

JUST SIX
QUESTIONS

RESEARCH
SUMMARY



The Syrian Canadian Sports Club: A Community-Based Participatory Action Research Project with/for Syrian Youth Refugees

“That newcomer youth in Canada (and the West) are underrepresented in sport and recreation pursuits suggests that current sport and recreation programs and places are lacking in cultural diversity, if not also in cultural responsiveness” (p. 2).

1. What is the research about?

Although the value of sport and recreation in community-building is widely recognized, newcomer youth in Canada are less engaged in sport and recreation programming than their peers. This is generally thought to be due to physical and social environmental factors, such as geographic location and cultural norms and/or beliefs. However, it has also been suggested that low engagement can be attributed to a lack of cultural diversity and cultural responsiveness in existing programs.

The **social ecological model** proposes four systems that can help explain the positive and negative effects on participation for newcomer youth: (1) individual, (2) social/interpersonal (microsystem), (3) organizational/community (mesosystem), and (4) public policy (macrosystem). This study aims to identify factors across these four systems that encourage and inhibit newcomer youth engagement in sport and recreation programming.

2. Where did the research take place?

The research was conducted in a rural county in Canada.

3. Who is this research about?

Nine newcomer Syrian youth refugees and seven additional youth (participants' friends or siblings) participated in the study. Youth ranged from 8 to 19 years old.

4. How was the research done?

The researchers used a **participatory action research (PAR)** approach, which allows participants to develop and implement actions in response to their own unmet needs.

Data was collected through photos and **photovoice** (a method in which participants take photos to respond to a research question), participants' drawings or notes, researchers' field notes, and focus group interviews.

The project involved three stages. In Stage 1, participants identified opportunities and barriers to sport and recreation engagement, and researchers used this data to design the Syrian Youth Sports Club, and establish a four-season sport and recreation schedule (tennis, paddling, swimming, and basketball). During Stage 2, participants engaged in the sport and recreation programming over the span of five months. Stage 3 involved additional reflection and program planning.

5. What are the key findings?

Participants identified the following obstacles and opportunities across three of the four social ecological systems:

A. Obstacles

i) Individual

- Perceived limitations in skills and abilities
- Restrictions related to sex/gender
- Constraining attitudes and/or beliefs

ii) Microsystem: Social/Interpersonal

- Cultural and religious “restrictions” (p. 6) (i.e., programming did not respond to cultural and religious considerations)
- Inactive friends
- Non-encouraging siblings and parents and/or guardians

iii) Mesosystem: School/Community

- Invisible/inaccessible community programs
- Limited access to physical activity spaces

B. Opportunities

i) Individual

- Enabling beliefs and attitudes
- Positive self-efficacy

ii) Microsystem: Social/Interpersonal

- Supportive Syrian friends
- Supportive siblings and parents and/or guardians
- Emerging allies

The researchers used this data to create a sports club that was responsive to young people’s needs (e.g., space, transportation, equipment). Over the course of four seasons of sport and recreation programming, the club **fostered a sense of belonging** and **helped newcomer youth become more physically literate** (i.e., motivated, confident, and physically active).

The study also revealed unanticipated difficulties associated with **cultural ignorance** and **cultural insensitivity** in the wider community towards Syrian newcomers. In particular, some community members were critical of the accommodations made for Syrian participants, such as single-sex physical activity opportunities.

6. Why does it matter for youth work?

This study holds significance in the youth recreation context because it identifies factors that may encourage and inhibit newcomer youth from participating in sport and recreation programming. It suggests that newcomer youth can gain physical literacy skills and feel a sense of belonging when programming is **responsive to their unique needs**.

This study can also **inform research with other youth populations** that may be less engaged in sport and recreation programming. Practitioners and researchers can effectively use qualitative data collection methods, such as photovoice and focus groups, to conduct needs assessments and evaluations.



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