

Research and knowledge mobilization in the GTA's immigrant and refugee-serving sector: A needs assessment

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Executive Summary

The Community Knowledge Program is a project to support networking, collaboration, and sharing of research and resources for stakeholders working in the fields of migration, integration, and settlement in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). The project was started at the Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Settlement (CERIS), and now continues at Wellesley Institute.

The past few years have been a time of great change in migration research and for the immigrant and refugee-serving sector in the GTA. This needs assessment was conducted in an attempt to understand the impact of CERIS, the effects of COVID-19 on research and knowledge mobilization, and to see how research in the field at Toronto's largest universities is influencing policy and front-line settlement programs and services.

This report is the result of collecting, analyzing, and synthesizing qualitative and quantitative data from over 80 people in the sector. Methods for data collection included key informant interviews, an online survey, and a focus group. Respondents were policymakers and public servants, academic and community researchers, sectoral leaders, and agency management and front-line staff in the immigrant and refugee-serving sector.

Key findings

Timely research and knowledge mobilization are critical

Researchers are at work studying migration, settlement, and integration at all three major universities in Toronto, and at community organizations and umbrella groups as well. However, findings often do not influence practice in a timely manner, if at all. The rapid changes to the sector due to COVID-19 have led to shifts in best practices for delivering settlement services, and practitioners need clear, curated information that is relevant to their work.

Numerous challenges exist

Structural issues were revealed in how research and knowledge mobilization are conducted in the sector. These included funding models; lack of centralized resources for information and discussion about current research; and lack of institutionalized, long-term, mutually respectful relationships between researchers and service providers.

There are ways to close the gaps

Analysis of the data revealed several ways to improve coordination of research, practice, and policy in migration, settlement, and integration. These included creating opportunities to foster collaboration and co-creation for research across the sector, such as by holding events for learning and networking. Developing a centralized online portal or hub for discussion and sharing of resources was suggested as well, along with training front-line workers in research skills, and curating and sharing lists of research reports.

Next steps

In 2022, to address these gaps, the Community Knowledge Program will offer the following:

- A series of public panel discussions about research topics of interest
- An online training course for settlement workers to acquire and build research skills
- An online hub for resources and networking

Introduction

Researchers generate a rich body of knowledge related to immigrant and refugee communities and their experiences of settlement and integration in Canada. Members of these communities are uniquely positioned to provide insight into these experiences, yet there are barriers to their involvement in research (Vaughn et al., 2016; Adebayo et al., 2018). High-quality research and the effective mobilization of the knowledge it creates are necessary for effective policy, service, and advocacy (Shields et al., 2015). Grassroots immigrant and settlement organizations and academic researchers need space, training, and tools to further develop their research and knowledge mobilization skills, in order to produce and share knowledge more effectively in ways that will improve the sector's practices and contribute to systemic change.

The Community Knowledge Program began as an initiative to build capacity for research and knowledge mobilization within immigrant and refugee-serving agencies in the GTA, in order to improve settlement services for newcomers to Canada. To this end, Wellesley Institute has conducted a needs assessment to understand current capacity and skills, as well as existing initiatives and any gaps in knowledge, in community-based research and knowledge mobilization in the sector. Because of COVID-19 and the changes it has brought to both research and service provision (Shields & Alrob, 2020), the scope of this assessment is now broader than first intended. As the sector grapples with new challenges during COVID-19, the Community Knowledge Program can help to inform and shape responsive educational and training opportunities, including workshops and research training materials for front-line workers to benefit the immigrant and refugee-serving sectors in Toronto.

This report offers findings from Wellesley Institute's research, as well as recommendations for next steps that stakeholders in the sector can take to help ensure that practices within settlement agencies are shaped by evidence.

What is the Community Knowledge Program?

Originally part of the former Joint Centre for Excellence for Research on Immigration and Settlement (CERIS), which was previously part of the Metropolis Project in Canada (Shields & Evans, 2012), the Community Knowledge Program is now housed at Wellesley Institute.

The Canadian Metropolis Project started in 1995 as a federally-funded set of research centres across Canada whose goal was to build capacity for and carry out policy-oriented research in migration and settlement, and encourage the use of such research in governments' decision-making (Shields & Evans, 2012; Shields et al., 2015). CERIS was established in 1996 as the Ontario branch of the network, and until federal funding from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) was cut in 2012, it administered and funded academic research projects conducted in partnership with community agencies. CERIS continued until 2019 as a network of academics, policymakers, and service providers, offering public panel discussions and research summaries as well as leading the Immigrant Women, Youth, and Seniors project.

The Community Knowledge Program began at CERIS to build research capacity and knowledge in the immigrant and refugee-serving sector, and to bridge research, policy, and practice. Shields et al. (2015) found that policymakers were most likely to use knowledge to create evidence-based policy when that knowledge has been generated by sustained collaboration between academic and non-academic stakeholders. Assessing the needs of the various stakeholders is an effort to lay the foundation for a training program that will build meaningful, lasting connections among them through knowledge mobilization and knowledge transfer, as CERIS and Metropolis have always emphasized (Shields & Evans, 2012).

CERIS's Immigrant Women, Youth, and Seniors project revealed major gaps in the research about immigration and settlement in Canada (Türegün et al., 2018). These include a lack of studies about the connections between services and outcomes, a lack of information about how newcomers use (or do not use) mainstream services rather than immigrant-specific ones, and insufficient attention to what immigrant women, youth, and seniors contribute to their communities and Canada as a whole (Türegün et al., 2018).

Furthermore, since the onset of COVID-19, research has been taking place across the sector in response to the current crisis. IRCC has funded work on the use of technology in settlement work (Campana et al., 2020). Researchers at the Université de Genève have considered health impacts on refugees to Canada during the first wave of the pandemic (Edmonds & Flahault, 2021). Shields and Alrob (2020) have assembled a comprehensive overview of the challenges to migration and settlement that COVID-19 presents. The interest in knowledge mobilization is also growing, as it is critical for service providers and policymakers to share up-to-date information about current trends and the needs of newcomers in this changing environment.

There is a need, then, to understand the general state of academic and community-based research into migration, settlement, and integration in the GTA. This report examines Wellesley Institute's efforts to that end, and recommends ways to build capacity for research in front-line immigrant and refugee-serving agencies, as well as to promote mutually respectful long-term relationships among researchers, service providers, and policymakers.

By building capacity and partnerships for research and knowledge mobilization, the Community Knowledge Program can help fill gaps, meet needs, and ensure that research findings have real impact on the provision of services (Shields & Evans, 2012).

Methods

Using a mixed methods approach, this needs assessment brings together evidence collected through an online survey, an online focus group, and key informant interviews with subject matter experts.

Recruitment

Participants in all three components of the data collection were recruited from stakeholders in the not-for-profit immigrant and refugee-serving sector in the GTA. This included people who work directly in support of newcomers, such as leaders and front-line staff of agencies that provide settlement services and programs for newcomer communities; academic and community researchers who investigate migration, settlement, and integration; independent consultants who work in support of the sector; representatives of sectoral organizations such as the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI) and the Toronto-area Local Immigration Partnerships (LIPs); and policymakers from the municipal and federal governments. Former senior leaders of the CERIS network were also consulted.

Potential participants were identified from the CERIS database, made up of stakeholders who had previously participated in or supported CERIS' work. The list was supplemented by informants identified through searches of publicly available information about immigrant and refugee-serving agencies. The researchers identified a shortlist of preferred key informants and contacted them by email, with standard explanatory text about the project and the nature of the interview being requested. The Research Ethics Board at Ryerson University determined that their review of this needs assessment was not necessary.

The following channels were used to promote the survey and the initial focus group:

- Mass emails to distribution lists hosted by Wellesley Institute, as well as OCASI, Social Planning Toronto, LIPs, and the United Way
- Posts to social media and websites, including Wellesley Institute's website and SettlementAtWork.org

Samples

Survey respondents

A total of 72 people responded to the survey, and 60 (n=60) were eligible to participate. Of these, 39 (over 75 per cent) were women, one was intersex, and 12 were men. Nearly half were white (European or North American), while many others were South Asian or East Asian. The majority were mid-career, in the sector for more than ten years, and nearly two-thirds had graduate degrees. 40 per cent worked at direct service agencies, 25 per cent at umbrella organizations

such as OCASI, and 20 per cent identified themselves as researchers. A large majority were at organizations with more than 20 employees.

Focus group participants

There were 13 people (n=13) who participated in the focus group. Three were researchers with academic affiliations. Three worked at settlement agencies, and four worked at agencies serving larger populations that included newcomers, including a legal clinic and an evaluator of international credentials. Finally, three independent consultants had long experience working in support of newcomers in both direct service and academia. All participants were women. The group was ethnically and culturally diverse, but no specific data on race or ethnicity was collected.

Smaller discussion groups in Zoom breakout rooms were composed of three to four people, including the facilitator. Four of the 13 focus group participants also responded to the survey.

Key informants

A total of 16 people (n=16) were interviewed as key informants. These included senior academic leaders at three universities, front-line workers and senior leaders at medium-sized to large community agencies serving newcomers, leaders of umbrella organizations such as OCASI and two LIPs, independent consultants specializing in migration and settlement, and representatives from IRCC and the City of Toronto. Ten were white, four were South Asian, one was East Asian, and one was Black. Two key informants also participated in the focus group.

Data collection

Respondents were able to participate in any or all of the three parts of the needs assessment. The first component of the data collection was an online semi-structured survey across the sector, seeking input from representatives of the groups mentioned above. Anyone who works in the immigrant and refugee-serving sector in the GTA was welcome to participate. Potential participants were screened by a question about their sector of work at the beginning of the survey to determine their eligibility. Quantitative data was collected about demographics and experience of respondents, their levels of comfort and familiarity with research and knowledge mobilization, and their insights into the popularity of various methods for sharing information within the sector. Respondents also had the opportunity to answer several qualitative questions about types of research that they had been involved in, how they preferred to share and learn about information, examples of good and useful research in the field, and suggested research topics for future study.

Second, a focus group brought together 13 stakeholders, including front-line service providers and academic and community researchers, for an online session. They participated in facilitated discussions about sharing information regarding new developments and promising practices in supporting newcomers to Canada, and any gaps they perceived.¹ The focus group used an adapted version of the World Café method, which involves facilitated discussions in small groups where participants agree on one or two main points to share with the larger group. The small groups enable people to focus and participate more, and share experiences and knowledge in more relaxed and authentic ways (Arivanathan, 2015; “World Café method”, 2020).

Because of COVID-19, the researchers moved the World Café approach online, onto the Zoom platform, where groups could talk in smaller “breakout rooms” as well as in the large group. This enabled the collection of broader perspectives and more data than would have been possible with a traditional focus group of eight to ten people.

In the third component, 16 key informants who were identified as particularly knowledgeable or influential in the sector were interviewed for their insights. Interviews were recorded on video or audio with the permission of the participants, and these recordings were transcribed and analyzed thematically as well.

¹ Facilitators were trained researchers from the staff of Wellesley Institute.

Analysis

The 26-item survey was constructed and administered online through Survey Monkey (<https://www.surveymonkey.com/>). Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the responses to 22 closed-ended questions, and thematic analysis was used to analyze four open-ended, qualitative responses. The focus groups and key informant interviews were recorded on audio and video, and the recordings were transcribed for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006; Braun et al 2018). Recordings of focus groups were transcribed using the NVivo QSR International software NVivo Transcription (<https://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo-qualitative-data-analysis-software/about/nvivo/modules/transcription>), and analyzed with the main NVivo analysis tool. NVivo QSR International is one of the most established and reputable software programs for managing and analyzing qualitative data.

Transcripts for the focus groups and interviews were reviewed and coded through NVivo, and analyzed to reveal several overarching themes. These included barriers and facilitators to research and knowledge mobilization in the sector, changes due to COVID-19, and ways to move forward in integrating research, policy, and practice. These themes are examined in more depth in the following sections.

Findings

The needs assessment has revealed challenges and opportunities for research and knowledge mobilization within the sector in the GTA, now and in the future. Most of these challenges existed before COVID-19, such as issues of funding and capacity for research within community agencies, tenuous relationships among community groups and researchers, and large volumes of uncurated research and data that rarely influence policy or practice (Shields & Evans, 2012). Other challenges are new since the pandemic, including the need to collect data online rather than in person, and the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on newcomer and racialized communities.

Respondents in this needs assessment offered a wealth of information and observations. First and foremost was recognition of the need for bolstering research and especially knowledge mobilization throughout the sector. There was broad consensus that it is crucial to build a foundation of relevant, timely evidence about migration, settlement, and integration, and to share that evidence widely, in order to inform policy and practice.

Many of the sectoral issues that respondents identified are systemic, and exist within and between institutions. A key finding from this work is that while there is a tremendous amount of research knowledge and expertise that already exists within the sector, this knowledge often has little effect on front-line services available to newcomers. Front-line workers are unlikely to see research reports in academic journals. At best, they may have some exposure to research findings through public events such as conferences or forums, emails from sectoral mailing lists, or conversations with colleagues. As a result, research does not typically inform professional development or program planning.

Several possible reasons for the gap between research and practice were identified, consistent with what is mentioned in the literature:

- Institutional structures and relationships among funders, academic researchers, and community agencies
- A lack of capacity within community agencies to engage in or with research
- A lack of formal recognition of the research work done within communities

Respondents also identified potential ways to close this gap:

- Building capacity within community agencies to conduct and share research
- Fostering collaboration and co-creation of research among different stakeholders throughout the sector
- Curating existing research to make it more accessible to front-line workers

The following sections examine these findings in more depth.

The need for research and knowledge mobilization

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Making research more accessible for people who don't have a research background is really important for front-line work.

– Key informant

Numerous participants stressed the need for accessible, timely research that is relevant to policy and practice. Funders are constantly looking for evidence that the programs and services they provide are responsive and effective and reflect the latest understandings of best practices in settlement work. Front-line workers and their managers want to know about new trends in migration patterns, insights into innovative approaches and useful technology, and ways to meet increasingly complex needs of diverse populations of newcomers. As one focus group participant noted, organizations are often unaware of ways to better define the needs of the communities they serve.

The needs assessment, particularly the survey, revealed a strong desire for research into a variety of topics. These included the following:

- Policies and practices that empower newcomers
- Canadians' understanding of newcomer issues
- The relationship between services upon arrival and long-term outcomes
- Feelings of connection, community, and belonging in the new society
- Effects of precarious status, and contributions of people with such status to Canadian society
- Use of new technologies in settlement work
- Intergenerational conflict in newcomer families
- Effectiveness of different interventions for different populations
- Barriers to credential recognition
- COVID-19 and its effect on the sector
- Effects of marginalization such as racism, xenophobia, ableism, anti-Black racism, homophobia, and transphobia
- Human trafficking

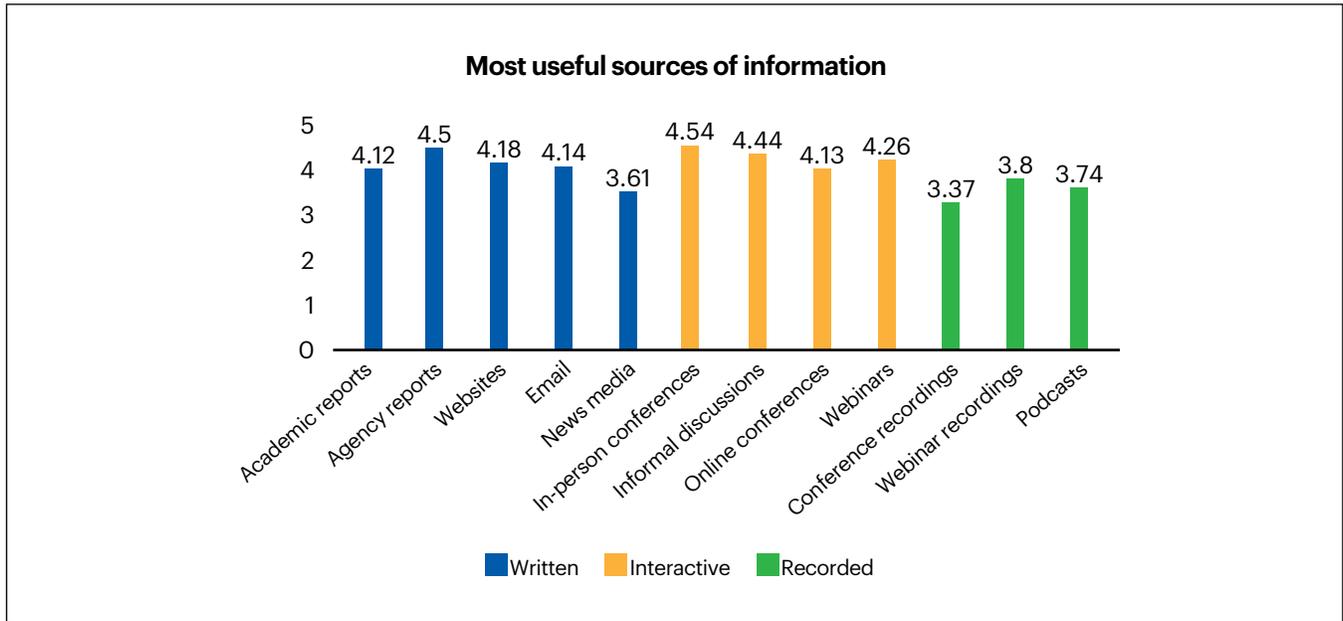
While many of these topics are indeed under-researched, several are already being studied, or are emerging, for example, work examining the impacts of COVID-19. Several conferences and other networking events in the sector have focused on the pandemic, and academics have been publishing papers on its effects. However, the insights from these papers do not seem to be reaching most front-line workers or influencing their practice.

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A lot of the time we are reinventing the wheel. There is a lot of research out there. And yet, there's no real professional development coming out of that research and that research is not going back into the sector.

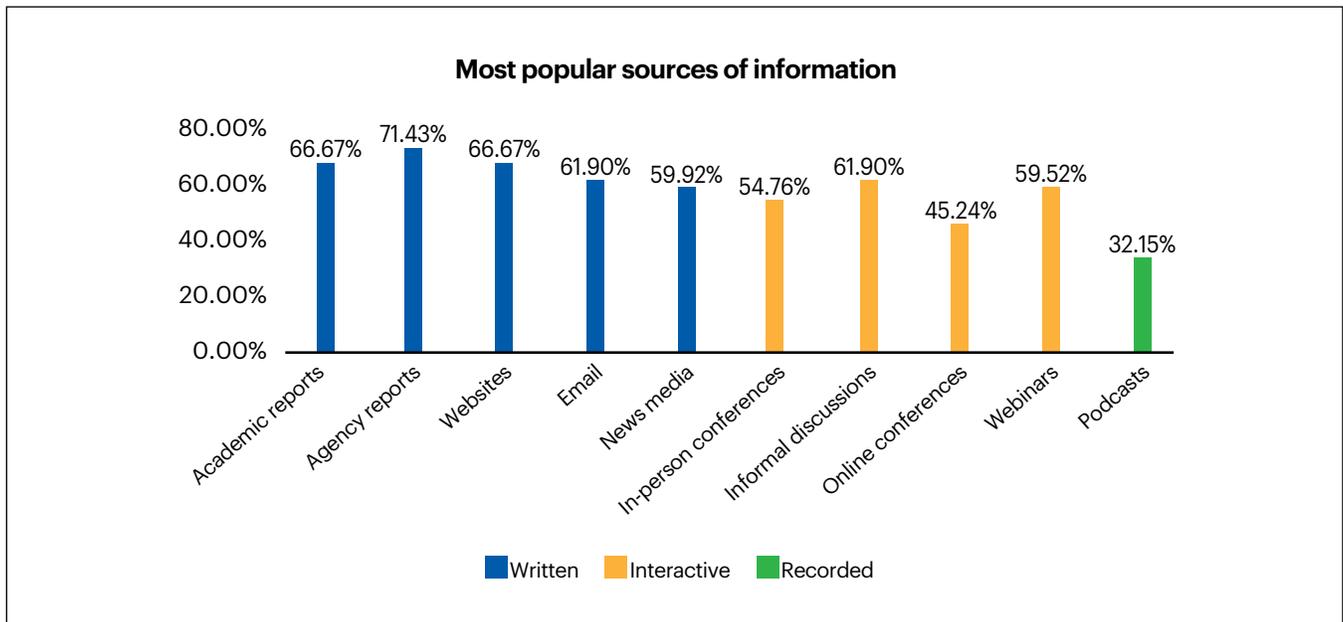
– Key informant

The survey results showed a preference for face-to-face events as the most useful way to engage with new information about research. Respondents were asked to rate various sources as to their usefulness, with 1.0 being the least useful and 5.0 being the most.



Overall, respondents rated interactive events as the most useful, with an average score of 4.49 out of 5, consistently higher than written or recorded media. Written information was rated next most useful, with an average of 4.11 out of 5, and recorded events, with an average score of 3.62, were rated as least useful. One respondent commented, “If I don’t make it to the live event, I rarely find the time to go back and listen to the recording.” The variability within each grouping may be evidence that medium matters less than how it is used, especially for written and recorded information.

However, when asked what channels they used to learn about research, survey respondents indicated that they were more likely to draw on written materials than interactive events.



Nearly two-thirds (65.23 per cent) of the respondents reported that they draw on written sources such as academic and agency research reports, websites, mailing lists, and news media for research information. However, just over half (55.35 per cent) made use of interactive sources, and less than one third listened to podcasts about research. Information about recorded versus synchronous online events was not collected.

Though much research already exists, survey respondents, focus group participants, and key informants all spoke about how much valuable information is lost because it is not shared. Knowledge is not mobilized because the formats in which it is distributed are often not easily accessible to front-line workers. Academic articles frequently exist behind paywalls, and the language in them may be too dense and difficult, especially since front-line workers may have varying levels of proficiency in English. Most also do not have time during their regular workday to engage with live or recorded webinars where research results are presented, nor are they able to attend conferences because of constraints on funds or time. Even when they can attend, there is so much material presented that it can be challenging to take it all in:

“““

...when we go to conferences, we know it's difficult to absorb all this information. Even if you had trainings on every single topic, in two days it's hard to absorb information and to be able to then apply it in your practice.

– Key informant

Challenges

Institutional and relational issues

Funding

Many respondents identified ways that current funding models hamper community agencies' ability to engage with research. Government funding for settlement agencies is usually reserved for direct provision of services, while public funds for research into migration and settlement generally go to universities. This means partnerships are necessary between agencies and academics, but institutional support for such partnerships is far less robust than it was in the days of the national Metropolis Project and even CERIS.

Most of the settlement programs and services delivered through community agencies are funded under fixed-length contracts with project-based funding and strict reporting requirements. This means that most settlement agencies, especially smaller ones, lack capacity to lead, participate in, and learn from research. Front-line workers also mentioned that they do not have time or opportunities to learn about and discuss research while at work. Agencies may have the rare worker or manager who has genuine interest and perhaps even expertise in research, but the organization loses that when the employee leaves. In addition, staff members who do engage with research almost always have to do so “off the side of the desk,” outside their usual duties.

The lack of researchers embedded in agencies as permanent staff means there is little possibility of longitudinal community-based research, and therefore major gaps in understanding changes over time. Agencies that do engage in research usually do so with funding from bodies other than IRCC.

Also identified as an issue was who receives and manages funding. With the increasing popularity of community-based research, there has been increased competition for funding community-based projects. Grants for academic researchers from bodies such as the Canadian Institute for Health Research (CIHR) and SSHRC usually fund universities, and academic researchers thus control access to the resources necessary for the project. This can lead to a major power imbalance with participating community agencies

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*Sharing [ideas] is usually seen as a threat, because
“If you take my idea, you’ll take my funding.”*

– Consultant in the sector

Furthermore, the limited pool of funding available to agencies to lead research can make service providers reluctant to share their insights and ideas, in fear that other groups will steal them to use in their own applications for the same money. Concerns about competition for funding were mentioned as particularly common during the application process for the Service Delivery Improvements program.

Long-term relationships

Relationships between academic researchers and community agencies serving newcomers were identified as a crucial component of effective research in the field. One key informant noted that research done in the context of respectful, long-term relationship with community is “usually more successful,” as it incorporates a broader and deeper perspective informed by service providers’ own knowledge and experiences.

However, the interviews and focus group revealed reluctance within community agencies to engage in research partnerships with academics. Some, comparing the research process to resource extraction, told stories of academic researchers who had drawn on the knowledge of service providers and service seekers only to disappear after collecting data. Front-line workers and program managers who are not informed of findings of research in which they were involved are often wary of participating in other projects. A leader in the sector whose organization frequently surveys front-line workers was very clear about this:

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They’re tired of all of the surveys, they’re tired of researchers contacting them. I think part of the fatigue is that they feel as if they give, give, and nothing comes back.

Just as in discussions of funding, there were concerns about power imbalances in relationships between researchers and community agencies. A senior leader of a large agency that serves newcomers indicated that their agency does not collaborate on research in the newcomer sector with universities at all:

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...we do feel a huge chasm between us and the universities. And we don’t really feel included or involved in the design phase or the early stages and so we refuse to participate in their research because if they’re not going to include us, then we’re not going to participate.

This respondent linked agencies' lack of involvement in research processes with a lack of interest in the results:

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“...[newcomer agencies] would be very uninterested in going to a symposium about research where they didn't get to set the research question or participate in framing it in any way.”

In addition, one key informant observed that some organizations are unwilling to adopt new practices based on research findings, as there is a lack of trust that researchers fully understand front-line work. The lack of strong relationships among different parts of the sector is thus a major obstacle to successful collaborative research.

Lack of a central hub

Currently, there is significant academic interest in migration, settlement, and integration. Research in these areas is underway at all three of GTA's major universities. York University hosts the Centre for Refugee Studies and Building Migrant Resilience in Cities (BMRC) project. Ryerson University's Centre for Immigration and Settlement has just added a new Canada Excellence Research Chair in Migration and Integration (CERC Migration). The University of Toronto houses migration and settlement research at the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, the Dalla Lana School of Public Health, the Centre for Diaspora and Transnational Studies, and the Global Migration Lab at the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy. Furthermore, other entities such as IRCC, Local Immigration Partnerships, OCASI, think tanks, hospitals, for-profit businesses such as banks, and not-for-profit organizations themselves conduct research and publish their results. There are even efforts underway to create knowledge networks for the sector, such as the Migration Initiative, the National Newcomer Navigation Network, and OCASI's SettleNet.Org. However, these spaces do not tend to overlap with each other.

Unfortunately, as this needs assessment has revealed, it is nearly impossible for anyone who works directly with service seekers to stay abreast of relevant research from so many different bodies on the huge variety of topics related to migration and settlement. Awareness and understanding about current research in the sector remains fragmented, especially among front-line settlement workers. There is no “one-stop shop” where stakeholders can share and find information from any reputable source about migration research that is directly relevant to settlement practice. This limits efforts to act on research evidence.

Many respondents expressed a desire for a curated “portal,” or “hub,” where stakeholders from all parts of the sector could gather to learn about research from a variety of sources, exchange ideas and insights, and connect with each other to develop and address research questions with direct relevance to settlement practices. Several noted that the closure of CERIS had denied the sector of such a space.

Lack of capacity to engage: “Too much and not enough?”

Respondents in all three groups noted the vast amount of information available about migration, settlement, and integration in Canada. They indicated that a great deal of available research and data is not being analyzed or shared, largely because the sector lacks the capacity to do so.

Moreover, this needs assessment has revealed that front-line workers are unlikely to learn about much current research at all, let alone apply it to practice. One key informant expressed a common theme:

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I think there needs to be time and space and resources put into meaningfully navigating that information that we already have.

– Key informant

This point was echoed and expanded upon by other participants. For example:

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The research that's already out there needs to be pulled together, it needs to be really broken down and made available made accessible for people who can actually use it, [and] I don't think that's happening at all, to be honest.

– Key informant

The assessment found a number of centres, networks, and individuals who are actively engaged in mobilizing knowledge from research. These included CERC Migration at Ryerson, BMRC at York University, Pathways to Prosperity, the Metropolis Conference, and IRCC itself. Several people specifically mentioned IRCC's Research at a Glance email newsletter as an excellent source of information, but noted that it may not be useful to some in the sector who already receive a high volume of email or do not have capacity to engage with academic research reports. Because these reports are not curated for specific relevance to agencies' staff and management, service providers may miss them and remain unaware of research that is directly relevant to their work.

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...unless you have the wherewithal and capacity to, even the time, but also even the language level sometimes to sift through the academic kind of stuff, how do you know that you should even start to read this, let alone what part of it is going to have an impact on your work?

– Consultant in the sector

Among most respondents, face-to-face academic and professional conferences were a popular way to share and learn about research. However, concerns were raised about the accessibility of these conferences: the high admission fees, and the requirement at one conference that each presenter and facilitator pay the full fee, can prevent staff from smaller community agencies from attending. These agencies often have limited funding for such expenses, as well as staff that may not be able to take time away from direct service to attend. This is especially true when there are multiple conferences taking place at the same time of year.

Lack of recognition of community-based expertise

Service providers who work directly with newcomers have great insight into their challenges and needs. There is a rapidly growing “grey literature” coming out of front-line organizations that reflects this insight. This grey literature includes community reports and newsletters, findings from action research projects, advocacy activities, submissions to commissions and government bodies, sponsored community-based research initiatives, evaluation reports, and service contract proposals. However, this work is often not recognized by academics, policymakers, or funders, and it is also difficult to find.

As noted above, successful research at community agencies has often depended on the presence of an employee who is particularly knowledgeable or interested in research methods and evidence-based practice. Given that the main mission of most settlement agencies is to provide programs and services to newcomers, and that research is not included as a priority in funding these agencies, research expertise of individual staff members is often unused. This means that opportunities to inform programs and services with agency-specific information are lost.

Closing the gaps

The needs assessment has identified a number of opportunities for the sector to improve how research is carried out and the findings shared. While some of these improvements would require major changes to the ways that researchers and community agencies are funded, other, more incremental changes can be made more easily.

Fostering collaboration and co-creation

Issues of power were a common theme among all groups of respondents. As mentioned above, who controls and administers funding for research can have a major impact on the willingness of community agencies to participate. Furthermore, many respondents stressed the importance of practicing the values that the sector preaches, namely anti-racism, anti-oppression, equity, and justice. In research, power imbalances can be addressed and these principles applied in many ways: through involving community partners from the beginning of, and across the phases of any research, identifying the issues to be tackled, developing the research question, collecting and analyzing data, and disseminating the results. This requires a shift in perspective from academic researchers who are accustomed to making all the decisions about the funds and direction of a project. As one respondent noted, community partners will not engage with research when they don't see “what's in it for me?”

Respondents in the key informant interviews, the survey, and the focus group all stressed the importance of building and institutionalizing long-term, mutually respectful relationships among service providers, researchers, and policymakers. There are many ways to develop these relationships, from providing opportunities in person and online for networking and collaboration, to building and supporting formalized, long-term partnerships and networks between research bodies and community agencies.

In-person events were identified as the most preferred way to connect with other stakeholders, as there are chances to converse before and after presentations. One key informant noted, joking only somewhat, that reconnecting face-to-face with colleagues and friends in the sector was almost more important to them professionally than going to workshops and poster sessions. Because COVID-19 has made in-person events impossible since March, 2020, there is now far more awareness of the benefits and drawbacks of online conferencing. Online events are available to a larger audience, as people do not have to travel to attend them, and they are considerably less expensive to organize and run. However, they can also be less engaging than events in person. Some respondents mentioned that they are easily distracted by regular work when they attend events online, and one recommended that such events be interactive, with features such as real-time polls and surveys as well as breakout rooms to maintain engagement.

One key informant mentioned allowing community partners to write the recommendations in reports and take the lead on advocacy as ways to ensure both that power is better balanced, and that recommendations for concrete actions accurately reflect community perspectives and needs.

Establishing a central “hub” or portal

Given how many respondents asked for a single entity to connect stakeholders from all parts of the sector with resources and each other, this report recommends establishing and maintaining an online hub, or portal. This hub can feature a voluntary registry of information about different stakeholders’ research needs, interests, and current projects. It can also contain discussion areas where stakeholders can come together, and a sectoral calendar of events to encourage scheduling of conferences, webinars, and so forth at times that are most accessible. Once in-person events are again possible, members of networks connecting to this hub can attend face-to-face events to continue conversations begun online.

Building capacity

This needs assessment was at first largely geared toward understanding the capacity of community agencies to engage with research. Respondents suggested several ways to build this capacity in order to improve services.

Training front-line staff in research and knowledge mobilization was a priority identified by all three groups of respondents. They indicated that any training must address “what’s in it for me” for participants by building an understanding of how research can change their everyday practices in positive ways. Topics that were mentioned as helpful to include were types of research; research methods, including data collection, analysis, and reporting; language and terminology; and keyword searches in databases.

Reflective practice was discussed in some depth by several key informants, who strongly suggested that staff be trained in how to notice trends in their interactions with service seekers, and provided regular opportunities to reflect on and discuss their work with fellow staff and management.

There were several ideas offered about training staff in knowledge mobilization as well. These included discussions of a variety of media and platforms, such as mailing lists, posters, infographics, social media campaigns, workshops, webinars, and podcasts. One key informant mentioned that front-line workers often have far greater understanding than most academic researchers in how to determine a particular story or narrative that can capture attention.

Storytelling was mentioned by numerous respondents as a particularly effective way to share information, and there was interest in including storytelling as part of the curriculum of any training. Personal stories, case studies, and concrete examples of the effects of changes to policy or delivery of services can provide strong support for advocacy, fundraising, and applications for grants.

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...if I had time and energy, I would just sit and like, parse out which are the stories that I’m going to use for specific donors, which are the stories that I’m going to incorporate into working with volunteers. Which are the stories, which are the pieces of data and research that we can as settlement agencies use for different purposes?

– Focus group participant

Stories also lend themselves to less traditional forms of media, such as podcasts, video, art installations, blog entries, and social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, and others.

There was also discussion of ways to build experience and capacity among academic researchers, especially those newer to the field. One key informant spoke at length about the value to both academia and community groups of placing postsecondary and graduate students within agencies to support research work: this practice helps train the next generation of researchers, it builds relationships and understandings of community-based research for academics and service providers, and it enables agencies to better understand and meet newcomers’ needs as well.

Moreover, several key informants described great benefits from embedding researchers within community agencies. Establishing long-term funding for research positions presents an excellent opportunity to track and examine changes in the sector over time. One informant suggested that smaller agencies offering similar services or serving similar populations might partner with each other to share a single researcher, who would work part-time at each agency.

Curating research

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Somebody's got to curate or interpret or do the research snapshots, or do the communications, or do the convening and all those things and it's not necessarily all a skill set that one or two people are going to have. It's multiple.

– Key informant

Even before COVID-19 forced large-scale changes to the delivery of settlement services, front-line workers had little time to engage with the vast quantity of available research to inform programs and services. Now, in addition to all this, new research about COVID-19 and its effects on migration, settlement, and integration is plentiful, and service providers have limited opportunities to learn from it.

There is a great need in the sector, particularly among front-line agencies, for a reliable source of information about recent research that is directly relevant to practice. Numerous respondents asked for a centralized resource where a curator who is knowledgeable about the sector can review and organize reports about research, produce summaries in plain language, and share the results through a variety of channels. A centralized resource may also be a useful conduit for building networks and for capacity building in and across the sector. As one focus group participant notes, the needs of the sector reflect a mixture of information, connection and training:

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I don't know how much people want more reports to read. I think people want more... connection, like ways to connect, ways to support each other's work, and maybe some opportunities for training, building capacity to be able to do some of the research on their own.

– Focus group participant

The need for better research, and particularly knowledge mobilization, in the GTA's immigrant and refugee-serving sector is clear. The challenges discussed above for academic researchers, policymakers, and front-line community agencies to compile, analyze, and share knowledge can be addressed in the short and medium terms by focused efforts of small groups, but in the longer term, the support needed is structural.

Discussion

The Community Knowledge Program seeks to foster collaborative research and sharing of knowledge within the immigrant and refugee-serving sector in the GTA. A comprehensive needs assessment on the state of academic and community-based research in the sector revealed challenges and opportunities for the sector moving forward. Findings were consistent with Shields and Evans' (2012) report that there is a strong need at all levels for accessible, relevant research information to inform everything from policy to advocacy to front-line services. This needs assessment confirmed that there are numerous challenges to research and knowledge mobilization, such as lack of research capacity at community agencies, and imbalances of power in relationships between researchers and community groups (Shields et al., 2015). Because of its timing, the needs assessment has also explored major shifts in the sector and research within it that have resulted from COVID-19.

The lack of coordination among stakeholders has led to missed chances to collaborate, share ideas, and inform work in the sector with diverse perspectives. This is especially crucial in the era of COVID-19, when service providers have had to shift rapidly to online services. Research into the effects of this shift has been underway for more than a year (for example, Liu & Campana, 2020; Edmonds and Flahault, 2021; Tuyisenge & Goldenberg, 2021; among many others), and initial findings have been published and presented recently at several conferences, including Metropolis and Pathways to Prosperity. Furthermore, the broader impact of COVID-19 on the sector is under study by a wide variety of researchers, and numerous reports have already been published (Campana et al., 2020; Shields & Alrob, 2020; Edmonds & Flahault, 2021; Tuyisenge & Goldberg, 2021). Recent conferences and webinars for the sector have focused sharply on the pandemic and its effects on newcomers; yet many especially front-line service providers, have not yet heard about this work or were not able to participate in such for a for various reasons.

Building on work done by others in the field, this needs assessment has furthermore revealed a number of ways to close these gaps, by creating and sharing research information that enables providers to serve newcomers and established immigrant communities in more responsive and effective ways. These include innovative funding models, focused efforts to build partnerships and research capacity in the sector, and curation of relevant research reports and findings. While these gaps have been recognized for some time (Shields et al., 2015), efforts to address them have been sporadic, and the lack of cohesion in research efforts has undermined the ability of the sector to work in a unified way.

A great deal can be done in the short term to ensure that existing research knowledge is shared more widely, and in accessible ways. Some of the steps discussed above – building relationships and research capacity within the sector, and establishing a centralized resource for sharing knowledge with all stakeholders – can begin in the very near future. In particular, training can be offered to front-line settlement workers on research basics and approaches. This will enable them to act more as full partners with academics, and to inform their own practice and advocacy with relevant evidence that they trust.

Another way to build capacity and relationships in the sector is to hold public events, such as panel discussions for researchers, to share and discuss their work. Such events as those held by CERIS before its closure also offer valuable opportunities for networking and building relationships among stakeholders (Shields et al., 2015). Although several academic research centres are already offering frequent webinars to share their own research, there is strong desire for a single, accessible entity bringing together stakeholders from all parts of the sector for regular discussions of topics of common interest.

In the medium term, as front-line workers are trained and relationships deepen, researchers and agencies can engage in research with a range of inclusive approaches such as participatory and community-based action research. Community-based participatory research (CBPR) has been recognized as especially successful in work with newcomer communities (Vaughn et al., 2017). CBPR's focus on equitable involvement of all parties during all phases of the research, from developing the research question to disseminating findings to strengthening policy and practice, is an effective approach to work with newcomers in other areas as well, including settlement services. Collaborative and community-based research partnerships within the immigrant and refugee-serving sector can themselves also be the subject of study, as literature is sparse on such partnerships.

There are, however, some barriers to the use of CBPR. Firstly, those who take this approach must be trained in its use. Immigrant and refugee-serving agencies have limited resources of staffing, time, and funding, and federal funders have largely divested from professional development in the sector (Bushell & Shields, 2018). In addition, much of the academic community is unfamiliar with community-based research capacity and the research it produces (Adebayo et al., 2018). This not only creates a collective knowledge gap but also leads to the duplication of research initiatives across communities and academia. As a result, opportunities for collaboration and partnerships are missed. With isolated research projects, resources are used less effectively, and stakeholders cannot build on each other's work and knowledge (Graham et al., 2018). It is therefore necessary to foster communication and connection among stakeholders, and CBPR can be an integral part of building long-term, mutually respectful relationships.

Importantly, the emphasis on equity in research with communities aligns with issues and principles raised in this needs assessment. Newcomers, especially racialized ones and temporary foreign workers, have been affected disproportionately by COVID-19 (Shields & Alrob, 2020), and are more likely to live with precarious and low-income employment and poor quality housing (Toronto Foundation, 2019). It is crucial that work done at any time to support immigrants, refugees, and people with precarious or no status be firmly rooted in principles of equity and access. Immigration is Canada's largest source of population growth, and to ensure newcomers' full participation in a just and fair society, everyone who works with and for newcomers must understand and work to end systemic discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender identity, family status, age, religion, disability, or immigration status (Bushell & Shields, 2018). Research within and about the immigrant and refugee-serving sector that acknowledges and addresses such discrimination will ultimately lead to more effective practice.

Through all research and knowledge mobilization about migration and settlement, at any phase, storytelling can be a potent tool for mobilizing knowledge and supporting advocacy. Narrative has been recognized as a powerful force in shaping policy and public opinion (Bannister & O'Sullivan, 2013), and narrative research has been used successfully as an approach to community-based participatory research with community organizations serving newcomers (Brigham, Baillie Abidi, & Zhang, 2018; George & Selimos, 2018). Sharing stories in formats that are less common outside academia, such as audio and video, photography, blog entries, and other digital media, can generate new knowledge and build the capacity of organizations to support newcomers (Botfield et al., 2018).

Longer-term improvements to research and knowledge mobilization in the sector will require changes to funding and management of agencies serving newcomers. Such changes may not necessitate new funding: thorough research and evaluation of existing activities may reveal less effective practices, and the funds for those can be reallocated to, for example, embedding researchers within organizations (Ward et al., 2021), curating research, and building sustainable networks or hubs. Furthermore, groundwork can be laid for a community of practice to convene stakeholders from all parts of the sector to discuss research, to build and maintain a directory of contacts and resources, and to curate research findings into formats that are easily accessible to any interested parties. A sector-based hub hosting such a community of practice offers opportunities to share knowledge and experiences to cross-pollinate each other's work to inform practice and policy (Shields & Evans, 2012).

Next steps

The following steps will be taken in the short term to foster networks and build capacity for research and knowledge mobilization in the GTA's immigrant and refugee-serving sector.

First, training for service providers in various aspects of research and knowledge mobilization is to be developed in order to build capacity and skills among the people who work directly with newcomers. This training can include basic information such as research terms and concepts, methods for collecting and analyzing data, introductions to relevant repositories of data, guidance for engaging in community-based research, and suggested ways to mobilize knowledge gained through research. It can also explore how to promote equity through research, by negotiating and building mutually respectful relationships with academic partners, using intersectional and anti-oppressive lenses at all stages of research work, understanding the importance of disaggregating data to identify issues specific to vulnerable populations, and translating findings into accessible formats that can be shared easily and widely.

The training can be offered online, as a multi-module, interactive course, in both self-directed and facilitated formats. Opportunities for synchronous and asynchronous discussions among participants can be provided as part of an effort to encourage networking. Once face-to-face gatherings are safe, components of the training can be offered in person at workshops as well.

Second, research knowledge that is especially relevant to front-line work will be disseminated through public events such as panel discussions and webinars that are open to all stakeholders in the sector. Such events present invaluable opportunities for researchers, policymakers, and service providers to come together and share knowledge to improve settlement practice. These events can be offered online, and in person when possible. Though this assessment has noted the strong desire within the sector to meet with colleagues face-to-face, the accessibility of online events has proved beneficial for people who could not otherwise attend. Therefore, all events held by the Community Knowledge Program will be livestreamed, with a chance for all participants to interact, and recordings will be hosted indefinitely on the program website.

Third, a centralized portal, or hub, will be created and supported as a broad-based resource that welcomes all stakeholders and provides opportunities for networking and sharing of curated information. Dedicated staff at an organization such as Wellesley Institute can create and promote the hub, curate and summarize research reports and other relevant resources, offer venues for formal and informal communication among stakeholders, and maintain a public calendar of events in the sector. There are already efforts to these ends that have emerged across the sector and in specific organizations, but many of the issues of fragmentation remain. To maximize the value of these efforts, Wellesley Institute will work toward building a community of practice for researchers, policymakers, and community agencies interested in research into migration, settlement, and integration. This will be a group of stakeholders who come together regularly, in person and online, to discuss shared interests and concerns in order to ensure that information and training are shared and responsive to the sector's needs (Edmonton Regional Learning Consortium, 2016).

Over time, a community of practice can bring people together with a shared domain of interest, provide opportunities for them to build and maintain relationships, and create a shared repertoire of resources (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). This collection can begin with the materials developed under the auspices of CERIS, and grow into a hub that will enable settlement practitioners, researchers, and policymakers to share ideas, knowledge, and insights that lead to robust services for newcomers as they arrive and integrate into Canadian society.

It is hoped that these steps will establish a foundation for a long-lived network and a dynamic set of resources that will change and grow with the sector through the era of COVID-19 and beyond.

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