



Fast

# FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

there is an alternative.

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## Towards a Family-Friendly Immigration System: Refugees and Family Reunification

**R**ecently, the Federal Liberal Government announced immigration targets for 2017.

The total target for all immigrant classes remained stable at 300,000, but economic class immigrants were disproportionately prioritized. 'Economic class' immigrants increased from a target of 160,600 in 2016 to a target of 172,500. 'Family class' increased from targets of 80,000 to 84,000. 'Refugees and Protected Persons' decreased from 55,800 to 40,000. 'Humanitarian and Compassionate and Other' decreased from 3,600 to 3,500.

The above numbers suggest a relative tilt away from the humanitarian objectives and towards using immigration to 'build the economy.' This trend has been occurring for some time. In recent years, Canada's immigration system has witnessed an increase in low-skilled migrants, and, in the majority of instances, the foreclosing of pathways to permanent residency for them, the liberalizing of conditions of entry for business class and high-skilled immigrants, and restricted entry for family members of economic migrants. We must re-orient our thinking from narrowly calculating the economic contributions and costs of newcomers to considering what makes sense for families as a whole.

Family disunity affects refugee families who are being relocated for humanitarian, not economic, purposes. *The Canadian Council for Refugees* (CCR) is calling for an express entry program for family reunification, which would commit to reuniting children

with their parents in a maximum of six months. Why is such a commitment necessary? The CCR reports that many children wait over two years before being reunited with their parent(s) in Canada, and that overseas processing of family members of refugees takes an average of 31 months. Furthermore, Canada is a signatory to the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, which confers a legal obligation to process applications that would reunite parents and children 'in a positive, human and expeditious manner.'

The CCR notes numerous barriers to family reunification for refugees, including 'a narrow definition of family (excluding, for example, non-biological children), costly and time-consuming DNA testing, bars on sponsorship if the sponsor is receiving social assistance, a category of "excluded family members," and administrative delays.' Overseas family members often remain in conflict zones and in acute danger. Some have died or disappeared with applications in process. In 2002, the federal government created a category of excluded family members, which imposes a lifetime ban on the sponsorship of a family member who was not examined by an immigration officer when the sponsor immigrated to Canada. Such a rule discriminates against emerging from the chaos of conflict zones.

Refugees experiencing delays, if

CCPA-MB  
205-765 Main St.  
Winnipeg, MB  
R2W 3N5

phone

(204) 927-3200

email

[ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca](mailto:ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca)

website

[www.policyalternatives.ca/  
manitoba](http://www.policyalternatives.ca/manitoba)

blog

[www.policyfix.ca](http://www.policyfix.ca)  
twitter

@ccpamb

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not permanent obstacles, to family reunification, are denied the security and stability provided by both nuclear and extended family networks. Family reunification restores basic dignity to their lives and enhances their emotional and physical well-being. Moreover, it is essential to facilitating both short and long term settlement in Canada. In addition to the interpersonal and emotional, physical, and mental health consequences attributed to being apart from one's family, prolonged family separation also has economic implications. Refugees who have resettled in Canada often send remittances to their family members who remain abroad. Remitting portions of one's income puts a significant amount of stress on the family member in Canada who, as a recently arrived refugee often takes entry level, precarious, and poorly-compensated work or remains on social assistance. Therefore, sending money to their families can be a financial burden as it causes difficulties paying for basic living necessities, such as food and housing.

In our ongoing research into the housing situations of re-settled refugees in Winnipeg, we constantly hear stories from members of families who remain separated across international borders. In some cases, the person or family in Winnipeg is supporting family members overseas who have no aspirations to move. But others are separated from their immediate family and awaiting reunification. One of our interviewees, originally from Congo, who has resettled in Winnipeg with his wife and four children but who has two children remaining in Africa, told us the following:

*I cannot sleep because my kids are always calling me to ask for money. They don't have shoes, they don't have clothes. All the money we get here, we just send to these kids. Sometimes we send money, but those people taking care of the kids don't use the money the way we want. If it is possible for our kids to finally come to Canada, that would be great. We would like to know, we informed them [immigration officials] about our kids in Africa, why is it taking so long?*

Expediting family reunification for refugees makes both ethical and economic sense. While refugee-serving organizations across the country continued to seek expedited family reunification, an Express Entry program for certain economic immigration streams (the Federal Skilled Worker Program, Federal Skilled Trades Program, Canadian Experience Class and 'a portion of the Provincial Nominee program') was launched in January 2015. Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) reports that '[with this] program the processing time commitment of 6-months for 80% of cases has been met.' If economic immigrants, who have been selected as a 'flexible' solution to labour requirements of Canadian businesses, can receive express entry, then Canada's immigration system has demonstrated the capacity to process applicants in an expedited manner. Why can't the same be achieved for the children and other family members of re-settled refugees?

*Ray Silvius is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Winnipeg and a CCPA Manitoba Research Associate. Emily Halldorson and Jessica Praznik are independent researchers. Ray and Emily are conducting Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council funded research through the Manitoba Research Alliance into the housing situations of refugees that have resettled in Winnipeg.*

References available upon request.

CCPA-MB  
205-765 Main St.  
Winnipeg, MB  
R2W 3N5

**phone**  
(204) 927-3200

**email**  
ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca

**website**  
www.policyalternatives.ca/  
manitoba

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**twitter**  
@ccpamb