Economic and Social Reports

From adaptability to vulnerability: Changes in admission criteria and refugee participation in social assistance
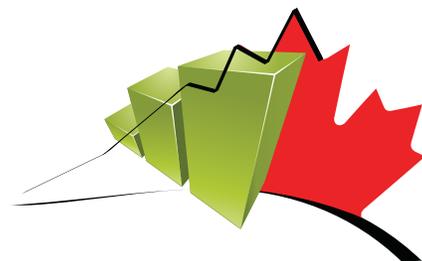
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From adaptability to vulnerability: Changes in admission criteria and refugee participation in social assistance

by Lisa Kaida, Max Stick and Feng Hou

The 2002 *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* (IRPA) replaced the *Immigration Act, 1976* as the primary legislation guiding immigration in Canada. It marked a major policy shift—from an emphasis on adaptability to vulnerability—in the admission of resettled refugees. Prior to the IRPA, those awarded refugee status had to demonstrate their capacity for economic independence in Canada. This would normally be within a year after arrival and would consider age, educational attainment, skills, presence of family members and other factors. The IRPA significantly altered Canada's refugee priorities by committing to admission on humanitarian grounds and prioritizing those in need of protection (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2016; Lu et al., 2020).

Changes in selection policy had a particular impact on the characteristics of government-assisted refugees (GARs). For example, prior to the IRPA (1997 to 2001), 53% of newly admitted GARs had less than a high school education. However, this percentage increased to 74% among GARs who arrived after the IRPA (2005 to 2009). The share of lone-parent GARs also increased from 6% in the pre-IRPA cohort to 12% in the post-IRPA cohort. Because of these changes, refugees admitted after the IRPA may be more prone to relying on social assistance than those who arrived before the IRPA. This is less likely for privately sponsored refugees (PSRs) who are more likely to have family or friends in Canada and are better positioned to find employment through their sponsors or familial networks.

A recent article published in *International Migration* compared the long-term use of social assistance among resettled refugees arriving under pre-IRPA guidelines (1997 to 2001), during the transition period (2002 to 2004), and after the IRPA (2005 to 2009). Authors Lisa Kaida (McMaster University), Max Stick (McMaster University and Statistics Canada) and Feng Hou (Statistics Canada) used the Longitudinal Immigration Database to determine whether resettled refugees arriving after the introduction of the IRPA were more likely to rely on social assistance than earlier cohorts. The analysis examined GARs aged 20 to 54 at landing. The social assistance rates among PSRs were also calculated for comparative purposes.

Chart 1 displays the social assistance rates of resettled refugees (GARs and PSRs) admitted during the three periods. The social assistance rate is defined as the percentage of refugees whose family received social assistance income in a specific tax year. The results show that two years after landing, transition-period (71%) and post-IRPA (72%) GARs received social assistance at higher rates than pre-IRPA (66%) GARs. In contrast to GARs, pre-IRPA PSRs had higher social assistance rates (33%) than transition-period (30%) and post-IRPA (28%) PSRs in year 2.

Chart 1
Social assistance rates among government-assisted refugees and privately sponsored refugees, by arrival cohort and years since immigration

percent receiving social assistance income
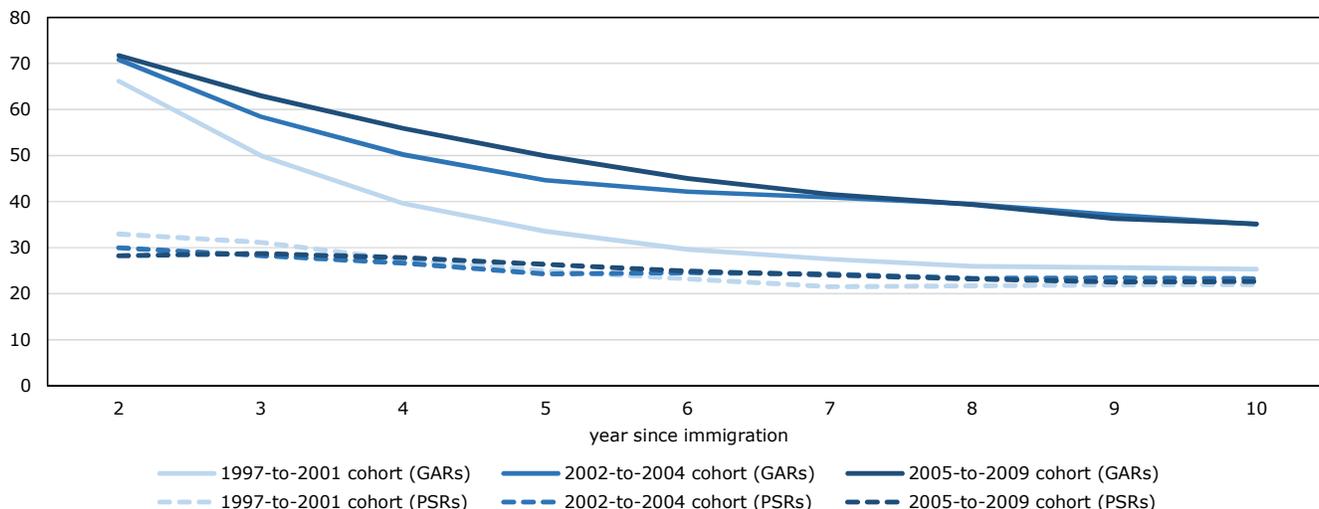
Notes: GAR = government-assisted refugee; PSR = privately sponsored refugee.
Source: Statistics Canada, Longitudinal Immigration Database.

While the social assistance rates of GARs dropped each year after landing, the rates for transition-period and post-IRPA GARs declined more slowly than those for the pre-IRPA cohort. The gap in social assistance rates between pre-IRPA and transition-period GARs continued to widen until year 8 (14 percentage points). The gap between the pre- and post-IRPA cohorts peaked in year 5 (16 percentage points).

After year 8 (for the transition-period cohort) and after year 5 (for the post-IRPA cohort), the gap in social assistance rates narrowed between these cohorts and the pre-IRPA cohort. By year 10, the difference in social assistance rates between the pre-IRPA cohort and the other two cohorts fell below 10 percentage points. Labour market characteristics of transition-period and post-IRPA GARs, especially their lower employment rates compared with pre-IRPA GARs, largely explained the differences in social assistance rates.

Social assistance rates of PSR cohorts slowly declined up to years 5 and 6, and then hovered at around 20% to 25% until year 10. The difference in social assistance rates between pre-IRPA, and transition-period and post-IRPA PSRs remained small from years 3 to 10.

The findings suggest that GARs arriving after the introduction of the IRPA took longer to integrate into the Canadian labour market and become economically independent than those arriving prior to the IRPA. However, transition-period and post-IRPA GARs started to close the gap with their pre-IRPA counterparts five to eight years after arrival. By the 10th year, their rates of social assistance decreased to 35%.

The full paper, "Changes in selection policy and refugee welfare use in Canada," can be found at https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12930.

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