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Hearing from refugee economic immigrants

As job matches and arrivals increase, EMPP alumni are becoming increasingly diverse, in terms of where they live in Canada and the sectors in which they work. The alumni are grateful to be given the chance to contribute in Canada in their respective fields, yet highlight their own still unfulfilled potential and those of other refugees who can only hope for a similar opportunity.

Acknowledgements

UNHCR would like to thank the partner NGOs in the Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot (EMPP) who helped make this research possible by disseminating the survey to alumni and past program participants. We would also like to thank various stakeholders in Nova Scotia – the Shapiro Foundation, RefugePoint and Pictou County Partnership among them – for facilitating focus group discussions with EMPP alumni.

We are grateful to the alumni most of all, who generously took the time to complete our survey or participate in a focus group discussion. Their insights are invaluable and will help to ensure that EMPP remains beneficial for all.

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Introduction

By the end of 2024, 750 people, 60 per cent of whom were dependents, had come to Canada through the Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot (EMPP) since its introduction in 2018.

Every indication suggests that the first arrivals are settled and contributing to their communities. More recent arrivals also show strong signs of integration at work and in their communities. Thanks to the efforts of partners to expand access, more recent arrivals are larger in number, are more diverse in makeup and professions and reside in a larger number of provinces.

The findings in this report echo those from UNHCR's first survey of EMPP alumni in 2023. Alumni are happy to be putting their skills to use, but like other immigrants, struggle with credential recognition processes.

Like many Canadians, alumni are affected by the cost of living and housing-related concerns. For some, their previous status as refugees no longer affects their lives, while others continue to face challenges related to this status, for instance, in reuniting with family members or providing documentation necessary for leasing an apartment or moving forward with credential recognition.

Despite their diverse experience and backgrounds, research participants overwhelmingly agreed that moving to Canada through an employment pathway has improved their lives and they would recommend skilled immigration to other refugees.



EMPP alumni, Mohamed Ismail, working as a healthcare professional at Hogarth Riverview Manor in Thunder Bay, Ontario.
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Research method

This study utilized a mixed-methods approach to collect both quantitative and qualitative data.

This report summarizes feedback from EMPP alumni during outreach conducted by UNHCR in late 2024. Data was collected via a virtual survey distributed through EMPP NGO partners, yielding 68 responses.

To understand certain concepts in greater depth, UNHCR also held focus group discussions with EMPP alumni in Nova Scotia. All focus group participants work in healthcare, with most having immigrated to Canada from Kenya.

The participants included both men and women, some with families and others single. Their time in Canada varied, with some having been there for over four years and the newest arrivals having been in the country for just two weeks.



EMPP alumni at the Nova Scotia Community College Pictou Campus library. © UNHCR/Soo-Jung Kim

RESULTS

“EMPP was a life changing program for me, and I’m grateful for anyone who took part for this program to succeed.”

‘*Opportunity*’ was the word that came up in all of the focus group discussions to describe how people felt about life in Canada. They felt that moving to Canada provided opportunities for themselves and their families in every aspect of life. For instance, participants highlighted freedom of movement, entitlement to financial and medical services, and eligibility for citizenship.

Unsurprisingly, they also highlighted the opportunity of using their skills in the workplace and expressed that remuneration was better and non-discriminatory, as

was their experience prior to coming to Canada. Several people highlighted that Canada offers safety and stability, which in turn gives EMPP alumni hope and allows people to plan for their future. Finally, focus group participants expressed that moving to Canada allowed them to put their refugee identity behind them and take their place as equals in Canadian society.

One person explained: “in Kenya, a refugee is always a refugee. You may work with citizens. You may have that job. You may live with them. Same neighbourhood, same qualities, same everything. But being called a refugee is another challenge. It’s a big difference. Having a place where you call home is a big difference. We feel like Canada is our second home.”

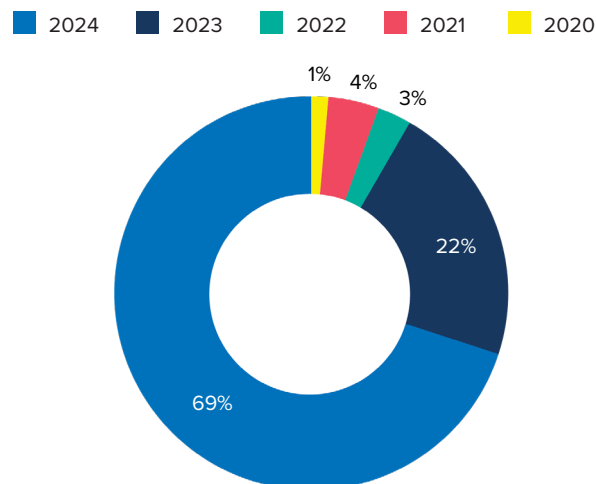
Coming to Canada

Most survey respondents were recent arrivals with the vast majority (91%) arriving in Canada in 2023 or 2024, and only six respondents having arrived prior. Respondents were from 17 countries of origin and relocated from 17 different countries of asylum. More

than half, 54%, of respondents who came to Canada originated from Kenya, Lebanon, or Pakistan. The top three countries of origin of survey respondents were Afghanistan (20.6%) and Syria (20.6%), followed by Somalia (14.7%).

Figure 1

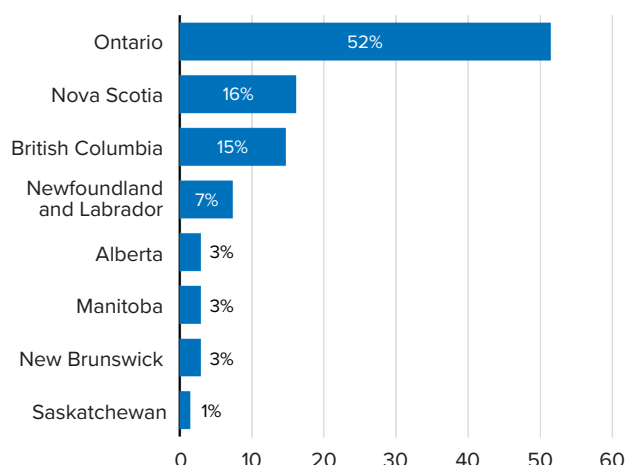
Survey respondents by arrival period, % (N = 68)



Source: UNHCR Canada
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Figure 2

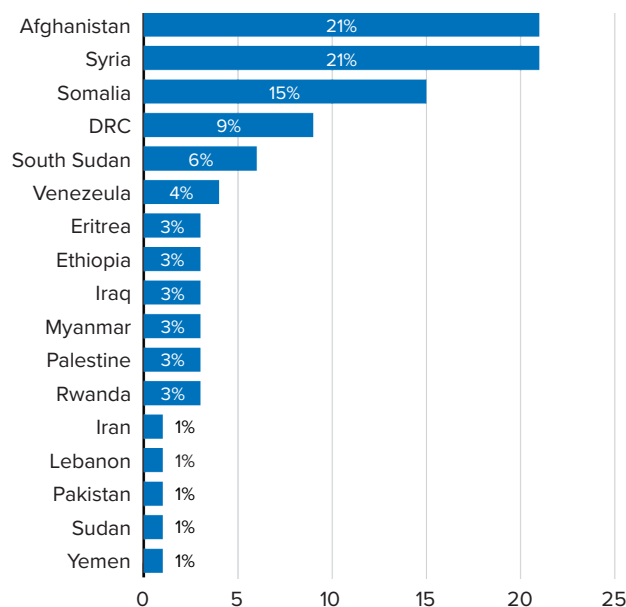
Survey respondents by province of residence, % (N = 68)



Source: UNHCR Canada
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Figure 3

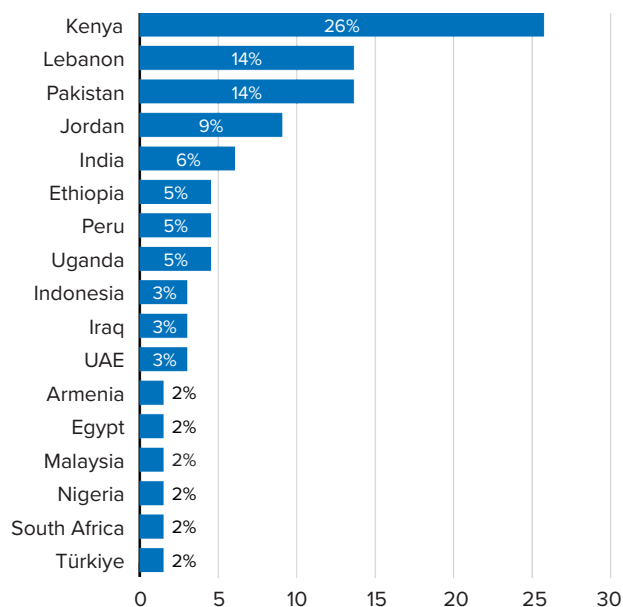
Survey respondents by country of origin or birth, % (N = 68)



Source: UNHCR Canada
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Figure 4

Survey respondents per country of residence prior to Canada, % (N = 66)



Source: UNHCR Canada
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Demographics

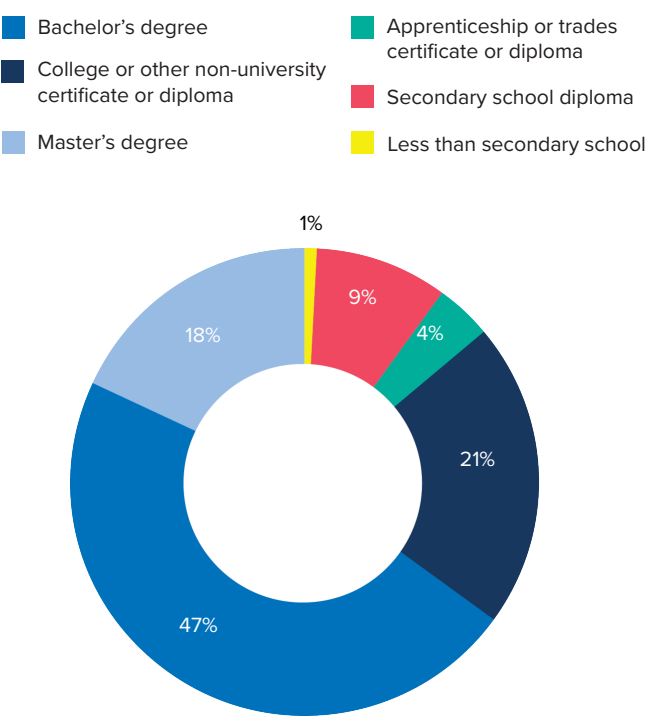
Most survey respondents were male (75%) and their average age was 35 years old. Respondents were as young as 23 years and as old as 68 years. A bachelor's degree was the most common reported highest level of schooling attained (47%), with college or other non-university certificate or diploma the second-most common at 21%.

Experience at work

While there is a small EMPP quota for highly skilled individuals without a job offer, most arrivals to date have anchored their application with a job offer from an employer in Canada.

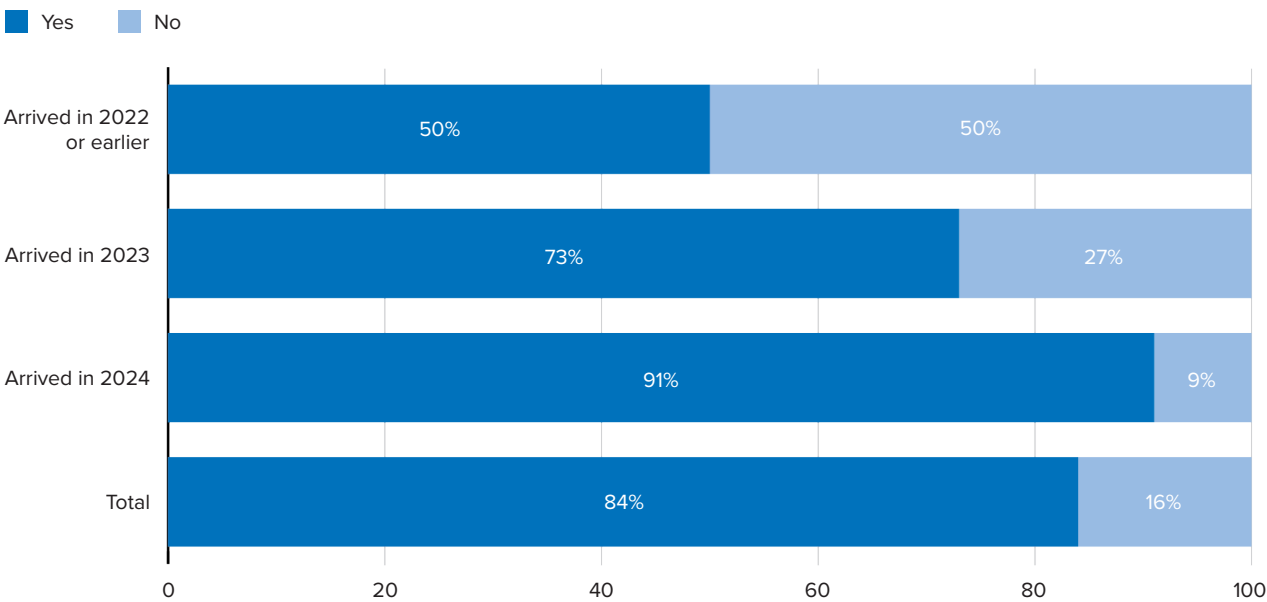
At the time of the survey, 84% of respondents were with the employer whose job offer brought them to Canada. Unsurprisingly this was more likely for those who arrived in 2024 than for those who arrived in 2022 or earlier (see Figure 6). Some focus group participants shared that they were no longer with their original employer because they had obtained further training and had their credentials recognized and were now working in a different capacity in the same sector.

Figure 5
Survey respondents' highest level of schooling attained, % (N = 68)



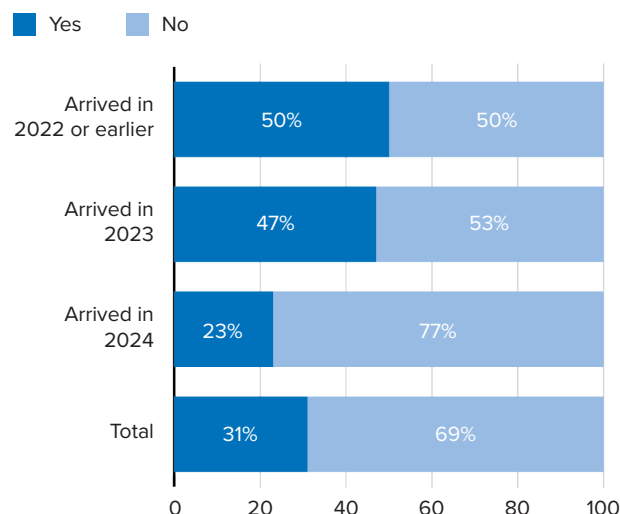
Source: UNHCR Canada
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Figure 6
Survey respondents with their original EMPP employer, % (N = 68)



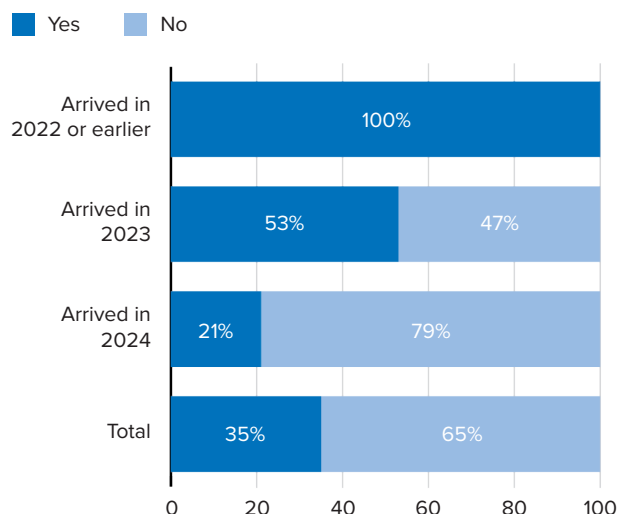
Source: UNHCR Canada
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Figure 7
Survey respondents with a promotion, % (N = 68)



Source: UNHCR Canada
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Figure 8
Survey respondents with a wage increase, % (N = 68)



Source: UNHCR Canada
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“Nursing is nursing... caring for patients is the same everywhere.”

When EMPP alumni reflected on their experience in the workplace, they felt that the fundamentals were the same. But there were also notable differences – for instance in equipment used - and in the population they aided, many of whom have dementia. Focus group participants shared that dementia was less common in their workplaces in Kenya, and their employers had arranged for them to receive training on dealing with this population. Several shared that the workplace was more diverse in Canada, which was considered in a positive light. While participants shared that co-workers were welcoming, some also suggested that a workplace orientation to refugee realities might be helpful.

Most of the focus group participants had started out or were still working in entry level “nurse aide” roles, known as Continuing Care Assistants (CCAs) in Nova Scotia. Those working as CCAs felt “highly needed”; some held down multiple jobs, given the demand.

Credential recognition was a preoccupation for focus group participants, who included people with a bachelor’s degree in nursing as well as credentials in other related fields like social work or community health. Participants had different levels of understanding of the credential recognition process and were at different points in the journey. Several

suggested that it would have been beneficial for them to start the process of having their nursing degree recognized while in Kenya. This was suggested not only as a means of saving time, but because it would be easier to collect the documents required and it would reduce the risk that courses would “expire” for credentialing purposes. It was suggested that UNHCR could play a role in vouching for the standard of training provided in Kenya. Others suggested that employers should be able to evaluate competencies, thereby reducing the importance of credentials.

Focus group participants included a cohort who had benefitted from a bridging program for internationally educated nurses and were working as Registered Nurses. This group considered themselves “lucky” because the program was relatively short, was offered at no cost and provided a wage subsidy.

They were proud to be working to their full potential and helping to mitigate local health care workforce shortages, citing noticeable differences in hospital wait times as a result and patients’ satisfaction in their level of care. Despite this positive experience, the group also identified ways that the credential recognition process could be more sensitive to refugee realities (around documentation, for instance).

Alumni shared that their experience at work improved over time, with the percentage reporting wage increases and promotions highest for those who had been in the country longest. As depicted in Figure 9, close to 90% of survey respondents described feeling well or very well integrated in their workplace, outpacing the reported feeling of integration into the community. Unsurprisingly, those who had been in Canada since 2023 reported higher feelings of community integration (4.3/5) than those who arrived in 2024 (3.95/5).

Integration experience

Survey respondents revealed the challenges encountered in their integration journey as well as their sources of support. Figure 10 shows the issues identified as the top five challenges since arrival, showing all survey respondents as well as single (unmarried) respondents only.

The top three challenges relayed in UNHCR’s 2024 survey are the same as the results of the 2023 survey; similar to challenges (finances, housing, transportation) facing many Canadians at this time. Loneliness is more pronounced as a challenge among single respondents, though it is a significant challenge for both groups especially when combined with the challenge of making friends and finding community.

Respondents gave a window into these challenges in the comments they wrote. For instance, “Here you have to support yourself. And its no[t] easy because the money we earn is not enough to pay our rent, bills, food and transportation.” Another wrote, “Canada is a

“What I would say to other refugees: it was worth it to come here to Canada. It’s a safe place. Quiet. Good to raise a family, as I would say. Just have patience, have patience”

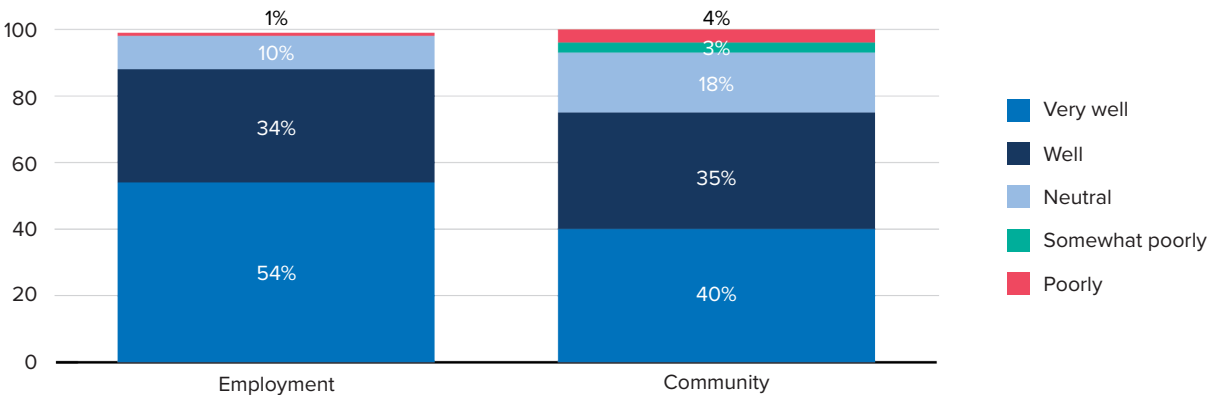
Anonymous
EMPP Alumni

great country and we love it but there are so many hard challenges such as so much expensive housing rental and food comparing with income.”

On the challenge of finding landlords that will rent to immigrants: “Nobody wants to give us house for rent, some- (sic.) landlords say, you are a newcomer, only one person working, your credit score is not much good, you have to pay one year’s rent together that I cannot. And someone refuse us, because we have four kids.”

As with UNHCR’s 2023 survey, 2024 survey respondents identified the internet, family and friends, and government services among the most important sources of help in the initial settlement period. Survey respondents from 2024 also highlighted the importance of employers/co-workers and EMPP partner NGOs. More than half reported being in touch with other EMPP alumni.

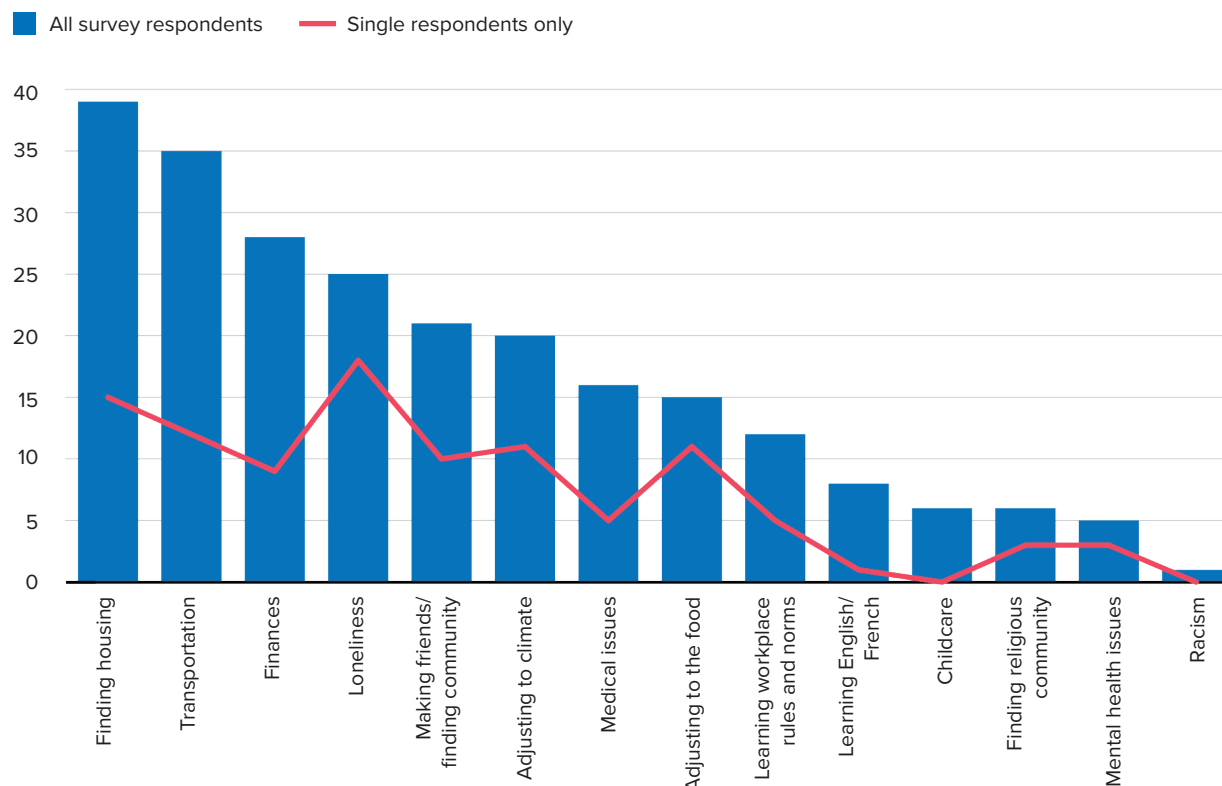
Figure 9
Survey respondents’ feeling of integration, % (N = 68)



Source: UNHCR Canada
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Figure 10

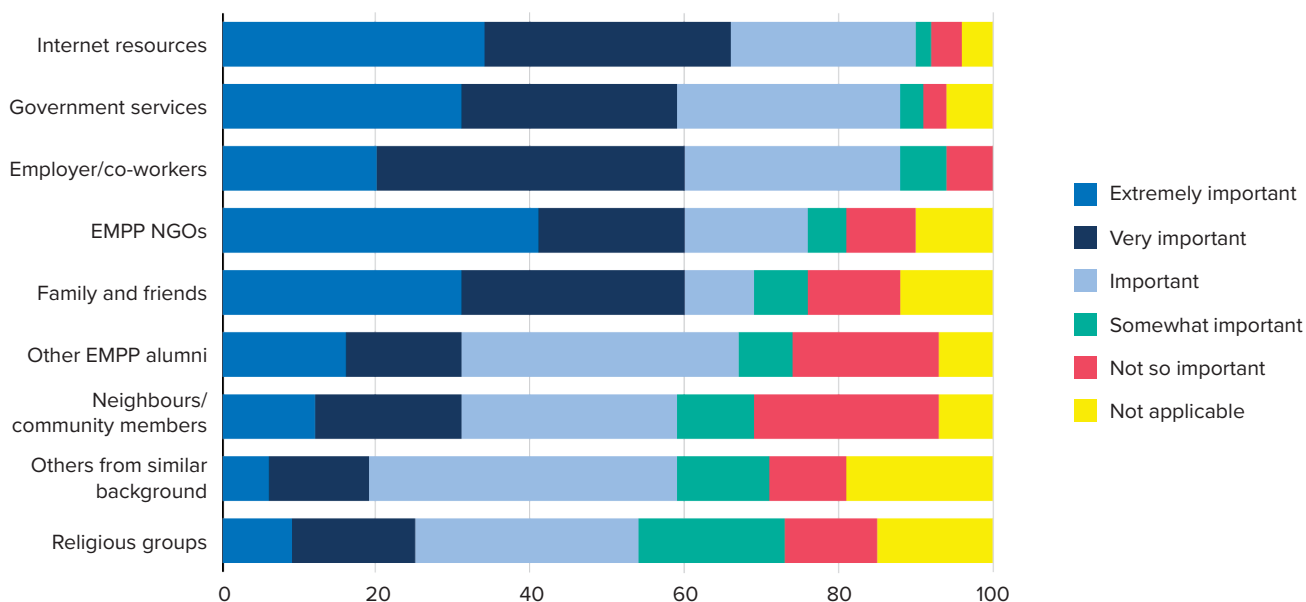
Top three challenges since arrival, all respondents (N = 68) and single respondents only (N = 29)



Source: UNHCR Canada
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Figure 11

Importance of listed sources of help during the initial settlement period, % (N=68)



Source: UNHCR Canada
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EMPP is like being given a clean slate to start over again. So coming here and being able to work and integrate into the community, it's a huge chance. And I really hope it continues because more people have skills back home and they don't have the opportunity to showcase them.

While moving to Canada brings many opportunities, it is not without challenges. Focus group participants, particularly those recently arrived, spoke openly about these.

Several people raised the issue of adapting to the weather, which in winter leads to additional costs for appropriate clothing and can make getting around more difficult.

Participants highlighted the consequences of leaving friends and family behind, acknowledging that it affects their emotional wellbeing and leaves them with less support, for instance, with childcare. One father shared that he had left his 23-year-old son behind, as he was ineligible to be included on the EMPP application. He said that it was a very difficult decision and that concern for his son interferes with his focus at work.

People spoke about loneliness and not knowing where to turn for support. While some participants shared how they had navigated through this period and made friends (through settlement organizations, for example) or drawn on the support of neighbours, others were still struggling with helping their spouse connect and adapt to life in Canada. It was not clear that all focus group participants had utilized settlement services.

Those who had done so spoke highly of organizations such as ISANS, YReach, Pictou County Partnership and Safe Harbour, saying that knowing where to go for answers reduces the stress of being in a new country. Others spoke positively about pre-arrival orientation by settlement providers or employers, as it “allowed them to prepare mentally ahead of time”. One participant argued that EMPP immigrants should have access to a social worker, as resettled refugees do, saying “we are still refugees and we deserve that kind of support because we are just the same”.

Cost of living was also raised as a concern by some focus group participants, particularly those with

families. Several participants shared that their monthly income was insufficient to cover their monthly expenses and that the stress of not knowing how to provide for one's family added an extra challenge.

While housing was raised as a challenge by some, it was also an area where employers and the EMPP community writ large demonstrated their commitment and creativity. Focus Group participants expressed thanks to employers who provided housing for an initial period and to EMPP alumni who offered up space in their homes for subsequent arrivals.

Finally, one participant mentioned that it was an adjustment coming from an urban centre to small-town Nova Scotia, where there was no public transit and residents are more car reliant. Transportation was raised as a concern for those living in small communities generally, especially in the initial period before Canadian drivers' licenses are obtained and cars purchased. Participants living in Halifax felt that transportation was easy and accessible.

Co-workers, employers and community members play a key role in helping EMPP alumni navigate these challenges. Participants reported feeling that “Canadians are good people” and they did not feel any discrimination. Co-workers offered rides to work and provided orientation while early EMPP alumni helped subsequent ones adjust, sharing generously of their time and resources.

Focus group participants suggested that a peer from a similar background would be an excellent resource for EMPP new arrivals, at the workplace but also in the community. Such a resource person would have a good sense of what norms or experiences may be unfamiliar. For instance, moving to Canada marked a new period of self-reliance for some alumni (for instance, paying rent on one's own). Having a peer mentor would help new arrivals avoid challenges and provide a “go-to” for information other than employers.

Family

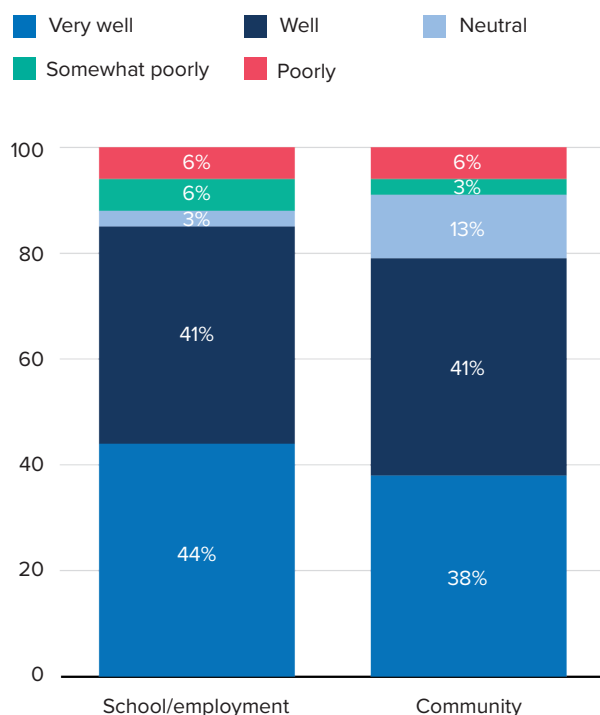
EMPP applicants may include spouses and dependent children (up to age 22) on their immigration application. 57% of survey respondents indicated being married, while 43% were listed as single. 18% of survey respondents relayed that they had dependents who did not come to Canada.

EMPP alumni's children

Thirty-two survey respondents came to Canada with children. The number of children per family averaged 2.3, and the average age of children was 7.5 years old.

Figure 12 shows respondents' perception of their children's integration at school/work and in the community. Most respondents (85%) felt that their children are integrating well or very well at school and well or very well in the community (79%). Three respondents suggested that their children were integrating poorly or somewhat poorly into the community, including two respondents with young

Figure 12
Survey respondents' perception of children's integration at school/employment and in the community, % (N = 32)



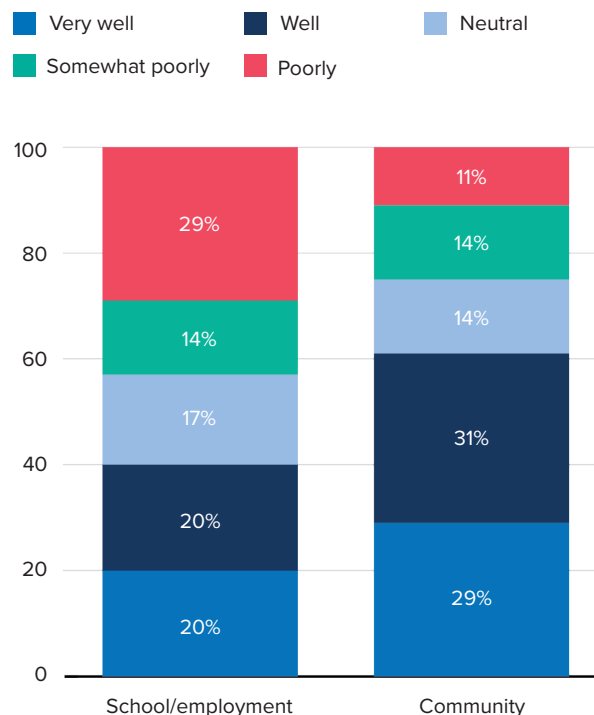
Source: UNHCR Canada
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children and one whose children are young adults. Respondents thought their children would have liked additional support especially with education/school (16 responses), childcare (14), and healthcare and language classes/opportunities to practice English or French (11 responses each).

EMPP alumni's spouses

Thirty-five survey respondents indicated that a spouse came with them to Canada. In comparison to how they felt about their own and their children's integration, survey respondents were least likely to say that their spouses were integrating well or very well into both the community (60%) and school/employment (40%). They reiterated this theme in outlining the top three areas where spouses might have liked additional support: help with education/school (21), more language classes/opportunities to practice English or French (20) and help finding employment (20).

Figure 13
Survey respondents' perception of spouse's integration to school/employment and the community, % (N = 35)



Source: UNHCR Canada
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Future goals

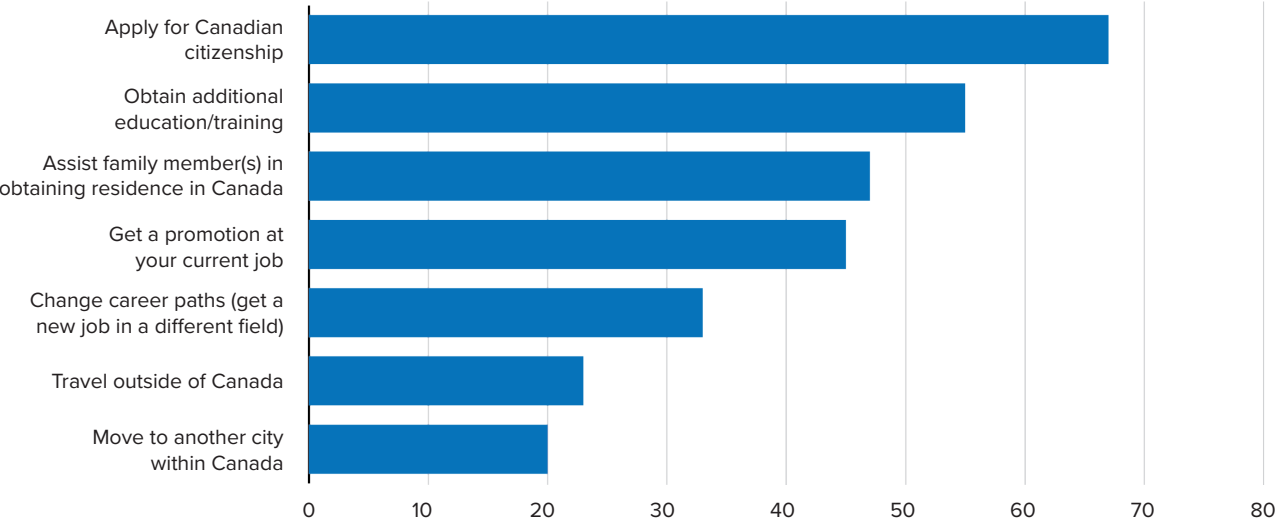
Refugees are drawn to immigrate through the EMPP by the opportunity to further their studies or careers and to live in a stable peaceful country. These themes featured prominently in survey responses about future goals, with most respondents revealing that their goals include applying for Canadian citizenship, and many listed the goal of obtaining additional education or training.

Survey respondents want to have their credentials recognized, regardless of their sector of work. Said one individual working in health care: “It is frustrating to

continue working as a PSW [personal support worker] when someone was a Nurse back in his/her host country or home country”. Another respondent said that he hopes to “validate [his] bachelor’s degree and get an opportunity to work as an engineer”.

Some respondents have already obtained education/training (25), while others highlighted that they had assisted family members in obtaining residence in Canada (9), relocated (1) or travelled (1), and one person reported having obtained Canadian citizenship (1).

Figure 14
Incidence of goals identified in the top five of survey respondents (N = 68)



Source: UNHCR Canada
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“I would like to achieve great things in future.”

Focus group participants shared their dreams for the future, full of ambition and the feeling of possibility. All wanted to grow professionally, and many said that they wanted to further their education, either in their current field or in something else. One person alluded to the reality of balancing dreams with obligations, saying that he would work as nurse aide for now, so that he could send money to family back in Kenya.

Participants shared that they wanted to get married, be present in their children’s lives or reunite with family.

They want to buy homes, open businesses and contribute to their new communities.

Lastly, participants did not forget where they came from: several shared that they wanted to be ambassadors for refugees, advocates for refugee rights or workers in the international humanitarian field. In the near term, several participants offered to testify to the success of EMPP so that other employers and provinces would embrace the model.

Final reflections

Survey respondents included comments on what immigrating to Canada through the EMPP meant to them.

Many expressed gratitude for the opportunity, and for the partner NGOs that helped make it possible. **Most (94%) would recommend immigrating through EMPP to other refugees.** Immigrating to Canada was especially valued considering the lack of safe alternatives alumni were facing.

One shared that her journey to Canada was a testament to the worthiness of investing in girls' education, hoping that it would inspire other girls and their families. Another highlighted the importance of having a program like EMPP that would dissuade people from taking dangerous journeys with smugglers or being exposed to the dangers of irregular routes. Finally, one respondent wrote, "Here in Canada, people are so friendly. All people are equal. There is diversity. And that make[s] it unique to live in blended communities with different cultures and customs. So proud to be in Canada."

While this research provides insight into how some EMPP alumni are faring, it does not represent the full

picture. The experience of alumni who came to Canada without the assistance of an NGO partner, or without a job offer would not be reflected, for instance. Focus groups with alumni in provinces other than Nova Scotia have not been conducted. As the population of EMPP alumni has grown and matured, different research methodologies may need to be explored to gain a more fulsome understanding.

This survey benefited from a wider variety of candidate perspectives than UNHCR's 2023 survey, though most respondents are still early in their Canadian journey. While the findings show that the employment and integration experience for both candidates and their dependents is on course, it would be useful to hear from them again as their roots deepen. This expanding population and Canada's pledge at the 2023 Global Refugee Forum to make the EMPP a permanent program, suggests there will be a growing evidence base for future study on how this initiative responds to employment needs and provides refugees with a meaningful solution.



EMPP alumni, Luis Carrero, pushing a pallet jack, feels hopeful about his future and building a home for his family in Canada.
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ECONOMIC MOBILITY PATHWAYS PILOT

ALUMNI SURVEY REPORT 2024



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