

Workshop Notes: Settling In: How newcomers use a public library

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The study was initiated at the request of ethnic librarians at Prince George and Surrey Libraries. They felt that professional libarians needed to better understand the needs and behaviours of new Canadians who use public libraries. This is a pressing issue within the City of Surrey where 73,000 local residents arrived in Canada within the past 10 years. The provision of services to recent refugees is particularly important as 40% of all refugees arriving in British Columbia reside in specific neighbourhoods in Surrey.

Researchers worked closely with the staff of Surrey Libraries in the development of the questionnaire, which was administered by university students stationed at the exits of libraries. The researchers first struggled to get the study approved by KPU’s Research Ethics Board and to deal with an extremely low response rate. The latter issue is a common challenge faced when surveying a population what is reluctant to participate in studies.

According to the Canadian immigrant literature, most newcomers arrive as young or early middle aged adults, often with young children. Most immigrants have a university degree, some work experience, and varying degrees of fluency in one or more of Canada’s official languages. Most immigrants struggle, at least to some degree, after arrival. Immigrants must adapt to cultural differences, a need to improve their fluency in the dominant languages, and employers who place limited value on their past work experience and educational credentials.

One model for describing the adaption process of recent immigrants has three stages. During the transitioning stage, newcomers must deal with immediate issues such as temporary housing and learning how to do basic tasks. All new arrivals experience some culture shock after arriving in a new country. Federal assistance only focuses on the first year after arrival.

During the second stage, settling in, newcomers slowly become productive members of society. Government assistance during the second stage is spotty, as no single government agency has overall responsibility for newcomer integration. Newcomers must deal with multiple government agencies to access training and other services. This process is complicated by funding cuts and outsourcing of settler services to not-for-profit societies.

The data collected during the Surrey Libraries survey was largely consistent with past library science studies. The pattern of in-branch use of Surrey Libraries by newcomers differed from that of other library users. Fortunately, Surrey Libraries conducted an in-house study of library use by its patrons two years previously, enabling a fairly detailed comparision of newcomer use to that of the general library population.

Newcomers are often heavy users of public library services. Seventy-five percent of newcomer respondents visiting library branches at least one a week. A bimodal distribution was noted when they were asked how long they had resided in the branch during their current visit. A third of the visitors resided for less than 30 minutes and nearly half stayed for one to two hours.

Newcomers were asked to select which activities they engaged in during their current visit. Their responses were both similar to and different from other users of Surrey Libraries.

In both surveys, similar proportions of library users were engaged in collections and computer related activities. Heavy use of children’s programming and collections was noted. Twenty-four percent of newcomer users attended children’s programs during their current visit and 43% of the materials borrowed were children’s books or DVDs. Nearly all children’s materials borrowed were in English.

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| **Activity** | **% Newcomer Survey** | **% 2015 All User Survey** |
| Read | **72** | 17 |
| Returned or borrowed | 59 | 59 |
| Studied | **34** | 10 |
| Library computer | 34 | 26 |
| Browsed collection | 34 | 32 |
| Used Wi-Fi | **34** | 9 |
| Help from Staff | **31** | 14 |
| Met with other people | **28** | 10 |

Newcomers tended to use a wider range of library services. In addition, the library branch itself was valued as a place to study, relax, and to meet other people. Higher proportions of newcomers reported studying and reading during their current visit. According to the literature, 60% of immigrants to Canada changed careers after arrival and two-thirds of immigrants expect to enroll in training or educational programs.

Their need for a quiet place to study is particularly important given their accomodations in Canada. A substantial proportion of recent arrivals live in substandard housing. For example, one respondent described “A/C” was a major benefit during the summer months.

A common theme in the immigrant literature is the public library as a safe, socially acceptable public space. As noted above, 28% of respondents met with someone during their current visit. One Australian study of Asian immigrants ranked libraries as the second most important public place among recent arrivals.

According to other studies, public libraries provide a socially acceptable meeting place for girls and strangers from tradition cultures. A place they could meet other people without surveillance by other family members. Researchers have observed that young immigrants use library facilities almost like a youth centre.

Another topic explored in the questionnaire was benefits received by Canadian newcomers from public library use.

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| **Benefits of library use** | **% Newcomer Survey** |
| Place to study | 70 |
| Place to learn | 67 |
| Affortable place to read | 63 |
| Improve my English | 53 |
| Build self-confidence | 50 |
| Welcoming place to relax | 47 |
| Meet people and make new friends | 40 |
| Feel connected to my community | 40 |
| Learn more about Canada and local customs | 33 |

Newcomer responses indicate that the public library helped them both to socially integrate and during their educational upgradings. Much of their use was driven by their practical needs. Over two-thirds of respondents selected libraries as places to learn and to study. Over half viewed libraries as a place where they can improve their English. Public libraries also helped them meet their emotional and social needs. The library is viewed as safe place, a place to meet people, and to feel part of the community.

The presenters noted that the respondents were not necessarily typical of new arrivals. The literature highlights that newcomers are often unfamiliar with the services available in a Canadian public library. Public libraries, where they exist, may have different roles in their home countries.

Another issue is the challenge of triggering the initial library visit for a Canadian newcomer. Traditional promotional material and media advertising is ineffective at reaching newcomers, who often rely on friends, family members, and respected members of their ethnic communities as trusted sources of information.

At least in Surrey, the public library has a major challenge in developing relevant multilinqual collections. The thirty people surveyed arrived from 19 different countries and spoke 24 different languages at home.

Depending on local demographics, it may not be feasible for a public library to offer a full set of multilingual services to each language group. At best, collections and services can target the largest linguistic groups in the community. However, all newcomers benefit from multiple copies of high quality ESL materials, English conversion groups, ESL book clubs, and related services.

For more information:

Shepherd, J., Petrillo, L. and Wilson, A., 2018. Settling In: how newcomers use a public library. *Library Management*, *39*(8/9), pp.583-596.