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MEANINGS OF SOCIAL SUPPORT, COPING, AND HELP-SEEKING STRATEGIES AMONG IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES IN TORONTO

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ABSTRACT: This paper reports on a study of the meanings of social support for Chinese immigrants and Somali refugees in Toronto as part of a national qualitative study. The goals of the study were to describe immigrants and refugees’ perceptions and methods of seeking social support, and to identify mechanisms to strengthen support by identifying unmet support needs and services and programs and policies that might be helpful. In the process of analyzing immigrants’ and refugees’ perceptions of social support both in Canada and in their homeland, we understand how they cope with challenges of settlement. While meanings of social support may be shaped by the culture and society of the sending countries, many coping and help-seeking strategies are shaped in response to challenges presented by the receiving society. The most effective social supports are those that enable newcomers to overcome barriers in settlement and adaptation.

KEY WORDS: social support, immigrants and refugees, health and well being, coping, help-seeking, settlement and social services

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1. INTRODUCTION

When newcomers arrive in Canada, they initially need social support to cope with the challenges of settlement and adaptation. Social support has been defined as “interactions with family members, friends, peers and, … professionals that communicate information, esteem, practical aid, or emotional help. When these communications are perceived as supportive, they may enhance coping, moderate the impact of stressors, and promote health” (Stewart 1993; Stewart and Langille 2000: 5-6). Formal social supports, including a range of settlement, health, and social services, exist to help immigrants and refugees, but for many reasons they are not adequate. To improve the existing supports, we need to know more about how immigrants and refugees perceive social support and what coping strategies and resources they feel are most effective. This is a complex problem, because newcomers arrive in Canada with a variety of needs, expectations, and experiences.

The purpose of this study

Our understanding of the diverse cultural meanings of social support for newcomers facing settlement and integration challenges in Canada has been limited. To enlarge this understanding, an interdisciplinary team led by Dr. Miriam Stewart conducted a 3-year, multi-site research project entitled, “Multicultural Meanings of Social Support among Immigrants and Refugees.” The purpose of the study was to understand the meanings of social support for immigrants and refugees in Canada and to explore the types and adequacy of formal supports offered to immigrants and refugees. In the study, we explored the challenges faced by newcomers, what social support means to them, what they do to help themselves, and what impact social support has on their lives. This working paper presents selected results from qualitative interviews conducted in Toronto with Chinese immigrants and Somali refugees, as well as interviews and focus groups with service providers and policy makers.

Our primary research objectives were these:

1. To describe the meanings of social support from the perspective of immigrants and refugees, specifically, a) sources and types of support in Canada compared to homeland; b) appraisal of support in Canada compared to homeland; c) duration and changes in support over residency in Canada; and d) perceived impact on health, health behaviour, and use of health services;

2. To identify immigrants and refugees’ methods of accessing/seeking social support;

3. To compare immigrants’ and refugees’ meaning of social support and support seeking methods; and

4. To determine mechanisms to strengthen support for immigrants and refugees by identifying, a) unmet support needs and b) services, programs, and policies that might be helpful.
In this paper, we first focus on these issues from the perspectives of service providers and policy makers who were interviewed in the initial phase of the study. We then turn to a description of immigrants’ and refugees’ perceptions of social support, as well as effective coping and help-seeking strategies, from the second phase of the study. Lastly, we report on the recommendations from all participants for improving supportive services to newcomers.

Background

Many immigrants and refugees face well-known challenges, such as learning a new language, finding a suitable job and pursuing training and education opportunities. Most need to rebuild disrupted social networks (Golding and Baezconde-Garbanati 1990; Grieco 1998; Hagan 1998). Many face social isolation, especially in the beginning, and are usually without the social supports they were accustomed to in their homeland. One of the most important challenges for newcomers is simply learning where and how to get help—what we might call “navigating the system”—when support is needed. Several studies have suggested that using personal and social resources to obtain social support is critical to reducing stress, maintaining health and well being, and achieving eventual self-sufficiency (Anderson 1991; Beiser 1999; Canadian Task Force 1988).

When faced with difficulties and stresses, people try to obtain help by mobilizing both their psychological and social resources in order to cope. Social support has many forms and functions, and can meet a range of material and non-material needs. Scholars have conceptualized social support as types of help, including informational, instrumental, and emotional support, which are available in the social environment (House 1981; Thoits 1986). Sources of social support also vary. Formal organizations staffed by social service professionals can provide valuable social support; but it is often informal social support, such as that provided through ties to family and friends, which provides the most meaningful and best form of help for meeting certain challenges (Antonucci and Depner, 1982: 241). Social support may be exchanged between individuals or within social networks as a product of shared obligations and experiences (Mitchell 1974; Neufield and Harrison 1995).

Social support is a key determinant of health, and is as vital to maintaining well being as food, shelter, income, personal security, and access to health care and social opportunities (Bloom 1990). The impact of social support on newcomers’ lives, or the lack of support, is significant. In the population health framework, social determinants of health are more important antecedents of health than biological factors or medical care (Oxman et al 1992; Wilkinson and Marmot 1998), especially for immigrants and refugees (Dunn and Dyck 2000). Studies of social support and health have been premised on the idea that social support “buffers” the deleterious effects of stress (Cohen and Wills 1985; House et al 1988: 295). As a coping resource, social support protects against physical and mental health risks (Stewart 1989; Bloom 1990: 636). Even when supportive social ties are merely a potential source of help, their perceived availability encourages successful coping with stressful situations (Lazarus and Folkman 1984; Thoits, 1986). Conversely, social isolation and the lack of social ties from which support may be drawn have long been associated with reduced psychological well being (Durkheim 1951 (1897); Kawachi and Berkman 2001).

Different coping styles and methods influence how newcomers handle stress and seek social support when needed. Personal resources such as education, life experiences and family circumstances influence how stress is appraised and handled (Anderson 1991; Lazarus and...
Folkman 1984). Newcomers must feel enough confidence in both their own abilities and the attitudes of others in society to seek and take advantage of available social supports. Social support not only helps individuals cope in an immediate way with stress during crisis situations, but also reinforces the self-confidence needed to manage long-term, ongoing challenges that is critical to the adaptation process of newcomers.

Personal coping resources and methods must be contextualized, taking into account conditions in both the sending and receiving societies. As a social resource, the existence of a like-ethnic community and strong sense of belonging, for example, has been found to help to reduce settlement stress for many immigrants and refugees in Canada (Baker 1993; Beiser 1999). Family and community ties are helpful emotionally and economically, especially in the early months and years of settlement. Familiar sources of support enable individuals to gradually enlarge their social networks beyond the culturally familiar and lead to help-seeking and opportunity within the wider society (Aroian 1992). Help-seeking strategies beyond this protective environment depend on perceptions of the appropriateness and accessibility of other social supports available from the larger society, which may be seen in either a positive or a negative light depending upon how effectively the support is delivered (Stewart 2000). In an ideal typology, some individuals may be active “consumers” of available services or see themselves as “achievers; others may be more passive or vulnerable “endurers” or “victims” (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2003). Many experience frustration and helplessness as a result of encountering barriers in the receiving society. Supportive services for newcomers can influence which style newcomers adopt and which strategies are ultimately most effective for adaptation.

Using an interpretive, qualitative approach, we have explored how interrelated factors shape expectations and strategies of support-seeking during settlement. Our research adopted a theoretical approach to the study of social support as a product of the interaction of personal and contextual factors. These included individual and social factors that influence adaptation and help-seeking strategies, such as personal experiences, cultural background, social organization in the sending country, and appraisals of challenges in the receiving society. We adopted the perspective that individuals are active agents in support-seeking in order to facilitate their own adaptation (Dyck and Kearns 1995; Giddens 1984). We hypothesized that culture, that is, norms, concepts, and patterns of behaviour, could be a powerful influence on the meaning of social support (Maton et al. 1996; Norbeck et al. 1997). We also contextualized emerging concepts of social support and strategies of support-seeking by exploring social conditions in the homeland as well as circumstances of settlement, such as barriers and opportunities in Canadian society (Portes, Kyle, and Eaton 1992). We set out to explore how these diverse factors influenced the construction of meanings of social support in the process of transplanting cultural roots into a new social context in Canada.

Research Design and Methodology

A multidisciplinary national research team conducted the study from 2000 to 2003 in three cities: Toronto, Edmonton and Vancouver. The team carried out the research in three phases across these three cities selected because of their sizable multicultural populations. The phases comprised: Phase One – in-depth interviews with 60 service providers and policy makers (20 in each site); Phase Two – in-depth interviews with 120 Chinese immigrants (from Mainland China and Hong Kong) and Somali refugees (40 total in each site); and Phase Three – six focus groups with service
providers and policy makers to solicit policy and program recommendations. In this paper, we concentrate on presenting selected research findings from the Toronto site of the project only.

In this research, we used a critical ethnographic approach to provide descriptions of newcomers’ lived experiences of social support. Interpretation of these experiences requires attention to the particular voices and characteristics of individuals, as well as social structural conditions and broader social relations in the contexts of immigrant settlement. The design of the inquiry followed a reflexive process of questionnaire development and pre-testing in preparation for Phase One and Phase Two. Interviews were conducted as dialogues between the interviewer and the interviewee in which the intent of questions and significance of terms were mutually negotiated. Translation of the concept of social support required special care to avoid prescriptive connotations and to capture a range of possibilities of formal and informal types of support.

Various data sources, such as census information and settlement service reports, were used as a triangulation on the data collected in interviews with different types of participants (immigrants, refugees, service providers, and policymakers). We also used methodological triangulation by collecting data from focus groups as well as individual interviews. The study benefitted from investigator triangulation, or engaging multiple researchers, as team members from different disciplines, cultural backgrounds, and cities regularly discussed research methods and analysis (Janesick 1994).

**Sample Recruitment and Community Participation**

Following an environmental scan and review of relevant services in each city, investigators composed representative lists of agencies providing services to newcomers and relevant policy-making bodies at all levels of government, including ethno-specific and advocacy organizations, in order to recruit informants for the Phase One interviews. Later, this list was expanded with the assistance of Community Advisory Committee members to invite participants for Phase Three focus groups, although the individuals and agencies in the two phases were not necessarily the same.

The criteria for choosing the specific study sample for Phase Two from among newcomer groups included the size of immigrant and refugees populations in the three cities and experiences of multiple barriers to health and social services during settlement and integration in Canada. Given the top source countries for immigration to Canada (in 1997, Mainland China, Hong Kong, India, Taiwan, and Pakistan) and the resources needed to conduct research in different languages, we selected Chinese immigrants as a group that was well established and represented in all three cities. After consultation with settlement service providers, we selected Somali refugees for comparative purposes, a less-established newcomer group that has experienced significant barriers to services and was accessible in all three cities as well.

From the beginning of the project, voluntary Community Advisory Groups – in Toronto formed with an emphasis on Somali- and Chinese-specific agencies – played an important role in reviewing translations of questionnaires, helping to recruit research assistants and interviewees, and

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1 For a list of participating agencies and organizations in Toronto, please see the Appendix.
discussing the study findings at key points in the research process. Members of the CERIS Partnership Advisory Council also advised the research team prior to Phase 1.

Data Collection and Analysis

Investigators, project coordinators, and research assistants in the three project sites coordinated all stages of questionnaire development and data collection and analysis through regular discussions and the exchange of documents. In all phases of the project, participants were given information about the purpose of the study and consent forms translated into their preferred language, and were asked for permission to audiotape their confidential interview for later transcription and qualitative analysis. At the conclusion of the interviews, interviewers offered immigrants and refugees respondents an honorarium in appreciation for their time. Interviews averaged 1.5 hours in length.

In Phase One, the research team jointly developed and administered a semi-structured interview guide – incorporating open-ended questions with probes – for service providers and policy makers across all three sites. The series of questions inquired about newcomers’ challenges and changing needs, the types of support programs provided by the agency, the respondent’s appraisal of supportive programs and strategies, and concepts of social support and its relationship to the health of newcomers.

For Phase Two, the team similarly developed a semi-structured questionnaire and translated it into Somali and Chinese to be administered by research assistants who were bilingual or trilingual (in the case of Cantonese and Mandarin speakers). Some questions from the Phase One interview guide were retained for comparative purposes and others were developed based on the findings from Phase One. The interviews elicited views on challenges, perceptions of social support, including support needs, strategies of help-seeking, impacts on health, and how social support differed between Canada and the homeland. Demographic data were also collected, including length of time in Canada, age, gender, employment, marital status, and household arrangements. Over forty questions and appropriate probes were developed and pre-tested, covering the following topics: situations requiring assistance in making a new life in Canada, sources and types of support, appraisal of support (such as negative and positive interactions), adequacy of supports, changes in support, methods of seeking support, the sense of belonging to supportive networks in Canada, comparisons to support in the country of origin, perceived impact of support on feelings and health, and unmet needs and desired supports.

For analysis, the research teams used NUD*IST (Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing, Searching and Theorizing) software. Researchers coded transcribed tapes according to a common coding framework that was jointly developed by teams of investigators and research assistants in the three sites, following procedures of inter-rater reliability, continual cross-site discussion of emerging themes, and regular exchange of coding summaries. Rigour was achieved through saturation.

Preliminary research results were presented and discussed by Phase Three focus groups in all sites in the closing months of the project (March 2003). At the time of this writing, analysis and dissemination of study results is ongoing.
2. FINDINGS

Phase One Interviews with Service Providers and Policy Makers

We began the study by interviewing 20 service providers and policymakers in Toronto (as part of the total Phase One sample of 60 respondents in the three cities). These professionals, who either worked directly with immigrants and refugees or on related policy issues, often had first-hand experience as immigrants themselves. To varying degrees, they felt that immigrants and refugees universally faced these challenges:

- Navigating the system – “Learning where to go for what” is difficult for newcomers, who encounter a confusing, fragmented service sector;
- Language – The ability to communicate is critical in all spheres of settlement and integration;
- Employment – Skilled and professional newcomers in particular experience problems with acceptance of foreign credentials; almost all are frustrated by the demand of prospective employers for “Canadian” experience;
- Income – Financial insecurity is a source of stress, especially in the initial period;
- Family dynamics – Family separation, intergenerational strains and gender role changes create special stresses for newcomers;
- Education – Higher education and retraining programs are often inaccessible or unavailable;
- Discrimination – They widely perceived systemic discrimination in policy and practice, especially with respect to employment and education; and
- Immigration status – Achieving permanent status in Canada in a timely manner can be a huge challenge, especially for refugees, for whom becoming landed and reuniting with family members is an especially long process.

Challenges for newcomers are interrelated, even though they are sometimes considered separately. For example, one policy maker said:

I think economic survival is the major issue and it could be specifically due to three reasons. One is the exploitation of immigrants and refugees – I would call it ‘slave labour’ because their professional qualifications are not accepted by Canadian regulatory bodies. They become a huge labour pool, which can be exploited. Secondly there is discrimination based on race, ethnic origin, language, colour of skin, and accent, so people are prevented from getting jobs that match their qualifications or being paid for what they are skilled at. Thirdly, I would say there is the language barrier for those who don’t speak English fluently [Toronto policy maker].
The challenges, therefore, are interrelated and comprehensive, but individual life circumstances and factors such as age, gender and culture also shape specific needs and responses. Describing the loss of status and mobility among immigrant and refugee seniors, for example, one service provider suggested:

Here, for example, we have some elderly people from our community. Back home they are well respected…. They are like mediators, arbitrators, judges, you name it, they are intervening and solving problems….We have seen that when the elderly people came here, they found that kind of stressful situation in this country, that they don’t have that role of leading the community. Now there are, yes, mothers, grandmothers who are here – their role became only to take care of the children. Back home, they were boss and doing everything. Now they are sitting there. That’s the situation in this country [Service Provider #02].

This service provider’s insight suggests that, despite common challenges faced by newcomers, there may be particularly vulnerable groups who are not well-supported, and, therefore, less able to contribute in their new home. Awareness of the specificity of individual needs and situations foreshadows the importance of building self-efficacy for newcomers. This highlights the necessity of providing appropriate supports and facilitating independence and active help-seeking.

Defining Social Support

Most service providers and policy makers expressed a holistic perspective on social support that enables newcomers to meet challenges effectively. According to one policy maker, social supports comprise:

… All those issues of nutrition and access to housing, access to education…. All of those things are very much inter-linked and it’s very hard to just separate and say it’s one or the other. Social supports are so critical to how families survive. Where they can find the additional support. How they can improve their circumstances [Policy Maker #02].

Others, while consistently adopting a holistic view, added cultural and contextual dimensions when defining social support, alluding to a learning process that occurs during settlement and integration, and which increases a newcomers’ sense of efficacy in the new environment:

Social support is a kind of a concept that encompasses the economic, political, and cultural…. People have cultural needs that relate to the values of the place they grow up, values of their friends and values of their families, and when those change, the values in the communities around, they need some type of, maybe not support, but maybe brokerage or translation. They need to know what the things mean here. People say, ‘I need to be able to understand the value set of where I now live, so I can interact effectively and efficiently in the way I’m used to’ [Service Provider #09].
[Social support] is contextual, because it can mean different things at different moments. What often comes to my mind are the Alma Ata Declaration of WHO [the World Health Organization] and the understanding of primary health care … looking at the total being, not only the physical being, but also the mental, psychological, the economic, the political, the social, the cultural. Understanding social support, it’s trying to adopt that kind of model or framework. The terrific challenge is how to make it real. How do you … develop potential actually [Service Provider #05].

Functions of Social Support for Newcomers

Policy makers and service providers noted several forms of social support: informational, instrumental, emotional, and affirmational. In their professional roles, they were keenly aware of the importance newcomers attach to information, such as advice, suggestions, directives, and specific service information and referrals. They described particular needs for information prior to immigration to prepare people for the reality of resettlement challenges, and post migration to present the range of services available to them. In addition to describing a lack of awareness of the reality of immigrating to Canada on the part of immigrants and refugees and the specific challenges associated with resettlement, the service providers and policy makers who were interviewed described a widespread lack of knowledge about “the system” with respect to education, employment, and community services. They also noted the need for highly practical supports to respond to financial, housing, immigration status, education, and employment challenges.

For newcomers, forms of support may be defined in special ways. Information is critical for accessing services; it is best provided in culturally and linguistically appropriate ways. Instrumental support is critical to meet basic needs, but also to break down structural barriers, for example, to employment and education. Emotional support is critical for those experiencing isolation, enduring family separation and facing family crises. Affirmational support, often from other immigrants, is critical for giving guidance, sharing experiences, and empowering newcomers to meet challenges. Significantly, many service providers were themselves immigrants or refugees, whose prior and shared experiences were helpful to other newcomers.

Social Supports Accessed by Immigrants and Refugees

Phase One respondents also described the existing supports accessed by immigrants and refugees as a continuum of formal and informal social supports. Formal supports most frequently accessed by newcomers were mainstream agencies, resettlement agencies, gender- and ethno-specific organizations, and language schools. Common informal sources of support for all newcomers included friends, relatives and neighbours from the same ethnic groups. Other sources were independent sponsors, religious organizations, and ethno-cultural associations. Agencies have made efforts to make services and support more available to newcomers, for example, by providing information packages and orientation sessions. Some service providers and policy makers suggested that institutional changes are needed to allow newcomers to participate more fully in the design of services.
Support Needs and Help-Seeking

Service providers and policy makers realized that immigrants and refugees need to build new and stronger support networks. Some respondents also noted the differences in support systems between the newcomers’ home country and in Canada, particularly the lack of support from extended family and community members. They noted that personal circumstances condition support needs (for example, single motherhood) and that, although some immigrants and refugees need relatively simple, short-term supports, others need more comprehensive, long-term support. There was concern among some service providers and policy makers that immigrant-serving agencies are not able to respond appropriately to the changing needs of newcomers.

Barriers to Support-Seeking

Service providers and policy makers felt that some newcomers lack awareness of services as a result of language and economic limitations, social isolation, inadequate information from government or agencies, and a tendency to stay within their own social/ethnic groups for support. They also described factors that impede newcomers' support-seeking efforts, such as distrust of agencies, language and cultural barriers, privacy issues, stigma, and family dynamics. They also acknowledged that many existing supports are, in fact, inaccessible to many newcomers due to inadequate funding, geographical, and other constraints. For example, some agencies are unable to provide needed services (such as translation/interpretation, financial services, culturally relevant or appropriate services), particularly to refugees. Other barriers include restricted eligibility due to time limits or immigration status, circular or inconsistent bureaucratic processes, perceived racism and lack of understanding by mainstream agency staff. According to service providers and policy makers, some newcomers are reluctant to seek help for fear of being a burden, while others are reluctant to express their feelings about personal problems. Whereas some barriers to support-seeking are intrinsic to an individual’s knowledge, abilities, values, or personal circumstances, service providers and policy makers repeatedly pointed out that there are many structural barriers in Canadian society that still need to be addressed. As one policy maker argued:

We believe that systemic issues are the major source of oppression, reinforcing the disadvantaged position. We also believe systemic issues need systemic solutions. That is why we are all so much concerned with the policies and the social structure in Canada [Toronto Policy Maker].

Impact of Support

Service providers and policy makers observed that having social support exerts positive influences on newcomers in many ways: by fostering a sense of empowerment, community, social integration and leading a productive life by building networks, sharing experiences and problems, reducing stress, and contributing to physical and mental health. Conversely, inadequate social support has negative impacts, such as increasing feelings of loneliness and social isolation, loss of identity, feelings of being “in limbo,” discouragement about seeking employment, and lack of knowledge of available options. When immigrants and refugees have difficulty overcoming the
challenges of initial settlement, they can find themselves stuck in “survival mode” for long periods, being unemployed or underemployed, financially insecure, and struggling to improve their living situation. If the challenges of settlement and integration seem overwhelming, they may experience feelings of isolation, shame, depression, loss of pride, blaming of self and others, and confusion about where to turn for help. Despite the challenges and lack of social support, respondents noted, many immigrants and refugees demonstrate remarkable resilience and willingness to retrain when their own occupational field is inaccessible, to share information and support with other newcomers, to work collaboratively to identify common needs and to create programs to fill gaps in service.

Meeting Challenges

Service providers and policy makers felt that they directly helped immigrants and refugees meet specific challenges, but often viewed the support they provided as affecting newcomers’ overall well being. As one service provider noted:

We attack a critical aspect of people’s well being – accommodation. As I say, the way you live is the way you socialize. You begin to build relationships with neighbours. It’s simple, right? When you create places where immigrants are dumped by the rental market in poor quality housing, then invariably it will affect their well-being and ability to integrate into larger society. That’s not a good start for anyone [Toronto Service Provider].

Service providers and policy makers also have faced challenges in delivering social support, partly because of the political context in which they have had to work.

In the mid ’90s when there were program cutbacks, what the politicians and government wanted was quick results. We are going to give you little money, but we want high results, which means you were not going to spend much time with people. Many people lost out – the people that were hardest to serve…. I think that period of the ’90s was more one of retrenchment than of innovation. I guess the impact is on the client, because you have to restrict the things you focus on, depending on where the government’s priorities are [Service Provider #09].

Agencies do not have the capacity to move towards building a healthy community by mobilizing, community networking, coalition-building, advocacy. Within the immigrant community there is a lot of potential, but they have not been recognized by politicians, because they’re voiceless…. Many of them are engaging in survival jobs … they don’t have the opportunity to engage … and raise their concerns [Service Provider #08].

Social Support and Health: Perspectives of Service Providers and Policy Makers

In keeping with their holistic perspective on the challenges facing newcomers and the social supports needed, most policy makers and service providers defined health comprehensively
and with concern for an individual’s ability to function effectively. For example, one policy maker suggested:

The determinants of health – it is more than physical. It is mental health, housing, safety, clean air and water, opportunity to participate in the political arena, education, employment, access to trades and professions [Policy Maker #03].

Another stated:

Health and well-being? It is being able to be healthy. I guess there is a physical aspect, but also to feel great and also to grow. I would say well-being is performance. Being able to perform optimally on a daily basis and getting the kind of opportunities that you need to do that [Policy Maker #02].

In summary, Phase One interviewees described the link between social support and health among immigrants and refugees as follows:

• Adequate, appropriate support has a positive impact on health;
• Lack of support, inadequate support or inappropriate support has a negative impact on newcomers’ mental and physical health;
• People’s health and well-being improve when they are aware that help is available and they are willing and able to seek help; and
• The support that service providers offer is critical to the health and well-being of immigrants and refugees.

Phase Two Demographics, Group Differences, and Immigration Status

In this section we first provide some background information for the Phase Two study groups – Chinese immigrants from Hong Kong and the Mainland and Somali refugees – to highlight major differences. To ensure gathering representative views, we attempted to include in the interview sample adult participants of both genders, of all ages and a variety of backgrounds (urban and rural, from all parts of the country of origin), a range of educational levels, occupations and length of stay in Canada.2

Somali interviewees were, on average, younger and less likely to be currently married than the Chinese. Given their younger average age, it is not surprising that more of the Somali interviewees were students prior to arrival in Canada, remained students in Canada, and were not employed at the time of the interviews. More Chinese interviewees possessed university and graduate degrees, and more were employed, but their reported occupations suggest some

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2 The researchers chose to restrict the Chinese sample to a time frame of 5 years or less in order to capture data from recent Mainland Chinese immigrants. The Somali refugee population had arrived in an earlier wave, so the same time limit was not feasible.
underemployment or a recognized need for retraining. The two groups were roughly equivalent in
self-reported English proficiency (fluent or good). More than half of each group reported coming
from urban backgrounds, with the rest of the Chinese coming from semi-urban (small town)
environments, and the remaining Somalis coming from rural or small town backgrounds. Although
the Somali interviewees had been in Canada longer and more had become citizens, many more
reported living in poverty.

Study Populations in Brief: Countries of Origin and Migration Patterns

Somalia is a country located in the Horn of Africa, the eastern part of the African
continent. The society is primarily agrarian with the majority of the population involved in farming
or raising livestock. Ninety-five per cent of the population belong to the same ethnic group, speak
the same language, share the same culture and are predominantly Muslims (Opoku-Dapaah 1995).
For the past 30 years, Somalia has suffered from military dictatorship and civil unrest. In the early
1990s, when the civil war intensified, the combination of war and famine led to the flight of a
significant proportion of the population to neighbouring African countries. Many of them spent
years in refugee camps before leaving for Canada and other countries (Scott 2001).

According to the 2001 Census, there were 17,380 Somalis in the Toronto Census
Metropolitan Area. This number has continued to increase since then. Today the actual number of
Somalis in the Greater Toronto Area is debatable, with estimates ranging from 40,000 to 100,000.
Somali settlement-service agencies estimate the number to be around 75,000 (Israelite 1999),
primarily concentrated in Etobicoke and Scarborough. This makes Toronto the largest home for
Somalis in North America.

The Chinese, in contrast, have a longer history in Canada, dating back to approximately
1858, when Chinese migrants (predominantly male labourers) from the US settled in the Fraser
Valley of British Columbia during the Gold Rush (Leung 2000). Due to discriminatory legislation,
Canada did not permit family reunification for Chinese until the government instituted a universal
point system for immigrants in 1967. This history resulted in a long delay in the formation of a
Canadian-born second generation, and a sex ratio in the Chinese-Canadian community that was
only balanced a little more than one decade ago (Li 1998). Although for some members of the
community the history is long, Chinese-Canadians still struggle with many of the settlement issues
of newcomer communities (Leung 2000). In the 1980s, South East Asian refugees and refugee
claimants from Mainland China (after the Tiananmen Tragedy in 1989) joined the established
Chinese in Canada and their numbers were further augmented by economic immigrants from Hong
Kong and Taiwan in the 1990s. Today, Mainland China has replaced Hong Kong as the primary
place of origin for Chinese newcomers, and has become the top sending country to Canada; the

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3 This includes those reporting Somali as either a single or as part of a multiple ethnic origin. The overwhelming
majority (16,105) fell into the former group. According to the 2001 Canadian Census, 13,615 residents of the
Toronto CMA reported Somali as their mother tongue, and 9,440 claimed to have been born in Somalia. In contrast,
435,690 reported Chinese as their ethnic origin, 348,010 listed Chinese as their mother tongue, 136,135 reported
their birthplace as the People’s Republic of China, and 110,735 claimed Hong Kong as their place of birth. Figures
were taken from the following Statistics Canada publications: 97F001XCB01001, 97F0009XCB01003, and
97F0007XCB1001.
proportion of Mandarin-speakers to Cantonese-speakers (from Hong Kong) has risen from 51 per cent in 1996, to 86 per cent in 1999, making the Chinese-Canadian immigrant community more diverse as well as larger (Leung 2000).

Differences between Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese Views of Social Support

In this study we hypothesized that meanings of social support would be a product of both individual and cultural experiences in both the homeland and in Canada. Marked differences among interviewees’ perceptions, and coping- and help-seeking strategies emerged from the Phase Two in-depth interviews with immigrants and refugees. We may attribute these distinctions to cultural, social, and political differences in the homelands, which influence perceptions and expectations of social support in Canada. For example, within the Chinese immigrant group, Mainland and Hong Kong Chinese differed in their perceptions of social support arising from differences in background and experiences in their homelands. Such differences influenced their strategies for seeking social support. As a former British colony, English-proficiency levels tend to be higher among the Hong Kong population. Moreover, Hong Kong has been open longer to Western influence and travel. Many newcomers from Hong Kong reported that they relied on family and friends already in Canada when immigrating; only two senior respondents from Mainland China who emigrated for family reunion had such support on arrival in Canada.

Mainland Chinese expressed higher expectations of the Canadian government, while Hong Kong participants rarely talked about the government’s role in providing social support to newcomers. This observation may be explained by the fact that Hong Kong does not have a system comparable to the “working units” (dan wei) that provide comprehensive social services to employees as in Mainland China. Some Mainland respondents also suggested that assistance in Canada is not practical enough, while none of the Hong Kong respondents perceived help in that way. A comment on employment in Mainland China illustrates one such difference:

The way of finding a job here is so different…. In China, as soon as one gets out of the University, he/she will be assigned to a job…. Many immigrants from China don’t feel comfortable with the way of looking for job here. The majority of the immigrants from China are independent class immigrants, so job searching is important. Help that teaches them how to find jobs in the Canadian way seems to be the most helpful support we need [Mainland Chinese Male #01].

Another migrant from Mainland China suggested:

It’s not practical, since they wouldn’t really give you a work placement. All they can do is to give you some information of job opportunities, resume editing, and interview skills. We have to do those things by ourselves [Mainland Chinese Female #02].

After the Communist Party came to power in 1949, a series of reforms occurred in Mainland China, each having an impact on thought and society. Generational differences of the Mainland Chinese participants in this study reflect these variations. The oldest generation recalls a time when the Chinese government was efficient and one could satisfy all basic needs by complying with government rules. As one female interviewee noted:
You have to wait until you have some problems that need to be resolved, then you go out and look for what kind of help you can get. It is not like in China. In China there is usually the ‘red title’ documents [government documents titles are printed in red] that tell people what to do. Things here need to be more transparent [Mainland Chinese Female #07].

Similarly, the next generation was part of the state-planned economy. They were assigned jobs and well taken care of by their working divisions.

I think it’s called ‘socialization of enterprise.’ An enterprise is a small society with many departments – departments that manage business and also departments that help manage workers’ lives…. When you need a place to live, you apply to the housing department; when your child reaches the age of going to school, a department manages a school for you. Different departments meet your different needs. You are very clear where to get the help you need. But here, I’m not clear where to go for help. Here, job is job, life is life [Mainland Chinese Male #01].

For the “free market generation” that followed, the government advocated more pragmatism, and values that differed from those of the earlier generations evolved. At the same time, strategies for help-seeking became less clear.

In China, you can see the doctor if you got the money. As long as you buy the number, you’ll get to see the doctor. There are some times you have to wait until your number is called, but it won’t take this long…. The staffs’ attitudes towards the patients are not that good. In addition, hospitals there are poorer. So there are a lot of ‘irregular strategies’… [Mainland Chinese Male #08].

I think the biggest difference is that Canada is more regulatory in terms of helping people. For example, if you want to take the driver’s license test (in China), it’ll be very hard…. You’ll have to bribe the teachers that teach you driving. But in Canada, I think everything is very clear and transparent [Mainland Chinese Male #10].

Particularly for the older generation, self-discipline and endurance are valued. Only recently has it become more acceptable to complain or express emotions such as anger or depression. The older generation has experienced repression and disadvantage, unlike younger immigrants, who are, therefore, not as well prepared for life in Canada.

I will try my best to look for a resolution. My age decides that I will behave like this. I know that among young immigrants, they complain a lot when they confront difficulties. I think research institutions like yours should provide counseling to these people. They should know that this is a society; it’s not heaven…. If you can’t get the help you want, there’s always another path to get your problem resolved…. Maybe these young people haven’t had any big defeat in their lives, but life is a long way to go. There is always the possibility of all kinds of problems. So I think these people need some counseling. Don’t always complain. Don’t think like, ‘I had a good job before, but I don’t have the same level job here.’ They should try to conquer their mental imbalance in the first place…. I’ve seen a lot in my time, people who were politically repressed, ‘the
right wing’ [one considered the ‘enemy’ in revolutionary China]. Many of them worked in factories…. It is not unique to Canada. There is no security of having a good job anywhere. So I think they should be mentally prepared for these difficulties [Mainland Chinese Female #05].

Refugee Status and Somali Settlement: The Problem of Identity Documents

Apart from the different cultures and social systems in their countries of origin and their migration experiences, the most notable contrast in the two main study groups, Chinese immigrants and Somali refugees, is their immigration status and its implications for life in Canada. On the one hand, immigrants are able to plan for the transition to life in a new country, are likely have more secure resources on hand, and may be assured that immigration status alone will not delay their integration into their new society. Refugees who are escaping persecution or conflict, unlike immigrants, are unlikely to have had the chance to plan their departure in advance, and may not have been able to bring financial resources with them, increasing their chances of living in poverty. Most are grateful to Canada for giving them refuge, although they live with ongoing stresses, such as family separation.

My brothers’ and sisters’ children … some are in refugee camps in Kenya, some are still in Somalia…. Those are some of the things I am concerned about. Other than that, I’m not missing anything else. The government of Canada is taking care of me by providing food, shelter and medication for me and I’m very thankful for this…. What I would like to do now is to give thanks to the government of Canada because it has welcomed us and helped us [Somali (Central) Female #05].

Even those refugees accepted in Canada under the Geneva Convention, but lacking official documentation from the country they fled, may have to wait years in Canada for landed status, which can slow their settlement and social integration due to barriers in pursuing education and securing employment. The case of a woman, who has been recognized on paper as a Convention refugee for over 12 years, but has still not been provided with landed immigrant status, illustrates some of the bureaucratic difficulties and the obstacles they present:

[It’s] never too late. I still want to go back to school. My case about wanting to get daycare, it is up to Immigration. Basically I am stuck with that, soon hopefully, God willing…. I have a problem with all, Immigration, the health card place and also the welfare place. The immigration paper [confirming her Convention refugee status] does not have an expiry date, but yet when I go to the health office, they say your paper is old. Immigration says as long as it does not have an expiry date they should accept it. I go to the health place, and they say that is immigration’s policy. We have our own policy. Unless you get something from immigration that is updated, we can't give you a health card … like ping pong going here, there, back, forth…. Other people have the same problem [Somali (Southern) Female #12].

In this respect, Somalis in Canada have faced particular challenges to their resettlement process. A major impediment to their timely integration into Canadian society has been a legislative amendment to the Immigration Act (Bill C-86), introduced in February 1993, requiring
that Convention Refugees present “satisfactory identity documents” before they can be granted 
permanent residence (Brouwer 1999; Canadian Council for Refugees 1999; Goodwin-Gill and 
Kumin 2000). No substantive definition of ‘satisfactory identity document’ was provided, thereby 
giving immigration officers discretionary power (Brouwer 1999; Goodwin-Gill and Kumin 2000). 
Only a few were fortunate enough to have not experienced this problem.

Luckily for me in February 1992 there was a change in my immigration status, 
because I was granted my landing papers, and I realized that I had an opportunity 
to go to university, unlike most Somalis who had a problem with their status 
because they were considered undocumented refugees. Luckily I had my 
(identification) documents with me when I arrived (in Canada). My process was 
much shorter than most Somalis who were caught in the backlog [Somali 
(Northern) Male #15].

Citizens of Somalia (and Afghanistan) have been particularly affected because of their 
inability to obtain such documents. The 1993 amendment also disproportionately affected women, 
youth, and people from rural areas because they are less likely to have identity documents 
(Canadian Council for Refugees 1999). As a result, in November 1996 there were 7000 refugees 
from Somalia and 500 from Afghanistan in “legal limbo.” In January 1997, the federal government 
responded by introducing the Undocumented Convention Refugee in Canada Class, allowing 
Convention Refugees from Afghanistan and Somalia to be granted permanent residence in Canada 
five years after receiving refugee status. This was intended to facilitate the landing of Somali and 
Afghan refugees but it largely failed to do so (Brouwer 1999; Canadian Council for Refugees 
1999). By the end of 1998, only 748 undocumented Convention refugees and dependants from 
Somalia and Afghanistan had been landed (Brouwer 1999). More than half of the 7500 refugees 
had applied for permanent residence in 1997, when the Undocumented Convention Refugee in 
Canada Class was introduced, and the majority of them were unsuccessful in their applications 
because they were unable to obtain a satisfactory identity document (Goodwin-Gill and Kumin 
2000).

The delay in obtaining permanent resident status for the majority of Somali refugees has 
had considerable implications for them. Being without permanent resident status delayed family 
reunification, limited mobility rights, imposed barriers to access to education, employment, social 
assistance, health care, and financial services, and prohibited them from voting (Brouwer 1999; 

Immigration [staff], most of them are not very welcoming – they don’t have good 
faces [friendly faces]. They have also good people, but a majority of them make 
life harder for people to get landing status in Canada. There are some who will 
just sleep on a file and not even bother to open it. And the person will suffer. He 
cannot work, cannot go to school, he will be put in the ‘back log.’ Although he 
has lived in this country for almost ten years he cannot vote, cannot travel. There 
are some people who while they are just sitting here their wife or relatives have 
died back home and they cannot even visit them. Immigration should improve and 
make life easier for people, so that they can adjust and do something in this 
country [Somali (Southern) Female #10].

In the face of these extensive barriers, the Somali community challenged the 
constitutionality of the requirement (Bill C-86), on the basis that it violated Section 15 of the
Charter of Rights and Freedoms. As a result of a legal challenge, in January 1999, the federal government proposed a change from a 5-year to a 3-year waiting period (Goodwin-Gill 2000). Still, problems related to immigration status, coupled with the obstacles that many immigrants face, take their toll on those refugees who remain without acceptable documents. As one female refugee from southern Somalia noted:

They have a misunderstanding about immigrants. There are people who in their countries were PhD holders, engineers, or doctors. The country should try to benefit from these people and not lock them up somewhere. The educated person who comes here … becomes stressed, many get sick, and some become crazy. There are some who, when they realize that their education cannot be used here, want to leave the country. But they have nothing…. There are some that have gone through hardship, who neither have documents to work with, nor documents to leave the country with [Somali (Southern) Female #10].

Refugee Status and Relative Socioeconomic Disadvantage

In this study, one indicator of hardship during settlement that appears to correlate with immigration status is the adequacy of income levels (Kazemipur and Halli 2000). Refugees appear to be at a greater disadvantage than immigrants. In our sample, there was a striking difference in responses to whether the respondents felt they had adequate money for daily living, indicating a significant difference in the kinds of challenges they faced as newcomers to Canada. Among the Somali interviewees, 19 out of 20 said they did not have enough money for daily living, whereas only 3 of 20 Chinese said that they did not. Somali respondents reported this despite the fact that most had been in Canada from five to ten or more years, whereas the majority of Chinese respondents had been in Canada less than four years. Given the longer average length of time in Canada for the Somali population, however, it was also noted that half of the Somali interviewees had become Canadian citizens, although only one of the Chinese respondents had done so at the time of interview (probably due to the fact that one can only acquire citizenship after three years of

4 “Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.” (Article 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms). Aden (1997 cited in Brouwer 1999, p.17) states, “The Somali plaintiffs’ claim is that Section 46.04 (8) of the Immigration Act has the effect of discriminating against them on the basis of national origin, contrary to Section 15 of the Charter, thus denying them equal benefit of the law. They claim that rather than end the discrimination, the Undocumented Convention Refugee in Canada Class continues it through its imposition of a five-year waiting period.”

5 In December 2000, a Federal Court ruling (Regina vs. Aden) was passed that allows applicants for permanent residence to swear declarations attesting to their identity or to provide such affidavits from a Canadian citizen who knew them prior to their migration to Canada, or from an official organization representing citizens of their country of origin (York Centre for Refugee Studies 2001). The Aden ruling was implemented and then was integrated into the new regulations introduced June 28, 2002 (see Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations 178). At that point the regulatory class – Undocumented Convention Refugees in Canada Class – was abolished.
residence). Due to delays described above, it can take up to ten years for Somalis to become Canadian citizens.

**Meanings of Social Support among Immigrants and Refugees: Phase Two Findings**

We present findings from in-depth interviews in this section, focusing on three aspects of social support as described in interviews by immigrants and refugees: meanings and perceptions of social support; ways of coping with challenges; and strategies of support-seeking. Throughout the interviews, respondents contrasted social support in their homelands and in Canada. The contrasts often were poignant, due not only to differences in conceptions of social support, but also to the often disappointing social conditions in Canada, where the discrepancy between expectations and reality revealed unmet needs for support. We end this section with a summary of the relationship between social support and health as described by study participants. Definitions of social support vary by cultural background, and depend on the social and political context in the country of origin as well as newcomers’ experiences in Canada. Given newcomers’ individual circumstances and personalities, definitions are also somewhat idiosyncratic.

**Meanings and Perceptions of Social Support among Chinese Immigrants**

Chinese immigrants typically described social support in practical terms as help from friends, family, or the government. Their expectations in this regard were high. Those immigrants from Mainland China seemed to think of support as being provided, rather than as services they must seek out. Those from Hong Kong expected more in terms of the quality of the services.

When asked what social support meant to them, some Chinese respondents described specific settlement programs and services that they had accessed at community centres in Toronto, or financial assistance for the jobless and needy. Others talked about the importance of individuals helping each other in whatever way they can, “sharing resources and helping others to solve problems” [Hong Kong Chinese Male #01].

For many, social support meant charity or help for the disadvantaged, including new immigrants like themselves faced with language barriers and competition for jobs, as a way of fulfilling ideals of social justice and equity. As one female immigrant from Mainland China observed:

‘Social support’ refers to help for disadvantaged groups in society. For example, Legal Aid is for people who are not familiar with the legal system and can’t afford the high expenses of hiring lawyers. That is why it is called ‘Aid.’ New immigrants are actually one category of minorities. Due to the barriers of language, culture and so on, at least for a temporary period, you are in the disadvantaged group. You are not able to compete with the native people here. Social support is to help disadvantaged groups and individuals get equal opportunities as other members of the society [Mainland Chinese Female #09].
Some of the interviewees offered quite broad definitions of social support:

It should make ‘life easygoing and enjoyable’ [a Chinese idiom]. When a problem arises, someone is there to offer advice and practical assistance, and to help you overcome the problem. It is that simple [Hong Kong Chinese Male #07].

Others specifically defined support in the context of either mental preparation or the knowledge needed for coping in a new environment. As one female participant from Mainland China stated:

[Social support] refers to something mental or spiritual … I don’t know how to put it…. For example, when I first came here, maybe there were these workshops, but I did not know that they were there. It would be great if there were workshops that introduce Toronto to new immigrants or programs that help new immigrants design their life in Canada [Mainland Chinese Female #03].

One male participant from Hong Kong talked about how to provide help or support. In his comments, he touched on two important aspects of the way in which help is provided: its timing and the attitude with which it is offered:

It is an art form. Help has to come at the right time. If someone doesn’t need your help and you offer your assistance, it is just nosy. If someone is in need and you can’t provide immediate assistance, you are not doing a good job. Thus, timing is very important. Secondly, it is the attitude: are you willing to offer a helping hand? Do you have some sort of motive? Are you helping for reward? If the help is like a ‘transaction’ – hoping that the person will return a favor – it is a shame. Help should be sincere, practical – unlike someone asking for oil, but being offered salt – and offered at the right time. This is the ideal case [Hong Kong Chinese Male #07].

Based on her working experience as a service provider in a Chinese-oriented agency, as well as her own experience as a new immigrant from Mainland China, one respondent offered a culture-specific understanding of social support:

Help, from a Chinese person’s point of view, refers more to help among friends, among individuals. After emigrating from Mainland China, I did not have any connection with community agencies or get any help from them. I did not even know that they were there until I started working in one. After I started working in this field, I found that Chinese – especially those from the Mainland – have very little sense of community service…. On the other hand, as a service provider, I think what we can provide is not as pragmatic as most Chinese expect. Based on my working experience, many people ask for a tangible service. What do they mean by a tangible service? Is it a tangible service if I give you a job? Is it a tangible service if I give you a bus ticket when you come to our activities? Maybe it is due to their financial capability or the old notions that are already in their heads, most Chinese’s notion about help is something tangible. Actually if there is a place that provides information and places for activities, it is a form of service. But most Chinese, including myself, haven’t realized this [Mainland Chinese Female #09].
In the opinion of some participants, the government, representing the whole society, should play the major role in providing social support. All respondents acknowledged that people helping each other is an important form of support. They thought, however, that well-organized institutional support was more efficient:

If you rely solely on individuals’ ability to help the others, if you expect everybody to be ‘Lei Feng,’ it’s economically impossible. I can help you once. I can even help you twice or three times, if it does not conflict with my interests. But it’s impossible for me to help you for the rest of my life. No one can always be there for you… Why are people after something? Because there is an economic drive. There is no economic drive for people to help the others. So, society should take responsibility. It should be the basic structure of a society, in my opinion…. In regard to individual help, we should all have a warm heart, as our Chinese tradition points out [Mainland Chinese Female #09].

Friends are not there particularly for providing help or support, but we can get information from them. The social support I mentioned just now refers particularly to the well-organized, institutional behavior…. Government is one form of support. The help other communities or organizations provide are social support too, such as churches. But if it’s just two friends getting together, I don’t think it’s social support. It’s just communication of the information we know [Mainland Chinese Male #06].

Respondents clearly felt that Canada should be responsible for making assistance to newcomers an essential part of social support. As one male from Mainland China observed:

For an immigration country like Canada whose yearly immigration is almost 1% of its population, social support should target largely on the newcomers. It is their obligation to provide service to these people so that they can adapt themselves successfully and locate themselves properly [Mainland Chinese Male #04].

Some respondents described social support as a network of every available resource surrounding an individual. Notably, they felt that forms of social support should be specific and flexible to suit individuals’ different needs. One respondent suggested:

One may encounter problems and issues that require help in any environment. Where can someone get the help he needs? He can get help from individuals, such as neighbors and Chinese friends, communities, and the government…. If there is such thing in Canada, it should be suitable to each resident and every group, such as Chinese immigrants [Mainland Chinese Male #08].

Chinese immigrants have come from different cultural and social backgrounds, yet they were accustomed to feeling that a variety of social support needs would be met, at least in a limited

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6 Lei Feng is a Chinese figure famous for helping anybody who had any difficulty in his life. In China, one month every year is set aside to honour him. Excerpts of his diary are still in the textbooks of primary school students. His most famous motto is, ‘It’s easy to do one good deed for others. What’s more difficult is to keep helping other people throughout one’s whole life.’
way, in their homeland. Mainland Chinese immigrants, in particular, took for granted comprehensive, though imperfect, formal supports. These functioned and were delivered differently than formal supports are in Canada, where help is not as readily available to them. As three male participants from Mainland China recalled:

In China, when you are in need, there will be someone come to you and ask what you need, because a work division is a small society itself. There usually will be someone that cares about your problem and difficulties. Here, nobody cares. There is a difference between positive and passive help [Mainland Chinese Male #01].

There are many differences. For example, here people cherish the value of independence. So the social service agencies won’t provide you any help if you don’t ask for it. But in China, they think stuff for you. I mean, they try to figure out what you’ll probably need and provide the help without waiting for you to ask. In China the social support system is not very good. I guess it is because of the lack of resources and the development level of our society [Mainland Chinese Male #06].

It’s hard for foreigners to understand. But it’s easy for us. We go to our working divisions for everything, legitimately. The working division can really resolve some problems for us [Mainland Chinese Male #08].

Some respondents differentiated among the types of help offered in Canada and the homeland. One migrant skillfully articulated the complex support system available in Mainland China:

Actually, there are household committees that are similar to the community centres here. The help or support these household committees provide is not necessary for all people – it is just useful for particular people. For example, if one wants to have a baby, she should go to the household committee to do her family plan…. To me, it is not ‘social support.’ … In China, teachers are like your parents. After you enter society, there are friends, colleagues, and even some supervisors you respect in your working division. They can give you some help. I don’t think there’s a lot of help you can get from the society [Mainland Chinese Male #06].

Chinese immigrants from Hong Kong sometimes were dissatisfied because they expected social support in Canada to be more timely and effective. Many felt that there was ample room to improve the quality and efficiency of existing services, particularly in education and employment, although some services were considered very useful.

What immediately comes to mind are the English classes I am taking. The teachers taught us phonetics and conversation skills. These skills are particularly useful to Hong Kong immigrants because English is our second language. I also commend the Canadian government for providing free services to new immigrants. However, there is still room for improvement in the quality of the service…. It would save resource if the government could control the quality of teachers [Hong Kong Chinese Female #05].
As my daughter says, some teachers are really irresponsible, and this is true…. My second daughter, for example, is undergoing a very tense period, as she is about to enter university and her teachers might not even come to school [Hong Kong Chinese Female #08].

The government should really improve the working methods of its various departments. Everything is already computerized, and yet mistakes still occur…. The way the government works can be very frustrating [Hong Kong Chinese Female #08].

When you go, you will be shuffled around: ‘Go over there. No, go over there.’ Pushed from one to the other…. For example, I had a friend looking for a job, who called for information and was referred to another informative channel and from there to another. In other words, from one department to another [Hong Kong Chinese Female #04].

The timing of information provision for new immigrants, which is not optimal according to many interviewees, was directly associated with its effectiveness. They also suggested that individual follow-up would be helpful:

The information that new immigrants receive when they first arrive at customs is not very useful. People are nervous when they first arrive. Going through immigration is stressful. They won’t understand any of the information given to them at that time. Immigrants could leave their names and phone numbers, and someone should then call and follow up on these new immigrants. This type of help is better than just giving out brochures [Hong Kong Chinese Male #03].

Many of the immigrants interviewed appraised social support – in this case, employment assistance – as ineffective if it does not enable a person to overcome barriers in a practical, specific way to meet personal expectations. As one male from Mainland China suggested:

For example, if you want to look for a job, what you need most is employment information and how to present yourself to meet the description of a position. But usually employment support is just general information. It is not specified to help people according to their different professions. Maybe an association for a particular profession would be more helpful [Mainland Chinese Male #01].

Despite generally positive appraisals of the Canadian system, some interviewees felt that the weakness of existing formal social support systems might be due to larger political decisions:

Canada is wonderful. Canada has taken a patient-centred approach a long time ago. It stresses the importance of patients’ feelings and rights. However, in recent years – 5 or 6 years ago – the Liberal Party greatly reduced resources, leading to diminishing medical services, and thus lowered quality…. The situation in Hong Kong is rather stable. If you can afford to see a private doctor, the doctor will certainly be of help. The wait time is just 1 or 2 hours. However, the wait time here is days…. In this respect, I think Canada is regressing [Hong Kong Chinese Male #07].
As another example, language is a significant barrier during contact with the Canadian health system. As one male immigrant from Mainland China argued:

There aren’t many specialists who can speak Cantonese. It is inconvenient for patients who can’t communicate very well in English. They should hire doctors from different ethnic groups [Mainland Chinese Male #03].

Study respondents reported that language was an even greater barrier for Mandarin-speaking immigrants from Mainland China. This was because Cantonese-speaking workers already are employed by many of the established Chinese social service and settlement agencies in Toronto.

In sum, Chinese newcomers talked about support in specific terms, emphasizing its pragmatic importance in settlement and assessing available services by their standards of quality and utility. They perceived the government, more than community organizations, as responsible for providing social support. They also perceived the help of friends and family members who arrived in Canada before them to be helpful.

Meanings and Perceptions of Social Support among Somali Refugees

Similar themes occurred in Somali respondents’ definitions of social support; namely, social support may be defined either broadly or specifically (that is, as settlement or employment services), and as something that may be provided by individuals or by the government in Canada. But for Somalis, the meaning of social support is both more holistic and more personal, perhaps because traditional Somali society is highly interdependent. This may also be due to the fact that refugees have faced more drastic life disruptions and consequently require more comprehensive help during resettlement. Participants offered holistic definitions of social support that included financial, emotional, psychological and moral support. Some participants perceive support as having an all-encompassing form, by which those in need are assisted completely. Consider the following observation:

Social support means support from those around you when you are in need of help. It can be psychological, emotional, or material support. For example, when you cannot meet your basic needs in terms of daily sustenance or rent. Also moral support, because adjusting here in the beginning is difficult. You will need people to give you support and encouragement that things will work out better and you should work hard … there is merit to that. Also, psychologically, when you arrive from a country like Somalia with civil war, still dealing with that trauma. Also in confronting instances, for example, where you have to deal with culture shock, you can get really confused.… And it depends on your situation. If a person arrives troubled and confused, he will need all levels of support, moral, social, psychological, material … [Somali (Northern) Male #15].

Most participants clearly associated the need for support with the circumstances of initial settlement in Canada. Social support was equated with the kind of assistance required for learning how to live in Canada, as well as coping with the many challenges newcomers usually encounter. As one female refugee from northern Somalia stated:
Social support is support you get from the people around you and how everyone tries to help and tries to teach you to cope with the new country and a whole new way of living [Somali (Northern) Female #13].

Somali study participants commonly contrasted support in Canada to that of their homeland. To them, support in Canada is associated with institutions and agencies such as the immigration department, social services, community groups, while that in Somalia is associated with individuals, especially extended family members and neighbours. Support in the two countries was also distinguished in terms of how the society is structured. In Somalia, support is based on extended family ties, networks of kinship, and community spirit. Everyone in the society knows that they will get help if they are in need and those who are in positions of providing support know that they are expected to provide help. They described their expectation to be part of a reciprocal social network in which social support is given, as well as received, as integral to traditional Somali culture and society:

In my homeland, in the first place you will get immediate support from friends, parents, relatives and close friends. Also from the wider society, because we believe in the concept of extended family whereby the society has a responsibility to individual and community. You are entitled to rights, entitled to get immediate help whenever needs arise from the extended family in the community, because of doing things in a communal way. In most cases, the extended family, the wider community and the society is well placed to help because people have a close kinship network around them…. This is on top of whatever support you will get from government agencies and the state itself…. We do not have the concept of individualism and people have to share whatever they have. People have to help each other whenever they are in need [Somali (Northern) Male #15].

Social support comes in different forms. When we [Somalis] think of social support, it means someone helping or giving something to another person. But in this country, it means someone who helps in providing health, housing, jobs [Somali (Northern) Male #16].

There are a lot of differences between Canadian and Somali culture. In our culture, people are very interdependent. If you needed assistance, there were always uncles, aunts, and cousins at your disposal. If you seek assistance, there was always support in different forms … material, emotional or motivational [Somali (Southern) Male #18].

Ideally, then, social support requires the involvement of all levels of society:

Social support is a very important thing, which requires the involvement of the individual, community, government and businesses to play a role. Each group has to take certain responsibilities in order to ensure the necessary social support is provided. One alone … will not be able to fulfill all the requirements of social support. It requires a united effort because it is in the interest of all the parties [Somali (Southern) Male #20].
Some of the Somali newcomers who were interviewed described the meaning of social support as having people on whom you can count to guide you through the complexities of settling in an environment very different from the one you came from. As one female from southern Somalia noted:

Well, it is there … social support. When you need help and you go to your community, you have people there for you who try to help you out and guide you, making sure you do what you need to do. When you come to a country like North America from Africa, you are obviously going to need help [Somali (Southern) Female #04].

Although family remains the main source of support for many Somali refugees, they recognized that this type of support is neither as extensive nor as readily available as it was back home. Migration has changed their circumstances drastically, resulting in socioeconomic and time pressures on family members. As one participant stated:

Here, if I can give you an example, there is no one to help you. Everyone is in ‘survival mode.’ Like my sister here, if she had a baby in Somalia, I would help her and my mother, aunts or other people would have to help her, too. But [in Canada], even if your mother is here, she cannot help you. Everyone is either going to school or working. You have to survive … you cannot even get help from your own sister because of the situation of life here, which is difficult. People are going to school, to work – time is too limited [Somali (Southern) Female #08].

According to study participants, life in Somalia was based on interdependence, while in Canada, society seems more individualistic. One participant felt that individualism, to some extent, was not bad, as it promotes self-betterment and hard work:

… In Africa, life was based on interdependence between people. But the major difference and benefit we gained over here [in Canada] is that every individual has to struggle on his own by either attending school or gaining different skills and working. Over here, everybody operates individually and strives for himself, which is the major experience gained in Canada…. The main thing we have learned that is different from Africa, is how to work hard and not be overly dependent on each other [Somali (Southern) Male #14].

The Somali refugees who were interviewed, like the Chinese respondents, felt that the most optimal social support is immediate and can effectively change an individual’s circumstances, increasing the recipient’s self-sufficiency. As one stated:

The best way is to help people immediately, so that the help can reach those who need it…. The other thing is that the help should be one that changes the person’s condition. It should not be where the person is still stuck at the same level he was before the help…. It should not be that the person is in a state of needing help forever. In the end, the person should be able to stand on his own feet [Somali (Central) Male #03].
Some study participants pointed out that one significant difference between being in Canada and in Somalia, is that they were in a position of providing support back home; in Canada they end up needing support. Consider, for example, the following pair of statements:

Truthfully, back in my homeland I did not need any form of assistance, on the contrary, I had employees working for me in different capacities [Somali (Northern) Male #19].

... besides, I was in need of little support. I was very satisfied and content with what I had and I was actually the one people came to for support [Somali (Central) Female #05].

Generally, Somali refugees in Canada perceive social support in their homeland as help provided through interdependent social networks of family and friends, in contrast to the formal and more impersonal supportive services provided by government and community agencies in Canada. The contrast in their own circumstances in the sending and receiving context is also vivid: in their homeland, they were integral parts of supportive networks, where they both received and provided support; in Canada they may be more dependent on receiving social support. Where formal supportive services fail, they fall back on familiar, informal support, even though such support is limited by poverty and pressures of life in Canada.

Methods of Coping with Challenges: How Newcomers Help Themselves

Not all immigrants and refugees in Canada help themselves or seek help in the same way, but all newcomers rely on a combination of personal and social resources to cope with the challenges of settlement. Individual attributes and cultural values also influence how newcomers evaluate and obtain available social supports in the receiving society. Primary sources of support for immigrants and refugees are usually family and friends, and sometimes formal organizations. Drawing on social supports available to them, newcomers actively cope with settlement challenges in several common ways. Personal and cultural styles may vary, however, common methods of coping among those Chinese immigrants and Somali refugees interviewed included:

- Building self-reliance: balancing independence with dependence on others;
- Maximizing efforts and options to overcome barriers;
- Redefining identities;
- Gathering information;
- Building social networks; and
- Changing, or lowering, expectations.
Coping Strategies among Chinese Immigrants: Independence vs. Dependence

Study respondents expressed the need to build self-reliance by balancing independence and dependence in adapting to Canadian society. Although gradually achieving independence is a frequently expressed goal, it is clear that many newcomers initially must depend on family members for security and guidance. Among Chinese interviewees, many had friends and family in Canada to rely on upon their arrival.

All in all, dependence on friends and relatives was a must. In various ways – clothing, food, shelter, transportation – if no one helped you, you would not have been able to fulfill these needs. Perhaps on fair-weathered days it would have been possible. But otherwise you must have depended on others to drive you to school, to buy daily supplies, and other various things. Dependence on others was a must. You could not achieve these on your own [Hong Kong Chinese Female #08].

I am fortunate that my brothers came here first. They are familiar with the process. I just followed what they have done. Everything went smoothly. For example, it was not difficult for me to get my SIN card, driver’s license and health card…. I got settled down immediately [Hong Kong Chinese Male #03].

I didn’t have too much need at all…. It may be because of my unique situation. All difficulties and hopes are taken care of by my family…. My family would take me out. When I was sick, they’d take me to see the doctor [Mainland Chinese Male #08].

We didn’t expect much from [Canadian] society when we first came. Our children sponsored us here. So we rely solely on our son and daughter. We didn’t demand anything from the society [Mainland Chinese Female #07].

Although social support from family and friends was normally necessary in the beginning, self-reliance was highly valued among the Chinese respondents, and a lack of independence was seen as regrettable. Several participants elaborated on this theme:

That’s what Chinese do. We rely on our children, but we also want to maintain self-efficacy. You must know that the elder Chinese people value self-efficacy and devotion to their children. This is one character of Chinese people [Mainland Chinese Female #07].

My family almost takes care of everything. In addition, I am not a very demanding person…. I tried to figure out things by myself, if I couldn’t get any help. For example, I wanted to know some business stuff, so I visited as many stores as I could. After a while, I understood many things about small businesses [Mainland Chinese Male #08].

You have to wait eight months before getting your license. That is unfortunate. And my husband can only use his international license for three months, so for five months without the license, you have to call people to drive you. You just can’t ride your bicycle or walk out there [Hong Kong Chinese Female #08].
Sometimes a tendency to be overly independent was seen as a drawback in Canada, especially when additional help was needed to facilitate social integration. Consider the following two comments:

I do realize networking is very important in Canada, especially because this type of [executive] position is not often found in the ‘open market.’ I think Chinese are a little different from the mainstream…. I do not prefer to rely on networking. I think this line of thinking contradicts with the mainstream a little bit [Hong Kong Chinese Female #05].

In Hong Kong, particularly, Chinese people like to rely on themselves. When I came here, I realize that this attitude is very important. However, you cannot rely 100% on yourself and adopt a trial and error policy. Networking is very important. Be willing to open your mouth and ask for help. It is not shameful to ask for help. People are willing to give you advice once you ask them. Chinese people are relatively introverted and afraid of failure. They do not like to display lack of knowledge in front of others. Sometimes, they would prefer to try it out themselves, and this strategy is not wise [Hong Kong Chinese Male #07].

Family members initially are the primary source of support for many Chinese immigrants, but relations are not always easy. For some respondents, relying on relatives was not a good experience, or they were not able to get the help they desired from family members, due to competing pressures in everyone’s lives.

We did not have our own house when we first came either. We lived with my uncle. There were many people living there. The intangible pressures were the most difficult. There were many children in this house and you had to help care for them. And then my own children – my son had yet to adapt. With over ten people in the house, it was quite difficult…. [Hong Kong Chinese Female #08].

If you really need to go out, and no one is available to drive at home, then you must depend on the people around you. Even if you ask, they may not be able, may not be free, to help. So the people around you are very important [Hong Kong Chinese Female #08].

When family support was inadequate, some respondents reported approaching teachers or others in the educational system for help, or acquaintances in community-based organizations, such as churches. Both male and female participants commented on this:

Many times, when there are things about which I am unclear, I call my school and ask…. I was initially afraid that my son would no longer be allowed in school, but the teachers at my school reassured me that they are only trying to help…. Right now the school is of great help…. Once, when I was sick and wanted to go to a hospital, they gave me the emergency numbers of the two closest hospitals, because I had just moved in and didn’t know [Hong Kong Chinese Female #08].

I had a tutor come to my house every other day to tutor my sister and me. He is a friend from Church and had resided in the United States. We asked if he could tutor us in English and he said yes [Hong Kong Chinese Male #10].
Maximizing Efforts and Options

To cope with multiple challenges, such as finding a professional job without the benefit of social networks in Canada, many Chinese newcomers show resourcefulness by attempting to learn more, work harder, and try various options to obtain information and other support. Several of the interviewees, regardless of gender or homeland, commented on this issue:

Apart from complaining, I have to move on and find other means. The first reaction is ‘obstacle.’ Then I will need to find another way to get around it [Hong Kong Chinese Male #01].

Well, there are other methods, too. I can go back to school to get a Masters or Ph.D. and then find this type of job from the university career centre, but this path is too long. Or I can try to get as much experience in the financial field as possible. Hopefully, someday there will be an opportunity for me [Hong Kong Chinese Female #08].

There must be some difficulty. Otherwise, I would have found a job successfully. It is because I could not get help from society. So I tried to know more people and to get the help I need by myself [Mainland Chinese Male #06].

I also need to work harder, because we already started late in this place. But the advantage we have is that we have higher education and we have prepared for the hard environment. Through hard work, I hope I can get a professional job in the first place. Then I hope I can open my own business in my spare time [Mainland Chinese Male #06].

Although adapting to employment conditions in Canada may be tinged with disappointment, immigrants often expressed the motivation to persist. As one noted:

My dream has changed a lot since we came here. My specialty in North America may not have a bright future if the North American market does not need this skill…. I have to adjust myself to fit in this society [Mainland Chinese Male #01].

Redefining Identity and Roles

Many of the Chinese newcomers who were interviewed expressed feelings that they are outsiders and have limited English proficiency that prevents them from integrating socially. They sometimes feel that they must struggle to be accepted by the mainstream. As one of them commented:

If you are referring to daily routines, I think I have adjusted to them. But I think it will take me some time to acculturate to the mainstream society. I am a full-time college student taking a business management diploma. I am also taking ESL classes to learn English. For immigrants to be part of the society, I think we have to improve our second language. Otherwise, there will be communication
constraints for immigrants. This can be applied to work. I don’t have a job right now, but I worked within the Chinese community for half a year. I don’t have experience working for the mainstream society. I believe that language would be a barrier for immigrants working there [Hong Kong Chinese Female #05].

Gathering Information

Having contacts already in Canada and a large, like-ethnic community confers advantages. Most Chinese immigrants devote some time and effort to gathering information from a variety of information sources and formal organizations, but the path to these sources of support is usually through more informal networks.

By talking to people, you can learn from them and gain many resources. My friends who came to Toronto earlier introduced me to human resource centres. They provide the ‘first step’ of information. For example, they told me that the Centre for Information and Community Services [CICS] has certain types of information, and other human resource centres have other types of information. The most important support I need is to find a job. My friends have given me a lot of support on this [Hong Kong Chinese Male #01].

The public library is a big source of information. My friends also tell me about all kinds of information, such as recreation activities and workshops. These are the major two sources of information…. Friends are ESL classmates or friends’ friends. They will tell you whatever they know when they know your needs [Mainland Chinese Male #06].

For many newcomers, the existence of ethnic media, churches, and public resources such as libraries, is a significant advantage for acquiring information and creating new and supportive social ties. Yet it still can be difficult to get comprehensible information required to meet specific or urgent needs. Providing this type of informational support is perceived as enabling, rather than promoting dependence.

I would also keep an eye on community agencies. I got to know them through watching TV. In Toronto, CFMT [a local Toronto channel] has an hour of Chinese news and information. At the end of the news broadcast, there is a 5 minutes segment of community information. I pay extensive attention to this information [Hong Kong Chinese Female #05].

Many libraries even have books in Chinese, but categories of Chinese books are so limited. I assumed that there should be a set of books about legal regulations, but I could not find any. I wanted some information on legal regulations of small business. Maybe it is because I don’t know how to search…. Even if the English collection could meet people’s needs, can they also provide some materials in Chinese? [Mainland Chinese Male #08].
Building Social Networks

No matter what information or services are formally provided, the immigrants who were interviewed expressed a desire for informal social contacts for emotional and instrumental support. Sometimes the social benefits of building new social networks came as a welcome revelation, and newcomers saw their efforts in this regard as rewarding. Several participants commented on the importance of this to them:

I need contact with others, say from church. I need time and people. Canada can provide me with time. People are more relaxed here. They are more willing to talk to you and provide insights [Hong Kong Chinese Male #01].

I think if you come to Canada and don’t make friends, it will affect your communication skills, and ultimately make life tougher. Therefore, I will try to make more friends and learn more about the society. Thus, adapt to the society with a quicker pace [Hong Kong Chinese Female #05].

I think there’s a network between you and your friends. When I first came here, I had a friend who had been here for almost two years. Then my friend introduced me to his/her other friends. Some of them had been here for more than ten years. They are very helpful and I can get all kinds of advice from them. The decision that I go back to school was made with my friends’ help [Mainland Chinese Female #02].

I have many friends, Chinese friends and foreigners. Chinese and the native people here have different perspectives towards a lot of stuff. You will confront many conflicts with others if you do not learn other people’s perspectives. That is why I tried very hard to get as many friends as I can. I think the term is ‘network.’ The bigger your network is, the more information you get, right? [Mainland Chinese Male #06].

Changing Expectations

According to respondents, adapting to life in Canada requires changing, or lowering, their expectations in many ways. Even Toronto’s geographic expanse was a factor for some:

Don’t expect everything to come easy, like pressing a button and things will work. It takes time. This environment is spacious. To go from one place to another may take one or two hours. You may not be able to complete one errand in a day. It is unlike Hong Kong, where everything is central and you can complete ten tasks a day. Be psychologically prepared for this. In addition, Canada may not recognize your professional qualifications. Be prepared to start over. Be prepared that gatherings with friends and relatives are less likely because they may live far apart or availability is difficult. Therefore, people may not be able to provide immediate assistance when you are in need. Learn to adapt to loneliness, because the winter is
cold and nobody leaves the house when it is snowing. You feel trapped in the house [Hong Kong Chinese Male #07].

For many Chinese professionals, it is necessary to change their expectations of their future employment in Canada in order to cope psychologically:

The information I read tells me that it is hard to get a full time job in my profession. The trend is to outsource this type of work. I have objectively studied the situation and I’m mentally prepared to switch jobs…. After this half a year, I am getting used to my worry and anxiety. I think that changing my job is not a big deal anymore [Hong Kong Chinese Male #01].

My job search hasn’t been very successful, so now my idea has changed. I will do whatever job I can get right now. Meanwhile, I’ll keep trying to look for opportunities that are good for my self-development [Mainland Chinese Male #06].

The mental adjustment is pretty critical. If you do not get something you wanted, you’ll feel upset and angry at the beginning, but this will do no good. You’ll have to adjust yourself to their way…. If you insist on your way, you may not be accepted for a long time. That’s not good for your long-term development [Mainland Chinese Male #06].

Coping Strategies among Somali Refugees: Independence vs. Dependence

Balancing dependence and independence was an issue for Somali interviewees as well. The Somali community in Toronto has grown over the years, and the norms of social reciprocity among extended family members remain strong. Without the support of family members who had come previously, however, many reported struggling to become independent of the formal support systems on which they were forced to rely, or struggling to overcome systemic barriers. Until more recently, Somali refugees also arrived in Canada without the benefit well-established community organizations. When they did not have people to depend on to guide them in the initial stages of settlement, they had to find their own way, but acting alone may come at a cost. As one female from northern Somalia stated:

For me, the problem I encountered was that I didn’t have anyone to tell me what to do and where to go. I didn’t have anyone to help me as a person. I just learned everything by trial and error [Somali (Northern) Female #09].

One woman from southern Somalia explained how she met with obstacles when having to find an interpreter for her appointments with social services:

I used to go on my own. I would just go there and they would tell me, “Didn’t I tell you to come with an interpreter?” I would tell them that I could not find anyone. Everyone is busy, so I just came on my own. So they would say, ‘Okay, just go back. We cannot see you today. We will have to make another appointment’ [Somali (Southern) Female #06].
Realizing that social assistance offered by the government is insufficient, and that there are family members back in their homeland who depend on them, some participants spoke of “forcing” themselves to work hard at looking for employment and trying to solve problems irrespective of what the challenges were. As one male from northern Somalia stated:

The way I coped is by realizing that any new place has its own set of challenges. I forced myself to work hard and try to fulfill my goals. The first step I took was to look for employment considering the fact that social assistance offered by the government is meager and I do have family members who depend on me back in my homeland [Somali (Northern) Male #16].

Many study participants learned independence out of necessity and wished to work hard at school to become independent of this system. According to one female respondent:

To study hard, to study as much as I could and to realize that what I am doing is good for me. If I don’t have someone to help me, I have to do it by myself. That is what I did [Somali (Northern) Female #11].

Maximizing Efforts and Options

The Somalis who were interviewed tried, as individuals and families, to overcome a series of barriers to their social integration by actively attempting to solve each problem they confronted, which was a long process for some. Many faced serious financial pressures, and like others interviewed, they faced difficulties finding employment.

I try to struggle. I try to educate myself. When I could not find a job, I said to myself, ‘Okay, they need Canadian education.’ I went and got the Canadian education and still I couldn’t find a job…. Although I had previous experience, now I am working on the ‘Canadian experience.’ What I hope for is to get a good job and live a good life, a normal life, where you can help your extended family, bring some of my family over to Canada, pay my debts, buy a house, buy a new car… [Somali (Northern) Female #09].

When Somali respondents encountered barriers to working in appropriate occupations, they coped by taking odd jobs or short assignments, or by retraining, but still remained focused on the future. After she was denied access to social services, one participant reported coping with financial problems by working, then by enrolling in college with a student loan that was available at that time. According to her:

I found a job and worked for three months. For three months, I survived on that, and then I enrolled in college. In the past, the rules were not like now. Once your (refugee claimant) case was accepted, you could right away go to university or college. So I applied for a loan [Somali (Northern) Female #09].
A male participant expressed similar views:

Truthfully, it took me a lot of time to adapt. Before coming to Canada, I had trained as an electronic technologist and attended a four-year college program.... It took me over seven years [in Canada] to start working in my field of interest. During that period, I was a taxi driver and took evening classes at Humber College.... Upon completion of my program I embarked on a job search, however, I met a great challenge due to the potential employer requesting ‘Canadian experience.’ My response was to ask them, ‘How do you expect me to get the experience, if you do not give me the opportunity at your company?’ Finally, I decided to start my own small business whereby I could gain some experience.... I was very determined and did not give up, compared to many other people. Finally I am very glad to have come a long way [Somali (Southern) Male #14].

One Somali teen explained how she and her family paid off the transportation loan provided by the government to refugees moving to Canada:

The only thing we could do was to save up as much as we can. We cut the luxuries and we used it more to get rid of the loan. Whatever we got in the month, we paid the rent [and] always kept $200 aside, and we tried to work with the other $150 for food and everything for the month [Somali (Northern) Female #13].

In spite of their efforts to find work and attend school while under financial pressures, many Somalis reported confronting systemic barriers. They coped by pursuing other options in an attempt to overcome these obstacles. As one respondent observed:

When I came to Canada, I had acquired a degree from the United States in accounting. In Canada, my first job was as a bookkeeper where I worked for about one year. Later, I started training new employees who I realized were progressing more in the job ranks and becoming my seniors. That was a difficult period for me at work and I started considering making a career change. I wanted something that required more intelligence and was less routine. Thereafter, I changed my career to information technology. I have several certificates but up to this day, I have not achieved much with my skills [Somali (Southern) Female #04].

To overcome barriers in the educational system, one Somali student described how important it is to know one’s rights and to have individuals who provide support and encouragement. As she argued:

The counselors were just telling me, ‘You can’t do it....’ I had to fight my way.... I remember walking out from the counselor’s office so many times, just closing my mind on what they said, because they were just telling me that I can’t do it.... One thing they could never do was remove me from the classes, and that was a good thing.... But what made the most difference was that teacher. When you have someone who is in there, who can tell you, ‘You can do it. Go ahead, if you really want to do it.’ That helped me out … the fact that he informed me that it is my choice. If you don’t know that, then you are stuck with what you [are] told [Somali (Southern) Female #04].
Some participants said that reminding themselves of their reasons for coming to Canada, focusing on their obligations to family members and the goals they have set for themselves, helped them to overcome barriers.

I came to this country to provide for myself and my family back home. For me, I come from a not-so-well-off background. My family lives in a country that is not very peaceful, with constant war. So the reason I came here was to benefit them and myself. I did not have much time to spend on education. I also did some research and realized that I won’t go very far by working for someone else. In this country, one has to be keen in finding out what benefits them and what doesn’t. I convinced myself that I could do whatever anyone else can, whether it is lifting a rock or driving a truck [Somali (Western) Male #01].

Redefining Identity and Roles

Like other immigrants, Somali respondents sometimes adopt a philosophical approach to living in Canada that is grounded in their traditional values. When times are good, they provide for themselves and their families. When things are not going as well, they exercise patience. Evidence suggests the culture of the homeland has helped them cope with challenges in Canadian society. For example, participants often find comfort and sense in the attitudes expressed through the idiom of Somali/Arabic proverbs:

Well, you will be forced … as the Somali saying goes, ‘You limp according to how your break you leg.’ The Arabs say, ‘You sleep according to how the mattress fits you.’ If it is wide, you spread yourself out. If it is narrow, you curl up. So, when you have something, you spend it and flaunt it, but when you don’t, you have to tighten up your belt [Somali (Northern) Female #09].

For the Somalis who were interviewed, any sense of belonging in Canadian society is tenuous. While young and middle-aged Somali newcomers cope by attending university and adopting Canadian social values, some of the elderly are sustained by the hope that they will one day go back to their homeland. In the meantime, Somalis turn to their families and the community here to solve problems and find affirmational support. After describing the post-September 11 problems that Muslims faced in Canada, this participant summarized how she and others coped:

You just stay home…. You are family to each other. You support each other, because you know other people are not there for you because of how they view you … the way they are prejudiced against you. So, what you do is you support each other. You turn to your family and your community – those who are going through the same thing that you are going through – and you seek help from each other [Somali (Southern) Female #04].
Gathering Information

Gathering information was reported as an important coping strategy for Somali refugees, just as it was for Chinese immigrants. To cope with problems such as unemployment, they gathered as much information from public sources as they can. As one male interviewee stated:

I spent most of my time going to the library and learning more about the country and reading newspapers to try to get a job [Somali (Southern) Male #02].

They also gathered necessary information through other means, including working as volunteers, and relying on others’ prior experience to guide them. With informal support, many were able to make plans to further their social integration:

The same friend was able to give me information on how to attend high school…. This friend of mine who gave me the initial support happened to be a university student at that time…. He told me that I could apply for a pre-university bridging program. Actually, that is what he did himself…. I was able to access this information through my friend. Access to information is crucial in the beginning and it depends on those who are around you. Luckily, my friend had a lot of useful information and this how I moved from one step to another [Somali (Northern) Male #15].

Building Social Networks

Somali newcomers relied on both informal and formal social ties to obtain support. Although informal supports may be more accessible for many, the personal importance of the little formal support there is may make a great deal of difference. For those who do not have any social networks to draw from, having to cope alone can be devastating.

… The thing that worried [me] the most was school, that I would be there by myself…. Then when we had the school counselors and everything, it was easier. For each thing that you want, there is a different person to help you…. I got the service I wanted, but I just feel sorry for people that didn’t, because I have seen many people that … are, you know, not so happy to be here. You should know actually how to live this life in Canada. It is hard…. We were lucky that we had sponsors, my uncles down here and many aunts, the people that we knew from the past [Somali (Northern) Female #13].

For Somali study participants, acquiring knowledge is made possible through one’s social networks. One participant said that he became aware of a youth training program through a friend. The program secured him a position as an administrator at an organization where he both extended his social network and learned to contribute to peace initiatives around the world.

The adaptation process was difficult. Adapting to the climate, the environment, food and everything else took time. Initially, I had to rely on friends and afterwards, through a friend’s advice, I was able to register for a training program
called the Futures Program…. I was able to train with an organization that promotes peace initiatives around the world. This was interesting for me coming from Somalia, which was torn by a civil war [Somali (Northern) Male #15].

According to several interviewees, volunteering not only helps build social networks, but also self-confidence, by helping them to understand mainstream society and the workings of the Canadian system. As one of them suggested:

In the beginning I had friends who helped me, and I maintained personal networks within my community here. This gave me strength. Secondly, when I started volunteering for non-profit agencies trying to improve the lives of other people, it contributed to my own development as well. It gave me inspiration…. Learning how the Canadian society and system operate … that way I was exposed to many people and to many important issues in Canada. Once you get more exposure and you learn more about the situation, you get more self confidence [Somali (Northern) Male #15].

Changing Expectations

Somali newcomers generally reported having low expectations concerning the available social support in Canada. One of the interviewees stated:

I think of where I can get the right support…. I also don’t get my hopes too high, when I know I wouldn’t get the assistance I need. So I don’t think about it [Somali (Southern) Female #08].

Newcomers’ expectations of support and ways of coping in Canada often were tempered by past experiences – for example, challenges encountered during the civil war in Somalia and subsequent settlement in refugee camps – as well as in Canada. As one female participant observed:

When someone you love dies or is killed, when your property and wealth are looted, or your home is destroyed, you will not experience greater stresses than these…. When you see dead bodies of people you love, small things, such as being lonely, small pains or cold weather against which you can find warm shelter – you will not see these as problems if you are a normal person…. You will be patient with all these things. You will persevere…. You have to compare what you experienced in the past and what you are experiencing now [Somali (Central) Female #05].

Like immigrants, some refugees who were interviewed had faced numerous employment barriers, had eventually come to feel demoralized, and had come to expect less of Canada. Some even were considering a return to their countries of origin. As a female participant from northern Somalia stated:

I was always someone who worked and was independent and on her own. When I came here and was told, ‘You are a newcomer, you have no Canadian experience.
I said to myself, once I get Canadian training, then I will not have problems. But still, you are a foreigner, you are a minority, other people have more priority than you all the time. You and the Canadian who has no accent are not equal; always, they are preferred. All the time, you are a minority that has no full rights…. Life does not seem to be good and the future looks bleak. You have to go back home maybe. At least you will benefit your people with the knowledge that you acquired, instead of sitting here waiting for a job for how many years? Maybe go back home and help the needy. I’m actually thinking of those options, because I’m just fed up here [Somali (Northern) Female #09].

Effective Strategies of Support-Seeking and Mechanisms of Social Support

Given the many obstacles and challenges in Canada, what types of social interactions and strategies of support-seeking proved most helpful to immigrants and refugees? First of all, newcomer respondents placed a premium on practical, highly-focused, informational and instrumental supports, for example, measures to facilitate access to education and employment opportunities. These were particularly salient supports because access to suitable jobs, retraining, and higher education for working-age newcomers is a significant problem today in Canada that is common to both immigrant and refugee groups. Many also place a high value on welcoming and respectful attitudes and explicit encouragement, which is needed, but not always received, from individuals, professionals, and social institutions in Canada.

Success in finding and receiving necessary social support depended on blending familiar and new strategies of support-seeking. Reliance on traditional norms of help-seeking, familiar social networks and like-ethnic service providers to share information and find guidance in Canada, for example, was particularly useful for newcomers. This strategy of support-seeking was most successful when met by service providers with professional, caring attitudes, who could help eliminate, rather than erect, further obstacles to the newcomers’ efforts to achieve their settlement and integration goals. Receiving some types of social support enables people to go on to obtain other needed supports and eventual self-sufficiency. The emotional and affirmational support expressed through the attitudes of family, friends, and helpful professionals encouraged many newcomers we interviewed to seek further information and practical help, which led to adaptive behaviour and achieving life and settlement goals.

Effective Strategies for Support-Seeking among Chinese Immigrants

For Chinese immigrants, asking help from friends or relatives who had already spent some time in Canada was the most common, effective strategy. Often the relationships began in the home country. Interesting responses were made when participants were asked: With so much to do, how were you able to accomplish everything?:

Well, you consult someone first, of course … acquainted people to whom I was close … friends, classmates. One of the main reasons I came was that a classmate had just arrived. They both helped me a lot…. They were like a ‘blind man’s
cane.’ Things you did not know, but wanted, you would ask them [Hong Kong Chinese Male #06].

Actually, when we first came here, we stayed at my aunt’s house. She came here a few years before us. She told us about everything. She was guidance for us [Hong Kong Chinese Male #09].

For many of the Chinese newcomers who were included in this study, especially from the Mainland, learning to seek help actively is itself a new and adaptive experience and part of becoming more independent and self-sufficient. As one male suggested:

First, I will convey my need among friends to see if there’s any help I can get. Second, it is important to keep in touch with some community centres and associations…. Third, if I know some particular departments that provide the information I need, I’ll just go there for help. In general, we must change ourselves into people that actively look for help. We cannot just sit here and wait for help. This is the biggest change for us…. Modesty is the biggest character of Chinese. We usually just put many things inside without letting others know. But here, nobody cares about others’ business. They won’t know your needs if you don’t articulate them [Mainland Chinese Male# 01].

Sometimes what encouraged immigrants to seek information and other support on their own was the shared experience and encouragement of people who had come before. As one male respondent from Hong Kong observed:

[We asked], what will schooling for our daughter be like? [Our friend said,] ‘Just go in and talk to the principal. It is not like in Hong Kong. The principal will definitely come out and see you.’ And that was true…. ‘Buy insurance before coming. It will be three months before you get OHIP, so buy the insurance first.’ It was because my friend came earlier than I did that he was able to provide me with a lot of information. If another friend were coming and asked me for advice, I would also provide information on what I consider vital to settling here [Hong Kong Chinese Male #06].

Another facilitating factor for many immigrants interviewed was good relations with neighbours, particularly when people shared the same language. This learned attitude of helpfulness extended to others in similar situations of need.

Since moving here, that neighbour has helped us a lot. There were things we did not understand, things we did not know how to approach, since we had just arrived. How to dispose of garbage, for example, or what to do when it snows…. To a new immigrant, it makes a great difference if neighbors are willing to help each other out. Later on, when a family moved in across from us, and our languages were similar, we would go over and help them. It is impossible not to depend on others when you first come because you do not know anything. For many things, you don’t even know where to start [Hong Kong Chinese Female #08].
Accessible media that deliver informational support in Chinese are especially helpful according to participants. This may be especially true for women and seniors who are sometimes homebound. Several survey participants commented on this:

I did some research through the government websites…. I saw the ads on TV first. Then I went to their websites and looked for information on child safety. They had free videotapes for parents. I think that is very good, so I recommended it to my friends who have children [Mainland Chinese Female #02].

For us seniors, it’s too much to spend money on newspapers everyday. We do not have money. We cannot find jobs here, so we hope that we can access those free newspapers to know the news. We also want to know something about living in Canada [Mainland Chinese Female #07].

LINC [Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada] has such a big sign that you can see when you are walking on the streets…. The teachers there introduced me to the youth centre. My English was awful at that time, so I was referred to the Chinese consultant. I did not go out and look everywhere. I did not know too much at that time. They just happened to me along the line [Mainland Chinese Female #09].

For reasons of mutual trust and comfort, the immigrants who were interviewed also had tended to seek practical information and help from coworkers who had the same ethnic backgrounds. As one interviewee stated:

Hong Kong people know best. They know every little thing. The financial advisor told me to deposit a fixed amount of $5000 in an account…. By doing that, I was able to apply for the gold credit card…. With the gold card, I rented a car without buying insurance [Hong Kong Chinese Male #02].

For many of the Chinese immigrants who were interviewed, the most important social support outside of immediate family and friends came from their social interactions with organizations other than social service agencies, such as churches and professional associations.

One type of social support is from church. I think the church plays a strong role in the process. From church, I was acquainted with my previous friends. Friends who haven't attended church in Hong Kong are now part of the church. It was a surprise to see them there. I could enlarge my social network, get to know more people. These people would introduce their friends to me and the effect would begin to snowball. From what I know, many people begin their social networking from church gatherings. I think this is something worth mentioning [Hong Kong Chinese Male #07].

Do you know the Association of Chinese Professionals? I am a member there. It often gives free seminars that are good for newcomers. They teach people how to claim their taxes and how to buy a car. You can also know more people through the dances they host. That is a good place [Mainland Chinese Male #10].
Most interviewees had come to realize that adapting to life in Canada and reaching desired goals would take time. As a consequence, they often tended to break the process down into smaller steps in order to feel a sense of achievement and purpose. One interviewee, for example, talked about wanting specific types of jobs that would improve her English language proficiency:

What kind of help do I need? I need direct help. For example, somebody gave me a McDonald’s application form. Then I needed my friend to arrange a position for me in the McDonald’s through his friend. I think I am qualified to work in a kitchen. I hoped this could become my first step to the society. My friend told me about an example of a friend from Taiwan who is working in a factory … she is happy there because she gets to talk to Chinese…. I need money, but making money that way is not meaningful to me. I want to do something that can help me with my English [Mainland Chinese Female #03].

Participants also sought help from social service organizations, community centres, public libraries, and even municipal government sectors. Others mentioned self-help, and some actively sought to understand the new culture to acclimate to Canadian society. Several participants commented on this:

Community centres [such] as CICS and Woodgreen, we often attend some of their workshops. There is also a newly established one called ‘North Chinese Community,’ a Mandarin oriented association…. Other than community centres, I often go to the public library to get some information. Also, City Hall and to some friends of mine [Mainland Chinese Male #01].

I wanted to learn more about the society. Religion is a very important aspect of Western society, so I went to churches and volunteered for about two months. I prepared food there for the homeless people every week…. I’ve learned two things. First, I got to know the situation of homeless people. Secondly, I also got to know society’s attitudes towards helping homeless people. In terms of religion, I have not formed my own theory; it is just my perception that religious people’s minds are very peaceful…. I also buy the metro [public transit] pass every month and go out to see the city and talk to people. This is also a way of knowing the society [Mainland Chinese Male #06].

Respondents felt that making more information available in their mother tongue would be enable self-sufficiency, but they were also committed to learning English. As one argued:

You should make newcomers, no matter which country they are from, feel like searching for the information by themselves. But you should create the environment for them to resolve their own problems…. You can try to improve your language skills and then learn about this place through English or French … [but] when the need is urgent, you should be able to grab some information in your own mother language. This will not cost the government too much money. I think that’s a big issue in terms of social support [Mainland Chinese Male #08].

Self-help efforts were common; however, practical obstacles remained that poor or vulnerable newcomers could not be expected to readily overcome, suggesting that their efforts be
better facilitated by practical means such as student loans. As one young female from Mainland China observed:

I go to Seneca [College] to take some courses. I can improve my English this way. I also found this apartment to live with native Canadians, so that I can improve my English…. Right now, my financial situation doesn’t allow me to concentrate merely on study without working [Mainland Chinese Female #09].

Despite the realization of having to adapt to change, some respondents valued retention of their culture:

As we have talked about earlier, multiculturalism – though fascinating in one sense – can disorient people. Everything seems good, here and there. Our core values are still within the Chinese tradition, at least for this generation. It is up to the next generation to carry this forward. I think our generation needs to retain and explore the Chinese culture. We need to retain our identity within the complexity of this culture. This allows people to respect us. Everyone should bring their best and contribute to the society, similar to a potluck. If everyone brings the same thing, we would be bored, and it would be unfavorable to the development of the country [Hong Kong Chinese Male #07].

Effective Strategies of Support-Seeking among Somali Refugees

Many of the Somali newcomers who were interviewed also acknowledged that finding needed services involved both self-reliance and actively seeking support. For newly arrived refugees, however, knowing where the available support services might be can be extremely difficult, especially if they have no prior contacts in Canada with whom to share experiences and advice, or any prior experience of actively looking for help from formal institutions. Newcomers settling in areas where their ethnic group already existed can help to alleviate some challenges. As one male from northern Somalia stated:

Yes, I did something to get help. I searched for places where one can apply for subsidized housing. I also went to schools to apply for admission. If you do not search for these services, nothing will come to you. All these things are extremely difficult for newcomers considering the fact that [we] do not know much about the country. Newcomers have trouble in this sense. However, if [Somali] people lived together in the same neighbourhood, it would have been much easier to access help [Somali (Northern) Male #16].

Somali women reported a reliance on informal sources of support for childcare, a beneficial and common practice in areas where the community is concentrated.

I look for someone whom I think will help me out. I have children, so I look for someone who can help in baby-sitting. I would not ask someone who is working at that time, but a person who is family or friend and available. I normally think about that and I ask for help. If I get it, I say thank you; if not, it is okay [Somali (Southern) Female #08].
If I want to take one of my children to the doctor, I have to call my neighbour so that they can look after the other one for me. Sometimes when I have to go out to run an errand or go shopping, I have to leave my girls with a friend of mine. She also leaves her children with me when she has to go somewhere…. In this country, some people are very close and others are not [Somali (Southern) Female #06].

Somali participants felt that their support-seeking strategies were greatly influenced by language proficiency and the ability to communicate their needs. To be able to seek support, many said, a newcomer needs to understand the language of the person or agency providing support. Otherwise, they will have to find an interpreter, a long process that can discourage newcomers from seeking support.

… Someone who does not speak your language cannot help you. The doctor needs me to explain to him what medical problems I have and, without knowing the language, I cannot do that. If the person does not understand the language, he or she needs someone who can explain to others what he or she needs [Somali (Central) Female #05].

Language and communication are important tools for everyone and a common challenge for most newcomers; but perhaps language as a form of communication and social interaction is especially significant for Somalis, who come from a predominantly oral society. Information and knowledge is normally exchanged by word of mouth. Traditions and important values were acquired in the past through poetry and story telling. Visiting people and simply talking to them is a favourite pass time. Conversation assuages feelings of social isolation and boredom. One elderly woman from the central region told us that since she could not physically go out to visit people, the telephone came to her rescue. She used the phone to find out about the condition of friends, family, and relatives, and also to relieve her own loneliness. As she noted:

I wake up in the morning, do my morning prayers, make my morning tea, and cook food. Then I use the phone to converse with all the people that I know or just greet them and find out how they are doing. Many elderly women like me do not have the opportunity to go out of the home. The brain needs stimulation through talking; it needs to be put to work. Otherwise, it might cease to function [laughter]. We use the phone as a means of support, to find out how the other person is doing…. The telephone is my company. It is my friend [Somali (Central) Female #05].

Another effective support-seeking strategy discussed by Somali study participants was learning from the experience of others who are well informed and have been here longer – a kind of *ad hoc* mentoring. Such people can be useful in providing information and explaining how the system works, to make it easier for other newly arrived refugees to seek support.

Everyone who has preceded you by a few years, who has more experience than you, can help you by telling you about their experiences. People who came here before you can give you more information about the system and how things work in the city [Somali (Northern) Female #09].
The person should be in touch with his community and the places where support is offered. At the same time, [the person] should contact individuals he thinks are better informed than he is in specific areas. For example, if … the person was an engineer, and I’m an engineer … then I can tell the person what to do with this skill…. That is how people can help each other [Somali (Western) Male #01].

Many considered a useful support-seeking strategy to be widening and strengthening one’s social networks, which is consistent with Somali social practices. The more different kinds of people newcomers interact with, the more they are exposed to new information and ideas.

I only had one friend initially whom I knew lived in Canada. It is through this friend that I got a lot of social orientation in the beginning. Due to our cultural patterns, he was able to introduce to me many other important and useful people in the Somali community in Toronto…. Gradually, after six months I started building networks. I attended different community functions, forums, and cultural events [Somali (Northern) Male #15].

Most immigrants and refugees interviewed for this study were engaged in helping other newcomers in some way. Many felt that, in helping others, one helps oneself – a strategy consistent with the Somali practice of reciprocity, but also the self-realization important to professionals. As with Chinese immigrants, Somalis often pursued volunteer opportunities in organizations that might be able to provide, if not employment at the outset, at least information that might lead to employment elsewhere.

I volunteered for organizations sometimes if I needed any level of help, especially in terms of looking for employment…. Because I expect very soon to graduate with a Masters degree, employment will be my priority. I am talking about decent employment. I will need help through networks. I know that it is critical. Although I have potential to help myself now, still I have to go to organizations and through other job search networks to get additional support [Somali (Northern) Male #15].

Somali interviewees suggested that where systemic barriers, such as inaccessibility to education, are the problem, they found it necessary and sometimes helpful to diversify support-seeking strategies. If obstacles are great, however, this strategy may be ineffectual. This can result in a frustrating feeling that their attempts at self-help are being dismissed. As one female participant from southern Somalia stated:

… I was looking for help to pay for university when I finished high school. I went to different places to seek financial help, because I could not apply for a loan. I went to them all but I did not receive any help from them. I do not know why…. If anything, I thought I was eligible for receiving help. It is not that simple…. I guess that tells me that they only help certain people, and it all depends on how they see your needs.

I even wrote to the immigration [department] one time and I asked them to speed up my process, because I wasn’t going to wait for five years. I had to start university. I wrote to them three times and asked them to speed up the process so that I could apply for a loan. They never responded. Never. They did not see it as
a priority. From my perspective, it was like I was putting my life on hold, because I couldn’t do what I wanted to do…. It just seemed like, wherever I went, they didn’t see the help I was looking for as much of a need [Somali (Southern) Female #04].

Another strategy discussed by participants was seeking support, particularly affirmation, from individuals with shared experience from within the very system creating the barrier:

… I had a teacher … the only reason I can think of now that he was helpful, is because he went through the same thing I went through…. He was an immigrant. He came from Italy and he went through a lot. He was more sympathetic to students that were going through what he went through…. When one of the counselors would tell me, this course is too hard for you, it requires a lot of English skills, I would go to him.... He would say, ‘You know what, it is your choice….’ I think that is what helped me out a lot. It was sort of like feedback…. ‘You believe in yourself, go ahead and take it.’ This is really the kind of encouragement I was talking about. That is what you need [Somali (Southern) Female #04].

A strategy discussed at length by some participants involved using the political process. These participants argued that since there are many Somalis in Toronto, the sensible thing for them to do is to approach politicians and ask for their help in solving problems, such as unemployment, if they want their vote. Somalis fear that if they do not unite and speak with one voice to seek support, they will remain powerless. Some said Somalis can even go as far as having representatives in parliament who push forward issues relevant to the community.

The important thing for us is to be united, have power and use our vote. If we were united on issues, people would be afraid to mess with us and we would get what we ask for. We would have political clout. Many Somali graduates cannot find jobs because society does not help them in this area. In this place, people fight for services through communities and numbers. You have to uplift your community. Even your vote is enough to influence people. You can say to the politicians, okay, we are these many thousands of Somalis in this riding. We have X number of graduates that are unemployed, why should I give you my vote? [Somali (Northern) Female #09].

The way people can help each other – especially talking about the Somalis – is first to be united with similar agendas. The objective is to be able to seek assistance for their community in unison. However, if the community is divided and every individual pursues his own agenda there will be no progress. The only way the Somali community can progress and achieve any tangible benefit is through unity and forgoing tribalism. With the large Somali population of over hundred thousand people, they can lobby and even have representatives in the parliament [Somali (Northern) Male #17].

Getting commitments from politicians at the time of elections that they will help with problems faced by the Somali community is an important, relatively new strategy. As one interviewee observed:
The only time politicians approach Somalis is at the time of elections…. At that time, they need to say, ‘What will you do for me?’ …They have to ask for support and help with the biggest problems that Somali community is facing, and this problem is finding employment. We have many people who are well educated, Ph.D.’s driving taxis [Somali (Northern) Female #09].

Somali refugees tended to find some of the same support-seeking strategies useful as did Chinese immigrants. Yet, probably because they have experienced more barriers to settlement and integration as refugees, they depended more on informal social support networks, and also expressed a stronger desire to strengthen social supports through political processes.

The Relationship of Social Support and Health among Immigrants and Refugees

Participants articulated explicit links between a lack of social support and their health, particularly mental health. They described both direct and indirect effects of a lack of social support on health via its impact on access to housing, education, and employment. Both Somali and Chinese respondents expressed these sentiments:

Sometimes when you do not get help and you are frustrated, you become stressed. It affects you not only mentally but also physically…. Well, you feel demoralized, also frustrated, it also leads to stress. You feel downtrodden; you have a sense of desperation, disappointment, despair. So a lot of things that have very negative mutual effect on you physically, mentally and psychologically [Somali (Northern) Male #15].

[Social support] will definitely influence my health. For example, you will definitely be very upset if you failed to get a job you wanted. But if at that time, there were friends or organizations that help you get the job, you will be very happy [Mainland Chinese Male #01].

When participants felt well supported, this had a positive impact on their health. They felt relaxed, had peace of mind, and could concentrate on their work, study, family, and other goals that they had in life. When participants felt that they were not getting adequate support, particularly when they felt that support was available but circumstances beyond their control were causing them not to get the support, this had a negative impact on their health.

Participants’ expectations influenced the impact of social support on their mental health. They described being affected by their expectations of family vs. strangers, their expectations of Canadian government/society and their expectations based on their migration history. They tended to experience a greater impact on their mental health when they did not receive support that they were expecting. Consider these responses to the following question: For instance, if you need help from others and you don’t get it, how do you feel?:

Sad or depressed. I ask myself why I am in such a terrible situation and so forth. But we are different. We have been living so long that we know not to expect too much. We know there is a difference between hopes/dreams and reality. In Hong
Kong, it may still be possible to force things to work. But in Canada, you can’t force anything [Hong Kong Chinese Male #02].

When I miss the expected help I usually start thinking a lot and begin having difficulties sleeping well. My fear is to find myself in a situation where I start talking alone and become crazy if I miss what I need [Somali (Northern) Male #18].

Direct Impact

Participants described feelings of helplessness, rejection, unhappiness, anger, frustration and stress as direct effects of a lack of social support. As one of them noted:

You feel helpless when you don’t get the help you need…. The fact that my family has learned so much in just two years … now you ask me any street I know … we are not helpless because we knew what we wanted and we worked very hard for everything that we have right now. Like we asked around people where is the cheapest car, how to do this and that…. [Somali (Northern) Female #13].

They described barriers to communication with their host society as intensifying the impact of a lack of social support on their mental health. According to one participant:

I came to this country blind [not knowing much], with no money. I didn’t know anyone either. The things I needed were to be given basic things, settled somewhere and to be given advice on how I can build my life here…. Because if you can’t communicate with the people here, then you can’t communicate with the society you live in, you can’t ask for things. These are the kinds of things that can really frustrate people and cause them to have a lot of problems and become depressed [Somali (Western) Male #01].

Indirect Impact

When a lack of social support impacted on their access to housing, education, and employment, to which they feel entitled based on their merits or skills and/or basic rights, participants’ confidence and self-esteem was lowered. One of them described the long-term effects of the impact of this damage to their self-esteem:

Of course [not getting the job I expected] is going to influence my mental health. Many people feel that they had good lives in China. But after they come here, they get refused all the time. It’ll damage people’s self-confidence significantly. If it lasts a long time, it’ll do harm to people [Mainland Chinese Male #10].

The particular impact of lack of employment on mental health was discussed frequently. Participants referred to a lack of stability, loneliness, stress, frustration, a lack of feeling at home,
and incompleteness resulting from unemployment. Several of the interviewees commented on this theme:

In life if one does not leave in the morning and work for himself, then life does not become a stable life or a beautiful one but one that is weak [Somali (Southern) Female #10].

I’m lonely here. I need a job. I’m very stressed. Frustrated. I’m not at home at all and I don’t think I ever will be [Somali (Northern) Female #09].

You need a good job so that you can contribute to society. So that you can help yourself, you can live a better life. If you don’t have these things … you are not complete and that is how I feel. I’m not complete. I’m lonely [Somali (Northern) Female #09].

In addition, they often tended to internalize the lack of support. As one interviewee noted:

… the person can’t get what they want or need, so the person will worry about many things. They will wonder why they did not get what they wanted or needed. ‘Why am I not being helped? Is there a problem with me? Am I the problem?’ … They will wonder ‘What is wrong with me?’ [Somali (Southern) Female #07].

The effects of a lack of informational and/or instrumental support may be exacerbated if participants receive no emotional or affirmational support. According to one participant:

You can become very angry, bitter … you want to say something, but you just have to swallow it back because people are just shutting you up, saying you can’t do this, you can’t do that. And … you want to say, ‘I can do it and who are you to tell me I can’t’ [Somali (Southern) Female #04].

In contrast, receiving emotional support can alleviate the stress of challenges faced by immigrants and refugees. Several participants commented on this:

For example, ‘emotionally’ when you have not yet adapted, you can talk to a friend to release the stress. For example, the friends I know now. There are many problems that men face, and we all can agree on them, big and small. Upon knowing, others are happier [Hong Kong Chinese Male #06].

… if someone is sick and is in hospital, while he is very sick and probably in pain, if his friends visit, and he is in a hospital room by himself, and his friends go visit him, he will feel better. This is because that period that his friends are with him, he will forget about his pain because they are keeping him company, talking to him, entertaining him. But if the person is isolated in a room all alone, he or she will feel double the pain because he will be dealing with it by himself. But when he is not alone and other people are with him, these people will share the pain with him. So this is why support affects one’s health [Somali (Western) Male #01].

After coming here … my daughter had a classmate who arrived two months before we did. She would call this friend and her parents – they live in Richmond Hill –
would come downtown. It would be a Saturday morning, and my daughter would call them and they would be down there almost immediately…. People tend to help each other here. In Hong Kong, not as many people would help you. So, was I scared? With people like this, the fear was lessened [Hong Kong Chinese Male #06].

Affirmational support also was described by participants as being helpful to mental health, when others are able to share positive, encouraging experiences. As one stated:

Social support is good to mental health. For example, other people’s experience will be encouraging. But if it’s bad experience, it won’t do any good [Mainland Chinese Female #02].

Enabling support was described as particularly important in dealing with discrimination that participants experience. When it was not available, participants described feelings of discouragement associated with an inability to achieve what they strive for.

I guess some times there are certain things you want to do, right. You can always set out to get what you hope for. But then … the question is what’s out there, like what obstacles you have to, like, go through to get what you hope for. And, if there is too much discrimination, then what you hope for sometimes you can’t get it because the doors are not open for you [Somali (Southern) Female #04].

Some variations in the expression of needs and experience with social support were due to contextual differences between countries of origin and Canadian society. Among Chinese immigrants interviewed for the study, for example, only Hong Kong Chinese expressed a desire for ‘counseling’ services, perhaps because the concept of ‘mental health’ has been introduced to Mainland China more recently.

For me personally, when we first arrived, my wife and I experienced a period of great anxiety as we had not adapted. Perhaps counseling of this nature can be useful in the immigrant serving agencies, or perhaps in the social services system. Of course, this is a luxury [Hong Kong Chinese Male #06].

In Toronto, there are approximately 30 to 40 thousand Chinese people. Counseling services are still lacking due to cause and effect. If you do not provide such service, there is less demand. Once you provide this service, people will realize it is helpful and demand starts to increase. If you go out and ask people, ‘Do you need this type of service?’, most people will say no. You can’t use this as a measure of demand [Hong Kong Chinese Male #07].

Cultural differences also influenced the need for social support among Somalis in Toronto, who recognized that social isolation and a comparative lack of interaction among community members influenced their mental well being. Respondents suggested that social isolation was more common in Canada because of the harsh weather, the busy lifestyle, and the less-integrated structure of the society. In Somalia, the tropical climate, communal living, and that society’s “open door policy” facilitated frequent visiting. Because many related individuals would typically live in the same household or vicinity, help was readily available in Somalia, enabling members of the household to have more free time to socialize and exchange ideas. In Canada, however, almost
everyone was busy earning a living and trying to make ends meet. This more-pressured existence allows little room for social interaction and fewer opportunities for providing support to each other.

There are a lot of differences between here and my homeland. The main difference is that over here people seem confined to their respective houses and are isolated. However, where I come from people freely visited each other; for example, one family visited the other. People would come from remote villages to visit you and each house had family members of six to seven people, where there was a lot of help from each family member. On the contrary, over here, you live on your own or with your family. One rarely gets visitors [Somali (Northern) Male #16].

There were many avenues for interaction back in our homeland. However, since coming here, all those activities have come to an end…. All you do is go to work during the day and retire in the evening or vice versa, if you work all night and sleep most of the day. But in my homeland, it is very common to have social gatherings where people meet each other and therefore it is rare to hear of people talking to themselves or [being] mentally ill, unlike here. All I can say is that over here there is very little social interaction. Different factors cause people not to have time to see each other, including the weather, a hectic lifestyle and the numerous bills that have to be paid, which do not apply to my homeland…. These factors contribute to stress which leads to cases of mental health [Somali (Northern) Male #16].

Summary of Recommendations from Study Participants

Participants in this study recommended many practical improvements, ranging from social interactions, programs, and services to larger government policies. Interviewees suggested that newcomers require at least two levels of social support: first, to survive, and second, to ease integration into Canadian society. Government should not stop at the first level, but should lead policy changes and initiatives at the second level. As one participant stated:

When I just arrived here, I needed some information from social agencies. Actually, what a newcomer needs most is to find a job. Survival is the most urgent need…. But if one needs to find his right location in this society, he will need more help…. Just social workers can’t [help one] make it to that latter level. Only the Canadian government has the ability to do this. It depends on the government officials’ understanding of high tech elite. If the government doesn’t have the right policies, the social workers can’t change the situation by themselves [Mainland Chinese Male #04].

Interviews with service providers and policy makers in Phase One, and with immigrants and refugees in Phase Two, both concluded with open-ended questions soliciting recommendations on ways to improve mechanisms of social support and supportive programs and services. We summarize common recommendations below. Because these recommendations are representative of the views of all study participants, they do not include some that are equally important, but specific to the situation of refugees, such as recommendations to speed immigration processing and
to increase opportunities for family reunification. Service providers and policy makers, and refugees as well as immigrants consistently expressed the following recommendations:

• Provide accurate information about Canada abroad, including its culture and the real challenges that newcomers face once they arrive;

• Ensure that information about services is available and accessible. Advertise more effectively and provide more information in the first languages of newcomers;

• Provide more case-oriented evaluation and follow-up services to newcomers to meet individual needs within the various immigration classes – skilled workers, independent, family class and refugees;

• Provide professional education to program managers and service providers about cultural competence and provide more culturally-appropriate services;

• Make translation and interpretation more widely available. Newcomers need information translated into their own language initially to speed adaptation;

• Provide more flexible social support; diverse needs require diverse supports;

• Address lack of integration and coordination, not only to harmonize supportive services, but also to improve the quality of services provided.

• Provide adequate financial assistance to allow newcomers to focus productively on education and integration, rather than just meeting basic needs;

• Offer counseling, loans, scholarships, and incentives to access post-secondary education;

• Allow agencies to advocate for policy-level changes;

• Recognize newcomers’ past work experience, as well as their foreign credentials;

• Increase opportunities for voluntary and paid internships in Canadian companies to help newcomers gain “Canadian experience;”

• Provide more diverse ESL services; they are currently inadequate to meet the range of actual needs. English proficiency levels vary widely; and

• Offer loans and grants to start sustainable businesses when these are difficult to obtain for newcomers.
3. ACTIONS TO STRENGTHEN SOCIAL SUPPORTS FOR IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FROM TORONTO

Phase Three of this study consisted of focus groups with policymakers and service providers from different levels of government and from a range of agencies and sectors. Participants were presented with a summary of findings from Phase One and Phase Two, including recommendations given by participants in those phases. They were asked to discuss the implications of the findings, and to generate ideas about actions that should be taken to enhance supportive policies and programs for newcomers.

Some of the observations that follow in this section are specific to Toronto, since each city in the study has its own policy and service “climate” related to population, scale, the history of intergovernmental relations and group composition of stakeholders in immigrant settlement. In recent years, for example, advocates in Toronto have observed that the settlement sector is fragmented, under-funded and limited by short-term programs and planning (United Way 1999; Mwarigha 2002; Richmond and Shields 2004).

As participants in the Phase Three focus groups noted, however, a strength of this study is that in-depth data were collected and analyzed across Canada; the findings represent the views of 120 newcomers and 134 professionals (practitioners, service providers, policy makers/advocates) in three major Canadian cities. Group discussions covered several topics; open-ended questions elicited observations and comments in nine distinct areas, including insights into possible future policy directions.

Policy and Discourse

Participants noted that this study concerned broader issues of social determinants of health, including social support, although it aimed to enhance what are conventionally understood as “settlement” services. A broader definition of the problem was seen as useful, because thinking about meaningful social support for immigrants and refugees, rather than settlement services-as-usual implied a shift in discourse, from conceiving of newcomers to Canada as needy recipients of services, to focusing on newcomers’ well being and capacity. As one focus group participant surmised: “We’re not talking about ‘settlement’ now. We’re talking about well being and the social support necessary for a healthy kind of implementation.” Another added:

7 To view summary findings from all study sites, we suggest that interested readers download the comprehensive final project report and collective recommendations, “Weaving Together Social Support and Health in a Multicultural Context,” available on the Web site of the Social Support Research Program, University of Alberta, at www.ssrp.ualberta.ca.

8 Due to the size and diversity of focus group participation, as well as the need to maintain confidentiality, quotations in this section cannot be attributed to individual participants. However, a list of the organizations that participated in the focus groups can be found in the Appendix.
… Talking about how to implement all those strategies and recommendations, I think we should start with language…. A major problem is whenever we talk about immigrants, what comes to mind is their dependence. They are the people in need and they are the ones who cost us money. We are evaluating how much money we put in so that we can get how much from them…. But the problem in most people’s minds is, immigrants are people of colour or people who speak English with accents like me. No matter how long you have been in Canada, you’re still immigrant. At the same time, when you deal with issues around immigration and immigrants, we draw the line at only three years. All those issues are confined to those newcomers, and … because of the length of time in Canada, they are more likely to be dependent than [to be] a contributor. But at the same time, they do have potential [Focus group participant].

The consensus was that this research should not only help to improve services, but also to influence policy. The main recommendations from the focus groups centred on improving coordination and communication.

With respect to communication on a macro-level, both the medium and the message need to be improved. According to participants, the public discourse about immigrant and refugee issues needs to change because newcomers themselves are often presented as the problem, when to a great extent, as in the case of skilled workers, it is the government that is failing them. They also felt more emphasis should be placed on public education, and less on “propaganda.” Ottawa has recruited the “best and the brightest,” as they said, but is not helping them to integrate. Communicating the anger and frustration of newcomers expressed in the results of this research would be a policy contribution in itself, according to many participants.

The obstacles in the system are very much the same in different cities. They take particular forms depending on the relative concentration of different immigrants in terms of the country of origin, et cetera. I think it is more a question of the discourse…. Some of the solutions may be in … articulating this as a problem for Canadian society in terms of making use of the capacity and the energies and the contributions of immigrants [Focus group participant].

I think the focus should be on the fact that these skills are needed, and are being wasted…. You can’t ignore the fact that if we don’t start doing a better job of people once they’re here, they’re simply not going to want to come [Focus group participant].

I think just to get that message across that we have recruited the best and the brightest and we’re not helping them to integrate here and that it is a failure on the part of the host society, rather than a failure on the part of the immigrants. To me that in itself is important to say [Focus group participant].
The Information Gap

With respect to both coordination and communication, Toronto focus group participants recognized that there is a critical information gap. People are not aware of the supportive services that already exist.

How do we get information about what already exists to people? … to get the information to people at the earliest stage when they’re planning to come, maybe in the application for immigration – what are sources of information? Regardless of [budget] cuts, which have been numerous, we still have an amazing amount of services here. The surprising thing is that people don’t know about them [Focus group participant].

Rather than adding more services that people don’t know about, how do we get people to the services that already exist? Which would in effect probably create more demand and might actually justify more services. But at this point, if people aren’t hearing about them, let’s find ways to get information to them [Focus group participant].

We did a survey with … newcomers; we found that information was, as we’ve heard time and time again, the most important thing…. We have different things that we have put out there but people seem to be so unaware of some of the things that do exist. That is a real big issue, especially getting information overseas [Focus group participant].

Information needs to flow, not just toward newcomers, but also among policy makers and service providers, who would like to be able to share effective strategies and models for the provision of social support across sectors and across the country. Networking opportunities are infrequent, but valuable for policy makers and service providers. Many focus group participants, though experts, were unaware of programs and initiatives offered by the agencies of other participants at the table, a situation which increases the chances of duplication and decreases the potential for good information and referral.

The Accountability Gap

Healthy settlement involves more than is currently recognized under the limited mandate of citizenship and immigration programs. According to our interviewees, social support is most meaningful when it is enabling and comprehensive, satisfying needs in all areas of a newcomer’s life. Immigrants and refugees need and value supports in areas that fall outside the current mandate of Canadian health or immigration and settlement per se, such as local labour market integration and increased access to education, which is a provincial responsibility. Given these observations and their own experience, it was apparent to focus group participants that more accountability is required among various departments of government. As one suggested:
Think of the frustration that people were talking about, too, like bureaucracy. Try to explain what it takes, who’s responsible for some of the things that they need, and it’s just a nightmare [Focus group participant].

Just as different government departments need to be more accountable, different levels of government need to contribute more effectively to the efforts to integrate newcomers. Lack of cooperation and communication between the federal and Ontario provincial governments and the limited commitment of the Ontario provincial government to immigrant settlement has created problems in Toronto in particular. These have not gone unnoticed:

There’s been a disconnect between the Federal and the Provincial governments in the last while. There’s been a total disconnect there. We know that immigration as such is not a provincial issue, we know that Ontario hasn’t signed on or done much and, in fact, has stepped back…. I see some shift again right now…. But it’s that real disconnect that has been a problem. A real problem [Focus group participant].

The public sector also needs to be accountable for implementing and evaluating cultural competency in its service delivery at all levels. As one participant suggested:

Centralized interpretation and translation service has to be considered by the three levels of government … if the Cancer Society is such a huge organization, and they can’t afford to have those multilingual services, how can you expect a smaller organization to deal with the linguistic barriers. I think the government is obligated in providing this kind of translation and interpretation service [Focus group participant].

Sustainability and Supportive Programs

Due to almost a decade of deep funding cut-backs and a resultant instability in the immigrant settlement sector in Ontario, the reluctance of government funding bodies to support small, ethno-specific community agencies, and an ongoing trend in short-term project grants, participants emphasized the need for greater organizational sustainability. This problem has resulted from a long-standing situation, and the recommendations from the focus-group participants were sound, if not new. For example, participants suggested that sustainability be achieved through multi-year funding, and that successful pilot programs be turned into ongoing programs with core funding.

Significantly, many of the programs that have been eliminated in Ontario were those that facilitated social support. Consider the following comments:

… This aspect of social connection, a lot of it can happen and did happen here in the schools. Historically, we had the heritage languages – gone! The anti-racism, employment equity stuff – gone! I wonder if you could make a recommendation to … go back and look at what worked. And if it’s been taken away, put it back [Focus group participant].
Anti-racism and employment equity programs just were completely eliminated, and yet, I think in terms of broadening the ability to provide support, those types of initiatives have to be combined … it’s not something you do once and forget about it, obviously. It’s something that has to be part of the way in which your organization lives [Focus group participant].

Seamlessness of Support

Well aware of the interrelated challenges newcomers face, participants suggested that a better service provision model would be a “one-stop shop,” where newcomers have more needs met at one place. This recommendation is also a reflection of the widespread feeling that the current service system is fragmented. More comprehensive service delivery models have been introduced in Toronto, but such initiatives are limited. They are not well known to immigrants and refugees, nor even familiar to other policy makers and services providers not directly involved in their implementation. More inter-sectoral coordination of information, referrals, and services, therefore, would help achieve more seamless support.

Given the apparent information gap for newcomers, participants recommended several methods and points of information dissemination that are currently underutilized:

- The use of existing local mainstream contact points (for example, schools, health centres, libraries, community centres, neighbourhood houses) to provide information and other types of support was recommended;

- The numerous ethnic media in Toronto are untapped resources for information dissemination;

- Important information about available services needs to be made available when newcomers first arrive in Canada. Optimally, some form of individual follow-up would be possible;

- More information should be provided at other crucial contact points; for example, when and where people go to get health insurance cards, social insurance numbers and bank accounts; and

- Comprehensive support services are desirable, but more flexible programming is needed to fill specific needs, e.g. for refugees. Programs tailored for neglected groups of newcomers – women, youth, seniors – were also recommended.

These points were underscored by several focus-group participants:

We also need to rethink what some of the solutions are. For example, if a good way to deliver information to immigrants is on the Internet, then maybe we should restore the funding to the public libraries and give the librarians some training in how to access information about settlement services on the Internet [Focus group participant].
We’ve always thought that there are three or four things that everybody needs to do: they need to get an OHIP card, set up a bank account, and get a social insurance number. The places where they do those things are places where everybody is going to end up, probably about the right time. Those are places where I don’t know whether they have information that people could access [Focus group participant].

Really key is a communication strategy…. Government, when it advertises about its initiatives, always pays tons of money to the mainstream English media and hardly pays any attention to the community media…. The other piece is ethno-specific agencies. I think you need both in terms of making things really work for the immigrant or the refugee [Focus group participant].

More Effective Working Relationships

One way to facilitate accountability, coordination, and information-sharing, participants felt, is to create a structure, such as a joint leadership council for ongoing consultation between government and organizations working with immigrants and refugees. As one suggested:

Get a mix of people including municipal people, NGOs, community leaders, and say, ‘Here’s the problem, here’s the service gap. Now how can we contribute?’ Can we maybe divert some of the resources to some of the existing programs, or do we need new programs? [Focus group participant].

Separate working relationships among funders and agencies have inhibited effective coordination. According to one participant:

The funders make decisions themselves or in private meetings with other funders. Then coordination takes place amongst the people who have been granted funding to do specific things, which may or may not be the things that were most needed to be done [Focus group participant].

There is also a need to develop a process for the regular collection and consolidation of information on immigrant/refugee issues from social agencies. For example, one participant suggested creating an ‘information portal:’

One thing would be an environmental scan…. I do not know what’s working in Alberta or Vancouver…. There’s so much going on with foreign-trained professionals here, there and everywhere. Let’s get some models, let’s find the ones that are really working [Focus group participant].

In sum, in Ontario there needs to be more federal-provincial-municipal coordination in information dissemination. In Toronto in particular, there is a need for more linkages between government funders and agencies, and between mainstream and ethno-specific agencies. Issues that have benefited from exemplary, effective partnerships among a wide range of stakeholders are those of access to trades and professions and foreign credential recognition. Such exchanges of information and ideas can be cross-cutting and issue-based, but should not be so limited.
Community Empowerment

Planning in a more socially-inclusive manner and building on the existing strengths of immigrant communities resonated with focus group participants. They recommended more links to existing informal supports, use of peer support models, mentoring, and other programs that capitalize on reciprocity, especially ‘older’ newcomers helping ‘newer’ newcomers. Such strategies address the expressed need for affirmational support among newcomers, from people with shared experience who already “know the ropes.” Specifically, capacity-building might involve recognizing the de facto widespread use of volunteers in immigrant-serving agencies and promoting more actual leadership training and paid on-the-job training, thereby providing “Canadian experience” for the job market.

Related to community empowerment is the need to engage and support emerging and small immigrant community organizations, which have fewer resources, to reach the underserved. As one participant argued:

There is lots of coordination activity going on between academia and policy makers, but not directly involving the community … also the image of local or community-based planning is always perceived as non-professional, non-academic and without leverage…. In terms of strategy I guess we should also look into funding for community based planning [Focus group participant].

Community capacity also needs to be expanded in such a way as to include people and places not currently benefiting from settlement and integration efforts. The need for both infrastructure and culturally-appropriate staffing in underserved communities, especially outside the Toronto city core, is critical. Moreover, settlement patterns often do not mirror the locations of agencies that deal with immigrants and refugees:

Settlement agencies tend to concentrate in Toronto, and your new groups are not really concentrating in Toronto. They are going outside, where there is hardly anything … they don’t know anything about what’s happening in downtown Toronto [Focus group participant].

Lack of engagement in the political process also is seen as a barrier to communities. As one participant suggested:

I haven’t seen much activity to promote voters’ registration for new immigrants…. The voting tendencies among the immigrants are very low, and that creates a problem. Politicians do not count immigrants’ voices when they consider any kind of election [Focus group participant].

Changing Expectations and Enhancing Self-Efficacy

The discrepancy between newcomers’ expectations and reality and between efforts to integrate and resulting disappointments in Canada, were recurring themes. Participants discussed this as a responsibility of both the sending and receiving societies:
What expectations people bring with them and how they’re met or not met impacts on how they feel … people are coming with inflated expectations and may be disappointed. We have to change the circumstances when they arrive, but also information and assessment of their opportunities before they come [Focus group participant].

Participants suggested that this dissonance is partly due to a change in expectations of newcomers, especially skilled and professional immigrants and refugees, who are no longer willing to wait until the next generation benefits from immigration. As one observed:

It’s a change in expectations on the part of the immigrants, not on the part of the host society…. The expectations of immigrants is increasingly to receive natural and social justice in Canada in their lifetimes, as opposed to submitting silently to different kinds of exploitation and racism in return for the deal that maybe their children or their grandchildren might be able to make it. That’s a big change … a lot of people in Canadian society, including government bureaucrats, have not caught up to that yet [Focus group participant].

Many participants felt that Canada should recognize that the discrepancy between expectations and reality takes a toll on individual well being and on the potential for social integration of large newcomer groups within the society. The onus for enabling newcomers to overcome this challenge is on the policy-makers and service providers, as well as the newcomers themselves. Accurate information should reach them sooner, optimally before arrival in Canada, and not only after they have exhausted their informal sources of help.

Some newcomers who are unaccustomed to having government and community resources may have to be encouraged to seek information and services more actively, but at the same time, information and services need to be more accessible and available, especially for the most vulnerable, such as women or refugees who have specific experiences of trauma. Newcomers often feel blocked by systemic barriers and discrimination from doing what they know they need to do to achieve successful settlement and integration, such as upgrading their skills.

To address the problem of preparing immigrants for their futures in Canada, one policy-maker suggested borrowing from research the ethical principal of “informed consent.” When Canada is ‘marketing’ itself to newcomers, they should be made aware of basic problems regarding employment, housing, and access to education in advance of their arrival. Clear information about risks and benefits would allow newcomers to make more informed decisions about immigration and settlement, to prepare mentally and practically for difficulties, and to lessen debilitating disappointment. Such information would be helpful also to refugees, who have fewer opportunities to make plans before leaving home. Increasing knowledge among newcomers could increase self-sufficiency, a goal of even greater practical importance where existing supportive services are inadequate.

**Future Directions**

Focus group participants remarked that the findings of this study have the potential to recast notions of supportive services for immigrants and refugees and suggested some areas for
research and development. One said: “The fact that you are actually here as a national study is good and the fact that you’re linking up health, I think is important.”

Participants observed pragmatically that there appears to be more funding available for health research, promotion and services than for social services. Therefore, the link between social support and health is worth pursuing.

Returning to the idea of changing the discourse about newcomers in Canada with which the group discussion began, some participants recommended analyzing in economic terms how providing social support to immigrants and refugees might lead to better health and measurable contributions to society. As one indicated:

I think it might be useful also to concretize it by talking about a cost/benefit analysis. If you look at the cost to the system in terms of human capital and health ... then you can see where a healthy person does not spend time in emergency rooms seeking therapy…. Working in a productive environment and how they contribute to society, and looking at both pictures. I think that is important [Focus group participant].

Lastly, focus group participants recognized that emotional support for newcomers is very important, especially for mental health, but health promotion information on the topic has not been available, nor has there been discussion of how to develop it in practice. Needs currently outstrip resources in Toronto. Again, better coordination among federal, provincial and local levels is crucial for research and development of supportive services. Indeed, focus group participants asked that future research:

Highlight the areas that will really impact on people’s health – mental health and physical health, so that you can make some recommendations connected with money allocated to health. Right now the social services area has been cut tremendously…. Although Toronto gets so many of the immigrants, we have no guarantee as to the kind of funding we get. That is a totally unfair situation if you look at it as a national picture [Focus group participant].
4. DISCUSSION

This section briefly summarizes findings and principles that may help strengthen supportive services, enhance settlement, and improve mental well-being among immigrants and refugees. We review the perceptions of social support, methods of coping, and effective help-seeking that emerged from interviews, and suggest the general implications of these findings for policy and practice.

Interviews with Chinese immigrants suggested that cultural differences can influence meanings and methods of support-seeking in Canada, which argues for greater culture-specificity in service delivery, while maintaining the principle of equity. Some immigrants who come from a society in which social services are delivered differently or are non-existent, may need to be encouraged to more actively seek social support from community, social, and government organizations in Canada that are not familiar to them. For their part, service agencies need to provide linguistically-accessible information and services. This study demonstrated that Mandarin-speakers, for example, are disadvantaged in receiving supportive services for both reasons.

Interviews with Somali refugees revealed a view of social support based primarily on historical cultural experiences of informal social networks. Canada needs not only to recognize how valuable these are, but also to utilize them. Alone they are insufficient, however, because they cannot fully counter either the inequities and disadvantages associated with refugee status or the structural barriers that tend to trap refugee newcomers in poverty.

Culture shapes meanings of social support, but so does the context of Canadian society. For example, Chinese immigrants tended to value practical social support above all, but this perception is partly a response to their current needs and the inadequacies of existing supports leading to employment and social integration in Canada. In this context, they also clearly defined social support as a responsibility of government, which they perceived as providing inadequate policies and direction. They also perceived some service provision in Canada as lacking in quality and efficiency.

Somalis compared social support in Canada and their homeland as well. They contrasted the notions of social support based on traditional norms of interdependence and reciprocity, on the one hand, with the norms and practices of a fragmented, impersonal Canadian social service bureaucracy on the other. Facilitating traditional forms of social support delivery within Canadian institutions – may help to enhance supportive services for many newcomers, and has the added benefit of capacity-building in the community.

Like the Chinese, Somali study participants positively appraised respectful, caring behavior of support providers, which suggests that service providers need to place greater emphasis on improving institutional attitudes toward immigrant and refugees. Such appraisals express sensitivity to the ambiguous reception that newcomers experience in Canada, and a plea for change in public attitudes that could be addressed through continued education and training of the Canadian public and public servants.

Understanding how immigrants and refugees cope with challenges, and seek help when necessary, has implications for enhancing the forms of social-support delivery. Understanding the cultural expectations arising from interdependent social networks may be helpful in designing
support programs and services for other newcomer groups. Policy makers and service providers have to respect these immigrants’ and refugees’ varied needs and values. Most newcomers first rely on family and friends, and gradually build independence and an ability to manage in the new social environment. Some Chinese newcomers interviewed in this study placed a premium on self-reliance. Somali refugees also valued self-reliance, but were more likely to have been forced into coping independently because of the relative lack of informal and formal supports available to them.

Also apparent were the considerable efforts newcomers expend in trying to adapt in Canada. The Chinese interviews were especially revealing of the expectations of the highly educated to find appropriate employment and the barriers to their progress. The Somali interviews revealed this as well, and even more, how hopes can be thwarted by low income, social exclusion, and limited opportunity. On both counts, more supportive policies and programs are urgently needed.

Most Chinese immigrants interviewed were very conscious of their need to improve their language skills and learn Canadian ways, but they often felt that the socialization ‘tools’ they require to speed their socioeconomic integration were not available. Somalis in this study also sought support for their cultural adaptation in Canada, but perhaps being somewhat more vulnerable as refugees, also were aware of the protective value of their own culture and group identity for themselves, for community advocacy, and for engaging in the political process. Supportive services and programs could perhaps provide or foster a greater range of integration tools, skills, and opportunities, from the level of the individual to that of the community. Concretely, more efforts to provide information and guidance in appropriate formats and languages would enable immigrants and refugees to capitalize on available social supports and integrate more quickly. Since some of the most effective social supports for immigrants and refugees are informal networks, or are based on religious or professional affiliations, these channels could be better linked to formal and mainstream services to provide the necessary information and guidance. In some newcomer communities in which formal supports have not yet developed, it is crucial to remember that existing informal social ties are a vital starting point for mutual aid, and could be nurtured. Finally in terms of service delivery, we should not underestimate the importance of an encouraging attitude, or a practical tip, from even one single, helpful front-line service provider in an individual newcomer’s experience.

Immigrants and many refugees have expectations of being able to work as professionals in Canada. Lowering expectations may appear to be a protective psychological strategy to an individual immigrant who cannot easily find the right job, but cannot be recommended as a social strategy to deal with widespread disenchantment and mental distress. Rather than depend on lowered expectations, policy and practice should provide more enabling social supports – social supports that function as a “springboard,” not just a “safety net” (Wilkinson and Marmot 1998). The influence of social support as a determinant of health and well being during settlement works not only directly in terms of social relations, but also indirectly in terms of access to employment, education, and other basic needs.
Conclusion

When individuals go through life-changing transitions such as migration, they may need help initially to cope with and to overcome obstacles. Social support helps people to make transitions successfully, reducing risks to mental and physical well being. Immigrants and refugees seek and obtain support from familiar sources, but they also learn different ways of coping and help-seeking that fill their needs and fit the context of the receiving society. Given time, they generally cope successfully with the transition by using personal resources and available social supports. This study proposed that the transition can be facilitated through understanding how newcomers perceive and reconstruct social support during settlement and integration in the receiving society.

Culture and context both shape perceptions of social support and help-seeking. We have learned that meanings of social support are not only defined by the culture and context of the sending society, but also by the culture and context of the receiving society. Socioeconomic circumstances, structural barriers, and the receiving society’s responses, shape coping strategies and help-seeking behaviours. Personal resources, such as newcomers’ attitudes, cultural, educational, and life experiences, also play a role in shaping coping mechanisms. Effective mechanisms of social support are those that are enabling and help newcomers to overcome barriers, both individual and systemic.

In coping with challenges and looking for help, newcomers draw on their own knowledge and experience of social support. At the same time, they learn to navigate a new system. How then is social support constructed in the process? How do new meanings of social support emerge? Expectations of social support that may have been taken for granted in the homeland become focused on specific supports to meet the demands of resettlement within Canadian society. Social support may be imbued with new significance for immigrants and refugees in a variety of critical situations and social interactions, especially when obstacles are encountered: the “red tape” of unfamiliar institutions, the reality of the Canadian job market, or efforts met with discrimination and discouragement. When help-seeking strategies are successful and needed support is forthcoming, obstacles fall away and settlement and integration are facilitated.
APPENDIX: FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants
Access to Professions and Trades Unit, Ontario Ministry of Education and Training
Chinese Canadian National Council
Community Social Planning Council of Toronto
Skills for Change
African Canadian Community Social Development Council
Canadian Heritage
Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Settlement, Ontario Region
Peel Regional Social Planning Board
Urban Alliance on Race Relations
World Education Services
Community Health Branch, Ministry of Health and Long Term Care
Community Resource Consultants of Toronto
United Way of Greater Toronto
Health Canada
Human Resources Development Canada
Toronto Public Health
St. Joseph’s Health Centre
Midaynta Association of Somali Service Agencies
Family Service Association of Toronto
Hong Fook Mental Health Services
Access and Equity, City of Toronto
St. Michael’s Hospital
Ontario Ministry of Citizenship
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CERIS

The Joint Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Settlement - Toronto (CERIS) is one of five Canadian Metropolis centres dedicated to ensuring that scientific expertise contributes to the improvement of migration and diversity policy.

CERIS is a collaboration of Ryerson University, York University, and the University of Toronto, as well as the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, the United Way of Greater Toronto, and the Community Social Planning Council of Toronto.

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- Citizenship & Immigration Canada
- Department of Canadian Heritage
- Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation
- Status of Women Canada
- Statistics Canada
- Human Resources and Skills Development Canada
- Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency
- Royal Canadian Mounted Police
- Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada
- Department of Justice Canada
- Public Service Human Resources Management Agency of Canada

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The Metropolis Project

Launched in 1996, the Metropolis Project strives to improve policies for managing migration and diversity by focusing scholarly attention on critical issues. All project initiatives involve policymakers, researchers, and members of non-governmental organizations.

Metropolis Project goals are to:

- Enhance academic research capacity;
- Focus academic research on critical policy issues and policy options;
- Develop ways to facilitate the use of research in decision-making.

The Canadian and international components of the Metropolis Project encourage and facilitate communication between interested stakeholders at the annual national and international conferences and at topical workshops, seminars, and roundtables organized by project members.

For more information about the Metropolis Project visit the Metropolis web sites at:
http://canada.metropolis.net
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