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ABSTRACT

Making a New Journey: Comparing the Settlement Experiences of Adult and Child Refugees in Atlantic Canada*

This article applies the ACL framework (Age at migration, Context/contact opportunities, and Life cycle stage) and uses qualitative interview data to compare the integration of Syrian adult & child refugees in St. John's, Canada. Almost all children report having Canadian-born friends, outpacing the adults, facilitated by highly integrated classrooms. Their recreational activities are less structured, while adults focus on language school or settlement agency events. Children are more open to the new experiences and are much more optimistic about Canadian weather & food. They more often walk by bus to school, with adults favouring automobiles for transportation; this tends to be - because they are zoned to nearby schools instead of attending centralized language classes.

Keywords: refugee integration, Atlantic Canada, youth refugees, refugee education, age differences, comparative study

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Making a New Journey: Comparing & Contrasting the Settlement Experiences of Adult, Young Adult, and Child Refugees in Atlantic Canada

Introduction

The migration literature increasingly emphasizes the importance of migrants integrating into their host country beyond mere labor market participation, which has historically been used as a primary indicator of success (Lichtenstein & Puma, 2019). The Indicators of Integration Framework (Ager & Strang, 2008) highlights social connections as a central determinant of integration (Strang & Quinn, 2021, p. 330), influencing policy, practice, and research (Strang & Quinn, 2021). Hannafi and Marouani's (2023) econometric analysis shows that social integration, rather than economic integration, increases the likelihood of Syrian refugees staying in Germany. Smaller economies in non-traditional immigrant destinations tend to seek advantages beyond economic metrics. St. John's, Newfoundland & Labrador (NL), Canada, serves as such an example (Sano et al., 2017). In Atlantic Canada, known for its natural resource-dependent economies (Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency [ACOA], 2020; Pottie-Sherman & Lynch, 2019), challenges include low labor productivity, high debt, labour shortages, and slower economic growth (ACOA, 2020; Akbari, 2015; Fang et al., 2022; Pascoe-Deslauriers, 2020). Despite these, NL boasts high life satisfaction, underscoring the important role of non-economic factors (Conference Board of Canada, n.d.; Statistics Canada, 2023). Younger immigrants and refugees generally integrate more easily and report higher life satisfaction (Dustmann, 1996; Hannafi & Marouani, 2023; Lichtenstein & Puma, 2019; Houle & Schellenberg, 2010; Monteiro & Haan, 2021), though educational outcomes decline with age at arrival for refugee youth (Pritchard et al., 2019). Most studies use age as a control variable rather than a primary focus, with age-related research primarily quantitative, identifying correlations without exploring

qualitative factors. Penninx and Garcés-Mascareñas (2016) highlight three key areas in immigrant integration literature: the object of study, integration process dimensions, and analysis level. Refugee integration has drawn scholarly and policy attention due to the necessity of supporting new arrivals. Existing research mainly centers on adult refugees, leaving a gap in understanding integration across age groups, especially younger children. This study focuses on refugees, examines the social dimension, and analyzes the early integration experience of refugees by age groups in St. John's, NL, Canada. It compares integration differences between newly arrived Syrian children and adult refugees, addressing calls for emphasizing temporal aspects of integration (Penninx & Garcés-Mascareñas, 2016).

Applying the ACL framework (Age at migration, Context/contact opportunities, and Life cycle stage) and using qualitative interview data, this study examines age-related differences, contributing to academic discourse and policy solutions. Atlantic Canada is a compelling study due to its faster-than-average population aging (Statistics Canada, 2022), making the satisfaction of younger newcomers crucial. Refugees, averaging 11.1 years younger than Canadian-born individuals (UNHCR, n.d.), fit well and show lower retention in the region (Akbari, 2020; McDonald et al., 2018; Statistics Canada, 2021a), indicating potential areas for improvement. Despite economic challenges, non-economic pull factors might enhance newcomer attraction and retention. High life satisfaction scores suggest residents enjoy living there, highlighting the need to understand these reasons to develop better retention strategies for newcomers. Unique and homogenous cultures, unpredictable climates, and geographic isolation might be unexpected for many recent refugees. Integration experiences vary by age at arrival, and this unique destination offers novel insights. Focusing on a specific location allows for observing localized differences that national datasets may obscure.

This paper is structured as follows. It first reviews the literature on immigrant and refugee integration outcomes by age and presents a theoretical framework. The study describes interview and focus-group data, qualitative methods, and research ethics. It explores differences in social and recreational life, and perceptions of food, weather, and transportation between Syrian refugee children and adults in St. John's while providing relevant context. The conclusion discusses the study's limitations and implications for policies and practices. By focusing on age-specific experiences, the study identifies issues and opportunities for policy adjustment, offering insights to improve integration strategies and assist scholars and policymakers in refining refugee integration programs.

The Case Study of St. John's

Geographic & Demographic Overview

St. John's, the capital city of Newfoundland & Labrador, is Canada's easternmost city, known for its rugged coastlines and unique cultural history. The city's strong Irish and British heritage is evidenced by local dialects and Celtic Newfoundland folk music. St. John's is becoming increasingly diversified in population due to immigration (Pottie-Sherman & Graham, 2021). With a population of approximately 110,000 and a Census Metropolitan Area population of about 224,000 (City of St. John's, 2024), it remains a small but vibrant urban center in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2023).

Climate & Weather Insights

St. John's' climate, influenced by the Atlantic Ocean, features moderate temperatures compared to other Canadian provinces (City of St. John's, n.d.). Winters are mild but have high

average precipitation (Government of Canada, 2024) and wind speeds (Government of Canada, 2016). Summers are short with frequent cloud cover year-round. These conditions are unfamiliar to Syrian refugees, impacting their adaptation to St. John's (Li & Grineva, 2016). While children often enjoy the snow, adults find it burdensome due to responsibilities like snow shoveling and driving in tough conditions.

Refugee Integration Across Ages in St. John's: Impacts on Policy & Practice

St. John's provides a unique context for studying refugee integration within economically challenged yet high-life satisfaction Atlantic Canada (Conference Board of Canada, n.d.; Statistics Canada, 2023). Despite low labour productivity and high government debt (Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency [ACOA], 2020; Pottie-Sherman & Lynch, 2019), Newfoundland & Labrador's welcoming communities are crucial for newcomer integration (Clark, 2009; El-Bialy & Mulay, 2015). Potential integration determinants include social and recreational life, food, weather, and transportation perceptions. Age-related differences related to these factors may significantly influence outcomes for refugees of different ages.. As such, examining refugee experiences by age may uncover issues not apparent when focusing on a single age group.

Transportation & Mobility

Personal vehicles are often essential for St. John's residents due to limited public transportation, unpredictable weather, and the city's spread-out nature. St. John's has a significantly lower percentage of its population and jobs in the downtown core compared to other Canadian cities (Sergerie et al., 2021). The city's single public bus service and suburban sprawl make owning a vehicle particularly important for adult refugees attending centralized language schools or employment services, which are usually not within walking distance, whereas refugee children typically attend nearby schools (Fang et al., 2020).

Implications for Our Study

Demographic, geographic, and climatic factors are crucial social factors for understanding refugee integration and retention in St. John's. Cultural homogeneity, harsh weather, and the city's layout often necessitate robust, tailored services (Li & Que, 2016). Recognizing the need for a car, weather adaptation challenges, and social isolation is vital for effective settlement services and integration strategies for refugees in St. John's.

Literature Review

This study adopts a unique comparative approach by examining the settlement experiences of newly arrived child refugees compared to newly arrived refugee adults. First, an overview of theoretical frameworks regarding immigrant integration will be provided in our literature review. Next, the literature on immigrant and refugee integration in Atlantic Canada, particularly in St. John's, Newfoundland & Labrador, will be explored. The review will then assess the distinct contexts faced by newly arrived children and adults, with separate subsections for each group. Finally, a brief discussion on the limited research regarding the role of age in immigrant and refugee integration will be presented, leading into the theoretical framework section. The term 'immigrant' is used throughout as a general term for international migrants from various backgrounds and migration classes, avoiding the temporal implications of the term 'newcomer.'

Immigrant & Refugee Integration: A Contested Subject

Despite frequent use in academia and policy, there is no universally accepted definition of immigrant integration (Kyeremeh et al., 2021). Various definitions exist (Jedwab, 2008), with

critiques suggesting the word integration implies immigrants must conform to majority standards (Kyeremeh et al., 2021; Penninx & Garcés-Mascareñas, 2016).

This study adopts Penninx and Garcés-Mascareñas's (2016) definition of integration as "the process of becoming an accepted part of society," emphasizing its continuous nature (Kyeremeh et al., 2021). Earlier research viewed integration as a one-way process requiring immigrants to adapt (Kyeremeh et al., 2021). It is now seen as a two-way process, with the host society also aiding immigrants (Kyeremeh et al., 2021; Garcés-Mascareñas & Penninx, 2016).

Furthermore, integration is divided into dimensions. Dekker and Siegel (2013) identify structural integration, involving integration in employment, citizenship, and education, and sociocultural integration, relating to social and cultural norms adjustment (Erdal & Oeppen, 2013). Literature often distinguishes between economic and social integration, with cultural integration occasionally treated as a separate dimension (Wilkinson, 2013).

In Canada, integration research and policy are mainly economically focused (Kyeremeh et al., 2021; Wilkinson, 2013). Integration is not linear, and its dimensions are not seamlessly connected, contrary to earlier assumptions (Penninx & Garcés-Mascareñas, 2016; Schunk, 2011; Wilkinson, 2013). Despite other important characteristics, extant literature emphasizes national and ethnic differences (Erdal & Oeppen, 2013).

Newcomer Integration in Atlantic Canada

Atlantic Canada, comprising Newfoundland & Labrador (NL), Prince Edward Island (PEI), Nova Scotia (NS), and New Brunswick (NB), presents a unique landscape that both supports and challenges the integration of immigrants and refugees. These provinces, with smaller populations and less ethnic diversity than major urban centers, require specialized

integration approaches (Li, Que, & Power, 2017). The region's economy, heavily reliant on primary industries such as fishing, forestry, and agriculture, further complicates integration efforts (Gien & Law, 2009; Fang et al., 2020).

Social integration in Newfoundland & Labrador benefits from close-knit community settings that support newcomers. However, these settings can also hinder integration due to the region's relative homogeneity and tight social networks. El-Bialy & Mulay (2015) note that while small urban centers may provide strong community support, the lack of diverse networks may impede broader integration. Therefore, fostering inclusive environments through community events and cultural exchanges is crucial for social cohesion (El-Bialy & Mulay, 2015).

Educational integration is key to long-term success for refugee youth. Li & Grineva (2016) emphasize schools' pivotal role in social integration, particularly for refugee youth (Li & Grineva, 2016). Programs like the Literacy Enrichment and Academic Readiness for Newcomers (LEARN) provide essential resources to help students overcome language and academic barriers. Li, Que, & Power (2017) identify ongoing challenges such as grade placement and the need for sustained language instruction. Li & Que (2020) examine how schools address the complexities refugee students face in adjusting to new academic and social environments.

Overall, successful integration in Atlantic Canada requires comprehensive strategies that address economic, social, and educational dimensions. Gien and Law (2009) assert that attraction and retention strategies in Atlantic Canada should be tailored to its specific characteristics, recommending flexible policies to meet newcomers' changing needs.

Experiences of Refugee Children

Refugee children and youth typically integrate into schools but face challenges such as trauma, language barriers, educational gaps, and interrupted schooling (Li & Grineva, 2016; McDiarmid et al., 2021; Stewart & El Chaar, 2020).

Studies often focus on teenagers, leaving younger children underexplored (Pritchard et al., 2019). Refugee children have less exposure to the host language and education, sometimes leading to segregation (Pozzo & Nerghes, 2020). In our study, most children were in mainstream classes, facilitating interaction with native-born peers, unlike some teenagers (Li & Grineva, 2016).

Age at migration partly explains these differences as older youths often attend separate classes in the LEARN program, absent in elementary schools (Government of Newfoundland & Labrador, n.d.). Segregation reduces contact with native-born students, while integration fosters social ties but presents initial language and learning challenges (Shuayb et al., 2022).

Younger children adapt faster than older adolescents (Erdal & Ezzati, 2015). Home life affects refugee youth stress (Beiser et al., 2015; Brar-Josan & Yohani, 2019; McDiarmid et al., 2021), and parental support can be beneficial (Brar-Josan & Yohani, 2019). Extracurricular activities support integration but can also lead to exclusion and discrimination (Spaaij, 2015).

Experiences of Refugee Adults

Refugees often have fewer native-born friends, predominantly forming co-ethnic relationships (Bauer & Hannover, 2020; Pozzo and Nerghes 2020). While intra-ethnic networks provide employment and housing support, they come with limitations (Cheung & Phillimore,

2014; Fang et al., 2020). Inter-ethnic friendships foster social capital (Bauer & Hannover, 2020) and enhance settlement satisfaction (Sapeha, 2015).

Refugees often face a lack of services, support, and access to social/recreational activities due to language barriers and cultural isolation (Murad & Versey, 2021; Strang & Quinn, 2021). Gradually, as awareness of recreational opportunities grows, they promote socialization (Stack & Iwasaki, 2009). Immigrants in Atlantic Canada report scant social/recreational opportunities and engagement (Randall et al., 2014; Pottie-Sherman & Graham, 2021; Akbari, 2020). Economic integration also appears to have minimal influence on refugees' social integration (Dustmann, 1996; Hannafi & Marouani, 2023).

Factors like language barriers, refugee accommodations, inter-ethnic contacts, having children in the host country, and younger age facilitate social integration, and may outweigh economic factors in the decision to stay (Hannafi & Marouani, 2023). In Nova Scotia, 60% of immigrants prioritize social over economic factors in their location choices (Akbari, 2020).

Age at migration intersects with life-cycle stages, impacting settlement and integration differently across age groups (Erdal & Ezzati, 2015). Life-cycle stages shape social network composition for adults of different ages (Wrzus et al., 2013; Zhaoyang et al., 2018). The life course perspective, though underutilized in immigration literature (Wingens et al., 2011), explores how prior events, conditions, and personal characteristics influence decisions and events over time (Edmonston, 2013, p. 1). Immigrants' time allocation among education, work, family, and leisure at different life stages influences their integration process (Schunck, 2011).

Theoretical Framework and Hypothesis Development

To establish a theoretical framework, defining comparable integration dimensions between adult and child immigrants is crucial. The life course approach identifies various life phases immigrants undergo, requiring a reference frame for assessing comparable integration dimensions across age groups for valid comparison. Edmonston (2013) examines key life course transitions for immigrants across six age groups within eight 'social institutions': political/immigration issues, religion, family, employment, schooling/language, income, housing/mobility, and health. For children, there are four categories—political/immigration issues, employment, income, and housing/mobility, which show no significant life-course changes (Edmonston, 2013), as these areas pertain mainly to adults who are of consenting age, leaving children reliant on parental decisions. Thus, the four 'social institutions' where both children and adults can actively participate are religion, family, schooling/language, and health.

Table 1: Dimensions of Potential Life Course Transitions of Interest for Immigrant Children & Young-Middle Adults in Relevant Categories

Life cycle stage	Religious	Family	Schooling/Language	Health
Children	Socialization	Socialization	Socialization, home language, learning official language (s)	Dietary changes
Young & Middle Adults	Religious participation, religious conversion	Marriage, childbearing, divorce	Learning official language(s)	Changes in diet, exercise, & health

Source: Edmonston, 2013

Table 1, based on Edmonston (2013), compares life course transition dimensions for children with those of young and middle-aged adults. It includes potential dimensions not universally applicable to every immigrant at a given stage. Our adult refugee sample averages are closer to middle adulthood, but we combine dimensions for young and middle adults for three reasons. First, adult refugees often have experiences akin to 'young adults,' such as learning the official language and obtaining a first job in a new country. Second, our sample included a significant number of young and middle-aged adults. Lastly, while Edmonston (2013) emphasizes life-course transitions, our focus is more on obligations and events at different life-course stages rather than transitions between stages.

The importance of socialization in children's lives, including informal play, is highlighted in Table 1, although it may be underestimated. Children and adults have different experiences in social institutions, such as religious settings, where children engage less deeply with scriptures and themes due to their developmental stage, primarily using these institutions as social venues to learn morality, prosocial behavior, and communication skills. Social integration is crucial for refugee children and adults in learning a new language and understanding their new society. Our study in St. John's, Newfoundland & Labrador, investigated the social integration, from first impressions to daily experiences of refugee children and adults. The city's island location, distance from multicultural hubs, and a small number of ethnic communities pose challenges in accessing diverse cultural foods, events, and activities. Familiar food is essential for newcomers' connection to their homeland and integration into their new communities (Almerico 2014; Takenaka 2017). The unpredictable coastal climate of St. John's presents another challenge for Syrian refugees (Gien & Law, 2009; Reitmanova & Gustafson, 2017). Transportation is a

significant issue, particularly for high school students due to limited school bus access and specialized classes for newcomers (Li et al., 2017).

Based on the literature review, we propose a theoretical framework, **ACL framework**, which stands for **A**ge at migration, **C**ontext/contact opportunities, and **L**ife cycle stage, explaining differences in refugee experiences based on age at migration, context/contact opportunities, and life-cycle stage. Younger migrants adapt more easily, and the life-cycle stage affects responsibilities and goals. Context/contact opportunities influence social integration, varying by life stage and depending on refugees' choices and the organization of social institutions. Integration responsibility lies with both refugees and the receiving society.

Our study's refugee children attended integrated classrooms, while adults joined English language classes and settlement agency activities with other newcomers. Based on the ACL framework, we hypothesize that children will be more open to other cultures, form higher-quality relationships with native-born individuals as well as other newcomers, and have more contact opportunities through integrated classrooms compared to adult refugees, whose primary native-born contacts are settlement agency volunteers soon after arrival. This leads to our first hypothesis (H1).

H1: Refugee children will become more socially integrated significantly faster than refugee adults.

Given their migration age, refugee children typically have weaker ties to their country of origin compared to adults, who spend more of their lives there. Children, with fewer memories and greater openness to new experiences, also bear fewer household responsibilities, which their guardians manage. Consequently, children passively benefit from meals prepared by parents and

may perceive snow as an opportunity for play and social interaction. This life stage affords children more time to explore new environments. Adults, however, face challenges like adverse weather conditions and limited access to familiar cultural foods. Thus, we propose the following hypotheses (H2 and H3):

H2: Refugee children will have more positive feelings about the food in St. John's than refugee adults.

H3: Refugee children will have more positive feelings about the drastically different weather in St. John's than refugee adults.

Transportation experiences vary greatly between children and adults. Adults can drive, while children cannot, and parents typically make transportation decisions for their children. Life-cycle stages thus influence transportation experiences. Context is also important: refugee adults often attend English classes and settlement events, whereas most refugee children in St. John's go to local schools. With one general settlement agency in the city, adults must travel to a central location for services, while children use school buses. Most children in our study attended nearby schools and used school buses or walked. Adult refugees, however, often need to drive or use public transit to attend language classes and events despite agency transportation support. Hence, our fourth hypothesis:

H4: Refugee children are more likely to take the bus or walk to school as their primary form of transportation. Facing longer commutes to the settlement agency; adult refugees will be more likely to travel by car.

Data & Method

This study uses data from semi-structured interviews with Syrian refugee adults and children in St. John's, NL, Canada, conducted in the summer of 2017[2]. Participant identification and consent involved creating a contact list by a refugee support group. Potential participants received an email with a bilingual poster (English and Arabic) about the study. Snowball sampling was used to find additional participants. The study received ethics approval from Memorial University, ensuring participant anonymity. Informed consent was obtained from adult participants, with adults signing a consent form and parents signing the form for minors. Interpreters signed confidentiality statements, and participants received gift cards for their time. The 64 participants were recently arrived Syrian refugees, most in Canada for less than a year. The sample included 42 adults (18+ years) and 22 minors, with 33 adults being government-assisted refugees. The adult sample had a nearly equal female-male ratio, while the child sample was predominantly male. Table 2 shows participant demographics.

Table 2: Participant Demographics

Category	Adults (18+)	Minors (Under 18)		
Total Participants	42	22		

[2] In this paper, newcomers are defined as landed immigrants (permanent residents) and refugees. Government-Assisted Refugees (GARs), unlike other categories of refugees, are resettled in Canada by the Canadian government and are referred to Canada for resettlement by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) or another referral organization. According to the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA) in 2002, (GARs) are selected based on their need for protection rather than their ability to resettle. The result of this action is a higher number of GARs arriving in Canada with significant high needs, which can include, but are not limited to:

https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/resettle-refugee/government-assisted-refugee-program.html

Government-Assisted Refugees	33	N/A		
Sex Ratio	20 Female (45.5%), 24 Male (54.5%)	7 Female (31.8%), 15 Male (68.2%)		
Grade Level	N/A	Grades	# of Participants	% of All Child Participants
		1	2	9.1%
		2	4	18.2%
		3	3	13.6%
		4	2	9.1%
		5	5	22.7%
		6	2	9.1%
		7	0	0.0%
		8	2	9.1%
		9	2	9.1%

Participants under 18 were in grades one to nine, with most (81.8%) in elementary school (kindergarten to sixth grade). Despite no direct age-grade correlation due to often missing or inaccurate refugee documentation (Fitzpatrick, 2018), the majority were in the child to pre-teen age range, with none in high school, as high schools in St. John's cover grades ten to twelve.

Interviews were semi-structured, using two standard question sets for adults and minors, with occasional impromptu questions for clarity. Youth interviews lasted 3 to 12 minutes, while adult interviews ranged from 10 to 60 minutes, depending on the details provided. Most interviews involved one participant, though some included two to four related refugees, with an Arabic interpreter present due to limited English proficiency. The interviews aimed to capture

settlement experiences, focusing on service delivery and employment for adults, and school experiences for youths.

Our theoretical framework highlights common experiences between children and adults, focusing on social integration and exploring food, weather, and transportation. The first question asked about initial impressions of Newfoundland and Labrador, *what was your first impression about Newfoundland & Labrador?* prompting discussions on people, food, and weather in the settlement destination. This formed the basis for analyzing food and weather, while impressions of the people informed our analysis of social integration.

The second set of questions on social integration examined friendships formed in St. John's. Children were asked two separate questions on this topic: *Do you have many friends at school? & Do you have many friends outside school?* When each question was asked, the interviewer followed up to ask if the friends were immigrants, Canadian-born, or a mix of both. Adults were similarly asked about their friends' backgrounds. Although direct questions about discrimination were not asked, participants could discuss it, especially when asked about the people in St. John's. For children, a question about bullying at schools in St. John's was included.

The final set of questions related to social integration involved community participation and extracurricular activities. Children were asked if they participated in activities outside school, with further probing if needed. Adults were asked about their involvement in community events, organizations, and volunteer work with questions such as 1) *Do you participate in community events/activities? If so, which ones?* 2) *Do you participate in community organizations? If so, which ones?* 3) *What volunteer work have you become involved in (if any)?* The social integration analysis of newly arrived Syrian refugee adults and children is based on four indicators: their first impressions of the people in NL, the composition of their friend

groups, reports of any discrimination or bullying, and their social/recreational/community involvement outside school/work/settlement activities. Regarding transportation, distinct questions were posed to children and adults. Children were asked about their primary mode of getting to school, while adults were queried about their community travel methods and any difficulties encountered. As children spend most of their time at school, their main mode of transportation to school likely reflects their general mode of transportation, aligning conceptually with the adult question regarding their main mode of transportation. This allows for comparison with other studies on immigrant youth in St. John's.

We used a case study approach focusing on Syrian refugee children and adults newly arrived in St. John's, comparing their initial settlement experiences. Three topics (food, weather, and transportation) were chosen for their relevance within St. John's context, which may vary in other settings. The fourth topic, social integration, is broadly applicable but still contextually rooted in St. John's. As noted in other case studies, distinguishing between a case and its context is often challenging (Ylikoski & Zahle, 2019). Our theoretical framework formalizes the significance of the study's contextual environment. Data was analyzed using NVivo software, with codes developed from recurring interview themes. Responses were categorized as positive or negative experiences and quantified by specific answers. Consistent with our ACL theoretical framework, we assessed differences between refugee children and adults based on migration age, context/contact opportunities, and life cycle stage.

Finding

To compare results between the two age groups, findings are divided into subsections that align with our four research topics: social integration, food, weather, & transportation.

Social Integration – Social Ties, Community Involvement & Recreation

All 22 Syrian children interviewed reported having friends at school, predominantly Canadian-born or a mix of Canadian- and foreign-born. Specifically, five had a mix of Canadian- and foreign-born friends, three had only Canadian-born, two had both Canadian-born and Syrian, one had mainly Canadian-born, one only foreign-born, and one only Syrian. This contrasts with literature suggesting refugee youth struggle to befriend native-born peers, possibly due to St. John's homogeneity and friendly culture. Studies indicate a higher proportion of native-born students fosters more interactions with migrants (Bergnehr et al., 2020). However, difficulties in forming such friendships have been noted in Newfoundland and Labrador (Li & Grineva, 2016), Canada (Stewart & El Chaar, 2020), and internationally (Pozzo & Nerghes, 2020). In Sweden, refugee girls often cite limited contact and cultural differences for their lack of native friends (Bergnehr et al. 2020), with initial segregation in classes (Bunar and Juvonen 2022). Friendships between refugees and native-born children are common in St. John's, possibly because refugee students in Newfoundland are integrated into mainstream classes (Flight, 2021). Although there are targeted programs like LEARN (Li & Que, 2020), refugees frequently join integrated classes (Flight, 2021), unlike regions with segregated classes (Netherlands – Pozzo & Nerghes, 2020; Sweden – Bunar & Juvonen, 2022). LEARN courses are available at intermediate and high schools (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, n.d.), but not elementary schools. Some children attended separate ESL classes but joined other students for additional subjects. Our sample was younger, most refugee children were in elementary school, unlike many other studies focusing on high school students. Younger refugee children are attending integrated classes and

often have a smaller language gap, facilitating fostering friendships with Canadian-born students and an easier integration.

Interviews with Syrian refugee children examined their friendships after arrival in NL. Twenty participants confirmed friendships outside school, one did not, and one was unclear. Five children had both Canadian-born and foreign-born friends, four had only Syrian friends, three had only Canadian friends, three had mainly Canadian friends, two had only foreign-born friends, and one had both Canadian-born and Syrian friends. Within school, 18 children had Canadian-born friends, one did not, and three were unclear. Seventeen had foreign-born friends, two did not, and three were unclear. Seven children mentioned Syrian friends in their new cities.

A notable difference was the higher likelihood of having exclusively Syrian friends outside school (21% vs. 8% in school). There was more mingling of foreign-born and Canadian-born children in schools, with 54% having a mix of friends in school compared to 32% outside school. For Syrian refugee adults, 66% had friends from Canada and other countries, 29% had only foreign-born friends, and 5% had no friends in St. John's. Fewer adults had Canadian-born friends compared to children (66% vs. 95%). Social opportunities in schools and play facilitated children forming Canadian friendships faster than adults. Some adults also cited language barriers as a hindrance. Adults primarily met friends through ESL schools, neighborhoods, and community volunteers.

Essentially, all participants, children & adults, felt optimistic about the people in NL & shared similar sentiments, at least in aggregate. In the words of one Syrian adult: *"To start with the people, they are very friendly here. They are so nice. Smiley & always happy. You can feel safe with them. When we went to other countries as refugees, it was so bad."* Numerous participants mentioned the smiling demeanour of those in Newfoundland. The people frequently

responded to general questions such as what a participant likes about NL or when children were asked why they enjoy their school. From the perspective of one Syrian man, through an interpreter: *"As he was coming, he thought he was going to move away from here, but as he met the people, then he changed his mind, & now he wants to stay here."* Another one said, "*The people are really so good. But the problem is with the climate you know it's really so cold."*

Discrimination reports were few, with negative experiences limited to occasional incidents like loud music from neighbors. School bullying was reported by three out of 20 children, but its frequency and basis for discrimination were unclear. Most participants' short duration in Canada and few adults entering the labour market limited their interaction with Canadians. Among 21 children who responded to this question, five (23.8%) reported no specific activities, with one planning dance lessons, while three (14.3%) attended only school-related activities. Thirteen (61.9%) engaged in extracurriculars, mainly soccer (eight children) and basketball (four). A Syrian boy became an ice hockey fan after moving to Newfoundland. Most children preferred unorganized activities and casual play without specifying a league. One child mentioned attending events organized by a settlement association and an afterschool program by a nonprofit, being the only non-sports clubs cited.

Among Syrian adults, 13 of 36 (36.1%) did not participate in community events or organizations, with some citing lack of time due to driving children to activities. Five participants (13.9%) were involved only in activities hosted by the ESL school, with two unaware of other events or lacking acquaintances for activities. Eighteen adults (50.0%) participated in community events/organizations outside ESL school, with 13 (36.1%) focusing on settlement agency activities. A common activity was a group for newcomer women (mentioned by four female interviewees). Four interviewees highlighted playing soccer, with one

on an organized team and another mentioning informal soccer tournaments. Soccer is often a semi-organized activity for recent Syrian adult refugees in St. John's. Of those participating in community activities, 17 of 18 (94.4%) primarily attended settlement agency events or played soccer. The other response involved going to the gym and engaging in activities with volunteers, presumably from the settlement agency. Syrian adults, compared to Syrian children, had a lower participation rate in extracurriculars (e.g., outside of school or work) activities (36.1% to 23.8%), with the share of both groups who participated in only grade school or ESL school activities being similar, about 14% in each group.

While answers did not consistently differentiate, the activities of the Syrian adults seem significantly structured or organized. They were also much more homogenous than the varied answers of the Syrian children interviewed, almost solely comprising settlement agency activities & soccer. As many adult refugees relied on ESL schools & a local settlement agency for socialization, their contact with the Canadian-born is limited. Some social opportunities could be tenuous after settlement supports lapse. While 66% did report having friends born in Canada, the overall picture suggests that many of these contacts are settlement agency volunteers, not necessarily close friendships. As such, the 66% figure probably underestimates the socialization gap between Syrian adults & children in our data. The children were likelier to state that they had Canadian-born friends, with school & play contributing to these cross-cultural bonds. However, the depth of some of these friendships does seem limited, given the language barrier.

Based on the findings above, *H1: Refugee children will become more socially integrated significantly faster than refugee adults,* is supported.

Food

Access to culturally familiar food helps refugees maintain connections to their home country and fosters a sense of belonging, aiding integration by bridging diverse backgrounds (Almerico 2014; Takenaka 2017). We thus investigated whether refugee participants enjoyed food in their new Canadian homes.

Refugee children have mainly been content with their food since coming to Canada. Eighteen respondents (86%) in this age group had favourable impressions of the food in St. John's, NL, while just three had negative impressions (14%). The picture painted by Syrian adult refugees is much different. Just 8 of 21 (38%) adult refugees reported positive impressions, compared to 13 with negative impressions (62%).

The transcripts of the interviews on this topic accentuate the divergence of opinion. On the positive end of the spectrum, one respondent *"still had the same food he had in Syria because… his mother cooks for them."* Others had *"everything"* and *"almost everything."* In an interpreter's translation, one Syrian man learned where to find Arabic food over time: *"The first time here, it was difficult for him to find Arabic food, but now he knows where to find it."* On the other hand, one participant suggested that *"things are getting better"*.

Several barriers to access were reported. Prominently, supplies of Arabic foods in St. John's are limited, causing a situation where *"when [the store has an in-demand food/ingredient], the Syrians go there and want to buy it. So, it is sold out immediately after they get [the shipment]."* Several refugees indicated they could get some foods they ate in their home country, whereas others could not find them in St. John's. Other difficulties mentioned include high prices and a lack of freshness. One interviewee implied that they had shifted toward eating more mainstream foods found in Canada, adapting toward this dietary change with time: *"First, [the food] was different, now it is good."*

In summary, Syrian refugee children reported much more positive impressions, on average, of the food available in their new Canadian home than their adult counterparts. *H2: Refugee children will have more positive feelings about the food in St. John's than refugee adults,* is supported.

This difference in opinions can be, at least in part, explained by the ACL framework (Age at migration, Context/contact opportunities, and Life cycle stage). First, this may be caused in part by the different roles of adults and children in the household regarding food (e.g., adults usually buy groceries and cook food while children happen to be just consumers), the highly divergent opinions among the age groups suggest something else is also at play. Second, although we cannot say for sure due to the lack of longitudinal data on dietary preferences, it may be the case that preferences for food from one's home culture are more ingrained with age and potential peer influences (e.g., Arnett, 2002); preferences, for example, time preference, are known to change with age (Bishai, 2004). Third, there also appears to be a learning curve regarding where to find cultural foods in St. John's, NL. This could be a space that non-profits, social enterprises, and other community groups can help fill, with support from the government as required. Demonstrating the importance of cultural food for immigrant integration and retention, one Syrian adult cited the lack of Arabic food in NL as a reason they intended to move away from the province.

Weather

The weather in St. John's is notoriously unpredictable, often with high precipitation and exceptionally strong winds (King, 2015). Summer temperatures are usually lower than in Canada's major cities. Refugees from hot, dry countries like Syria often experience climate

shock, as evidenced in interviews. Again, there is a stark contrast between the impressions of refugee children and adults. Out of 33 responses from Syrian adults about the weather, only three (9.1%) were positive, while 30 (90.9%) were negative, typically regarding the cold and snow. Some adults, however, reported acclimating over time, though two considered the weather a reason to leave the province.

In contrast, refugee children had a more positive outlook, with 18 (72.0%) expressing favorable views of the weather compared to seven (28.0%) negative ones. While some children disliked the cold, many enjoyed the novelty of a snowy Canadian winter. One Syrian father shared through an interpreter that his children were excited about the snow, having been promised this experience while living in Lebanon, and they continue to enjoy it. Again, *H3: Refugee children will have more positive feelings about the drastically different weather in St. John's than refugee adults, is supported.*

Consistent with the ACL framework, the differing opinions between Syrian adults and children may be attributed to life responsibilities and preferences. Adults handle tasks such as shoveling snow and commuting in harsh weather, while children find the snow wondrous and enjoy new play opportunities. Adults, with years of experience in Middle Eastern climates, have more fixed weather preferences, whereas children are more open to new experiences (Arnett, 2002). Additionally, several adult refugees found St. John's to be a beautiful city with stunning natural surroundings. Children did not mention the city's beauty, which is expected as appreciation of natural environments is typically low among children and increases with age (Meidenbauer et al., 2019).

Transportation

Most adult respondents primarily use cars (26), while others use buses (6), walk (1), or take taxis (2), with some using multiple modes or sharing cars with relatives. Many initially walked or took buses before acquiring cars, while others relied on friends, sponsors, or settlement agencies for rides. Despite a few praising the St. John's bus system, one mentioned timing and frequency issues. Only one adult refugee reported weather-related transportation difficulties. Refugees generally find St. John's easy to navigate, likely due to its small size.

The high number of car-using refugees is notable considering the costs and challenges associated with car ownership in a new country, which may stem from Syrians' familiarity with car use, as Syria's automobile ownership rate is higher than most developing countries (International Organization of Motor Vehicles Manufacturers, n.d.). Table 3 details the primary transportation methods for Syrian adult refugees in St. John's and the usual transportation methods for Syrian refugee children going to school.

Table 3: Primary Mode of Transportation for Syrian Adults & Children in St. John's

Main Mode of Transportation, Adults	**N**	**%**	**Primary Mode of Transportation: Children**	**N**	**%**
By car	26	74.3%	By car	8	38.1%
By bus	6	17.1%	By bus	5	23.8%
Walking	1	2.9%	Walking	8	38.1%
Taxi	2	5.7%	Taxi	0	0.0%

Children (38.1%) walked to school more often than their parents did (2.9%), and bus use was also higher among children (38.1% vs. 17.1%). Syrian adults predominantly used cars (74.3%), while Syrian children were frequently driven to school (38.1%). This is because children cannot drive and their transportation is generally dictated by school attendance, in line with the ACL framework. The higher bus usage or walking among Syrian children likely reflect

the proximity of schools for children, as the sample of 20 responses included six different schools. Conversely, adult refugees often require centralized services such as ESL classes, which are less geographically dispersed. For instance, Newfoundland and Labrador have only two settlement service providers under the Atlantic Immigration Program, compared to New Brunswick (13), Nova Scotia (5), and Prince Edward Island (3) (IRCC, 2023a). Consequently, children walk to nearby schools, while adults need long-distance transportation for centralized services, especially shortly after arriving in St. John's.

Li et al. (2017) noted gaps in school bus services for newcomers in St. John's, but most children in this study attended nearby elementary schools, facilitating friendships with Canadian-born students. Syrian refugees faced fewer transportation difficulties than other migrant groups, with 74% of adults mainly using cars and only 38% of children primarily receiving car rides to school. The centralized location of segregated classrooms often limits newcomer students' access to school buses, contrasting with the convenient bus or walking access available to younger children attending nearby integrated elementary schools. Our final hypothesis, *H4: Refugee children are more likely to take the bus or walk to school as their primary form of transportation. Facing longer commutes to the settlement agency; adult refugees will be more likely to travel by car,* is also supported.

While Syrian refugee adults report no significant transportation issues, heavy reliance on cars could hinder future economic integration due to high costs and limited financial support for government-assisted refugees (GARs) (IRCC 2023b). Recent non-Syrian GARs often get rides instead of owning cars. Positive transportation experiences here contrast with earlier studies on immigrant challenges (Clark, 2009; Li & Que, 2016; Li et al., 2017), likely due to recent arrival, high car ownership, and younger participants of our Syrian refugee sample.

Conclusion

Our study examines the settlement experiences of Syrian refugee children and adults in St. John's, Newfoundland, and Labrador, Canada, about a year after arrival using qualitative interviews. This research addresses a gap in the literature by comparing the settlement experiences of different age groups and focusing on young children. While most studies focus on teenage or young adult refugees, our study includes mainly pre-teens and children under ten.

Our findings show that 95% of children have one or more Canadian-born friends, compared to 66% of adults. Children's higher classroom integration in St. John's fosters more intercultural friendships than in other studies where teenagers are often segregated. These relationships are crucial for the social integration and well-being of refugee youth. Adult friendships with Canadian-born individuals, often settlement-related volunteers, tend to diminish over time, possibly overstating their social integration. Language barriers affect friendships for both groups.

Refugees expressed positive feelings toward St. John's residents, with no reports of blatant discrimination. Despite positive feelings toward residents and no blatant discrimination, adults participate less outside of school or work, focusing on settlement agency events, language schools, and soccer with other newcomers, while children engage more with Canadian-born peers. Children also partake in more unstructured activities. Awareness of children's programs may be lacking.

Refugee children also had more positive impressions of the weather and food, enjoying the snow more than adults, likely due to their adaptable preferences and fewer household responsibilities, in line with the ACL framework (Age at migration, Context/contact opportunities, and Life cycle stage). Transportation issues were not highlighted, as many Syrians

own cars and focus on settlement. Adults attend centralized language classes by car, while children take school buses or walk to nearby schools. Segregated classrooms for older students mean they often lack bus access, while most pre-teens and younger children attend nearby elementary schools, enabling them to bus or walk.

Theoretical Implications

Age plays a crucial role in refugee social integration, with children forming Canadian-born friendships more readily than adults, aligning with ACL framework and suggesting that children adapt more easily to new social environments due to their developmental stage and openness. Naturally social environments, particularly schools, facilitate these interactions, emphasizing the importance of educational settings in social integration theories. The study's comparative approach reveals age-related dynamics in social adaptation.

Differences in weather perception and feelings of local food between adults and children highlight broader themes of cultural adaptation. Children's positive responses to NL climate suggest cognitive flexibility and lower cultural resistance, supporting theories of cultural fluidity in younger populations. Conversely, adults exhibit more entrenched cultural preferences and greater adaptation challenges, indicating higher cultural maladaptation. These findings necessitate re-evaluating cultural adaptation models, which often assume age uniformity. Adaptation theories should encompass more than language and employment, reflecting diverse age and life stage experiences.

Policy and Practice Implications

Given that adult refugees form less diverse friendships, policy interventions should promote broader social connections to enhance the social integration of recent refugees. Programs could introduce refugees to more Canadian-born residents through community-based initiatives or partnerships with local organizations. Policies should also support recreational, cultural food, and cultural exchange programs involving adults, in addition to existing programs for children.

This study's insights into transportation usage among refugees illuminate crucial areas for policy intervention. Given that adults often use cars for centralized language classes, policies should focus on improving public transportation accessibility and affordability.

By expanding public transportation access and, perhaps, subsidizing transport for low-income refugees, newcomers can better integrate into the community.

This study highlights that integrating refugee children into mainstream classes yields desirable social benefits. Educational policies could focus on reducing segregation by ensuring that newcomer students, including teenagers, are integrated into the general student population where feasible.

Limitations and Future Research

Our study has limitations; interviews relied on self-perceptions, assuming truthful responses. Migration factors and age differences affect responses, complicating the analysis. Differences in experiences and personalities mean our comparisons are broad rather than exact. Results may not apply to long-settled refugees. Further research should focus on child refugees and compare integration by age and years since migration. The study's short timeframe also

highlights the need for longitudinal research to follow up on refugee integration over extended periods.

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