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Resettled Syrian Refugees in Oxford



Key points

- Overall, SVPRS families are satisfied with their new life in Oxford and wish to become well-integrated into Oxford and UK society.
- Increased support for employment and job-seeking among refugees is needed to facilitate and improve their employment opportunities.
- As learning English is key for integration, increasing the capacity for English language-learning for refugees in Oxford can hasten this process.
- Broadening the approaches to English language-learning is recommended, to accommodate refugees with a range of educational backgrounds.
- Community-based support groups should be assisted more systematically so their services can most effectively complement those of formal NGOs.
- Continued research on the integration process is needed in order both to improve understanding and to improve its facilitation.

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Context and background

This policy brief presents preliminary findings on how Syrian refugees who came to Oxfordshire via the Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement Scheme (SVPRS) have been adapting to their new life in the United Kingdom.

According to the latest statistics of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the number of refugees fleeing from Syria has reached 6.3 million, constituting the largest refugee population in the world. In response to the large outflow of Syrian refugees, the UK government launched the SVPRS in 2015, announcing plans to resettle up to 20,000 Syrian refugees in the UK by May 2020.

Following this announcement in 2015, Oxford City Council passed a proposal to accept 10 Syrian refugee families. This decision was reviewed in 2016 and again in 2017, with a decision being made to take a further 10 families each year. At the time of this study, a total of 28 families have been received in Oxford via SVPRS. After fleeing the civil war in Syria, most of these families had sought refuge in neighbouring countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Iraq, and experienced many difficulties in the years before they were resettled in the UK. Given that a few years have passed since the arrival of the first families in Oxford, this study aims to understand the integration processes that these Syrian families have followed, while highlighting policy implications for local authorities and refugee-supporting agencies.

Oxford City Council secures accommodation for the refugee families and commissions support services. Once SVPRS families are received in Oxford, contracted NGOs (Asylum Welcome and Connection Support) assist the newly arrived Syrians. These aid agencies provide guidance on daily life in Oxford and help to facilitate their 'settling in' processes. In addition, they are responsible for helping newly arrived refugees meet their basic needs, facilitating access to medical and educational services, enrolling in English lessons, and searching for employment. The ultimate objective of these agencies is to enable Syrian families to be 'integrated' into Oxford, which is often discussed in terms of achieving 'independence' or 'self-reliance'. This means that they do not have to rely on commissioned support providers but can either manage independently or have the knowledge and skills to be able to access the support they need such as welfare rights advice.

At the time of this study, most of the families had been in Oxford for 1–2 years, and had navigated considerable challenges in adjusting to a completely new living environment, even as they found opportunities in their new country of residence.

The research entailed semi-structured interviews with 14 families out of the 28 families currently in Oxford, and also interviews with staff members from Oxford City Council, community-based groups, and refugee-assisting NGOs between January and July 2018. For privacy reasons, the names of all refugee interviewees are pseudonyms.

Findings

To organise the research findings, this study draws upon the concept of 'integration'. In the UK, the Home Office broadly defines integration as a process in which refugees are empowered to achieve their full potential as members of British society, which includes contributing to the community and becoming fully able to exercise the rights and responsibilities that they share with other residents. In order to operationalise this broad definition, this research brief employs the conceptual framework of refugee integration proposed by Ager and Strang (2008). The framework identifies four core domains that it considers central to 'successful integration': 1) access to employment, housing, education and health; 2) facilitators and barriers – language, culture and the local environment; 3) social connections within and between groups within the community; and 4) foundation – access to citizenship and rights.

1) Access to employment, housing, education and health

Employment

Amongst the 14 families interviewed, four had some form of employment at the point of research. One reason for this limited number is that most of the interviewed refugees arrived in Oxford in the last 1–2 years and have been encouraged to prioritise English language learning. During this initial transition period, these families are supported by unemployment benefits from the government, and thus are able to manage their daily life in Oxford.

As Omar, a male refugee who arrived in Oxford in August 2017 after spending 4 years in Jordan, shared: "I want to find a work that suits to my expertise. But first I need to learn English. This takes time." In Syria, he was working for an audio-visual company and applied for two related posts in the UK but both applications were unsuccessful due to his limited command of English.

The four Syrians currently employed were not necessarily able to find a job that matched their skill sets or longer-term career interests. One male refugee, who came to Oxford in March 2017 from Egypt, is working part-time at an Arabic restaurant washing dishes. Before the outbreak of civil war, he was running a manufacturing company making car batteries in Syria. Upon his arrival in Oxford, he looked for car-related jobs but could not find anything. Now he work 24 hours per week with an hourly wage of £7.50 per hour. The other three refugees are also employed in the food sector and reported similar working conditions.

Housing

All the resettled refugees who come to Oxford via SVPRS are provided with housing in the private sector by Oxford City Council. This is arranged prior to their arrival; therefore all of the 14 families have secured flats or houses appropriate for their household size. Their living locations are dispersed across the city and are all private rented properties. The rent is covered by a mixture of benefits and a top up payment from the SVPRS funding. Refugees who start to work also pay a portion of the rent themselves.

Almost all interviewed families expressed their satisfaction with their current housing arrangements in Oxford. Most of these families suffered from poor housing conditions in their first asylum countries in the Middle East, and all families noted that their quality of housing has significantly improved compared to their time in the Syrian neighbouring states.

However, several families told me that they were 'shocked' by the extraordinarily high rent prices in Oxford and expressed concerns about whether they would be able to cover the full

cost of rent in the future. For instance, one male refugee in his early 30s, who lives in a 2-bedroom house with his wife and three children, said to me: "Our monthly rent is £1,350. Now the government is helping with our rent but in the future we will have to cover this expense by ourselves. As I have some medical problems, I am anxious whether I can manage to do so." This is a plausible concern, given the high cost of rent and property in Central Oxford (relative to national averages) as well as the difficulties Syrian refugees have described in securing full-time employment.

Education

Across the different domains of integration, access to education appears to be one in which resettled families have made significant advancement since their arrival. Of the interviewed families with school-aged children, all of these children have been already enrolled in the UK public education system. When I asked broadly about positive changes since arriving in Oxford, most families raised education as one of the most appreciated forms of support offered by the SVPRS.

During their asylum in Middle Eastern neighbouring countries, many Syrian families struggled to access quality and affordable education for their children. Probably as a result, parents reported themselves as very satisfied with the quality of the educational system in Oxford, as well as their children's progress in English language acquisition. These families believe that education is a crucial investment for the future integration of their children in the UK and consequently place a high priority on it.

Health

As the programme title 'The Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement Scheme' indicates, the UK government has actively sought to accept families with specific vulnerabilities, such as health issues, under this resettlement programme. Accordingly, some of the interviewed families have members with serious health problems. They are extremely happy with access to advanced medical facilities in Oxford. For instance, one Syrian family whose husband has a kidney issue expressed appreciation that he has been able to receive proper medical treatment in Oxford. During 4 years of exile in Egypt, he was unable to receive adequate healthcare and his condition deteriorated greatly.

Dissatisfaction relating to medical services in Oxford was primarily associated with a lack of Arabic and English translation support at local hospitals. Most of the SVPRS families have little command of English and a lack of language proficiency makes it hard for them to communicate with healthcare staff or read letters received from health facilities as they are written only in English.

Meeting of Syrian Sisters in Oxford. Credit: N. Abdo





Meeting of Syrian Sisters in Oxford. Credit: N. Abdo

Particularly for those with serious medical issues, lack of access to Arabic medical translation services has created anxiety. While these families have attempted to rely on Arabic-speaking staff working at refugee-assisting NGOs or fellow Syrian migrants with better English, these workarounds are not always dependable. Therefore, even though access to health facilities has been secured, language barriers can undermine the usability of such services.

2) Facilitators and barriers – language, culture and safety

Language and cultural knowledge

One of the most significant factors for refugee integration is proficiency in the predominant spoken language as well as broader cultural knowledge. Unsurprisingly, being able to speak English is consistently identified by previous research as a necessary key to integration in the UK.

Unfortunately, lack of English proficiency is limiting the capacity of almost all newly arrived Syrian refugees in Oxford. My research consistently found that those with weaker language abilities tend to struggle more in everyday life and reported more stress than those with better English skills. One male refugee interviewee commented: “The most prominent challenge for us is no doubt English. Lack of English makes all aspects of our lives hard. I don’t know which buses I should take and what the contents are in food items at shops.” In this case, this person also explained that he stopped schooling in the 5th grade in Syria and is illiterate in Arabic, which he feels makes his English lessons even more difficult because of illiteracy in his mother tongue.

Refugee-assisting NGOs and Oxford City Council are aware of the communication challenges faced by SVPRS families. According to them, several families have been unable to make progress in even the pre-entry levels of English language programmes since their arrival in the UK. These families will likely continue to struggle in the future, as English remains a key precondition for accessing most public and private services and facilities in Oxford, despite the city’s diversity. In response, Oxford City Council is currently considering increasing the number of lessons offered to SVPRS families and also revisiting the teaching modalities.

Safety and security

Safety and security are fundamental for successful integration. Previous research has found that refugees feel more ‘at home’ in their localities if they see them as ‘peaceful’ (Ager and Stang 2008). Without exception, all 14 families expressed no concerns about safety and security in Oxford. No refugees reported any xenophobic attitude or discriminatory practices since their arrival. It is possible this could stem from Oxford’s history of hosting

other migrant communities from Arabic-speaking countries and that it has a generally liberal attitude towards migration.

When I asked about perceptions of safety and security in Oxford, a Syrian refugee couple who had spent 5 years in Jordan responded: “Our life here is so peaceful and calm. Things are in order and systematic. People are friendly and don’t discriminate us. They don’t interfere with our daily life.” In contrast, they had experienced frequent harassment in Jordan due to their Syrian identities.

As noted above, most SVPRS families survived the conflict in Syria and then experienced varying degrees of discrimination in their first countries of asylum. Since many interviewees tended to compare their life in Oxford with that of their first asylum country in the Middle East, it is very likely that this comparison influences their perception of safety and security in the UK. Regardless, all of the families interviewed expressed that they were very satisfied with the security situation in Oxford.

3) Social connections within and between groups within the community

Social connections play an instrumental role in removing barriers and facilitating the process of adjustment for SVPRS families in Oxford.

Amongst the various types of social connections, my research found that connections with fellow Syrians or people from other Arabic-speaking countries are considered crucial by resettled Syrian families, primarily because of a shared common language for easier communication. Those who came to Oxford via SVPRS arrived at different times and did not know each other before being resettled in Oxford. However, upon their arrival, they met at language schools and events or meetings held at refugee-supporting agencies, or at mosques and churches, and came to know each other. The communication between them is dense and frequent; for instance, they exchange information about where to buy halal food items and how to use social services, and also frequently assist one another when a family needs support due to illness or emergencies.

I also found that networks with Syrian non-refugee migrants in Oxford existed. Some SVPRS families mentioned that they communicate with other Syrians to seek advice, since these migrants have usually lived in Oxford for longer. One SVPRS family revealed that they borrowed £700 from a Syrian non-refugee business person when they experienced a personal emergency.

The research also found that connections with non-Syrian Arab people often play a facilitatory role in accessing employment. For example, a male refugee in his 20s – one of the four Syrian refugees interviewed who is currently employed – found work as a cooking assistant at a fast-food restaurant through a personal contact with an Egyptian migrant living in Oxford.

Additionally, networks established through community-based organisations set up by refugees themselves can also play a critical role in supporting resettled families with day-to-day integration challenges. At the time of writing, there are 3-4 refugee-run community organisations in Oxford. One of the most active is ‘Syrian Sisters’, which was founded by a Syrian female refugee who spontaneously migrated to Oxford in 2015. According to an interview with the founder, she established this group to complement the work of formal refugee-assisting NGOs by providing guidance and support around integration challenges facing SVPRS families in Oxford.

Out of the various types of support this group offers, translation support was identified as particularly useful for resettled families, given their limited English proficiency. The group also organises a weekly meeting at a community hall,

and occasionally members cook Syrian food together, chat in Arabic and talk about adjusting to life in the UK. This regular get-together not only serves the purpose of providing information about daily life in Oxford, but also helps to avoid isolation among SVPRS families by ensuring they have community support.

4) Foundation – access to citizenship and rights

In the integration process, particularly from a long-term perspective, access to residency and citizenship in the receiving country, and the associated rights and responsibilities, are fundamental. All families who are resettled in the UK via SVPRS are granted refugee status, with corresponding rights. As discussed above, the SVPRS families also have access to public funds including employment services and housing support.

In addition, for SVPRS families, upon their arrival, they are granted a right to residency in the UK initially for 5 years. After spending a minimum of 5 years in the UK, they are entitled to apply for permanent residency and then eventually citizenship like other foreigners.

While the interviewed families emphasised a desire to maintain their Syrian identity, almost all of them expressed an intent to secure permanent residency and subsequent citizenship in the UK. Of course, this strong interest in residency and citizenship is closely linked with the continued protracted conflict and precarious political climate in Syria. One Syrian interviewee commented: “Syria is still in war. I don’t think we can go back there. The UK is our new country. We are facing some challenges but we want to be integrated and obtain citizenship here.”

These comments were echoed by other resettled Syrian families. They were very keen to learn more about how to access and secure UK permanent residency and citizenship. During interviews, I received numerous questions regarding the procedures related to residency and citizenship in the UK context.

Recommendations

Overall, the degree of satisfaction amongst interviewed SVPRS families about their new life in Oxford is generally very high. While their lives are not without challenges, the families are cognisant of significant improvements in most aspects of life in Oxford, especially in comparison to their time in their first asylum country. Importantly, they also emphasised their strong intentions to become well-integrated into Oxford and UK society more broadly. To further facilitate their adjustment process, the following recommendations are suggested from this study.

Increased support for employment and job-seeking

At this point, only a few members of the resettled families have been able to secure employment. However, almost all the refugees interviewed expressed a strong desire to find work, especially once they improve their language skills. Those of working age usually have had some kind of vocational experience and have skills and expertise that they acquired in Syria before displacement. One potential way to better facilitate their job search is to better understand and collect data on the vocational backgrounds of resettled families and then to set up a matching system between resettled refugees and potential employers. This can help refugees to utilise their existing skills as well as fill gaps



A special lunch by the 'Syrian Sisters' in Oxford. Credit: N. Abdo

in labour needs in Oxford and other areas, and creates a win-win situation for refugee participation in the UK labour market.

Strengthening language capacity

What this initial study clearly highlights is the significance of language capacity for adapting to living in a new country. English proficiency affects almost every aspect of refugees' new lives in Oxford, in addition to being a major obstacle for obtaining a job and accessing medical services. While providing more language lessons for the SVPRS families would certainly be helpful, it is also important for Oxford City Council and refugee-supporting NGOs to realise that in some cases a limited educational background and limited Arabic language literacy can further slow the language acquisition process. For such cases, it may be necessary to think about a different approach to enhance spoken English abilities, in addition to the provision of normal language lessons.

Assisting communal support groups

Community-based organisations such as Syrian Sisters play a key role in resolving the day-to-day challenges of resettled SVPRS families in Oxford. For refugees, these communal groups are often more accessible than formal refugee-assisting NGOs as these groups are run by fellow Syrian refugees who have experienced similar adjustment challenges. Furthermore, these groups provide a gathering place and help to connect resettled families living in a new place. Given their contributions, these communal initiatives should be more systematically assisted by government bodies in order to more effectively complement the support provided by formal NGOs.

Researching the integration process

Refugee integration is not a single event but rather a process that takes place over several years or even longer. In order to understand whether and how SVPRS families manage to adapt to their new lives in the UK, it is essential to continue research that follows resettled families over various periods of time. This type of longitudinal study is especially necessary if Oxford City Council intends to facilitate SVPRS refugees to become 'self-reliant' and 'socio-economically independent' in the context of Oxfordshire.

Bibliography

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