




Refugee Settlement Patterns in Waterloo Region

July 2024





Waterloo Region is a hub of diversity, with people from many cultures and backgrounds calling the area home. Since its early beginning, it has provided refuge to people fleeing war. Today Waterloo Region continues to be a resettlement community for refugees from around the world.

This snapshot explores the experiences of 355 recent and longer-term refugee respondents in the 2023 Waterloo Region Immigrant Survey.¹ Through a combination of personal narratives and data-driven insights, this report aims to shed light on the settlement journeys, support systems, and the resiliency of refugees living across Waterloo Region's communities.

The Waterloo Region Immigration Partnership prepared this snapshot as a tool to help governments, funders, business leaders and non-profit organizations understand and take action on the critical issues of our evolving community.

Key Insights

- ▶ Refugees experience significant challenges across many indicators when they start their new life in Waterloo Region. Survey responses clearly demonstrate that changes over time. The longer they live in the Region, the more fully refugees integrate and are able to contribute to a thriving community for everyone.
- ▶ Over half of both recent and long-term refugee respondents reported that Waterloo Region was quite welcoming to immigrants, but for many, this was not the case.
- ▶ Over time, refugees are more able to find affordable housing and employment and feel less isolated.
- ▶ Over time, refugees continue to use community services and seek out support as they integrate in Waterloo Region.

¹ This snapshot compares 204 recent refugees that arrived in Canada within the previous five years, with 151 refugees that arrived more than five years earlier. This comparison gives a rough idea of changes over time for refugees in this community – though they should be interpreted with caution as differences may be impacted by changing demographics over time. See the last page of this snapshot for more information about the 2023 Immigrant Survey.

Recent versus Long Term Refugee Respondents

Most refugee respondents felt Waterloo Region was quite welcoming and had a positive experience settling in the community, though significant proportions had a more negative experience of welcoming and settling.

In 2023, over half of recent (59%) and long-term (60%) refugee respondents² felt Waterloo Region was quite welcoming to immigrants. Over 40% felt the region was only somewhat or not welcoming at all.

A majority (73%) of recent respondents reported that they had a positive³ experience settling in Waterloo Region. This increased somewhat to 80% among long-term refugee respondents. Between 23-30% of refugees did not have a positive experience of settling in the region.

Almost one third (29%) of recent refugee respondents felt very isolated⁴ in the past year. Feelings of isolation seemed to decrease over time, with only 18% of long-term respondents reporting feeling isolated.

Over three quarters of refugee respondents felt a strong sense of belonging⁵ in Waterloo Region. This was stable between recent respondents (76%) and long-term respondents (78%). Almost one quarter of refugees did not feel a strong sense of belonging.

Intention to stay permanently in Waterloo Region grew over time among refugees, with 62% of recent refugee respondents and 71% of long-term refugees reported that they intended to stay permanently⁶ in Waterloo Region.

Cost of living, employment and housing are top challenges for refugees in Waterloo Region. Over time, refugees are more able to find affordable housing, employment commensurate with their skills, and earn sufficient income for their needs.

Refugees that participated in the survey shared many stories:

“After 6 months in Canada, I found a women's support group, and we need more programs like that. They helped me first of all to regain control of my emotions, and then everything started to improve.”

“By fostering a culture of inclusivity, community leaders can help to create a welcoming and supportive environment for immigrants in Waterloo Region. This can help to improve their overall wellbeing, enhance their sense of belonging, and promote a more vibrant and diverse community for all residents.”

“A correct, good approach and help should be given in the beginning, and all this should be provided with understanding and support in everything because every beginning is hard.”

² Respondents living in Waterloo Region for more than five years.

³ Positive experience includes “excellent” and “very good” responses.

⁴ Very isolated includes “a great deal” and “quite a bit” responses.

⁵ This includes “very strong” or “somewhat strong” responses.

⁶ Includes “might stay” or “definitely staying” permanently responses.



In 2023, 67% of recent and 63% of long-term refugee respondents reported **cost of living was one of their top challenges**. Almost all recent refugee respondents (89%) indicated their income was not sufficient⁷ for their needs. This dropped to 68% among long-term refugee respondents.

Many refugees face housing affordability and suitability challenges in Waterloo Region, but this decreases over time. Among recent refugee respondents 62% indicated finding affordable housing was one of their top challenges, compared to 44% among long-term refugees. Over half (53%) of recent refugees lived in housing that was not affordable or suitable, compared to 38% of long-term respondents.

Many refugees face employment barriers, but these too decrease over time. More than half (54%) of recent refugees stated that finding work was one of their top challenges, compared to 29% among long-term respondents. In 2023, 61% of recent refugees survey respondents were employed, which grew to 77% among long-term respondents.

The proportion of refugees in employment commensurate with their skills and experience also grew over time. Among recent refugee respondents 28% were in a job commensurate with their skills and experience, compared to 63% of long-term refugees. Education levels also grew over time, with more long-term refugee respondents having a bachelor's degree or above (50%) compared to recent respondents (42%).

Many recent and long-term refugee newcomers use language and settlement services and rate these services more positively over time.

A majority of recent (87%) and long-term (73%) respondents reported accessing English language learning services, with 62% of recent and 77% of long-term respondents rating these services positively.

Similarly, 88% of recent and 80% of long-term refugee respondents reported using language interpretation services, and 62% of recent and 67% of long-term rated these services positively. Most (90%) recent refugee respondents accessed settlement and immigrant services, 76% of long-term refugees continued to use these services. A majority (79%) of recent and long-term respondents rated these services positively.

These are some of the stories that survey participants shared:

"It is super intimidating coming to a new country where you may not speak the language so having warm and inviting programs is necessary."

"Even though I have lived here for several years, I still need help and I can't find it. Sometimes I feel like I am still a newcomer and there is not much help for me."

"Our community is strong and I'm proud of them. Language and work are the most important things for a newcomer so keep going."

"Without government support, I don't know how I and my family would have survived until now. I thank Canada and its government from the bottom of my heart for their attention."

⁷ Includes "somewhat" or "definitely not enough" responses.

Calls to Action

Refugee respondents shared many suggestions for community leaders to improve the welcoming, integration and wellbeing of immigrants in Waterloo Region. Recent and long-term refugees most commonly suggested that leaders focus on creating more affordable housing, more opportunities to help improve English skills, and better programs to help immigrants to find work. For refugees, these are the critical supports they need to thrive.

Stories shared by survey participants:

“It is difficult to ask for something when you are in a country that opens its doors to you voluntarily, maybe it is difficult for us but I think that in general they do a very good job. However, it might be a good option to regulate housing costs and advocate with landlords so that we can get a rent without being discarded because of our immigration status.”

“The officials need to recognize the skills and knowledge immigrants bring to this country and make jobs more available by acknowledging the past experiences.”

“Clarity in the information/support provided to immigrants, where to access those tools, supported by interpretation/translation.”

“Make sure the newcomers don’t feel alone.”

“I thank all those who have helped me to settle here in this region. Always looking out for me and what I need. Keep up the excellent work. Thank you very much.”

Conclusion

Refugees arrive with many strengths and abilities, and responses to the 2023 Immigrant Survey paint a hopeful picture. A significant majority of refugees gradually integrate into the fabric of the community, achieving milestones in housing, employment, and other vital domains as they settle in Waterloo Region.

Over time, there is a shift among refugee respondents from initial feelings of isolation to a greater sense of belonging and inclusion. At the same time, their continued use of community services over time demonstrates a long-term need for services and support networks to help with their settlement and integration journey.

The experiences and many positive improvements reported by refugees ultimately reflect their resilience and ability to overcome challenges. Making significant efforts to settle and participate within their communities, the stories shared by refugees living in Waterloo Region highlight the importance and beneficial community impact of welcoming and supporting refugees.

Data Sources and Limitations

The data for this snapshot comes from the Immigration Partnership's 2023 Immigrant Survey. This biannual, multilingual survey is for immigrants who live, work and/or study in Waterloo Region. It covers immigrant experiences on a range of topics impacting their ability to reach their full potential and contribute to a thriving, prosperous community for everyone. The survey was most recently conducted in June 2023 with 1,676 participants.

In 2023, the majority of participants filled out the survey online. Participants reflected the whole range of immigrants living in Waterloo Region. Two thirds (67%) had been in Canada for 5 years or less, while the rest had been here for longer. More than half were permanently in Canada (57%) and 39% were here on a temporary permit. Almost all (93%) were living in Cambridge, Kitchener and Waterloo, with 3% in the rural townships. Participants answered the survey in 11 languages and had 75 first languages. English was the first language of 14% of participants, 77% spoke English well or very well and 9% spoke English poorly or not at all. A full 76% of respondents identified as racialized; 59% were female and 40% male; 3% identified as LGBTQ+; 6% were living with a disability or chronic illness. Respondents, like immigrants overall, were highly educated: 75% had a bachelor's degree or above. Almost two thirds (63%) were working (full/part time/casual/self-employed) and 26% were unemployed and looking for work.

Survey responses were disaggregated along many demographic lines and analysed to uncover the varying experiences of different groups of immigrants. This profile highlights larger differences among refugee subgroups. Because of the small numbers for some subgroups, the findings should be interpreted with caution. Additional information can be found at www.immigrationwaterlooregion.ca/immigrantsurvey.

The Waterloo Region Immigration Partnership is collaboration of over 100 community service, business, municipal, post-secondary and ethno-cultural organizations, and residents working together to create the conditions for immigrants to succeed and help build a welcoming, dynamic community.



For more information contact:

Waterloo Region Immigration Partnership
ImmigrationPartnership@regionofwaterloo.ca
www.immigrationwaterlooregion.ca

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