

Costs of family separation following successful refugee claims in Canada

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Context

People seeking refugee protection whose claims are accepted in Canada receive protected person status and are allowed to apply for permanent residence. They are permitted to include on their permanent residence applications eligible family members who are outside Canada. Eligible family members are a spouse or common law partner and dependent children under the age of 22 years at the lock-in date.²

While accepted refugees and their family members are legally eligible for permanent residence in Canada, they must be admitted under the immigration levels for Protected Persons in Canada and Dependents Abroad. Because the number of people applying under these levels exceeds the number of spaces available, family separation currently lasts 50 months.³ In 2024, the Government of Canada announced major reductions in immigration levels starting in 2025 (see table 1 below).

Table 1: Immigration levels for protected persons in Canada and dependents abroad⁴

2024	2025	2026	2026
27,000	20,000	18,000	18,000

At the end of April 2024, IRCC had inventories of 75,879 Protected Persons and 41, 908 dependants abroad for a total of 117, 787 Protected Persons and family members abroad.⁵ Given these reduced immigration levels and increased numbers of asylum claims, the backlog of permanent residence applications will grow, resulting in longer wait times for family reunification.

In this context, this paper seeks to answer the following research question: What does the existing literature tell us about the economic, social and health costs – for accepted refugee claimants and governments in Canada⁶ - of delays in family reunification for accepted refugees?

Methodology

This document is based on secondary data and literature available in French and English to March 2025. The researchers undertook a comprehensive search in the University of Ottawa library database, with the assistance of a librarian. We subsequently reviewed the bibliographies

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² For more information about the definition of dependent children, as well as exceptions for married children and children with disabilities, see: <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/immigrate-canada/age-limit-requirements-dependent-children.html>

³ <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/application/check-processing-times.html#immigration>

⁴ Data from <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/notices/supplementary-immigration-levels-2025-2027.html>

⁵ <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/transparency/committees/cimm-may-27-2024/key-data-tables.html>

⁶ In the federal state of Canada, costs are borne by federal, provincial and municipal governments.

of published work to find other peer-reviewed studies, as well as grey literature. With the assistance of a data services librarian, databases were also reviewed for statistics and cases of family separation. Unfortunately, because the category of protected person/accepted refugee claimant could not easily be disaggregated from other immigration categories, it was difficult to find specific data relating to the scope of this study.

Most research and data are dated. The most recent study in Canada is from 2018 (Martin 2018), with most of the relevant data from the early 2000s. Moreover, there is limited literature specifically on protected persons/accepted refugee claimants. Rather, in most cases, we had to extract information on this immigration category from broader studies that focused on family separation across a broader range of immigration categories. This task was exacerbated by the ambiguous use of the term “refugee”, which is often used by researchers, policy-makers and practitioners to refer both to people who arrive in Canada as permanent residents through refugee resettlement, as well as those who successfully apply for refugee protection in Canada. Only the latter are included in our study. To avoid confusion, in this paper, we refer to these individuals as protected persons/accepted refugee claimants.

In order to fully understand the costs of family separation for protected persons/accepted refugee claimants, we recommend a more comprehensive study. This larger research project should involve economists and statisticians who can work with “dirty data”⁷, as well as new qualitative primary data collection involving psychologists, social workers and sociologists with expertise in working with refugee families and children navigating traumatic experiences. Given the multifaceted costs identified through this preliminary study, a more comprehensive, interdisciplinary research project is necessary to generate and analyze new data given the current context of increasing backlogs prolonging family separation.

Despite the limitations of the existing data and literature, we were able to identify clear trends in relation to health, economic and social costs. Moreover, the fact that these issues have been identified and documented over more than two decades demonstrates the need for urgent action to respond to a longstanding and recurring problem.

Health costs

The existing literature in Canada (Rousseau, Mekki-Berrada, and Moreau 2001; Moreau, Rousseau, and Mekki-Berrada 2008; Coates and Hayward 2005), as well as in analogous contexts like the United States (Suarez-Orozco, Kim, and Bang 2011) and the United Kingdom (Beaton, Musgrave, and Liebl 2018), overwhelmingly points to severe physical and mental health impacts of family separation. The health issues affect protected persons/accepted refugee claimants in Canada, as well as their family members overseas, who will eventually come to Canada. The severity of these health issues, as well as their long-term effects – even after reunification – have serious implications for the Canadian healthcare and education systems, the costs of which are primarily born by provincial governments.

Research with Latin American and African refugees in Montreal indicates that family separation results in both individual and family trauma (Rousseau, Mekki-Berrada, and Moreau 2001). In

⁷ Dirty data refers to statistics and information that are incomplete, inconsistent and inaccurate.

the following sections, we separate out the impacts on different family members, as well as the costs for Canadian governments.

Impact on children

Medical associations around the world “have asserted that family separation is a traumatic childhood experience due to critical disruptions in attachment and the child’s environment.” (Shadid and Sidhu 2021, 152) There is limited research directly with children of protected persons affected by family separation in Canada, a gap that should be filled by further studies. The existing data indicate that children experience individual trauma due to feelings of abandonment by parents (Rousseau, Mekki-Berrada, and Moreau 2001).

For example, a Salvadoran man noted: “It was hard at first. My son never wanted me to get close to his mother. It was hard. The children thought that I had abandoned them. They considered me to be a traitor.” (cited in Rousseau, Mekki-Berrada and Moreau 2001, p. 50)

In contexts of family separation from one or more parent, older children may have to step into parent-like roles to care for younger siblings or a parent who cannot cope.

For example, one daughter told researchers, “The stress of my mom is being too much for us and it is because my dad is not here. [...] One person is supposed to stay with my mom but I can’t because I have to work.” (cited in Coates and Hayward 2005, p. 78)

International research by medical professionals indicates that separation may cause “developmental regression” in children (Shadid and Sidhu 2021, p. 153) and higher rates of unexplained illnesses (Shadid and Sidhu 2021, p. 155). Children left behind in refugee camps and conflict zones face heightened risks of violence, injury, malnutrition and disease and do not always benefit from access to health services. Family members in Quebec report disappearances, threats (Rousseau, Mekki-Berrada, and Moreau 2001) and military recruitment of children left behind (Moreau, Rousseau, and Mekki-Berrada 2008).

Impact on parents and spouses

Adults who are separated from their child(ren) and/or partner experience trauma and mental health issues due to guilt at leaving family behind and anxiety related to reprisals or threats against these family members (Rousseau, Mekki-Berrada and Moreau 2001, p. 41). Research indicates that these mental health issues increase over time due to prolonged separation (Moreau et al 2008, p. 190).

For example, one woman from Afghanistan who had been waiting over 6 years for reunification with her husband told researchers, “In night I sometimes cannot sleep and I just walk and walk around the lobby [of my apartment building]. [...] I can no longer take care of my children when they’re missing all the time their father. They need their father. Even sometimes my family asking ‘where is he’ and other kids at [my children’s] schools are asking.” (Coates and Hayward 2005, p. 77-78)

The “compounded stress of adapting to a new country, single parenting, financial problems, and anxiety concerning her spouse in Afghanistan” caused severe mental and physical health issues

“to the point where she needs assistance with simple day-to-day activities.” (Coates and Hayward 2005, p. 83)

Impact on adults in Canada who are separated from their spouse and/or child(ren)

Research indicates that refugee adults who are separated from all family members in Canada experience emotional and social isolation (Martin 2018). Mental health challenges arise from undertaking daily activities – such as preparing meals – alone. The feeling of social isolation is also felt during special events like holidays or missing significant personal events – such as birthdays, births, marriages or religious ceremonies – of family members who remain overseas.

For example, a man from Nigeria spoke about the intense pain of being separated from his wife and children, “I talk of being alone, very hard. I’m telling you, I did not pray for my enemy to be in this situation, do you understand? [...] I would not wish it for anybody.” (Martin 2018, p. 261)

Costs to Canadian governments

The longer the separation, the more likely that refugees and their family members will need mental and physical health interventions (Moreau, Rousseau, and Mekki-Berrada 2008), both before and after reunification (see also next section). While refugee claimants’ healthcare costs are covered by the federal government under the Interim Federal Health Program, once they become protected persons, they are eligible for provincial healthcare. This shifts the costs from federal to provincial governments.

Referrals to mental health professionals and prescriptions for medications create costs for individuals and families without insurance and put a strain on an already burdened healthcare system.⁸ Provincial health coverage for mental health services and prescriptions varies significantly. There are also waiting lists for family doctors and mental health services across the country. Where protected persons cannot pay for these services out of pocket, or cannot access the services due to waitlist, they are more likely to delay accessing care, resulting in more emergency visits, with a higher cost to government.⁹

Because refugee families underutilize mental health services, children are also more reliant on school-based counselling and mental health services (Rousseau and Guzder 2008). Such support may require culturally appropriate, specialized approaches and/or translation/interpretation, resulting in additional costs to school boards and provincial governments funding education services.

Social costs of family breakdown

Despite the significant time, money and emotional labour (Martin 2018) invested in long-distance relationships, the literature shows that prolonged family separation also creates strained relationships, both before and after reunification. These social costs of family breakdown are borne by children, parents, spouses and all levels of government in Canada.

Before reunification

⁸ <https://www.cma.ca/healthcare-for-real/what-mental-health-services-are-covered-canada>

⁹ <https://www.cihi.ca/sites/default/files/document/hospital-spending-highlights-2020-en.pdf>

International research demonstrates that “maintaining long-distance emotional intimacy over an extended physical absence is challenging” (Suarez-Orozco et al 2011). There is ample evidence of relationship breakdown between spouses due to separation (Rousseau, Mekki-Berrada, and Moreau 2001). Lengthy separation over many years represents a significant percentage of a child’s life, during which parents may also miss significant life course events (Martin 2019; Clark-Kazak 2024).

For example, one refugee spoke about the damage to his emotional bond with his children: “I’m talking to them, but it’s like I’m talking to friends. The love is still, dead.” (Martin 2018)

After reunification

Following years of separation, family relationships are not repaired immediately. The literature indicates many ongoing, intergenerational effects of prolonged family separation. Children who have spent formative years of their life away from parents and/or siblings may feel like their family members are “strangers” (Suarez-Orozco, Kim, and Bang 2011).

For example, a 14-year-old girl recalled the moment she was reunited with her mother: “My mother was crying. She hugged me...and I felt bad. Like neither my sister nor I knew her.” (Suarez-Orozco et al 2011, p. 15)

Family relationships are further strained when a parent has a new partner or spouse (Suarez-Orozco et al 2011, p. 9). In some cases, children must also adapt to being reunited with a sibling who accompanied their parent, or to a new sibling born after the family was separated (Suarez-Orozco et al 2011, p. 9).

Children who spent significant time in their home country or a transit country with a guardian may have formed a parent-like attachment to that person, who is not eligible for resettlement. In these cases, family reunification with their parent(s) also entails a new separation with another loved one.

For example, a 16-year-old girl explained, “I loved living with them [grandparents] because they were really sweet people. They were wonderful parents.... [T]hey understand me, [and] they love me...I did not want to leave them. We [she and her siblings] were used to living with them.” (Suarez-Orozco et al 2011, p. 16)

Similarly, it is difficult for parents to adapt to being reunited with their children, some of whom feel resentment against them.

Some people require individual, couples and/or family counseling, therapy or mental health supports to cope with long-term separation (Moreau, Rousseau, and Mekki-Berrada 2008; Rousseau, Mekki-Berrada, and Moreau 2001; Martin 2018).

For example, a refugee from South America, described the ongoing difficulties she and her teenaged son faced after 11 years of living apart: “I think that the separation of so many years ... left wounds in his heart. And maybe he doesn’t express it, and here we are. Because his attitude sometimes is ... a little bit ... it hurts me. For example, his responses. Sometimes I don’t feel

like he really wants me as his mother despite the fact that he tries. But I know that we need family therapy really. Because ... I know he needs to get it out, because one way or another, even if I did it for his benefit, separation leaves scars, especially psychological ones, for a child. And our separation was very long.” (Schmidt, Bhuyan, and Lash 2022, 309–10)

Costs to Canadian governments

Given the current backlogs, family separation will last at least four years, during which time relationships will deteriorate. This family breakdown is not only a preventable tragedy for the people involved, but also entails costs to Canadian governments. In extreme cases, child protection services will need to be involved, with significant costs for provincial governments.

Economic costs

In addition to the significant resources related to mental and physical healthcare outlined above, there are also real economic costs of family separation for protected persons and their families, as well as Canadian governments.

Costs for protected persons

Families who are separated across borders must maintain at least two households. Protected persons in Canada not only pay rent and living expenses here, but must also send money abroad to support their family members living overseas.

For example, a refugee told researchers that “sending remittances was more expensive than if they lived together in Canada.” (Bélanger and Candiz 2019, 3483)

Research shows that single, foreign-born adults are most likely to have unaffordable housing due to reduced social networks (Choi and Ramaj 2024). Food insecurity is also correlated with single-parent households and racialization (Men, Urquia, and Tarasuk 2021).

Parents who are separated from their spouse or partner also have to pay childcare costs, which can be prohibitive (Morantz et al. 2013). Those who cannot access affordable childcare face integration challenges with limited opportunities to work, learn English or French and manage daily tasks. Researchers also report that “increased rates of depression among immigrant and refugee mothers of young children have been associated with social isolation and lack of help with child care” (Morantz et al. 2013, 323).

Costs for Canada

In addition to the financial burden that remittances place on refugee families, there is also an indirect cost for Canada, as funds are leaving the country. Some researchers report that “All of the families that we spoke to for this project were sending financial assistance back home. In the case of a sick or hospitalized relative, the costs were even greater and more money was leaving Canada.” (Bronwyn 2014, 14)

Research shows that family separation is a barrier to integration, including finding work. In a study in the UK, for example, “Thirty-three of the 44 families were unable to focus on activities essential to integration, such as learning English, because they were preoccupied with worries about family members, experiencing feelings of guilt or struggling with mental health problems.”

(Beaton, Musgrave, and Liebl 2018, 3). In contrast, family reunification can be an accelerator of integration. Research in family showed that “a united family gives the refugee further support to cope with the stresses of resettlement and an increased flexibility to adjust to a new country and culture.” (Coates and Hayward 2005, p. 83) As refugees and their families integrate, they find work, pay taxes and contribute to the economy, communities and social life.

Reputational and legal costs to Canada

The right to family unity is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Canada’s Immigration and Refugee Act also explicitly lists as an objective “to support the self-sufficiency and the social and economic well-being of refugees by facilitating reunification with their family members in Canada” (IRPA 3(2)(f))

Prolonged family separation undermines these rights. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has, on several occasions, expressed concern, including:

“The insufficient measures aimed at family reunification with a view to ensuring that it is dealt with in a positive, humane and expeditious manner.” (CRC 1995, #3)
“The delays in dealing with reunification of the family in cases where one or more members of the family have been considered eligible for refugee status in Canada.” (CRC 1995, #3)
“Ensure that family reunification is dealt with in an expeditious manner (CRC 2003, #47)
“Preserve children’s rights to family unity” (CRC 2022, #42)

These recurring concerns demonstrate a longstanding problem and pose reputational damage to Canada. Moreover, there could be legal costs, should families choose to pursue litigation.

Conclusion and recommendations

The existing literature and data clearly document the health, social, economic and reputational costs of family separation for protected persons, their families and Canadian governments. Given current backlogs, these costs will be reproduced for thousands of people over many years. As an immediate solution to this problem, the Government of Canada could issue Temporary Residence Permits to eligible family members, to allow them to live in Canada while they await finalization of their permanent residence application. Should the Government not adopt this policy immediately, a more comprehensive research project could be undertaken to measure the costs of family separation in a more holistic way.

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