

Newcomers and the Digital Divide

A Research Collaboration with the Guelph-Wellington Local Immigration Partnership
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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Research Goals	3
Background.....	3
Newcomers to Canada	3
Barriers to Accessing Services	4
Newcomer Experiences with the Digital Divide	5
Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic.....	5
Research Methods	6
Results.....	6
Environmental Scan	6
Immigrant Services Guelph-Wellington (ISGW).....	6
Lutherwood	7
St. George’s Centre.....	7
Settlement Services in the County	7
Themes from Research Interviews.....	8
Challenges	8
Opportunities	10
How Organizations are Adapting	10
Future Considerations and Recommendations.....	11
Conclusion	12
References.....	13

Introduction

In 2022, the Research Shop, in partnership with the Guelph-Wellington Local Immigration Partnership, conducted an investigative analysis to explore how the digital divide has impacted Canadian newcomers, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. This project specifically sought to investigate how and in what ways the digital divide has impacted the provisioning of programming to newcomers during the pandemic. Over the past two years, the public health guidelines surrounding the pandemic have shifted service and program delivery online, resulting in an increased reliance on technology by schools, government, and social services. This shift can be especially challenging for newcomer families, who now must navigate a largely digital system that may be new and unfamiliar.

Research Goals

The goal of this project is to understand how the digital divide impacts newcomer families in the Guelph-Wellington area as they navigate accessing digital resources and programming, specifically in the context of the pandemic. Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) defines a “newcomer” as “an immigrant or refugee who is adapting to life in Canada”, regardless of how long they have been in the country (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2020a). For the purposes of our research, we interpret this definition to refer mainly to permanent residents and refugees, unless otherwise specified.

The objectives of this research project include:

- Understanding which programs are offered in the Guelph-Wellington area and how they support newcomer families in relation to programming and technology;
- Understanding how these organizations engage with newcomers and their methods of communication;
- Understanding how the pandemic has affected newcomer Canadian families;
- Understanding how to minimize the digital divide for newcomer families, particularly during the pandemic.

The Guelph-Wellington Local Immigration Partnership (GWLIP), hosted by the City of Guelph, was established in 2009 with the aim of bringing together the Guelph and Wellington County and community stakeholders to support newcomer needs and integration.

Background

Newcomers to Canada

Canada is home to a diverse and growing immigrant population. In 2019, 341,000 permanent residents were welcomed to the country, including 30,000 resettled refugees (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2021). Newcomers to Canada have unique needs that must



be addressed in order to facilitate the challenging process of settlement. From a socioeconomic perspective, immigrants often face many inequities compared to the general population, including higher rates of poverty, as well as poor housing, employment, and education levels (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2018). These factors are determinants of how newcomers interact with their communities. Newcomers that are visible minorities, have a low income, have a disability, and/or have experienced trauma are at a greater risk of facing social isolation (Caidi & Allard, 2005). These conditions are exacerbated by the discrimination faced by individuals due to factors like race and language proficiency (Edge et al., 2014).

Based on their migratory experience, different newcomers have different needs in terms of accessing health care and social services. For individuals who have had traumatizing migratory experiences, including refugees, there are a wide range of barriers that prevent them from accessing the support they need to ensure their well-being (Edge et al., 2014).

Barriers to Accessing Services

Settlement services, health care, and other social services are of critical importance in the newcomer experience. Settlement service providers facilitate access to the supports needed for newcomers to integrate within their communities (Barker, 2021). This support is not just limited to the early newcomer experience. Barker (2021, p.41) states:

Settlement service providers who are critical supports to newcomers when they first arrive can reach out to relatively settled migrants to provide support, a sense of community, tips for well-being and self-care, and resources to other public or private sector services.

While social services are important resources, many barriers exist for individuals seeking support. These barriers include language barriers, stigmatization, and accessibility factors like the lack of transportation or childcare options (Salami et al., 2019). Furthermore, due to the lack of resources, these services are often provided during traditional working hours, making it difficult for newcomers who are working to access supports (Mukhtar et al., 2016).

There are also several barriers associated with newcomers seeking and participating in training and education programs as part of the settlement process. Sethi (2015) summarizes the following common barriers experienced by individuals within the service delivery setting:

- Not knowing where to find courses or programs
- Financial constraints
- Time constraints
- Communication problems
- Transportation constraints
- Inability to find/afford childcare
- Being unable to navigate the internet
- Staff not having knowledge or skills to help newcomers

Newcomer Experiences with the Digital Divide

The “digital divide” is a term that refers to the gaps between people who can access and use information and communication technologies (like smart phones and computers, as well as reliable and affordable internet services) in their daily lives and people who cannot (Vital Focus, 2021). Scheerder and colleagues (2017) find that factors like age, gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and geography affect individuals’ ability to access internet. These findings are supported by Kim and colleagues (2007), who emphasize that individuals who have higher incomes, more education, and are younger are more likely to have internet access. For many newcomers, acquiring technological resources is a low priority compared to meeting basic immediate needs like housing and employment (Gallagher et al., 2019).

However, there are also findings that indicate that some newcomers harness technology to mitigate settlement stressors. For example, McCaffrey and Taha (2019) share examples of resettled individuals using smartphone applications to translate information and send messages. Additionally, using applications like Uber and Lyft allowed newcomers to generate income, while other GPS features made it easier for individuals to meet with other community members and participate in social activities (McCaffrey & Taha, 2019). Digital tools have also been used as a tool for engaging with individuals learning English. They have been used in digital storytelling, teacher-student communication, and other educational initiatives (Galante, 2014).

The digital divide presents a complex issue of inequity and access for newcomers. Caidi and Allard (2005) argue that both the lack of access and the inability to effectively use information technologies is a form of marginalization. This is especially important in terms of social inclusion. Yuan and colleagues (2019, p. 130) find that “digital literacy has become increasingly essential for individuals to be successful in living, learning and working in the context of the far-reaching digitalization of society.” This highlights the need for newcomers to be equipped with digital skills, in order to reduce further marginalization. Furthermore, access and ability to use the internet can be empowering for individuals who are settling in a new country, by providing them with an autonomous way to obtain information (Wang et al., 2020; Yuan et al., 2019).

Researchers argue that access alone is not determinant of individuals benefitting from technology, or being impacted by the digital divide – rather knowing how to effectively utilize these technologies is important (Caidi and Allard 2005; Yuan et al., 2019).

Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has had wide ranging effects on the lives of newcomers, particularly in disrupting access to essential services, including settlement supports. Many newcomer-serving organizations were forced to limit their services to addressing emergency needs, while others transitioned to an online mode of service delivery (Barker, 2021). This shift “has likely left many newcomers in vulnerable situations, rendering them in positions of instability and isolation” (Barker, 2021, p. 35). During the pandemic, access to health-related information is also a challenge, especially for newcomers that are refugees (Clarke et al., 2021). Newcomers that have low literacy and access to technology may also find it challenging to access telehealth services (Clarke et al., 2021). Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic may make it more difficult for



vulnerable newcomers to access health care. For example, interpretation services being limited and the inability for individuals to access in-person support from trusted sources may make it more difficult to access care (Smith et al., 2021). This situation is exacerbated by the closure of community programs and activities (Smith et al., 2021). While there is limited literature on the effects of the pandemic on the digital divide and service provision on newcomer communities, the impact that it has had cannot be understated.

Research Methods

This research project utilized a multi-methods approach, including an initial literature review, an environmental scan of organization web platforms, and four in-depth key informant interviews.

The environmental scan was conducted by searching for service providers on Google. Each organization had a website with a web link and information that was incorporated into this report. The literature review was conducted using the University of Guelph Library and Omni Libraries search engine to find relevant sources. Key words and phrases included were “newcomers”, “digital literacy”, “newcomer services”, “COVID-19”, and “settlement services”. Due to the limited literature on this topic, the search was done in a purposeful manner to identify relevant sources for review. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify key areas and gather information about research objectives.

The in-depth interviews with four key informants included services providers from organizations in the Guelph-Wellington region that engaged closely with newcomers to Canada prior to and through the COVID-19 pandemic. The Guelph-Wellington Local Immigration Partnership shared the contact information for potential interviewees with the research team. Members of the research team contacted potential interviewees by email to confirm their interest in participating in this project. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and one hour, and asked interviewees nine questions with follow-up prompts. The interviews were facilitated by one researcher, with another researcher present to take notes. Notes from the interviews were inputted into the qualitative data analysis software NVivo 12 and were analyzed for key themes. The themes that emerged in this analysis are further described in the results section.

Results

Environmental Scan

The environmental scan focused on the English as a Second Language (ESL) and digital training available to newcomers in the Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph area. Together these offer a snapshot of some of the types of services that are available to newcomers who are becoming part of Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph communities.

Immigrant Services Guelph-Wellington (ISGW)

Immigrant Services Guelph-Wellington has been operating since 1978 in the wider Guelph community. The organization offers various services to the public, including:

- Settlement Services
- Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS)
- Language Assessment and English as a Second Language (ESL) Referral
- Community Connections
- Translation and Interpretation (TIPS)
- Employment Readiness

Through the Employment Readiness Program, participants can receive computer skills training amongst other services. The Introductory Computer Club is a recurring event that encourages participants to develop basic computer skills. Participants meet online via Zoom and can earn a certificate of attendance for attending 80% of the classes. The registration form on the website includes questions about prior experience with Zoom and computer skills in order to assist individuals who may require extra support (Immigrant Services Guelph-Wellington, 2022).

Lutherwood

Lutherwood is a not-for-profit organization that serves the Waterloo Region and Wellington County community. The organization provides services ranging from mental health support to employment and housing services. The organization offers career support services for newcomers in Guelph, such as job search workshops, mentorship, and job connection. Individuals can also book appointments to speak with Lutherwood Employment Services staff to receive advice and information on training. Furthermore, the organization also hosts a Job Search Workshop for Immigrants which covers topics such as career exploration, self-marketing, and networking. The workshop is offered for individuals with basic English and computer literacy skills (Lutherwood, 2022).

St. George's Centre

The Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada program, also known as LINC, is offered at two locations in Guelph. The program focuses on improving English language skills (writing, reading, grammar etc.), computer skills, and speaking skills. LINC is free for Permanent Residents and Refugees and enrolment at the St. George's Centre is on a continuous basis. Prior to beginning the program individuals must have completed a language test at Immigrant Services Guelph Wellington. There is also a Care for Newcomer Children's Program available for children of parents who are completing LINC classes. Additionally, the St. George's Centre also has Adult English as a Second Language (ESL) programs for newcomers (Classes at St. George's Centre for ESL, 2022).

Settlement Services in the County

The Wellington County website offers information on where education and training can be accessed through the Employment Resource Centre. In the City of Guelph, there are four organizations that are dedicated to providing educational opportunities: Action Read Community Literacy Centre, The Wellington Centre for Continuing Education, Conestoga College, and the St. George's Centre. Both the Action Read Community Literacy Centre and The Wellington Centre for Continuing Education provide computer training. Similarly, in the Wellington County community, The North Wellington Centre for Continuing Education and The Wellington County Learning Centre provide computer literacy and training (Settlement Services, 2022).



Themes from Research Interviews

The service providers interviewed provided a range of services to newcomers – mostly adults or youth aged over 16 - to help them settle into their new communities, including:

- Providing information and general orientation
- Connecting newcomers with resources
- Helping newcomers fill out government documents
- Answering questions
- Helping newcomers access employment opportunities and services
- Helping newcomers access healthcare, social and legal assistance
- Helping newcomers navigate housing and apply for housing assistance

In general, service providers found that the COVID-19 pandemic brought with it a mix of challenges and some unexpected opportunities, as organizations shifted their services to being largely – if not entirely – online. These challenges and opportunities varied between user groups, who might differ based on their level of education, level of digital literacy, access to electronic devices and wifi, and access to transportation services, amongst other factors.

Challenges

Differences Between Newcomer Groups

Service providers agreed that there is a need to consider variation between diverse groups of newcomers – as one interviewee explained, there can be vast differences in the levels of English language and digital literacy between various groups, and in particular between newcomer professionals and newcomer refugees. For newcomer professionals, who often hold professional designations or degrees, the pandemic has been much easier to navigate because they already have a high level of digital literacy. As another participant put it, newcomers are not a monolithic group and this diversity in newcomer groups needs to be recognized by programming and policies designed to support newcomers. For instance, women may experience specific challenges as newcomers, given that they do not always have the same level of access to education in their home countries as men. Women may also have the added responsibilities of childcare. Specific challenges are also felt by elderly newcomers, who might not have the knowledge, or comfort, in accessing and using digital devices.

Challenges with Transitioning to Online Service Provision – Newcomers

Service providers described the challenges faced in switching to online learning and service provision for newcomer clients. For newcomers, this transition came with a range of new challenges, including not only navigating digital devices and new platforms for communication, but also finding ways to work and learn at home in an online environment. Often, clients were not equipped with workspaces, and many clients had the added pressure of learning from home while balancing childcare responsibilities. One service provider noted, however, that clients were open to learning how to transition to obtaining services from home, and that providers and clients learned together through this challenging time of transition. Other service providers explained that their clients missed in-person interactions, and once restrictions were lifted, they wanted to come to the office. This was particularly true for elderly clients, who may desire the social interaction that comes with in-person interactions. Another service provider echoed this



sentiment, stating that in-person classes used to be a place for clients to socialize, and that it is difficult to replicate this aspect of programming in an online environment.

Challenges with Transitioning to Online Service Provision – Service Providers

While participants mainly focused on challenges faced by newcomers, they also shared challenges faced by their organizations and service providers due to the transition to online service provision. Service providers noted that compared to face-to-face communication, online service provision was less efficient in many cases. It often took service providers longer to explain processes over the phone or in virtual meetings with clients. This form of “indirect” service delivery could sometimes be confusing to clients and providers, which could lead to frustration. For example, one service provider shared that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions on in-person meetings, they could show clients pictures or forms on their office computer screens, or directly indicate which documents they were referring to for the service they were providing. They shared that being unable to communicate directly in this manner due to online service delivery created a “distance” that could be felt by both the provider and client. Participants also spoke about the impact this transition had on their organization’s staff and their capacity to teach digital skills. One participant shared that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and transition to online service provision, their organization did not perceive the need to have staff trained in digital skills. They reflected on this by emphasizing that they would have been more prepared for this transition had they incorporated digital aspects and training into their programming earlier. They addressed this challenge by providing training to staff on facilitating access to digital services for newcomer clients.

Access to and Knowledge of Digital Devices and Technologies

While most service providers agreed that newcomers generally have access to smartphones and a baseline level of digital literacy, there remain challenges when it comes to accessing computers, tablets or wifi. This has led many service providers and organizations to start offering lending services or devices and wifi hubs free of charge to the clients they work with.

There are significant challenges for newcomers with low levels of digital literacy skills – without digital skills newcomers may face difficulties getting a job that is not labour intensive (e.g. in the manufacturing sector). This means that newcomers often end up working shifts, which can create challenges for childcare, transportation, and can be especially challenging for those with physical challenges like the elderly or people with disabilities.

Those with low levels of digital literacy may often be confused about how to use devices or online services. Clients will often share email accounts with friends and relatives, meaning that sometimes the wrong person will fill out a form. Clients will often also create multiple email accounts, creating challenges for communication with service providers. Finally, one service provider explained that clients will sometimes fill out the wrong form online by accident, which can lead them to accidentally commit fraud. They described an incident where their client accidentally completed an application for a COVID-19 related benefit program, instead of applying for benefits related to maternity leave from their employment.

It was also noted that some newcomers may be susceptible to fraud. Those who are not comfortable with online banking can easily become victims of different scams. This can create a sense of distrust when service providers ask for information relating to banking or finances, because many newcomers might have already been scammed in the past.



Lack of Available Programming

There are limited opportunities for digital literacy training in the Guelph-Wellington area, particularly for those with low levels of English language skills. This has become particularly pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic, with many services limiting or eliminating existing programming, or transitioning to offering them largely online. This lack of availability in programming can be very challenging for newcomers who are trying to learn both English and digital literacy skills at the same time to prepare for entering the workforce. For example, the ESL Tutoring Program at the St. George's Centre, a volunteer tutoring program that focused on providing specific language support to newcomers and other individuals, was suspended as a result of the pandemic.

Workforce Challenges

Recruitment for employment is increasingly digital – with both advertising for positions being online as well as application submission. This may cause a significant barrier for those who are unfamiliar with online platforms. Many positions require online training, especially during the pandemic. It was noted that this can create inequities in compensation for newcomers. For example, online training may be given a set time frame (wage), not considering that someone with low digital literacy skills may take much longer to complete the training.

Service providers also expressed concerns about the safety of their clients. If employees are expected to complete training online, on their own, there may be barriers in how they understand and interpret the information provided, which can result in them having another person complete the training for them. This can jeopardize their safety when they arrive at the worksite. Further, this can put service providers in a difficult position because they must balance the health and safety of their clients while also maintaining good relationships with employers in the Guelph-Wellington area.

Opportunities

In spite of the many challenges identified with service provision during the pandemic, service providers were generally optimistic about their clients' ability to adapt to online learning and service provision. As one service provider stated, through the pandemic many clients learned about their potential to be successful in an online environment.

Service providers noted that some barriers have been removed by the pandemic, such as:

- Increase in flexibility for those doing shift work;
 - Working learners often have rotating shifts, and it can be easier to get off night shifts then go to a class if they don't have to commute to or get ready for class;
- For those with limited access to transportation, online appointments can be more convenient and can also save on transportation costs;
- For some families, having children study remotely is easier and allows for more flexibility;
- Children may be more versed in the use of online devices and can help their parents or grandparents.

How Organizations are Adapting

Service providers spoke to several ways in which their organizations are adapting with the increased use and/or reliance on digital programs. Some ways they are adapting include:

- Utilizing 'Navigator Roles'
 - One organization spoke to beginning these roles in 2021;
 - Navigators were newcomers themselves who have developed language and digital literacy skills and have become community mentors;
 - They can help others with a variety of tasks, such as housing, childcare, income and sponsorship applications.
- Staff training
 - Staff are trained on how to support clients in alternative formats (e.g. over the phone or online).
- Mobile services
 - Some organizations have started offering mobile services where they might, for instance, go to a person's home and set up their computer for a job interview;
- Sending clients 'how to use' videos for different technology platforms; constantly communicating with clients through different platforms, like by phone, mail and email
- Providing tablets, chromebooks, wifi hubs to clients

Future Considerations and Recommendations

After conducting the background research and research interviews, a few considerations that could reduce the digital divide have become clear. To begin, participants emphasized that newcomers are not a monolithic group and that different groups will have different needs depending on their employment status, level of English literacy, and level of digital literacy, amongst other factors. To meet the needs of newcomers and to prevent issues related to language barriers, navigators and service providers who can communicate in various languages should be accessible to clients.

Additionally, funding is an important component and should be secured to ensure that various services can be offered. Through the research interviews, it became clear that organizations require more funding for English language training and for digital literacy training programs for individuals with low levels of English proficiency. Furthermore, funding can be applied towards providing clients with the devices they need to be successful – e.g. laptops, tablets, cellphones, and wifi connections if they don't have access.

Lastly, service providers could offer more flexibility in when services are offered and how to accommodate people who are working shifts and may not be working in an online environment. This likely means offering a hybrid of in-person and online service options as the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions loosen with time. As previously mentioned, people are more likely to come in person to obtain services. Continuous connection and communication with clients is also important in a virtual environment to help alleviate some of the distance felt when communicating online – e.g. sending clients 'how to use zoom' videos the day before appointments; calling and emailing with appointment reminders, etc. These are a few recommendations and considerations that could reduce the digital divide and increase accessibility.



Conclusion

In this preliminary study on newcomers and the digital divide in Guelph-Wellington, we found that many of the results from the environmental scan and in-depth interviews reflected findings documented in the academic literature. Newcomers, and particularly refugees, face many inequities compared to the general population, and this can be exacerbated if the individual has a disability, is a woman, is elderly and/or has experienced trauma. These inequities have become particularly pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic, as newcomers have had to learn not only new language skills and societal norms, but also sufficient levels of digital literacy in order to access basic services like healthcare, childcare, employment and housing.

Our central finding, that newcomers are not a homogeneous group and therefore need tailored programming based on their unique needs, is documented in the literature by authors like Edge et al. (2014). Due to the changes associated with the pandemic, we also found that newcomers may lack access to the digital devices they need to succeed; may be especially susceptible to fraud; and may experience inequities and new health and safety issues in the workplace.

While the pandemic was mostly associated with new challenges for newcomers, there were also new opportunities, such as the added flexibility that comes with learning in an online environment; the ability to save time and money on transportation; and the ability to stay home while learning and care for children.

The findings of this study, although preliminary, highlight the need for more and expanded settlement services in the Guelph-Wellington region, to support a diverse range of newcomers as they settle into their communities under the backdrop of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Future research could explore these topics by engaging with newcomers directly to learn more about their experiences of resettlement during the COVID-19 Pandemic and to identify any gaps in service provision in the Guelph-Wellington region.

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