



## Exploring Socio-Cultural Factors that Mediate, Facilitate, & Constrain the Health and Empowerment of Refugee Youth

### Key Details

#### KEY WORDS

Canada, refugee youth, health, wellbeing, service access, health agency, resiliency

#### POPULATION GROUP

Newcomer youth

#### STEPPING UP THEMES

Health and Wellness; Diversity, Social Inclusion & Safety; Coordinated & Youth Friendly Communities

#### RESEARCH ORIGIN

Ontario

#### SOURCE

Academic

**“Little attention has been given to examining how youth themselves define what it means to be healthy, or the meanings, beliefs and understandings youth have about social and structural factors that facilitate and/or hinder their ability to achieve health and wellbeing.”**

### 1. What is the research about?

Most research studies on health and wellbeing of refugee youth have paid little attention to the youth perspective on these issues. The majority of studies of refugee youth health tend to be expert-driven and quantitative, lacking insight from youth themselves about their experiences of migration, settlement and integration and how these experiences relate to their health and wellbeing. This study contributes to addressing this research gap by asking refugee youth to define and contextualize their experiences of health and wellbeing. It also identifies social and structural cultural factors that enable or constrain efforts to promote and advance health among refugee youth.

### 2. Where did the research take place?

The research took place in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.

### 3. Who is this research about?

This research is about refugee youth (age 18-25 years) who migrated to Canada from 12 different countries.

### 4. How was the research done?

To better understand refugee youth's own perspectives on health and wellbeing, this research organized two focus groups and an in-depth interview with 26 youth (12 females and 14 males) between the ages of 18 to 25 who migrated to Canada. To further accommodate the participants, one of the focus groups was female-only because of cultural norms about discussing gender-specific issues in the company of males. Research participants found that the focus groups were comprehensive, and so, with the exception of one individual, they did not elect to participate in a follow-up in-depth interview.

The researchers consulted with program managers to discuss research objectives and identify best strategies to recruit the most suitable and diverse candidates for the research project. During this time, the lead researcher regularly participated in workshops, events and programs in order for research participants to become comfortable with the researchers' presence.

## 5. What are the key findings?

This study identified the following important issues which significantly impact the lives of refugee youth in Canada:

- 1. A sense of belonging and positive identity:** This study found that refugee youth experience various “forms of discrimination based on their race, or visible appearance, newcomer status, or language proficiency”. Many youth claimed that they were singled out and labeled as “un-trustworthy”, “violent”, and “dangerous” at school, workplaces and other social settings. These experiences, in combination with mistreatment due to lack of language skills, contributed to feelings of exclusion.
- 2. Mental or emotional well-being:** Many participants claimed that “mental illness was not acknowledged or validated in their cultures”. Due to stigma associated with mental illness, many youth refuse to admit that they suffer from mental illness, and therefore do not seek appropriate mental health services to address their issues. That being said, many refugee youth experience significant mental health-related issues that negatively affect their health and wellbeing.
- 3. Supportive environments and relationships:** Although there are some social programs in place to support refugee youth, they must be encouraged to access those services. The programs and services created for refugee youth may be used as a gateway for establishing trust relationships and provide additional support in improving their health and wellbeing.

## 6. Why does this research matter for youth work?

It is important to incorporate the perspectives and experiences of refugee youth when designing health promotion programs. Refugee youth tend to experience more physical and psychological health issues than their Canadian counterparts, due to facing discrimination, isolation and resettlement and adaptation challenges. Youth workers need to gain a greater understanding of the social and structural factors that shape the health determinants of refugee youth and assist them in accessing services based on those needs. In particular, when creating health promotion programs, significant attention must be paid to creating refugee youth-friendly environments that provide opportunities to build self-esteem and develop social connectedness and networks through which youth can access health services.



Edge, S., Newbold, K. B., & Mckeary, M. (2014). Exploring Socio-Cultural Factors that Mediate, Facilitate, & Constrain the Health and Empowerment of Refugee Youth. *Social Science & Medicine*, 117, 34-41.