other research (Ahonen et al. 2007). It is important that OHS awareness training is more proactively promoted and enforced in workplaces. For example, regulatory bodies could initiate proactive inspections and audits that target industries that hire immigrants. Identifying and penalizing employers who fail to provide safety training can enforce safer working conditions.

It is possible that many newcomers do not expect to find themselves in hazardous, poor quality jobs and, as a result, do not anticipate needing information about how to keep safe at work and do not fully understand the gaps in their knowledge. For example, a study by Lay et al. (2018) found that in a survey of recent immigrants and refugees, participants reported similar levels of knowledge of rights and OHS awareness as Canadian-born workers. We would expect immigrants to report lower levels of knowledge. Similarly, in this study, there were newcomers who said they were aware of their rights at work. However, as we have noted above, the participants' understanding of rights was not always congruent with those of the researchers and often, when participants were probed about the depth and breadth of knowledge, it became clear that their knowledge of this area was limited. If content related to employment standards, OHS, and workers' compensation is included as a regular part of employment-related programming, regardless of whether clients ask for this type of programming or not, newcomers accessing employment programs will be better prepared when they start their first jobs.

Having knowledge about rights and responsibilities and OHS does not guarantee that newcomers will be safe at work. Precarity in the labor market and financial pressures made it difficult for newcomers to speak up and protect themselves when asked to do something unsafe when they were mistreated. The experiences of study participants moving from one short-term contract to another were similar to those experienced by temporary agency workers. The adverse health effects and heightened injury risk among temporary agency workers are well documented (Underhill and Quinlan 2011; Benavides et al. 2006; MacEachen et al. 2014). Inadequate training and supervision, irregular work hours, and lack of job stability coupled with the fear of job loss can exacerbate the vulnerabilities experienced by participants (Benavides et al. 2006). Although temporary agency employment may put newcomers at risk for injury, often it is the only kind of work that they can get. One solution may be to provide additional oversight and inspection of these types of industries/work arrangements. Complicated regulatory arrangements in the temporary employment sector can also make it confusing for workers to understand who has responsibility for health and safety (MacEachen et al. 2014). It is also important for policy-makers and government bodies to understand how system-level factors affect the delivery of safety training and worker health.

In addition, a multi-pronged and wide-reaching approach is needed to decrease hazard exposure in newcomers' first jobs and increase newcomer empowerment to speak up when they encounter discrimination, hazards, and poor working conditions. In addition to providing resources to new workers, this approach should involve targeted inspections by regulatory bodies to address workplaces that employ immigrants and penalties for employers who fail to provide safe working conditions. The possibility was also raised by some study key informants that recent immigrants who are small business owners, and who hire other recent immigrants, may themselves not be sufficiently aware of employment standards or OHS. As a result, OHS regulations may not be properly implemented in these workplaces (Gravel et al. 2011). Providing training and resources to employers who hire newcomers—especially to small businesses—on managing health and safety and on injury prevention can help create safer workplaces.

The types of programming that newcomers can access and their labor market integration can be shaped by race, gender, and age. Studies on labor market experiences or workplace injury rarely include statistics on race, ethnicity, or culture, and this can mask how these factors influence job acquisition and quality. It is important to question cultural and gender stereotypes and whether programming reinforces these. Offering women from all cultures access to the same employment programs as men, regardless of background, opens opportunities. Female-dominated workplaces, such as those involving child care, housekeeping, and food preparation, can be hazardous and these workers need protection. It is important that the developers of employment programs understand this; employment programs that explicitly address these issues with female newcomers will better prepare them for safe work. It is also imperative that sustained funding for settlement agencies to integrate OHS training be extended to all clients—not limited by gender or occupation.

## Strengths and Limitations

During this study, we spoke to newcomers using settlement services about their experiences integrating into the labor market in three different regions in the province of Ontario, Canada. This research cannot speak to the frequency of particular events or experiences. However, given the convergence between the reported experiences of newcomers and the information shared by service providers in interviews, we are confident that the experience of our participants is not unique. Caution, however, should be taken when extrapolating findings. For example, this study included only newcomers who had some connection to settlement groups in Ontario. However, there are large groups of immigrants and refugees who never access settlement services. It is important to consider how these newcomers connect to the labor market, as well as their access to health and safety resources. Also, most of the refugees participating in the study were Syrian and, because there has been a great focus on the integration of Syrian refugees in Canada, these newcomers may have greater access to resources and support than other refugees in the province.

It is also important to note that the participants in this study had fairly high levels of language skill (excluding Syrian refugee focus group participants) as they were recruited via employment programs that require a certain facility in English. It is likely that newcomers with lower levels of education and poor English-language skills have more difficulty finding work, understanding their rights and invoking them.

This study focused on the experiences of newcomers and other key informants who were service providers, educators, program developers, and policy-makers. Future research should examine the experiences of employers who hire recent immigrants. For example, what are the needs of different types of employers (large businesses that hire recent immigrants, immigrant-run small businesses, etc.)? Where and how do employers learn about their legislated responsibilities and any changes to them? What are the challenges they face? Are there employers who have found effective ways of training recent immigrants?

Although there is much research on the economic integration of newcomers in Canada (e.g., LaRoche-Côté and Hango 2016; Buzdugan and Halli 2009; Frank 2013; Reitz 2007), research related to the experiences of newcomers with settlement agencies is limited. Most of this research has focused on newcomers' access to language training and employment programming (e.g., Thomas 2015; Sethi 2015; Cukier et al. 2010). This study provides a novel examination of newcomers' experiences with settlement programming related to access to health and safety information during their work integration in Canada. Our study findings contribute to this research area by identifying the gaps and optimal points in the settlement process for the provision of resources.

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## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Research Involving Human Participants** All procedures involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee.

**Informed Consent** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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