

Supporting LGBTQI+ Newcomers in Canada: Considerations for Inclusive Programming

Introduction

Canada's commitment to diversity and inclusion extends to its approach to newcomers, and this commitment is especially pertinent when addressing the unique needs of LGBTQ immigrants. For many LGBTQ refugees, their journey to Canada is driven by a need to escape persecution, discrimination, and violence they faced in their home countries due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. To provide effective support and a sense of belonging, it is essential for programs to acknowledge the intersectionality of experiences, recognizing how factors such as race, gender, and disability can compound vulnerabilities. Therefore, the focus of this discussion will be on identifying key considerations for designing inclusive and effective programs to support the diverse experiences of LGBTQ newcomers.

1. Structural Barriers in Accessing Services

Research on the experiences of LGBTQ newcomers in North America points to several structural barriers in accessing services. These challenges can include:

- Limited awareness among service providers regarding the specific needs of LGBTQ newcomers. This gap can lead to insensitivity, such as making incorrect assumptions about an individual's gender or their partner's gender when seeking services.
- The presence of biases, particularly when service providers hold racist, homophobic, or transphobic beliefs, can exacerbate the challenges faced by LGBTQ newcomers.¹
- Language barriers present a significant obstacle, particularly when resources are only offered in English.

Profile of LGBTQ Refugees in Canada

- From 2013 – 2015, **13%** of all asylum decisions in Canada were based on **sexual orientation**, with approx. 70% of claims accepted.
- The **Rainbow Refugee Assistance Partnership**, funded by the Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), sponsors 60 LGBTQ refugees annually.
- An additional **150** spots are designated for LGBTQ refugees from **Afghanistan**.

2. Safety, Health, and Well-Being

The safety, health, and well-being of LGBTQ newcomers can be impacted in several compounding ways:

- **Lack of supportive and reliable social networks.** Cultural and religious communities, as well as families are among the most important sources of social support post-immigration. However, stigmatization within these social networks can lead to LGBTQ immigrants not feeling safe, in fear of not having their identities accepted. This not only limits their access to support in the community but can place them in danger.
- **Burden of sharing.** The need for LGBTQ immigrants to repeatedly disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity during service delivery can be an additional emotional burden that should be mitigated when possible. Confidentiality is key to ensuring that LGBTQ newcomers are not inadvertently outed.
- **Trauma and Retraumatization.** Many LGBTQ immigrants have experienced threats of persecution, torture, and death in their home countries due to their sexual and gender identity. These traumas can continue post-immigration, throughout the claims process, forcing claimants to re-live past experiences of violence and oppression², as well as during the settlement process.
- **Existence of intersecting vulnerabilities.** Trans and non-binary individuals within the LGBTQ community often face additional layers of stigma and discrimination.

3. Housing

While accessing housing is a challenge for many immigrants, refugees and LGBTQ community members face an elevated risk of homelessness. LGBTQ individuals, and in particular LGBTQ youth, are grossly overrepresented in the unhoused population. Specific considerations for LGBTQ refugees in this context include:

1. **Immediate shelter needs** for individuals who may be disowned by their families upon coming out in Canada.
2. Recognizing that **not all shelters are safe for LGBTQ immigrants**, who may be at risk of violence and harm due to their intersecting identities.

Income and Housing Data

- **63%** of immigrants in Canada reported household incomes of **less than \$30,000**.
- **15%** reported an annual income of less than **\$10,000**.
- **Newcomers under 5 years** reported annual incomes of **less than \$10,000**.
- Racialized immigrant communities are disproportionately overrepresented in the homelessness and poverty crisis in Canada.

Key Recommendations

- Provide staff with diversity and cultural awareness training.
- Update intake forms and interview processes to be inclusive of gender and sexual identities.
- Facilitate or provide access to free and culturally sensitive therapy and counselling services for clients.
- Share information on a need-to-know basis only.
- Recruit gender and sexuality-diverse individuals within service organizations.
- Facilitate kinship support groups for LGBTQ newcomers, including mentorship programs.



Works Cited

1. Giwa & Chaze, 2018
2. Kahn and Alessi, 2018