



Making the Grade: Immigrant Youth in Post-Secondary Education

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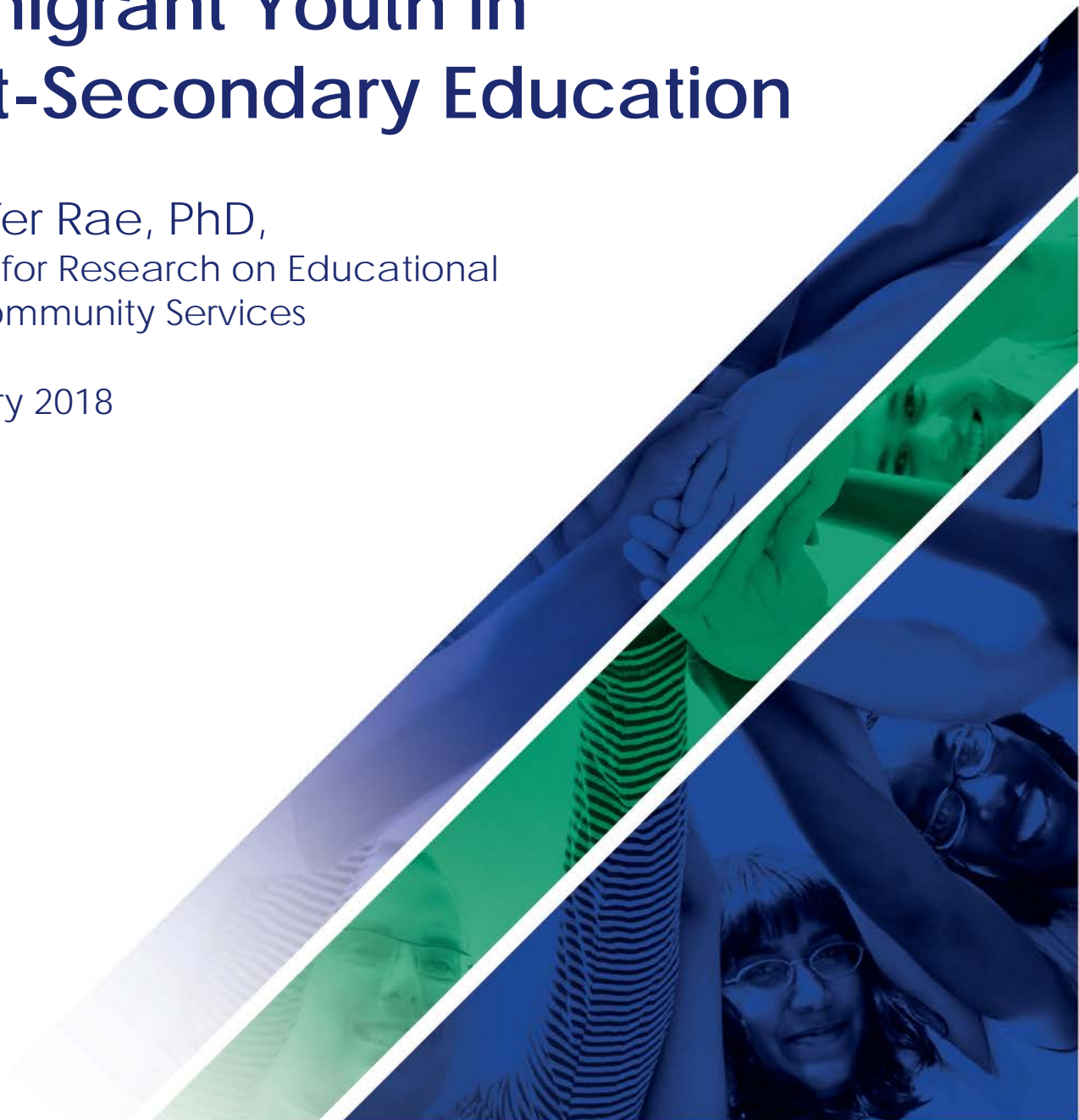


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Executive Summary

This paper explores access to post-secondary education among youth from immigrant families in Canada. In this paper, post-secondary education includes both university and college. Post-secondary education occupies a very important role in Canadian society. Research shows that graduates of post-secondary education in Canada experience higher rates of employment, higher earning potential, and improved health and well-being. Post-secondary education is also associated with positive societal outcomes, including reduced rates of poverty and crime.

Encouragingly, current studies show that as a group, youth from immigrant families in Canada access post-secondary education – especially university – at very high rates. The highest rates of educational attainment are found among immigrants from three regions: China, Western and Southern Asia (including India and Pakistan), and Africa. Among first-generation immigrant youth from Africa, university access rates are 64 percent, which is a full 26 percent higher than the university access rates of non-immigrants. This achievement gap is even wider among second-generation immigrant youth from Africa, who access university at a striking rate of 81 percent, which is the highest of any second-generation immigrant group, including immigrants from China. Please note that this paper looks at immigration status, and not race.

High rates of post-secondary access have been found among immigrant youth across all levels of family income and across all levels of parental education. These findings indicate that immigrant youth and their families demonstrate a great deal of strength and resiliency in overcoming challenges to succeed in higher education. Immigrant parents foster a culture of education within the family and encourage their children to pursue college and university.

Community-based programs can provide supports to ensure that immigrant youth continue to experience positive educational outcomes. Tutoring, mentoring, peer-based support, and culturally-grounded programming may be particularly valuable. These types of supports are especially important for some groups of immigrant youth who face higher risks, including youth who arrive in Canada at an older age, youth who have a lower level of English or French language proficiency, and youth who arrive in Canada as a refugee. All young people deserve an equal opportunity to experience the benefits of a post-secondary education.

Introduction

This paper explores access to post-secondary education among youth from immigrant families in Canada. This paper is intended to provide a summary of some of the research in this topic area by reviewing studies reported in both academic and grey literature. This paper may be of interest to community members and to service providers who work with immigrant youth. The findings that are presented in this paper are generally from studies conducted at a provincial or national level and may not be representative of the experiences of individual youth and their families.

The Value of a Post-Secondary Education

The cost of college and university tuition in Canada has been on the rise. The increasing expense, coupled with drastic changes in the labour market, lead many young people to question whether a post-secondary education is still worth the money. However, recent research demonstrates that a college or university education is indeed a valuable investment. A post-secondary degree pays off in the long run by providing a reliable pathway to secure, well-paying jobs.ⁱ

Over the next decade, about two-thirds of job openings in Canada will require a post-secondary credential.ⁱⁱ Adults with a post-secondary education experience fewer layoffs and have much lower rates of unemployment.ⁱⁱⁱ The lifetime earning potential and income growth of post-secondary graduates – across all fields of study – is significantly higher than that of high school graduates.^{iv} One study of cumulative earnings showed that over a 20-year period, university graduates earned about twice as much as high school graduates, and college graduates earned about 1.5 times as much as high school graduates.^v

A college or university education is more than just a financial investment. It is also an important social investment. Post-secondary education is linked to improved health and well-being for individuals. Post-secondary education also benefits Canadian society as a whole by increasing tax revenues and decreasing costs associated with the health care, child protection, social assistance and criminal justice systems.^{vi} These improvements indicate that there is a significant social return on education.

The Relationship between Education and Crime

The relationship between education and crime is particularly important to explore, given the large social costs associated with criminal activity. Studies have indicated that improvements to educational systems and policies lead to reduced levels of crime.^{vii} Individuals who have lower levels of educational attainment are at a higher risk of involvement in the criminal justice system. High school graduation significantly reduces rates of arrests, imprisonment, and self-reported crime.^{viii} In Canada, less than half of the prison population have graduated from high school.^{ix}

Researchers have identified three main reasons why education may reduce crime.^x First, education increases access to high-quality, steady employment, which results in higher incomes and lower rates of poverty. Unemployment and unstable or poor-quality employment are risk factors for certain types of criminal behaviour, like property crime.^{xi} Second, education affects time availability. Essentially, if people are busy attending school and work, they will have limited time available to participate in criminal activity. Third, education has been shown to increase an individual's patience and risk aversion. These personal attributes can help to discourage criminal behaviour.

Education can be a critical 'protective factor' for youth. Young people who have positive experiences in school are at a lower risk of engaging in criminal behavior. By contrast, young people who have a poor attachment to school are at risk of engaging in criminal behavior, delinquency, substance abuse and gang involvement.^{xii} Education can reduce crime rates by increasing the legitimate work opportunities available to youth, raising the value of staying out of prison, and positively impacting their knowledge, habits, and personality attributes.^{xiii}

Post-Secondary Access Rates in Canada

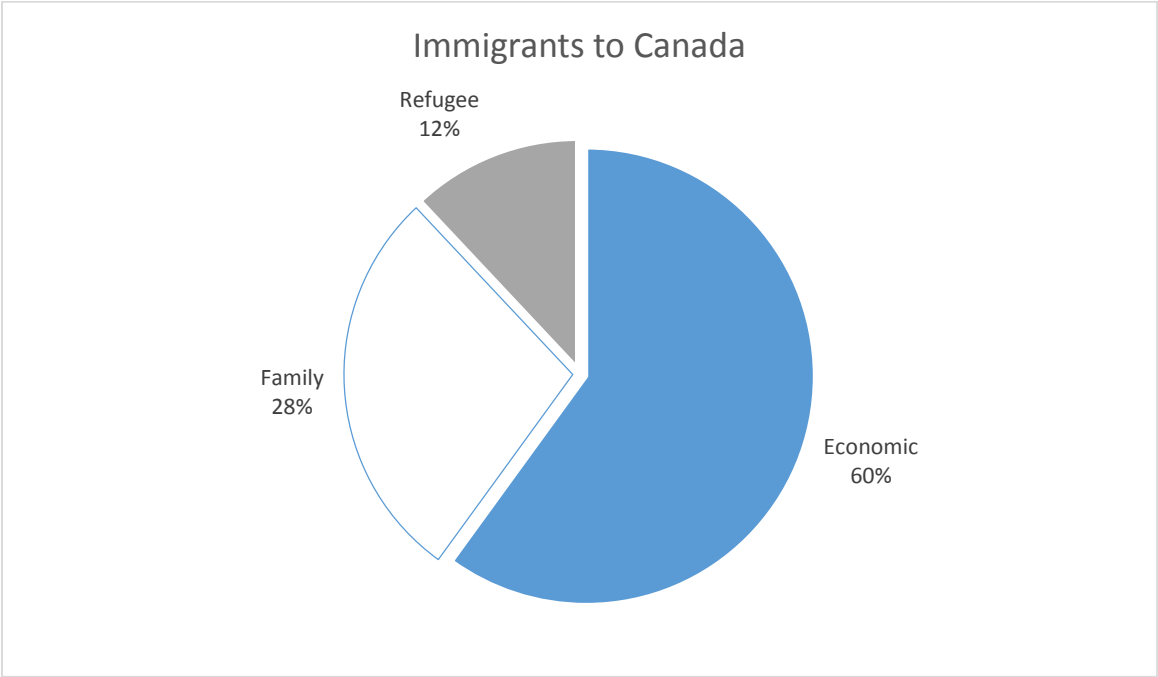
Given the well-established benefits of higher education, it is encouraging that recent research demonstrates that most young people in Canada are pursuing post-secondary education. In fact, Canada is one of the most highly-educated countries in the world. Of all the people in Canada between the ages of 25 to 44 years old, 75 percent have post-secondary experience of some kind.^{xiv} Provincially, 46 percent of Ontario youth attend university by the age of 21, and an additional 36 percent of youth attend college by the age of 21.^{xv} These rates of post-secondary access are considerably higher than they were in previous decades. For example, the proportion of working-age individuals in Canada (aged 15 to 64) with university degrees more than doubled between 1990 and 2012.^{xvi}

These overall post-secondary access rates are promising, but there is still important work to be done. We know that post-secondary education contributes to social mobility and equality of opportunity in Canadian society. One of the best ways to interrupt an intergenerational cycle of poverty in a family is to ensure that young people from all family backgrounds have equal access to a college or university education.^{xvii}

With this in mind, it is concerning to learn that certain groups of young people remain under-represented in higher education in Canada.^{xviii} Research shows that youth from low-income families, youth whose parents do not have a post-secondary education, youth who identify as Aboriginal, youth in out-of-home care, youth from rural areas, and youth with disabilities are all significantly less likely to access post-secondary.^{xix}

To address these gaps in post-secondary access rates, researchers have examined risk factors that predict low educational achievement and have identified barriers that prevent some youth from pursuing a post-secondary education. Immigrants are one group of youth that have been the focus of this type of research on educational access in Canada.¹

Post-Secondary Access Rates among Immigrant Youth

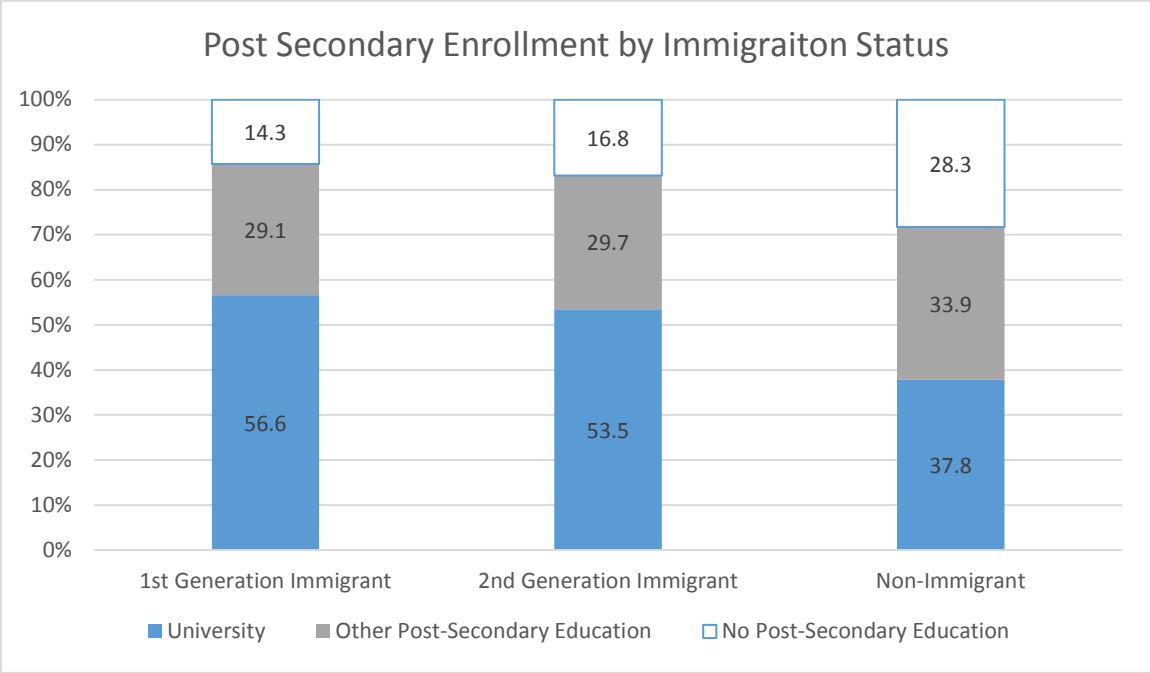


¹ This paper focuses on youth who are first- and second-generation immigrants to Canada. Most of the studies that are cited do not include youth who arrived in Canada after the age of 15. International students, in Canada on a visa with the intention of pursuing an education, are not included as a focus of this paper.

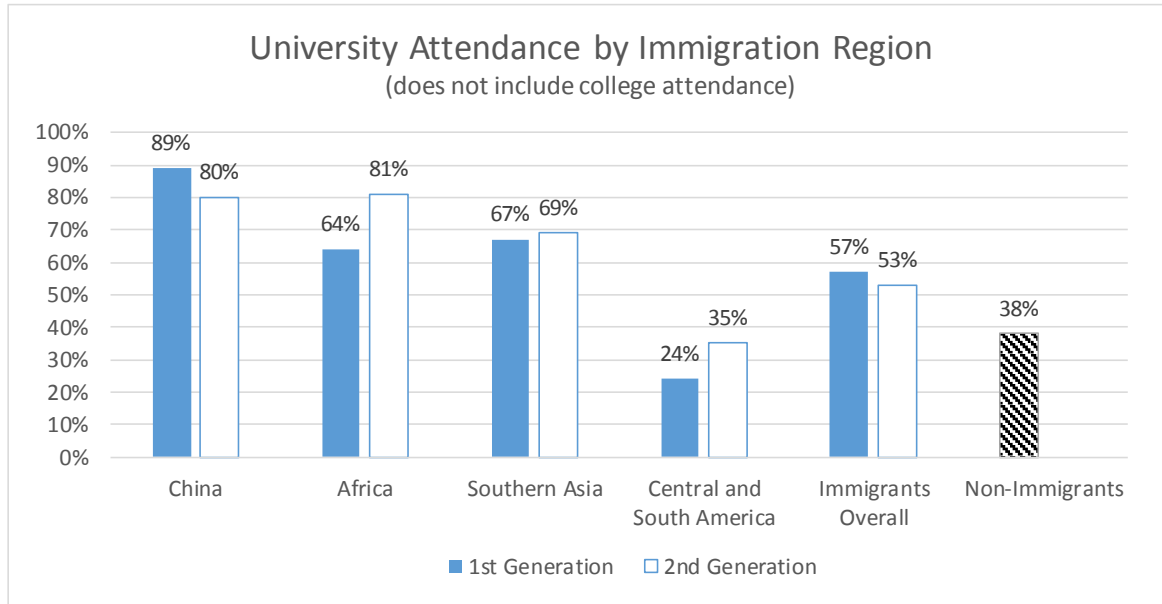
Canada is a country that is well-known for its cultural diversity. Around 20 percent of the population are “first-generation immigrants” born outside of Canada. An additional 15 percent are “second-generation immigrants” born in Canada to one or more parents who were born outside of Canada.^{xx} Canada currently welcomes 300,000 new immigrants annually, with 60 per cent of immigrants entering in the economic class, 28 per cent entering in the family class, and 12 percent entering as refugees.^{xxi}

Immigrants face unique challenges in the education system and labour market in Canada. These challenges include language barriers, limited recognition of foreign credentials and experience, and discrimination.^{xxii} Such challenges are important to address because they contribute to troubling labour market trends that show recent immigrants are earning less than non-immigrants and are less likely to obtain employment that is in line with their qualifications. However, it is also important to highlight the fact that many immigrant families do experience positive outcomes.^{xxiii} One critical predictor of labour market success is earning a Canadian education credential. Research suggests that across education levels, immigrants who are educated in Canada experience good labour market outcomes in terms of earnings and rates of employment.^{xxiv}

Both first- and second-generation immigrant youth demonstrate strong performance on measures of educational attainment within Canada. Young immigrants in Canada are less likely to drop out of high school and they are more likely to pursue a Canadian post-secondary education, especially at the university level.^{xxv}



First-generation immigrant youth attend university at a rate of about 57 percent and second-generation immigrant youth attend university at a rate of about 54 percent. Both of these rates are well above the average of 38 percent found among non-immigrant youth. ^{xxvi}



The highest rates of educational attainment are found among immigrants from three regions: China, Western and Southern Asia (including India and Pakistan), and Africa. ^{xxvii} First-generation immigrant youth from these regions have a university participation rate that exceeds 60 percent. The only groups of immigrant youth who have university access rates that are lower than non-immigrants are youth from Central and Latin America (including the Caribbean). ^{xxviii} It is important to note that by the second generation, youth in this group are accessing post-secondary (which includes college) at a higher rate than non-immigrants. ^{xxix}

These results may be surprising to some. Again, this research speaks to broad immigration data, and not race data. Although the high educational attainment of immigrants from China and other parts of Asia have been well-documented, the educational successes of immigrants from Africa may not be as widely known. However, research indicates that among first-generation immigrants from Africa, university access rates are 64 percent, which is a full 26 percent higher than the university access rates of non-immigrants. This achievement gap is even wider among second-generation immigrants from

² In this research study, all African countries were grouped together. The authors explain that this was done for a number of reasons: it is consistent with previous research, only small sample sizes were available for some countries, and preliminary analyses indicated that different countries had similar outcomes.

Africa, who access university at a striking rate of 81 percent, which is the highest of any second-generation immigrant group, including immigrants from China.^{xxx}

One of the most interesting research findings has to do with the post-secondary access rates found among immigrant youth who come from low-income families and/or have parents who have low levels of formal education themselves. In general, family income and parental education levels are usually considered predictors of post-secondary access among youth. Parental education level is particularly important: youth whose parents have a college or university education are two-and-a-half times more likely to participate in post-secondary education, compared to youth whose parents have only a high school education or less.^{xxxi} There is also a well-documented relationship between family income level and access to post-secondary education. For example, in Ontario, 72 percent of student from families in the lowest income quartile (income less than \$25 000 per year) attend college or university, compared to 93 percent of students from families in the highest income quartile (income more than \$100 000 per year).^{xxxii}³

In immigrant families, the usual trends related to family income and parental education levels do not seem to apply. High rates of post-secondary access have been found among immigrants across all levels of family income and across all levels of parental education. For example, researchers found a 10 percentage point difference in post-secondary access between students living in lower- versus higher-income neighbourhoods. However, they determined that it is Canadian-born students living in lower income neighbourhoods who are the least likely to access post-secondary education. First-generation immigrant youth living in low-income neighbourhoods enroll in post-secondary education at rates that are comparable to those of Canadian-born students living in high-income neighbourhoods.^{xxxiii} Other studies on parental education levels have found that immigrant youth who have parents with no post-secondary experience go on to pursue post-secondary education at rates that are much higher than those observed for non-immigrant youth whose parents lack post-secondary experience.^{xxxiv}

³ Although the relationship between family income and post-secondary access has been well-documented, recent research shows that overall post-secondary access rates are increasing and the largest gains have occurred among students from low-income families. The effect of family income is considerably less than what is commonly believed and is greatly reduced when other student characteristics are accounted for.

These research findings suggest that immigrant youth are resilient in the face of some common risk factors and that immigrant youth in Canada are achieving intergenerational mobility. The educational attainment of immigrant youth is not predetermined by the income or education levels of their parents – in fact, the tie between parental factors and the outcomes of children is looser among immigrants than among the non-immigrant population.^{xxxv}

Although the patterns of post-secondary access among immigrant youth are unique in a number of ways, some trends are consistent with the general population of students. For example, among all student groups as a whole, young women are more likely to participate in post-secondary – especially university – than young men.^{xxxvi} This difference has been attributed to the fact that young women show better high school grades and higher levels of academic engagement.^{xxxvii}

Before concluding this section on post-secondary access rates among immigrant youth, it is important to acknowledge that access or enrolment in education is not the same as completion or graduation. Although the research presented in this paper is primarily focused on the issue of access to post-secondary education, the issue of *persistence* in post-secondary is also worth mentioning. The Canadian post-secondary persistence rate is among the best of the OECD countries. Most students who “drop out” do so only temporarily, transferring to other programs or institutions, or taking a break before re-enrolling again.^{xxxviii} Overall persistence rates indicate that 82 percent of college students and 90 percent of university students will go on to graduate.^{xxxix} Some evidence suggests that as a group, first- and second-generation immigrants in Canada are less likely to leave post-secondary studies than non-immigrants.^{xl} However, experts suggest that the most effective way to identify students at risk of dropping out is to look at academic records and attitudes toward school, which are better predictors of graduation than any single family background factor.^{xli}

Factors Contributing to the Educational Successes of Immigrant Youth

The causes of the high rates of post-secondary access among immigrant youth are complex. Researchers have identified a number of contributing factors. For example, immigrant youth may be more likely to pursue post-secondary education because their parents are more likely to be highly educated themselves. This is a result of the points-based immigration system used in Canada, which emphasizes education and language knowledge among new immigrants.^{xlii} Immigrant families are also more likely to live in urban areas, within commuting distance of universities and colleges, which may also facilitate post-secondary access among immigrant youth.^{xliii}

While these factors may play a contributing role, they are not enough to explain the very high rates of post-secondary access found among immigrant youth,

particularly those youth whose parents have low levels of formal education. In fact, researchers have found that the biggest factor contributing to the educational successes of immigrant youth is culture. Specifically, immigrant families place a high value on education.

Studies show that immigrant parents are 'education inclined', regardless of their own education level. This means that even when immigrant parents have low levels of formal education themselves, they still promote a 'culture of education' in their families by strongly encouraging their children to pursue a higher education.^{xliv} Immigrant parents engage in deliberate parenting practices to support their children's education, such as paying close attention to their children's homework, or hiring private tutors. Research shows that immigrant parents also save more money for their children's education, compared to non-immigrant parents.^{xlv}

Immigrant parents have high expectations for their children, and these expectations influence their children's own beliefs and decision-making about education. Immigrant youth are taught to value education from a young age. Immigrant youth often report that for them, education is equated with cultural identity, prestige, and success.^{xlvi} Some young immigrants also explain that they are motivated to succeed academically because they know that their parents have made sacrifices to migrate to Canada for their benefit.^{xlvii}

Factors that may Challenge the Educational Successes of Immigrant Youth

Evidence clearly indicates that on the whole, immigrant youth in Canada are demonstrating high levels of educational attainment. Nevertheless, immigrant youth do face unique challenges that are important to address.^{xlviii}

Immigrant youth may experience complex, intersecting identities. In some cases, youth may experience conflict between the values, expectations and cultural practices of their home/family life and those of their peer group, school, and larger community.^{xlix} Immigrant youth report that it can be challenging to learn and adjust to new cultural norms.ⁱ

Further, immigrant youth, particularly those from minority backgrounds, may experience discrimination, racism, and negative stereotypes, which can be detrimental to their sense of identity, well-being and safety.ⁱⁱ For example, immigrant youth who enter the Canadian school system may encounter teachers or administrators who place them in classes that are an inappropriate match for their abilities, based on discriminatory views of racialized groups or "foreign education".ⁱⁱⁱ In a study of first-generation undergraduate students, young immigrants talked about how the various forms of discrimination they encountered made them feel uneasy and made it more difficult to transition

into Canadian society. These students talked about how discrimination made them acutely aware of the ways in which they occupied a “minority status”.^{l.iii}

Some sub-groups of immigrant youth are at a particularly high risk and may be in need of more intensive support. Significant barriers to education may arise for youth who immigrate at older ages (i.e. over nine years of age), youth with lower levels of English or French language proficiency, and youth who arrive in Canada under certain immigration admission classes.^{l.iv}

The immigration admission class of parents has implications for the educational outcomes of children due to differences on factors like family resources, education levels, official language proficiency, and pre- and post-migration experiences. ^{l.v}The best educational outcomes are found among children whose parents immigrated in the business class and skilled-worker class. The worst outcomes are found among children whose parents immigrated in the live-in caregiver class and family class. Refugee youth also experience diminished educational outcomes compared to other groups of immigrants and are considered an especially vulnerable group.^{l.vi}

Refugee youth and their families are forced to flee their countries of origin due to humanitarian concerns, often with little or no time to prepare for migration. Refugees experience separations and loss of families and friends and tend to have few financial or familial resources available to them.^{l.vii} Although some research has documented good educational outcomes among refugee youth in the Canadian school system, other studies have identified challenges, such as higher risks of dropping out and lower rates of enrolment in Academic-level high school classes.

Some of the challenges facing high-risk immigrant youth include separation from family; academic gaps due to periods of disruption in their schooling or lack of access to formal or adequately-funded schooling; fear of authority figures, stress caused by adapting to a new culture; being placed in the wrong academic grade or stream upon arrival to Canada; and exposure to trauma. ^{l.ix}

Supporting Immigrant Youth in Pursuing Post-Secondary Education

Community-based programs can play an important role in ensuring that immigrant youth receive the supports they need to reach their full academic potential. Research suggests that the most effective programs are those that have multiple components, including tutoring and academic enrichment, mentoring, peer support, and career guidance and counselling.^{l.x} Programs should address the social and emotional needs of youth, while also supporting them in developing fundamental academic skills in areas like reading, math and language.^{l.xi} Programs should aim to intervene early, because many of the

factors that affect access to post-secondary begin to influence youth during their elementary and middle school years.

Community-based programs can provide immigrant youth with information and guidance about the Canadian education system and the process of searching for, deciding on, and applying to college and university programs.^{lxii} It can be helpful for community-based programs to provide supports to parents as well as to youth. Although immigrant parents do a very good job of encouraging their children to attend college or university, they may struggle when it comes to helping their children with the specific logistics of navigating the Canadian post-secondary system, because they may not be personally familiar with it. Parents who do not have English or French language proficiency may find it particularly challenging to assist their children.^{lxiii}

Immigrant youth may also benefit from information about the wide range of post-secondary programs, fields of study, and career paths available at Canadian college and universities. In some families and communities, a narrow range of careers are represented and respected, and youth may not be exposed to other options.^{lxiv} Some research has also shown that immigrant youth are more likely than non-immigrant youth to switch out of college-level programs, indicating that college may be a stepping-stone to university for these students.^{lxv} Community-based programs can support immigrant youth in learning about educational pathways in the Canadian post-secondary system and can help youth select programs of study that match up with their individual interests and abilities.^{lxvi}

As a vulnerable group, refugee youth may require more intensive, specific forms of support from community-based programs. Refugee youth may have experienced trauma as a result of war, civil unrest and family disunity, and may need mental health care and counselling.^{lxvii} Refugee youth may also need assistance in improving their proficiency in English or French, overcoming gaps and lapses in their formal education, submitting transcripts from foreign institutions, applying for financial aid without Canadian citizenship or permanent residency status, and dealing with stressors related to uncertainty in their family immigration status. Community-based programs should employ multilingual staff who are familiar with foreign educational systems and settlement issues.^{lxviii}

Programs that target immigrant youth should be culturally-grounded and should highlight the many strengths of immigrant youth and families.^{lxix} Research suggests that youth are more likely to engage in programs that respect their individual values, choices, and culture.^{lxx} It may be helpful to connect youth with adult role models and peer mentors in their cultural community. Mentorship from others who have had similar experiences and faced similar challenges can provide immigrant youth with both emotional and informational support – they

can learn how to decide which program to pursue or which school to attend and can gain insight into what the culture and structure of Canadian post-secondary institutions are like. ^{lxxi} Culturally-grounded programs can promote empowerment, sense of belonging, self-confidence, and positive identity development, so that immigrant youth can see that their experiences navigating intersectional identities can be a strength to draw upon in their personal and professional lives. ^{lxxii}

At a local level, there are a number of innovative community-based programs aimed at fostering positive educational outcomes among immigrant youth in Ottawa. Some examples include the following: The Somali Youth Support Project (SYSP), a community initiative operating out of Pinecrest-Queensway Community Health Centre which includes a youth advocacy group, leadership and life skills training, literacy programming and a recreation drop-in; ^{lxxiii} Newcomer Reads, a literacy program and reading club for immigrant youth delivered in partnership between the Ottawa Public Library and Capital Welcomes; ^{lxxiv} and the Ottawa Child and Youth Homework Club Community of Practice, an inter-agency initiative that offers tools, resources and supports to after-school programs throughout the city. ^{lxxv} To ensure that community-based programs align with the best practices outlined in the research, the Ontario Community Integration Network has put together a toolkit of resources for working with newcomer youth. ^{lxxvi}

Conclusions

All young people deserve an equal opportunity to experience the benefits of a post-secondary education. With support and encouragement from their parents, immigrant youth in Canada demonstrate high levels of educational achievement. These positive educational outcomes are good for individual youth and families, and good for Canadian society as a whole. Community-based programs can continue to support immigrant youth in reaching their full academic potential. As our world – and our economy – become increasingly globalized, Canada will have an advantage as a multi-cultural country that includes highly-educated newcomers ready to take on new challenges. ^{lxxvii}

This paper explores the educational outcomes of immigrant youth. The overview of the research presented here suggests that because immigrant youth are more likely to pursue post-secondary education, they are less likely to be involved in crime than their non-immigrant peers. Unfortunately, there is a lack of in-depth data available on the relationship between race, immigration status and crime; yet, we know that there is evidence of disproportionate rates of incarceration by race. Institutions can facilitate more research into this important matter by collecting and reporting more nuanced immigration and race data.

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