

Barriers for New Immigrant Youth

What countries do youth arrive from?

Each year, about 250,000 immigrants arrive in Canada. About one-third consist of youth between the ages of 15 to 25 (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2009). Approximately 40,000 immigrant youth arrived in BC from 2008 to 2009, representing the second highest migration of youth into Canadian provinces. A little more than half (54%) of those youth came from China, India, and Philippines with the remainder originating from the United States, South Korea, Pakistan, Russia, and the United Kingdom.

What are the barriers to successful integration for new immigrant youth?

As Canada is a diverse country, youth who are new to Canada often face a number of challenges that effect how well they adapt to school, learn a new language, become familiar with Canadian culture, and make new friends. Fitting in is a critical aspect of social integration. Unfortunately, many youth feel they must change who they are in order to fit in. Failing to fit in contributes to lower levels of self-esteem and confidence. Research suggests that immigrant youth who had been in Canada for three years or less were often afraid to speak their minds, in part due to language barriers.

Barrier #1: Language

Language fluency is an important factor affecting students' participation and success in school (Yee, Johns, Tam, & Paul, 2008). The most common non-official languages spoken among new immigrant youth are Mandarin, Punjabi, Arabic, and Spanish (CIC, 2009). The ability to converse with fluency in English or French not only enhances one's chances of fitting in, but prepares youth for future careers (Yee et al., 2008). From 2004 to 2008, approximately 65% of new immigrant youth spoke English or French. Though this was higher than a decade earlier, 60% of immigrant youth stated that language was a significant barrier to obtaining a job, with some adding that prospective employers expected accent-free English (Yee et al., 2008).

Barrier #2: Poverty

The effect of poverty also contributes to greater likelihood of physical and mental health risks, social isolation, and decreased ability to concentrate in class (Singer, 2003). Though most youth are dependent on their families, parents who are new to Canada may not have the needed skills to find gainful employment.

As part of the migration process, new arrivals are generally classified into one of two categories: Economic Class and Non-Economic Class (Government of BC, 2010). Economic Class refers to those who have recognized skills and abilities that contribute to Canada's economy. Non-Economic Class refers to those who do not meet this criterion (CIC, 2008). From 2004 to 2008, approximately 52% of youth who were new to BC were from the Non-Economic Class. Of these, 49% also lived in households where the total income fell below the Statistics Canada low-income cut-off level (Cooper, 2008).

Immigrant youth have greater difficulty finding employment compared to non-immigrant youth. In 2009, the unemployment rate of immigrant youth was approximately 19% compared to 15% among Canadian born youth. Furthermore, immigrant youth from single-parent families tended to suffer from poorer health resulting from the effects of poverty (Jiwani, Janovicek, & Cameron, 2001).

How can the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) help to improve conditions for immigrant youth?

The UNCRC is "the first legally binding international instrument to incorporate the full range of human rights (United Nations Children's Fund, 2008). This convention was ratified in Canada in 1989 and founded on four core principles:

1. Non-discrimination
2. Best interests of the child
3. Right to life, survival, development
4. Respect for the views of the child

Every child and young person under 18, including immigrant youth, receives protection under the UNCRC that contains 54 separate articles. At least four of these articles specifically reference immigrant youth:

Article 2: All children and youth enjoy their rights, whatever their race, religion, abilities, whatever they think or say, no matter what type of family.

Article 14: Ensures youth have the right to think and believe what they want and to practice their religion.

Article 22: Governments must make sure that refugee youth have the same rights as children born in that country.

Article 30: Ensures children and youth have rights to learn and use the language and customs of their families.
[For further information:](#)

BC Centre for Safe Schools and Communities (CSSC)

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How can I help youth adapt to life in BC?

- Befriend them or their family
- Teach English language skills
- Model respect for diversity
- Increase cultural awareness
- Help youth access services and programs in your community

Schools Pilots Program

This program focuses on vulnerable groups, such as older immigrant students who arrived in Canada with poor English skills, significant social barriers, and those struggling to adapt. Intended to complement the SWIS program, this pilot program offers specialized and individualized services for immigrant youth.

[For further information](#)

Special thanks to Jackie Zhu, UFV International Student, for her work on this fact sheet.

Jackie's Area of Study: Criminology

Through her field practicum at UFV, Jackie was interested in identifying the barriers that prevented immigrant youth from successfully integrating into Canadian communities. She was also interested to learn about programs that have been implemented to support these youth. As an international student, Jackie wanted to share this information so that schools and communities could promote greater acceptance and inclusion of new citizens.

Barrier #3: Social Isolation and Risk for Deviance

In addition to language and poverty barriers, youth who are new to Canada often feel socially isolated. Discrimination may be a daily experience, contributing to feelings of exclusion and alienation (Cooper, 2008). Over time, youth often make friends within their own ethnic group where others are experiencing similar challenges, and where they are more likely to feel respected and understood. However, sustained marginalization and lack of school engagement contributes to unsuccessful integration and places individuals at higher risk for involvement in deviant and criminal behaviors (Wortley, 2009). This includes recruitment into gangs due to the lure of gaining social status and respect (Wortley, 2009).

What programs have been initiated by the provincial government to help new immigrant youth?

Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS)

SWIS is an outreach program offering guidance to new immigrant students and their families in both elementary and secondary schools. SWIS provides information and support to enhance an understanding of Canadian culture through the following objectives:

- Promoting greater engagement in the school system;
- Providing information about school registration, activities, and community resources;
- Offering support in conflict situations; and
- Increasing opportunities for further involvement in the schools and communities.

[For further information](#)

My Circle Program

Available through Immigration Services Society (ISS) of B.C, the goal of My Circle is to promote active participation and positive integration of young newcomers by training them to become peer support group facilitators and young community leaders (ISS, 2010). Following 80 hours of training, young volunteer facilitators return to their communities to recruit and engage others to join activities that support other newcomer youth and their families (Lalani, 2008).

[For further information](#)

CSSC Resources

- Call BC Centre for Safe Schools and Communities for assistance, referral or research services 1-888-224-7233 or 604-870-5936
- Visit the Centre's On-line Library - for ordering resources, [click here](#)
 - For a sample of books, videos, or DVD's , [click here](#)
- Visit the Centre's Speakers Bureau - for training, [click here](#)