

How Do Sponsors Think about “Month 13”?

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Abstract

There are many different ways in which one might describe the goal of Canada's Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program. For sponsors, though, one goal is clear: to get “their” refugees ready to handle the rigors of “month 13.” The supposed ideal is that, by month 13, newcomers are employed and living independently in Canada, as productive members of society. The reality is messier. The objective in this article is to offer an account of how sponsors think of their job, in relation to month 13. Using data collected via interviews with nearly sixty private sponsors in Ottawa, it is shown that sponsors are motivated by securing stability for newcomers by the time month 13 arrives, but that sponsors differently flesh out the meaning of the stability they are seeking to achieve on behalf of newcomers. In particular, the data suggest, sponsors believe that newcomers' attitude to integration is especially strongly related to their actual integration, and newcomers do especially well by month 13 to the extent that sponsors are able to build and support a positive attitude towards it.

Résumé

Il y a plusieurs façons dont pourrait être décrit l'objectif du Programme de parrainage privé de réfugiés du Canada. Pour les parrains, toutefois, l'objectif est clair: il s'agit de

préparer « leur » réfugié à gérer les rigueurs du « 13^e mois ». L'idéal supposé est qu'à partir 13^e mois, les réfugiés travaillent et vivent de façon indépendante en tant membres productifs de la société. La réalité est plus compliquée. Cet article a pour objectif de rendre compte de la façon dont les parrains envisagent leurs tâches en lien avec le 13^e mois. S'appuyant sur des données recueillies auprès d'une soixantaine de parrains à Ottawa, cet article démontre que les parrains sont animés par le désir d'assurer la stabilité des réfugiés avant 13^e mois. Cependant, les parrains définissent de manière différente ce qu'ils entendent par stabilité. Notamment, les données indiquent que les parrains estiment que le niveau d'intégration des nouveaux arrivants est particulièrement relié à leur attitude envers l'intégration. Les parrains estiment également que la réussite des nouveaux arrivants dépend de leur capacité à développer et soutenir chez eux une attitude positive envers l'intégration.

There are many different ways in which one might describe the goal of Canada's Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program:¹ it gives Canadians with a commitment to refugees a way to personally increase the number of resettlement spaces for them in Canada; it provides a highly personalized and robust welcoming team for newly arriving refugees; it involves the community in the larger Canadian project of welcoming refugees to our country. Refugees to

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Canada are admitted in one of two ways: as government-assisted refugees and as privately sponsored refugees. Government-assisted refugees are admitted with formal links to Canada's extensive settlement services, which take charge of supporting them as they construct their new lives in Canada. Privately sponsored refugees are selected by Canadian citizens and permanent residents for admission. In supporting their application to Canada, sponsors commit to a range of tasks with respect to "their" refugees, including finding them accommodation, health care, language classes, and so on, all of which are directed at facilitating their integration into Canadian society. This commitment is officially one year long, and the supposed ideal is that, by month 13, refugee arrivals are self-sufficient in a meaningful way. The reality is messier. Using data collected via interviews with nearly sixty private sponsors in Ottawa, this article offers an account of how sponsors think of their job, in relation to month 13.

In this article, Part 1 outlines the overarching theoretical questions that motivated this work, and elaborates the ways in which the terms *integration*, *independence*, *agency*, and *self-sufficiency* are understood across a range of fields in social science. Part 2 offers a summary of recent accounts of the objectives of month 13; this summary includes anecdotal accounts suggesting that not all refugees are prepared to be on their own when their sponsorship comes to an end. Part 3 describes the methods deployed to carry out the research. Part 4 offers an account of how "independence," and the related concepts listed above, is conceptualized by sponsors, to reveal that they describe it both in "hard" terms, i.e., with respect to whether refugees have jobs or competence in a national language, and in relatively "softer" terms, i.e., with respect to whether refugees arrive with attitudes towards their new lives that makes integration easier or more difficult. This part also offers an account of how sponsors worked to support refugees in achieving success in both dimensions. The results suggest, ultimately, that while many sponsors have a multidimensional understanding of what success at month 13 entails, a significant minority of sponsors continue to have narrow accounts of what counts as success at month 13, understanding it only or mainly in terms of economic self-sufficiency. These latter sponsors, in particular, expressed some disappointment with their sponsorship experience, in those cases where this objective was not reached. Yet it is well known among scholars and settlement workers, as described below, that integration into Canadian society, and the labour market in particular, is gradual; the failure to attain it by month 13 means neither that the refugees have failed, nor that the sponsorship has failed. As the guidelines from the Refugee Sponsorship Training Program for Month 13 note, "It is important for sponsors not to feel disheartened or discouraged if the refugee(s) they have sponsored are

not self-sufficient by the end of Month 12 ... integration is a long-term process."²

What Is the Goal of Month 13?

Month 13 looms large, for both sponsors and refugees. As articulated above, sponsors agree to support refugees for one year, and the legal dimension of the relationship between sponsors and refugees concludes one year after the refugee arrives in Canada. The most concrete dimension of the cut-off is financial: whereas sponsors take on the financial responsibility for supporting refugees for their first year in Canada, on the first day of month 13 this financial responsibility concludes. In a small number of cases, sponsors are willing and able to continue offering at least some financial support to refugees beyond month 13, but according to the data gathered from sponsors in Ottawa, that is not the norm. In a larger number of cases, strong affective ties have developed between sponsors and refugees, so the friendships continue beyond month 13.

Much of the commentary on the implications of month 13 is anecdotal. Between November 2015 and January 2017, over 40,000 Syrian refugees were admitted to Canada, over 18,000 of whom were privately sponsored.³ In early 2017, after many of these refugees had been present for a year or more, journalists in Canada and the United States profiled many of these refugees, reporting on how their first year in Canada had gone.⁴ One central theme in these stories was that there was a lot of nervousness felt among all parties—refugees, sponsors, and settlement workers—about how the transition would go. The point is not that support is not available—all provinces have welfare systems that will support refugees, if they require it, and refugees continued to be permitted to access settlement services of all kinds, although some reports suggest that refugees are unaware that ongoing support, financial and otherwise, is available.⁵ But the precise mechanisms by which refugees would support themselves after the formal cut-off point, and how the relations among refugees and sponsors would be navigated, were all hazy in ways that generated anxiety for refugees and sponsors alike.

The Research Set-up

The data reported below were collected from interviews with nearly sixty sponsors in Ottawa, conducted as part of a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council grant.⁶ The research design was approved by the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board. We recruited sponsors by communicating with refugee settlement agencies in Ottawa as well as sponsorship agreement holders, across all major religious groups in Canada.⁷ These agencies forwarded our recruitment email to the sponsors with whom they worked, asking them to be in touch with us if they were willing to speak with

our interviewer. Each of these sponsors reached out to the research team and an interview was scheduled, and it ran approximately ninety minutes. One interviewer conducted all of the interviews, between October 2017 and January 2018. The interviewer used a questionnaire⁸ to direct the interview, but followed the standards associated with semi-structured interviewing techniques, allowing her to ask follow-up questions when sponsors hinted that they had more of relevance to say on the areas of focus. Respondents came from every major religious group in Canada (Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu), and many were secular.⁹ They were mainly women, often retired, many from the Canadian public service.¹⁰ With two exceptions, sponsors resided in Ottawa.¹¹ All of the people interviewed had completed their sponsorship year. In many cases, interviewees were first-time sponsors who had responded to the call to support Syrian arrivals; in several others, interviewees had been participating in refugee sponsorship for years, and even decades. The intention was to interview sponsors individually, but several sponsors early on indicated a strong preference to be interviewed in groups, and that preference was respected. As a result, while most interviews were one-on-one, a dozen were conducted in small group of between two and four sponsors.

Three main questions form the basis of the analysis:

1. One of the main jobs of a sponsor is to secure the independence of newcomers. What do you think *independence* means?
2. What skills do you believe that newcomers need, in order to be independent?
3. At what point, if any, do you believe that the newcomers with whom you worked became independent?

The interviewer asked these questions in order but had flexibility to pursue additional follow-up questions where she felt it was appropriate.

A word about linguistic choice: the research was born from the observation that *something* is meant to be achieved for refugees by the time their first year in Canada comes to an end. This something was initially conceived as *agency*, a term familiar to philosophers, which designates the capacity of an individual to formulate decisions among quality options and to be able to act on these decisions in meaningful ways.¹² Are refugees *agents* in their own lives, and do sponsors support refugees' agency? The language of agency, it turns out, is familiar to scholars but not as familiar to sponsors. Correspondingly the language deployed in the research was shifted to focus on independence; questions focused on the nature of independence, and related terms were better able to capture quality data on the actions sponsors were taking to support the refugees with whom they worked. In particular, our research framework, and the specific questions selected to begin conversations, was derived from

an analysis of labour market integration literature; from accounts of "self-sufficiency"; and from the philosophical literature focused on agency and empowerment.¹³ As with the entire research team, the interviewer was armed with the broad understanding of independence described here and so was cognizant that the simple questions reported above may not have been able to capture the nuance sought in this project. She was therefore able to probe further, shifting language in follow-up questions, towards self-sufficiency or agency, where appropriate. No doubt the language is imperfect, but these initial thoughts are intended to frame the readers' understanding of the objectives and results reported here.

The theme of "economic independence" will prove especially relevant to the analysis below, but there is an important caveat: the research team does not believe that self-sufficiency, integration, or independence translates in any easy way to *economic* independence. Yet much of the rhetoric around immigration admission and settlement in general—and refugees are not excluded—is about the ways in which migrants of all kinds contribute to the Canadian economy. Moreover, attempts to mobilize support in favour of admitting refugees, by the government and often refugee advocates themselves, emphasize the contribution that they will make to Canadian society. Admitted refugees may impose short-term costs, so the public discourse goes, but over the long term they become active contributors to our economy; indeed, there is considerable evidence suggesting that, overall, refugees do in time contribute as taxpayers to the Canadian economy, and that the work they do recoups the short-term costs their arrival and early integration generates.¹⁴ To take just one example, in a recent speech detailing new pre-arrival services available for migrants to Canada, Minister of Immigration, Citizenship and Refugees Ahmed Hussen began by noting the ways in which immigrants support Canada's economic success, and casually and repeatedly mentioned the "positive role that immigrants play in our economy and society."¹⁵

There is nothing striking or original about this quotation, other than it is run-of-the-mill for immigration-related commentary from the Canadian government. Yet public statements of this kind sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly propose that, were Canadians to believe that refugees imposed only, or mainly, costs on Canadian citizens, they would not be willing to support their admission. More worryingly, this emphasis on the economic contributions that refugees ultimately make suggests that, where they do not do so, or were they not to do so, they would be understood as *burdens* on Canadian citizens. This view is particularly problematic, since refugees ought to be admitted for resettlement because a commitment to humanitarianism

demands it; Canadian refugee policy recognizes this, moreover, and in general prioritizes the admission of refugees who are most in need, rather than (as historically had been the case) those who appear best able to make contributions to the Canadian economy.¹⁶

Three central findings that emerge from the data are outlined below. One finding is that sponsors offer two general accounts of how independence should be defined, and what skills are associated with it. One account emphasizes hard skills like education and linguistic competence; a second emphasizes softer skills, some of which are not straightforwardly *skills*, including the capacity and willingness to shift habits and norms, and a willingness to “jump right in.” A second finding is that large numbers of sponsors focused explicitly on engaging with refugees in ways that they believed built independence; for many, something like independence was at the top of their minds. Yet when and where they were able to support transitions to independence were not always clear, or were impeded by other considerations. A final and related finding is that month 13, though a cut-off of sorts, does not correspond neatly with the achievement of independence; rather, independence is gained gradually and imperfectly, over the course of sponsorships and beyond.

Findings: Defining and Supporting Independence

What Is Independence?

As noted above, sponsors were asked to consider what it means to be independent. Broadly, sponsors offered two kinds of responses: one focused on the development of skills (or accomplishment of certain tasks) and another focused on the possession (or development) of specific attitudes.

Among sponsors who focused on skills development, one group described independence straightforwardly in terms of gainful employment, as did these sponsors: “I think being employed or knowing how to access a source of income” is central to independence; “I think it means, ultimately to get working”; and “Financially independent: I guess this means they should be getting jobs or at least getting the skills to get jobs.”¹⁷ Sponsors who defined independence in employment terms expressed frustration with refugees who rejected what they viewed as perfectly good jobs. One sponsor noted a low-skilled refugee, with poor English skills, refusing to clean toilets, for example. Another expressed frustration with a refugee who insisted that he work as a barber, for whom an apprenticeship position was found, but who then refused to study for the additional qualifications that would have secured him more stable and lucrative employment.

Among those sponsors who immediately associated independence with employment, there was a persistent worry about the danger of refugees accepting a life on social assistance. One sponsor, when asked to consider the meaning

of independence, immediately observed that “they have only to be not dependent on Canadian taxpayers’ money.”¹⁸ Sponsors with this attitude described their job as, in part, to ensure that refugees did “not think that it’s OK to be on social assistance.”¹⁹ Another explained that they were very clear, in working with refugees, that “welfare is a way of life that you really don’t want to get addicted to.”²⁰ One sponsor reported a conversation with refugees in which refugees were asking for support in sponsoring additional family members; the sponsor explained that sponsorships are expensive and cannot be undertaken easily. The refugees responded that the additional money was not necessary, since their family members could “get on welfare.” The sponsor noted, “Nobody had educated them that welfare isn’t a default way of life here.... You need to educate them that welfare is not an end state in Canada.”²¹ Some sponsors expressed the worry that “they” believed that social assistance was “a way of life” or theirs for the taking, and that sponsors thereby should count among their jobs ensuring as much as possible that refugees do not “go on welfare.” Regardless of whether sponsors believed that being financially self-sufficient was necessary to declaring the sponsorship a success, most advised against relying on social assistance unless it was essential, and, at least according to the data, sponsors are generally successful in persuading refugees to avoid it. In the discussion section below, the reasons and implications of a sponsor focus on economic integration—and the pressure to encourage avoiding social assistance—will be considered in more detail.

In addition to employment, many sponsors connected independence to linguistic competence. One sponsor noted, “First of all language is a big thing, because obviously if they can’t communicate then they’ll never be independent.”²² Another sponsor echoed this view: “To learn the language ... that’s number one. That means they can become independent if they have the English language.” Every sponsor we spoke to understood that among their jobs was securing language education for refugees, noting its key role in securing self-sufficiency among refugees. Some sponsor groups supported formal language training by offering in-home additional tutoring, in one case by focusing specifically on language instruction appropriate to the employment desires and experiences of the refugees with whom they were working. The stories varied, but the motivation was the same: to encourage and support the learning of English (in our sample, only English) so that refugees could navigate Canadian life on their own.

Correspondingly, multiple sponsors reported anguish at navigating the challenges of month 13 precisely in terms of linguistic acquisition and competence. As sponsors reported, refugees overwhelmingly arrived with a desire to work as quickly as possible. These sponsors highlighted how often refugees worried about being burdens on Canada, since

the country had offered their family a new home in safety and security; they wanted to “repay” Canada as quickly as possible, and if not pay Canada back, at least not impose additional costs on Canada. Yet where refugees arrived with no competence in English, one year simply did not seem to be adequate to give them the base they needed to operate fully independently (of their sponsors) in Ottawa. In response, sponsors felt, refugees were forced into difficult choices. Many refugees who were able to access the labour market often preferred to abandon language classes, simply to ensure that they did not have to rely on social assistance. For many individuals—overwhelmingly but not exclusively men—after having secured safety for their families, after often traumatic and dangerous journeys, the thought of being unable to financially support families at month 13 was painful. In response, some sponsors focused on encouraging refugees to understand that they could make more and better contributions if they chose to slow down and gain competence in English before entering the labour market. Some sponsors, with additional capacity, opted for hybrid options in which they encouraged employment but continued offering (sometimes extensive) in-home tutoring in English.

Not all sponsors responded to questions about independence in terms of hard skills. Many others responded by pointing to attitudes or character traits that supported achieving self-sufficiency in new environments. Sponsors who answered questions about independence in this way were quick to point out that refugees had not only survived extensive trauma before arriving in Canada, but that they had *survived* this trauma without sponsor support. They described refugees as resilient in the face of significant trauma and change, and connected this resilience to the grace with which refugees responded to the challenges they faced in learning how to flourish in Canadian society. This approach was reflected in statements like the following: “We were very respectful of the fact that this family managed just fine in Syria without us.”²³ They were, said these sponsors, already independent in all the relevant ways, and described the sponsorship job in terms of guiding refugees towards understanding how to achieve their own objectives in Canada.

Some sponsors in this category referred to refugees who seemed to possess basic problem-solving skills that enabled them to confront and adapt to their new circumstances. Others noted that the refugees they sponsored had an orientation that lent itself to coping with new circumstances—one noted with affection that the grandfather in the family simply went for extended walks, not worrying about whether he would get lost. One described this attitude as a “certain amount of get-up-and-go ... you need to be motivated to go.”²⁴ This sort of attitude facilitates the trajectory towards independence, explained many sponsors. Sponsors described refugees as

“adaptable” or as willing to learn and incorporate the Canadian “way of life.” Said one sponsor of the family she was working with, “They are the most resourceful, and adaptable, and flexible people imaginable. And I think they are going to do just fine.”²⁵ Typically, sponsors who responded in this way noted that among the refugees with whom they worked, there was an orientation towards understanding how Canadian society worked, and that this orientation propelled choices among them that would allow them to flourish in Canadian society specifically.

To take just one example: many sponsors appeared attentive to gender norms and dynamics in operation in the families they had sponsored. Several sponsors noted the importance of encouraging both men and women to achieve linguistic competence, and especially highlighted the efforts they had made to ensure that especially mothers of young children were able to attend classes, detailing, for example, extensive cooperative babysitting they had provided until day-care spaces for young children became available. Many sponsors expressed the view that families in which men and women were willing to abandon relatively less egalitarian gender relations in favour of integrating both women and men in a family, the better able the family seemed to be able to cope with the challenges of integration; sponsors understood this “abandonment” as evidence that refugees were taking on Canadian gender norms. One sponsoring group especially noted a new dad’s willingness to stay home with his baby while his wife attended language class; as they reminisced, they told a story of the panicked dad calling the sponsors to them the baby was crying, and to ask what he should do. The sponsors reassured him that the baby loved him, and that he should try various strategies for helping the baby to calm down. In their telling, as the baby’s mother was working to gain linguistic competence, a key element of independence, so too was the dad learning that he was capable of caring for his family in multiple ways.

Supporting the Development of Independence

When sponsors were asked how they supported the development of independence among refugees, two consistent themes emerged. One theme centred upon how best to engage refugees in decision-making about critical issues, and another focused on how best to “help” refugees, when some ways of helping them were occasionally thought to threaten to undermine their own capacity-building in the longer term. Overshadowing these reflections is the obvious fact that sponsors simply do know more about how Canadian society operates, and what it takes to be successful within it; moreover, it is *of course* the sponsors’ job to work towards securing the well-being of the refugees they have sponsored. This knowledge differential, along with the

felt pressure among sponsors to do their job well, can create challenges as sponsors aim to support refugees who do need the information sponsors possess, but who often have distinct priorities about what is valuable and how to spend their time and money.

Correspondingly, one way in which sponsors supported the development of independence was via a focused attempt to involve refugees in as many major decisions as possible, such as about housing and educational trajectories. The former is especially meaningful, since there is some pressure on sponsors to ensure that accommodation is available upon the refugees' arrival; yet many sponsors chose to offer temporary accommodation so that refugees could be more directly involved in selecting their "permanent" home.²⁶ These sponsors thought of their job as providing refugees with the resources to make often complicated decisions among options available: "A lot of it is about your own decision-making—having all the information that they need to be able to make the decisions they need for their lives."²⁷ Another sponsor noted of their sponsorship group, "We really tried to involve them in all the decision-making, everything we can."²⁸ The goal, as sponsors saw it, was to provide information about options, do what they could to ensure that information was adequately absorbed and understood, and then step back as refugees made decisions, such as to buy cars, to continue or halt language classes, to take or reject certain jobs.

Multiple sponsors noted distinct ways of supporting refugees, hinting at a distinction between passive and active forms of support. Passive forms of support place refugees in the position of receiving help, at the whims of sponsors, whereas active forms of support involve sponsors attempting to create the conditions under which refugees could help themselves, in the present and also in the longer term.²⁹ When, asked this sponsor, was it appropriate to respond to requests for "help" by refugees, such as with providing transportation to appointments, by saying, "OK, you've been to the doctor five times already, you know where it is,"³⁰ or when just to stop offering transportation automatically? The answer is, of course, that sponsors must judge a range of factors, including the readiness of refugees to tackle day-to-day tasks like getting to appointments on their own, as well as the resources within the sponsor group to expend on such tasks.

One sponsor noted, for example, "I do think that it's really important for the sponsors not to be too hands-on,"³¹ and another noted, "You are not doing them any favours by holding their hand too much."³² The sentiment these statements reflect is that refugees were well served by sponsors who encouraged them to take on basic life tasks on their own, and quickly. One sponsor explicitly connected this orientation to independence: "From the outset, that was very much the goal, was for them to become independent. A lot of that

for us meant not trying to do every little thing for them. Showing them how to do things rather than for them, and to help them find their way around with life in Canada."³³ Ultimately, explained a sponsor, "at a certain point ... you step away a little bit, so you can never let them feel lost and feel abandoned, but you step away in small bits and if you do it bit by bit.... You follow their lead, you check in with them."³⁴ This approach can also backfire, as one sponsor explained, reflecting on their group's decision to step back from the refugees they were supporting: "We just figured they would have to now step up and, you know, be more active in their own lives and in their decision-making. But unfortunately, they didn't.... They felt as if our group had kind of abandoned them. And yet the intention of our group was to help them become more independent.... So that strategy didn't work."³⁵

A frequently noted complication is that there are ways that sponsors can "help" refugees, which refugees would appreciate, but that according to some sponsors are better withheld; sometimes sponsors believed that the conscious choice to withhold certain forms of help that they *could* offer was more likely to support refugees in gaining independence in the longer term. This situation arose mainly with expenditures, a complication that stems from the fact that, as sponsors repeatedly observed, they are often well-off financially, especially compared to the refugees they support.³⁶ Add this to the general desire of sponsors to support refugees, and their genuine affection for them, and many sponsors felt that they were in the position to do favours for their refugees by buying them things they needed or wanted, and so on. But, noted many sponsors, this inclination can and sometimes did get in the way of refugees' education about the real cost of living in Canada.

A single refugee's income for one year is approximately \$12,600, so careful budgeting is necessary.³⁷ Sponsors noticed that refugees to Canada often had no experience with Western banking systems and so were unfamiliar with bank accounts and machines, credit cards, the way interest works, and so on. For many, the fact that in Canada tax is added to the cost of items, at the cash register, is disconcerting. Additionally, as with any new arrival, the basic cost of items in Canada must be learned—for example, many were surprised that cellular service in Canada is much more expensive than in their countries of origin. Newly arrived refugees often appeared to feel overwhelmed by the choices that had to be made, relatively quickly after arrival. Correspondingly, many sponsors focused on making sure that refugees understood the cost of necessities.

Yet, even as sponsors understood that their job was to provide information, many reported uncertainty and sometimes tension in describing how and when to intervene

where refugees deliberated options and made choices that to sponsors appeared financially irresponsible, especially in the choice to purchase cars, cigarettes, and other goods that they felt were unnecessary and perhaps frivolous. Car purchases was repeatedly mentioned as a tension point, focused upon how best to understand what does and does not support independence in refugees. The frequent story was that a newly arrived family, generally with multiple children, expressed interest in buying a car. Overwhelmingly, sponsors expressed anxiety over this expression, citing what they viewed as the significant costs associated with such a purchase, suggesting that the family continue to make do with public transportation. Refugees' budgets, they felt, could not accommodate the cost of a car; according to sponsors, the source of refugees' inability to understand this was traced in part to their lack of financial literacy. Sponsors certainly recognized that these choices *were* the refugees' choices to make, and correspondingly that their job was to offer information and advice, sometimes strenuously, but nevertheless to support refugees even where their advice was not heeded. When asked about their felt need to encourage financial responsibility (according to their own understanding of it) in refugees, many sponsors pointed out that they had raised money from friends, colleagues, and (often) co-religionists, and felt an obligation to their donors to ensure that their donations were being used responsibly. Upon reflection, however, many sponsors acknowledged that the choice to purchase a car had in fact served refugees well; whereas the worry and hesitation stemmed from worries about financial stability, the result was relief on both sides of the equation, since refugees no longer needed to rely on sponsors to get around, and sponsors were free to use their valuable time to support refugees in other ways. What these reflections suggest is that the priorities of refugees and sponsors do not necessarily align, and moreover that (of course) refugees often have a better sense of what is in their best interests than do sponsors.

The Complexity of Attaining Independence

Multiple sponsors, prompted by questions about when refugees achieved independence, noted that, even if it is in some sense the goal to achieve by month 13, it is gained gradually. Some explicitly, and others implicitly, rejected the idea that independence is achievable by month 13, saying something like "I wouldn't see a natural association between sponsorship and independence.... It could take years for a family to be fully independent, and sponsors can be an important part of supporting that. But I don't think that is only sponsors who would have that role. And there are so many other services, friends and other resources that play into that."³⁸

When sponsors were asked to reflect on when (if at all) independence had been achieved, refugees were described in

general as having made significant progress in getting by, day to day, and sponsors acknowledged that the sheer number of times that refugees called on them for support decreased over time. Many noticed that over the course of the sponsorship year there was a gradual pulling away from sponsors (several noted that refugees returned to them regularly after the sponsorship year had completed for help in deciphering government forms, including income taxes). Said one sponsor, "I think it's like a bit of a scale.... In order to get there, there were so many different steps."³⁹ Another sponsor responded, "There were just many, many milestones. And there is no scale on 1 to 10. But they asked for help ... less and less. They asked questions less and less."⁴⁰ Repeatedly sponsors noted that the first several months were intense, but that often things would start "rolling along" somewhere approximately half way through the sponsorship: "Certainly, we have seen them become more independent as the year went on."⁴¹

Even so, several sponsors noted that, after all, one year had not been sufficient for the refugees with whom they worked to achieve full independence. One sponsor noted of independence at month 13, "It won't mean necessarily that they can function entirely only their own. But one of the most basic things is that to promote independence is that they should be helped to know where to go if they need help."⁴² Some noticed this as a matter of fact, as described above, that full integration into Canadian society for individuals who arrive with no competence in English simply is a longer-term venture than formal sponsorship timing admits. Others observed that even where refugees were financially self-sufficient, in the sense of employed adequately to cover their basic needs, this self-sufficiency did not seem adequate to declare that refugees were "flourishing." One sponsor said of the refugees, "While I think they could stand on their own at the end of the year, I am not sure they would necessarily flourish."⁴³

Discussion

This research was conducted to gain some insight into how sponsors think of their objectives, especially in relation to "month 13." Month 13 is the first month in which refugees are expected, in some sense, to be able to fend for themselves in Canadian society. As outlined in the introduction, the main change at month 13 is that, suddenly, sponsors are no longer responsible for supporting refugees financially. The strong implication, for sponsors and refugees alike, is that at this moment, refugees should be financially self-sufficient or on the road to financial self-sufficiency. This implication finds support in multiple sources, including in particular in the rhetoric invoked by government officials who aim to shore up support for refugee admissions and defend higher

admission numbers in terms of the financial contributions that refugees will ultimately make to Canadian society. Indeed, as outlined earlier, the economic contributions that immigrants of all kinds offer to Canada are repeatedly invoked as a justification for the high number of immigrants admitted, and are offered as an explanatory factor for why anti-immigrant sentiment has remained low in Canada even as immigration goes up.⁴⁴

As a result, it is no surprise that sponsors are focused on achieving this objective, nor is it surprising to find that some sponsors express discomfort, and even disappointment, when refugees transition, not to financial self-sufficiency, but to social assistance. For some sponsors, certainly, a transition to social assistance felt like a kind of failure of the sponsorship venture: their job was to work with refugees to give them the tools they needed to be financially independent, but had not successfully done so. Some sponsors blamed refugees for failing to understand that being “dependent” on Canadian taxpayers was inappropriate or problematic in some way. Refugees, in this story, had somehow failed in their job to the Canadians who had supported them to find safety here; these refugees were portrayed as taking advantage of Canadians and their generosity. Other sponsors took responsibility for the failure, saying that they had tried but failed to communicate that social assistance was a backup, which should be resorted to only in times of emergency. Some took responsibility partially, suggesting that there were cultural explanations for refugees’ preferences to rely on social assistance, so the failure was not that sponsors did not communicate the information, but that cultural biases among refugees remained so strong that they were not able to penetrate them. Even among those sponsors who noted that integration was gradual, the sense that financial independence was the objective of sponsorship loomed large.

Only a handful of sponsors acknowledged familiarity with the normal trends that immigrants in general, and refugees specifically, follow during integration into Canadian society.⁴⁵ Data suggest that refugees are among the most likely to require social assistance support in the first several years after they arrive.⁴⁶ Approximately 30 per cent of privately sponsored refugees do transition to social assistance, either immediately at month 13 or later, and the mere fact of this transition to social assistance should not merit declaring the sponsorship a failure.⁴⁷ Thus, the transition to social assistance should not be surprising or disappointing. Refugees are, first of all, not voluntary migrants, in the sense that they have been forced to flee and have not chosen to make their lives in a new and unfamiliar environment—in the Canadian case, the vast majority of migrants are entering to gain access to our robust labour market and the benefits it offers. Moreover, refugees have almost certainly experienced

trauma that can reasonably be expected to affect their ability to attain self-sufficiency rapidly.⁴⁸ Their objectives are not simply to get ahead as quickly as possible, but also to decompress in a safe and secure environment. Both factors, and undoubtedly more, explain why refugees may be slowed in their progress towards independence; that they have not achieved full “independence” in 13 months and are thereby more likely than other migrants (and Canadian citizens) to require social assistance support⁴⁹ is neither unreasonable nor lamentable.

Space restrictions prohibit extensive consideration of the policy implications that flow from the research reported above. Moreover, the conclusions are one-sided, and without corresponding contributions from sponsored refugees they are necessarily incomplete.⁵⁰ Yet the results suggest that as the Department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship continues to search for ways to stimulate private sponsors to volunteer their time in support of refugees, it would do well to find ways to offer sponsors access to more nuanced information about trends among refugees and immigrants in gaining self-sufficiency. It is not that they should be counselled differently, away from encouraging refugees to focus on preparing to become self-sufficient; on the contrary, at least some evidence suggests one benefit of private sponsorship is that sponsored refugees are better (than their government-assisted counterparts) able to gain financial self-sufficiency.⁵¹ Yet no one is served if sponsors believe (mistakenly) that sponsorships are successful if and only if refugees are fully self-sufficient when it comes to its formal conclusion. Since their willingness to do this work is predicated, in part, on their belief that they can successfully support refugees, there is value in ensuring, among sponsors, that what “counts” as success is broadened. Although it is difficult for any individual sponsors to view their work as part of a larger Canadian resettlement project, the results of their individual labours of love suggest tremendous success that, if successfully mobilized, could be deployed to resettle even more refugees, and to support their transition to self-sufficiency in Canada, than it has done in the past.

NOTES

- 1 Government of Canada, “Guide to the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program,” 2019, <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/publications-manuals/guide-private-sponsorship-refugees-program.html>.
- 2 Refugee Sponsorship Training Program, “Month 13 Planning: Resource Kit,” 2016, <http://www.rstp.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Month-13-Resource-Kit-v.1.4.pdf>, 2.
- 3 Government of Canada, “#WelcomeRefugees: Key Figures,” <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees->

- citizenship/services/refugees/welcome-syrian-refugees/key-figures.html (figures updated January 2017).
- 4 For several recent stories about the anxieties associated with month 13, see Michael Friscolanti, "A Milestone Looms for Canada's Syrian Refugees: 'Month 13,'" *Macleans*, 15 December 2016, <https://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/a-milestone-looms-for-canadas-syrian-refugees-month-13/>; Jodi Kantor and Catrin Einhorn, "Canadians Adopted Refugee Families for a Year. Then Came 'Month 13,'" *New York Times*, 25 March 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/25/world/canada/syrian-refugees.html>; Nicholas Keung, "Honeymoon for Syrian Refugees Over as 'Month 13' Looms," *TheStar*, 10 December 2016, <https://www.thestar.com/news/immigration/2016/12/10/honeymoon-for-syrian-refugees-over-as-month-13-looms.html>.
 - 5 Lori Wilkinson and Joseph Garcea, "The Economic Integration of Refugees in Canada: A Mixed Record?," Migration Policy Institute, 6 April 2017, 18, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/economic-integration-refugees-canada-mixed-record>. Additional challenges must be overcome to ensure that newcomers are comfortable to access the services available to them, i.e., to communicate that they have a "right or entitlement" to them. See Jill Hanley, Adnan Al Mhamied, Janet Cleveland, Oula Hajjar, Ghayda Hassan, Nicole Ives, Rim Khyar, and Michaela Hynie, "The Social Networks, Social Support and Social Capital of Syrian Refugees Privately Sponsored to Settle in Montreal: Indications for Employment and Housing during Their Early Experiences of Integration," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 50, no. 2 (2018): 123–48.
 - 6 "Success and Failure in Supporting Agency among Refugees: Lessons from Refugees and Their Sponsors."
 - 7 I am principle investigator of this grant. Ravi Pendakur is co-principle investigator, and Emily Regan Wills is collaborator. I am solely responsible for the analysis in this article. Stacey Haugen conducted all of the interviews reported in this article.
 - 8 The questionnaire is available upon request. We asked questions on a range of themes pertaining to the sponsorship experience.
 - 9 We did not ask whether sponsors were working with sponsorship agreement holders (SAH), or as constituent groups under their supervision. But, the majority of private sponsorship does happen with SAH support (rather than, for example, as a 'group of five'), and since our recruiting was via settlement agencies that work with SAHs, it is likely the case that our respondents were collaborating with SAHs to do their work. See Jennifer Hyndman, "Refugee Research Synthesis: 2009–2013" (CERIS report submitted to Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Ottawa, 2014), 58. Additionally, we did not distinguish between groups who deployed the Blended Visa Office–Referred Program (BVOR) and those who engaged in a fully private sponsorship. Our thought was that the experience of sponsorship was more or less the same regardless of the legal mechanism by which the sponsorship was arranged.
 - 10 As such, although not representative, our respondents look very much like those profiled in Audrey Macklin, Kathryn Barber, Luin Goldring, Jennifer Hyndman, Anna Korteweg, Shauna Labman, and Jona Zyfi, "A Preliminary Investigation into Private Refugee Sponsors," *Canadian Ethnic Studies Journal* 50, no. 2 (2018): 45.
 - 11 Two sponsor groups were based in Perth, which is approximately an hour from Ottawa. With respect to the questions that are the focus of this article, their responses showed no noticeable differences from people living in Ottawa proper.
 - 12 For example, see Charles Taylor, "What Is Human Agency?," in *The Self: Psychological and Philosophical Issues*, ed. T. Mischel, 103–135 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977).
 - 13 Pieter Bevelander and Ravi Pendakur, "The Labour Market Integration of Refugee and Family Reunion Immigrants: A Comparison of Outcomes in Canada and Sweden," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 40, no. 5 (2014): 689–709; M. Emirbayer and A. Mische, "What Is Agency?," *American Journal of Sociology* 103, no. 4 (1988): 962–1023; Taylor, "What Is Human Agency?"
 - 14 Rignam Wangkhang, "How Syrian Refugees Will Help the Canadian Economy," *TVO*, 25 May 2016, <https://www.tvo.org/article/current-affairs/how-syrian-refugees-will-help-the-canadian-economy>; "B.C. Bound Syrian Refugees to Boost Local Economy by \$563 Million," *Vancity.Com*, 2 December 2015, https://www.vancity.com/AboutVancity/News/MediaReleases/RefugeesBoostLocalEconomy-Dec2-15/?xcid=tw_Refugees.
 - 15 Ahmed Hussen, "Speaking Notes for Ahmed Hussen, Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship: An Announcement on the Pre-Arrival Settlement Services Program" (Government of Canada, 4 January 2019), <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2019/01/speaking-notes-for-ahmed-hussen-minister-of-immigration-refugees-and-citizenship-an-announcement-on-the-pre-arrival-settlement-services-program.html>.
 - 16 See, for example, Hyndman, "Refugee Research Synthesis," 31. Hyndman notes that the choice to focus on those most in need (rather than integration potential) is a result of legislative changes enacted in 2002.
 - 17 Interviews with sponsors 1, 13, and 14.
 - 18 Interview with sponsor 16.
 - 19 Interview with sponsor 9.
 - 20 Interview with sponsor 13.
 - 21 Interview with sponsor 13.
 - 22 Interview with sponsor 6.
 - 23 Interview with sponsor 6.
 - 24 Interview with sponsor 26.
 - 25 Interview with sponsor 38.
 - 26 Interview with sponsor 17.
 - 27 Interview with sponsor 26.

- 28 Interview with sponsor 15.
- 29 Interview with sponsor 25.
- 30 Interview with sponsor 25.
- 31 Interview with sponsor 6.
- 32 Interview with sponsor 7.
- 33 Interview with sponsor 1.
- 34 Interview with sponsor 4.
- 35 Interview with sponsor 26.
- 36 The financial stability of sponsors in general is supported by the data reported in Macklin et al., "Preliminary Investigation into Private Refugee Sponsors," 45.
- 37 There are many factors that go into the question of how much sponsors must raise to support a single refugee or refugee family, as well as how much of this raised money goes to refugees in the form of income. As well, the costs and incomes of families are treated differently. Additionally, families are often entitled to additional benefits, in the form of child tax credits and so on. To see how the Canadian government advises sponsors on these matters, see sections 2.8-2.10 of Government of Canada, "Guide to the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program."
- 38 Interview with sponsor 12.
- 39 Interview with sponsor 26.
- 40 Interview with sponsor 1.
- 41 Interview with sponsor 15.
- 42 Interview with sponsor 17.
- 43 Interview with sponsor 6.
- 44 Derek Thompson, "Canada's Secret to Escaping the 'Liberal Doom Loop,'" *Atlantic*, 9 July 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/07/canadas-secret-to-escaping-the-liberal-doom-loop/564551/>.
- 45 It is worth pointing out that the reality that newcomers who arrive as refugees may require social assistance as part of their transiting to self-sufficiency is well-recognized by Sponsorship Agreement Holders. See for example this document produced by the Mennonite Central Committee, an organization that has been involved in refugee sponsorship since its inception: Wendy Adema, "Month 13: From Sponsorship to Integration," Mennonite Central Committee, 2016, <https://mcccanada.ca/stories/month-13-sponsorship-integration>.
- 46 For example, see <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/economic-integration-refugees-canada-mixed-record>.
- 47 Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, "Evaluation of the Resettlement Programs (GAR, PSR, BVOR and RAP)" (Government of Canada, July 2016), <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/reports-statistics/evaluations/resettlement-programs.html>; Andrea Woo and Wendy Stueck, "Privately Sponsored Refugees Fare Better in the Short Term, Research Says," *Globe and Mail*, 1 December 2015, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/british-columbia/privately-sponsored-refugees-fare-better-in-the-short-term-research-says/article27543752/>; Nicholas Keung, "Sponsored Refugees Fare Better Than Government-Assisted Peers, Study Shows," *Star*, 31 October 2016, <https://www.thestar.com/news/immigration/2016/10/31/sponsored-refugees-fare-better-than-government-assisted-peers-study-shows.html>; Shaina Luck, "Many Syrian Refugees in Canada Reluctantly on Social Assistance," *CBC News*, 12 November 2017, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/syrian-refugees-struggling-social-assistance-language-barrier-1.4368833>; Wilkinson and Garcea, "Economic Integration of Refugees in Canada," 12; Friscolanti, "Milestone Looms."
- 48 Branka Agic, Kwame McKenzie, Andrew Tuck, and Michael Antwi, "Supporting the Mental Health of Refugees to Canada" (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2016), https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/sites/default/files/2016-01-25_refugee_mental_health_backgrounder_o.pdf.
- 49 See <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-626-x/11-626-x2015051-eng.htm>.
- 50 As part of this work, data from both privately sponsored refugees and government-assisted references were also collected, and this analysis will be available in future publications.
- 51 Woo and Stueck, "Privately Sponsored Refugees Fare Better." See Wilkinson and Garcea, "Economic Integration of Refugees in Canada," 18, for references to many research studies outlining this. There is some countervailing evidence, suggesting instead PSRS are encouraged to go in to the labour market earlier than GARS, at some cost to their overall income capacity in the future. See in general the discussion by Hyndman, "Refugee Research Synthesis: 2009–2013," 14–16. See also Jennifer Hyndman, William Payne, and Shauna Jimenez, "Private Refugee Sponsorship in Canada," *Forced Migration Review* 54 (2017): 56–9.

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