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## **A Preliminary Investigation Into Private Refugee Sponsors**

### **Abstract**

Faith-based and other civil society organizations, along with more ad-hoc groups of Canadians, have sustained a continuous program of private refugee sponsorship in Canada for 40 years. The Syrian refugee exodus inspired thousands of Canadians with little or no prior experience to also take up refugee sponsorship. Little is known about private sponsors, their characteristics and experiences, and the impact of sponsorship on them. This article undertakes two tasks. First, it sketches the contours of a large, interdisciplinary project investigating the phenomenon of private refugee sponsorship from the perspective of Canadian sponsors of Syrians, including both long-term and new sponsors. The project asks how the project of welcoming refugees remakes the citizenship of Canadians. Second, the article presents original data selected from a survey of over 500 sponsors of recently arrived Syrians. We conclude with future directions for research and analysis.

**Keywords:** Refugees, private sponsorship, Syrian refugees, citizenship, Canadian national identity, cosmopolitanism.

### **Résumé**

Au cours des 40 dernières années, des organisations religieuses et civiques ainsi que des regroupements citoyens ad hoc ont soutenu un programme continu de parrainage collectif au Canada. Récemment, l'exode syrien a inspiré des milliers des canadiens avec peu ou pas d'expérience de parrainage collectif à devenir parrains. Jusqu'à présent, il existe peu de données sur ces personnes, leurs caractéristiques démographiques, leurs motivations et leurs expériences de parrainage collectif. Le présent article accomplit deux tâches distinctes. Premièrement, il décrit les objectifs d'un grand projet interdisciplinaire qui examine l'expérience du parrainage collectif du point de vue des parrains canadiens. Le projet cherche à comprendre comment la réception des réfugiés a influencé la perception de la citoyenneté canadienne de la part des parrains. Deuxièmement, cet article présente les résultats inédits d'un sondage auprès de plus de 500 parrains de familles syriennes. L'article conclut en identifiant les futures orientations de la recherche.

**Mots clés :** Réfugiés, parrainage privé, réfugiés syriens, citoyenneté, identité nationale canadienne, cosmopolitisme.



## INTRODUCTION

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The Syrian civil war, and the human displacement it precipitated, has reinvigorated domestic and international interest in Canada's unique model of private refugee sponsorship.<sup>1</sup> A fall 2015 federal election replaced a government that cultivated antipathy toward asylum seekers and refugees with one that campaigned on a pledge to resettle 25,000 Syrian refugees in a matter of months. In December 2015, media images of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau welcoming Syrian refugees at a Toronto airport went viral around the world as thousands of Canadians formed groups and undertook preparations to privately sponsor refugees from Syria.

Academic research about private refugee sponsorship lags behind the recent flurry of activity and attention, and this special issue of *Canadian Ethnic Studies* adds momentum to the closure of that gap, with a focus on the Syrian experience (except see AAISA 2017; Drolet et al. 2017; Munson and Ataullahjan 2016; Oda et al. 2017). Refugee resettlement is one of three 'durable solutions' for refugees espoused by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, along with voluntary return to the country of origin and local integration in the country of first asylum. As a distinctly Canadian mode of resettlement, private sponsorship has sparked a range of policy-relevant research questions about its benefits in terms of refugee outcomes in comparison to a public model of resettlement. However, the impact of private refugee sponsorship on sponsors and the communities in which they live remains virtually unaddressed.<sup>2</sup>

Why study sponsors? From an academic perspective, private sponsorship offers a unique opportunity to explore perceptions and experiences of an encounter between citizen (member) and refugee (other) that is both highly personal and constituted and mediated by the state. Refugee sponsors interact with refugees at the granular, quotidian level of daily life, but the possibility, structure, and terms of that relationship are set by government regulation. While many scholars conduct important research with partners in established civil society organizations, we probe the motivations and experiences of individual refugee sponsors, thereby offering a way to examine everyday enactments of 'civil society' from a distinct angle. For purposes of advancing both research and policy, it is vital to understand better who sponsors, why they sponsor, how they do it, and whether they would sponsor again and/or encourage others to do so.

Owing to the dearth of empirical data on private sponsors and the absence of public (or publicly available) datasets about them, our research team created a comprehensive survey of private citizens who sponsored Syrian refugees. We focused specifically on those whose sponsored party (usually a family, but sometimes a single person) arrived after November 2015. We offer here selected initial findings from

the results of that survey, which closed early after the first quarter of 2018. This survey and the resulting dataset constitute the first phase in a two-phase research project and the survey forms the basis for qualitative interviews with sponsors that we will conduct during 2018-19.

The paper is organized as follows: first, we outline Canada's unique model of private sponsorship (Labman 2016). Second, we sketch the conceptual framework of the project, its aims and objectives. Third, we describe survey design and methodology. Next, we present data from the survey that address the demographic characteristics of survey respondents, their motivation for sponsorship, and the mechanisms by which individuals assembled into groups. Some of the findings presented here speak directly to elements of our conceptual and theoretical framework; others are antecedent or ancillary to the framework, in that they provide information that will aid in contextualizing other data and/or guide us toward future paths of inquiry for the next phase of research. Thus, while the findings presented here do not fully answer the overarching conceptual and theoretical questions posed by our project, the data stand on their own as a contribution to knowledge about private sponsorship of refugees.

## **BACKGROUND: CANADIAN REFUGEE SPONSORSHIP**

This is a propitious moment to study sponsors. Not since the Indochinese refugee movement inaugurated the contemporary refugee sponsorship system have so many Canadians undertaken to financially and personally support the resettlement of refugees through private sponsorship (Molloy et al. 2017). From the nineteenth century onwards, diasporic communities mobilized informally to assist ethnic, religious, or personal kin to flee oppression, war, and persecution, but it was not until the 1976 *Immigration Act* that public and private refugee resettlement was legislated into formal and stable existence (Canada 1976; Labman 2016). Shortly after the *Immigration Act* came into force in 1978, Canada resettled over 60,000 refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos between 1979-80. Admissions subsequently tapered to annual levels of around 10,000-13,000 for most years post-1994 (CCR 2016). Since 1994, privately-sponsored refugees typically comprised between 25-40% of the annual total resettlement numbers (CCR 2016).

The policy framework governing private sponsorship establishes different categories of private sponsorship. A sponsorship group may be formed under the auspices of a Sponsorship Agreement Holder (SAH), where the SAH acts as institutional intermediary between sponsorship groups and the government. Groups of Five (G5) and Community Groups (CG), on the other hand, operate autonomously and interact directly with government. SAH sponsorship groups, G5s and CGs usually spon-

sor through the privately-sponsored refugee (PSR) model, which permits the group to name specific refugees for sponsorship, and requires the group to provide the equivalent of twelve months of income assistance. Since 2013, prospective sponsors may also sponsor through a Blended Visa Office Referral (BVOR) program, whereby refugees referred to the Canadian government by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees are proposed to sponsor groups (Labman and Pearlman 2018). Sponsors of BVOR refugees split the cost of support with the government on a 50/50 basis.<sup>3</sup> For the period 4 November 2015-28 February 2018, 51,835 Syrian refugees were resettled in Canada, half as Government Assisted Refugees, 41% as Privately Sponsored Refugees, and 9% as Blended Visa Office Referrals (IRCC 2018, Table 1).

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: MAKING AND REMAKING CITIZENSHIP

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The overarching question animating our research into refugee sponsors is ‘how does the project of resettling refugees as future citizens remake the citizenship of sponsors?’ Put another way, does refugee sponsorship figure in the civic imagination of sponsors, and the way they see themselves as citizens? We pose these questions fully aware that citizenship is a capacious analytic category (Macklin 2007). We adopt a pluralistic approach to citizenship, while recognizing that different definitions of citizenship may overlap. Refugee sponsorship furnishes a context for bringing varied conceptions of citizenship to the fore and into conversation with one another (Macklin 2007).

Citizenship as legal status is the subfloor underlying the edifice of the refugee regime. Under international law, states are obliged only to admit citizens and retain nearly unfettered discretion to exclude non-citizens. The 1951 UN *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* creates an exception by obliging States Party to the Refugee Convention not to *refouler*<sup>4</sup> refugees who arrive as asylum seekers at or inside a state’s border. The *Refugee Convention* does not address refugee resettlement; the selection and resettlement of refugees from abroad remains a purely discretionary act. In Canada, both asylum seekers who obtain refugee status and resettled refugees are normally granted permanent resident status, which, in turn, eventually enables access to citizenship.<sup>5</sup> The role of private sponsors is to contribute constructively to that transition from refugee to citizen.

Citizenship as national identity, or *nation-ness* (Amarasingam et al. 2016; Anderson 2016) also matters to this project. In a speech before the UN General Assembly, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau summed up the ethos behind Canada’s commitment to refugee resettlement as ‘We are Canadian. We are here to help’ (Macleans 2016). Trudeau’s maple-syrupy pronouncement suggests that what it means to be Canadian is linked to helping others. Citizenship as [Canadian] identity may thus be relevant to individuals’ self-conception as sponsors; the content they

ascribe to national identity may also inflect whether and how they understand themselves to be engaging in a process of ‘Canadianizing’ refugees in a national context.

Citizenship as identity shades into citizenship in the substantive sense. Inspired by T. H. Marshall’s (1950) account of political, civic and social citizenship, contemporary accounts of substantive citizenship invite critical scrutiny of the ways in which the democratic ideal of equal citizenship is challenged by laws, practices, norms and structures that situate people’s membership differentially and hierarchically within a polity. Citizenship as membership is not monotone: it is striated by race, class, culture, religion, gender identity, ability, and so on (Goldring and Landolt 2013; Korteweg 2006). Those who exhibit certain traits, characteristics or behaviours are valorized above others as better or more genuine citizens; those who are disadvantaged by these metrics may be denigrated as ‘second class’ or partial citizens from the perspective of identity or belonging (Yuval-Davis 2011). Sponsors and those they sponsor are positioned differently along these metrics of membership. Sponsors’ conception of what it means to be a good citizen may inflect their views of the people they sponsor and their measure of ‘successful’ refugee resettlement.

Active citizenship – engagement in the political and civic life of the polity – occupies a central role in this project. If legal citizenship is concerned with status, and substantive citizenship attends to recognition (through enjoyment of rights and entitlements), active citizenship focuses on the performative dimension of citizenship, or practices of citizenship. Drawing on the Greek and civic republican traditions, active citizenship attends to how citizens exhibit civic virtue by engaging as members within their communities through deliberation, participation and collaboration. Refugee sponsorship activates the citizenship of those who do it. It requires people to constitute themselves into groups, and commit time, energy and resources to a cooperative undertaking of public and civic value: the enrolment of newcomers into substantive, identarian and, ultimately, legal citizenship. The performance of these tasks occurs within a tacit belief that citizenship in its various dimensions is genuinely available and accessible to refugees. As such, the act of ‘making citizens’, or including new members in the polity, is itself an act of citizenship, and is shaped by underlying ideas about citizenship’s content. The project will explore private sponsorship as a citizenship practice, with a view to ascertaining whether sponsorship not only activates citizens but also reconfigures sponsors’ own understanding and practices of citizenship. In this sense, we are interested in whether and how sponsorship ‘remakes’ the citizenship of sponsors.

Our empirical analysis is then organized around three main questions: Why do people decide to sponsor refugees? What are the distinctive programmatic features of private sponsorship and how do these structure the sponsorship dynamic? Finally, how does the experience of sponsorship constitute sponsors as citizens?

*Why sponsor?* We identify four potential factors motivating action: religion, diasporic attachments, national identity, and cosmopolitanism. Religiosity would appear to be a strong motivator; many of the sponsorship groups in existence since private sponsorship became formalized in the 1970s have had a religious affiliation. Indeed, the majority of SAHs are faith-based institutions. The practice of hospitality resonates deeply in sacred texts of several religions that enjoin us to ‘welcome the stranger’ (Bhabha 2018; McKinlay 2008). Yet, both private sponsors and bureaucrats share a mutually enforced ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ silence around religiosity that, according to Bramadat, obscures from view the reasons why faith-based communities perform so much of the ‘heavy lifting’ of resettlement (Bramadat 2014, 24).

Another motivation for sponsorship is national rather than religious commitment. When Justin Trudeau addressed the United Nations General Assembly early in 2016, he implied that part of what it means to be a good citizen of Canada is to reach out and welcome strangers – specifically, those in need of refuge. This move resonates with what Kymlicka and Walker (2012, 4) label ‘rooted cosmopolitanism.’ Building on Anthony Appiah’s insights, they postulate that “people become good citizens of the world because this is part of what it means to be a good Canadian: being Canadian motivates being or becoming cosmopolitan” (Kymlicka and Walker 2012, 4-5). Cosmopolitanism may also be expressed as a wider set of political commitments and practices related to migrants and refugees, human rights, or international solidarity. For present purposes, we define cosmopolitanism in individual terms, as a sense of personal moral obligation owed to others with whom we may share little more than common humanity (Appiah 2007).

Finally, reasons for sponsorship may be expressed in more affective or experiential terms. For example, a personal or familial history of immigration (which is very common among Canadians) may be cited as a factor in the decision to sponsor. This feeling of connection to the migratory experience – whether expressed in personal or national terms – may mediate the meaning of being ‘Canadian’, or inform sentiments of empathy and obligation toward refugees. Some of these currents may be revealed in reactions to the death of Alan Kurdi. The image of his lifeless body washed up on a Turkish beach horrified people across the globe and created a (fleeting) hope that a shared recognition of the innocence of children could overcome differences generated by race, ethnicity or religion, and even generate a broad humanitarian impulse to intervene. Within a day or two, it emerged that Alan had a Canadian aunt, and that prior to Alan’s parents’ desperate act of loading their family onto a rickety boat, she had repeatedly and unsuccessfully entreated the Canadian government to admit her relatives to Canada. The Canadian link to Alan Kurdi, an otherwise random and contingent fact, added to the mix the possibility of a different outcome both imaginable and notionally linked to actions taken (or not taken) by the Canadian government.

The character of private sponsorship as a collective undertaking distinguishes it from individualized interventions, such as donating money, or volunteering for a local agency. Therefore, it may also be important to consider ‘second order’ motivations for engaging in collective rather than individualized action. This may become apparent upon closer investigation of how sponsorship groups form, and the significance of a prior, stable institutional structure for continuity and future sponsorship. For example, some church congregations make an institutional commitment to ongoing refugee sponsorship. This may, in turn, motivate ‘repeat players’ to participate in sponsorship in order to support and sustain the institution’s undertaking. Some people may respond favourably to an invitation to join a sponsorship group because of their affinity to the person who invited them, or the attractions of a collective enterprise. We do not purport to exhaust the range of possible explanations for action, only to signal the range and multiplicity of sources.

*How does the way in which the government structures private sponsorship affect the sponsorship experience?* To understand the potential remaking of sponsors’ citizenship, we also aim to investigate how sponsors operate within a given legal and institutional architecture. Despite the label, it is probably more accurate to regard the ‘private’ sponsorship program as a ‘public-private partnership’, where volunteer sponsor groups (rather than business interests) represent the private side of the equation. Note that the private sponsorship program retains a significant role for government: the program depends for its existence on a legislated structure creating the space for it (Labman 2016). The government regulates numbers of privately sponsored refugees through annual levels, governs the criteria for sponsorship, screens nominated refugees against the refugee definition, conducts medical, criminality and security checks, and organizes refugees’ transport to Canada. During the sponsorship period, privately sponsored refugees can access various government-funded settlement services, such as language training and employment programs.<sup>7</sup> School-aged children attend public schools and everyone is entitled to public health care. Once the twelve-month sponsorship period ends, sponsored refugees qualify for provincial social assistance on the same terms as any other permanent resident. In all these respects, government remains an important public presence in private sponsorship.

From the other side, private sponsors undertake a quintessentially public function associated with nation-building in settler societies, namely the integration of newcomers. Yet they do so by creating relationships that entail financial dependence, partiality, and bonds of affect that are typically associated with private relations of kinship or friendship.

*How does the experience of sponsorship constitute sponsors as active citizens?* The various activities that comprise refugee sponsorship constitute a distinctive exercise

of civic engagement. They align with what James Boyte (2011, 633) calls ‘public work’, which he defines as “self-organized efforts by a mix of people who solve common problems and create things, material or symbolic, of lasting civic value”. Private refugee sponsorship is a form of public work in which sponsors must embark on extended processes of deliberation, dialogue, trust-building and compromise with the sponsored refugee family, and within the group itself.

Understanding how people engage in sponsorship activities allows us to see how people engage in active citizenship in ways that potentially transform their experience of and engagement with citizenship itself. Does sponsorship confer any of the benefits sometimes attributed to active citizenship, such as creating, strengthening, or extending networks of solidarity, trust and cohesion?<sup>8</sup> These potential effects on individuals who undertake collective action, independent of the direct impact of those actions on refugees and sponsors, warrant empirical investigation. We also attend to the potential significance of how groups coalesce, and the nature of the connections between members, in relation to commitment to future refugee sponsorship.

## EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION

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Our framework for situating and understanding the elements of private sponsorship directly informs the design of our empirical research, which probes how private refugee sponsorship relates to the citizenship of sponsors. Our project consists of two parts, an online survey and in-depth qualitative interviews. This article focuses on the first part, an online survey that gathers data about sponsors, as well as their motivations for sponsorship, the relationship of sponsorship group members to one another and to sponsored refugees, and sponsors’ evaluation of their experience. Below, we report our preliminary findings regarding survey respondents, their motives for sponsorship, and the mechanism by which they formed or joined a sponsorship group.

We begin with an account of the demographic characteristics of private sponsors who responded to the online survey created by the authors. The identity markers include location, race/ethnicity, gender, age, education, income, legal status, occupation and religious affiliation. We turn next to the questions of why and how individuals embark on sponsorship. We report data about motivations, and since private sponsorship is a collective undertaking requiring a minimum of five participants (two in the Quebec model), we also sought information about the process by which individuals form or join sponsorship groups, and the type of group they form.

Our goal in this paper is to supply original, descriptive findings about sponsors that will consolidate knowledge about private sponsorship and catalyze the next stage of research. Learning more about *who* sponsors necessarily precedes an analy-



sis of *why* and *how* they sponsor. In short, our survey findings not only provide original data about refugee sponsors, but they also lay the foundation for the next phase of the empirical research.

### **Method**

The team of authors developed a national online survey directed at individual sponsors of Syrian refugees who arrived post-November 2015.<sup>9</sup> The format varied slightly, depending on whether the sponsors were still within the twelve-month sponsorship period or had already completed it.<sup>10</sup> Most respondents completed the survey in approximately 30 minutes. The topics addressed by the survey tracked the trajectory of refugee sponsorship from pre-arrival to post-sponsorship. The survey posed questions about the personal and demographic characteristics of sponsors; motives for sponsorship; formation of sponsorship group; sponsorship activities across time; time dedicated to sponsorship activities; governance of the sponsorship group; dynamics between sponsors and sponsored refugees; post-sponsorship relationships; future sponsorship intentions; impact of sponsorship and evaluation of experience. The survey instrument also provided respondents with the opportunity to add written comments, and to share contact information if they wished to participate in future interviews.

The survey was piloted in summer 2017 and launched in August 2017. IRCC publishes information on more than 300 destinations across Canada for resettled Syrian refugees. However, there is no data set containing information on sponsors and as a result, there is no sampling frame of private sponsors. We might infer the location of concentrations of sponsors by the location of refugees, but there is no way to determine anything about their demographic or other characteristics. Without such a sampling frame, non-probability sampling was necessary. The authors developed a convenience sample based on multiple-points of entry network and snowball sampling techniques to recruit participants.

Invitations to complete the survey were sent to the Canadian Refugee SAH Association, the national sponsorship agreement holders network, for circulation among its 102 SAH members across Canada. Individual SAHs, both faith-based and secular, were sent invitations directly where emails could be found online. The funder of the survey research, Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) sent out a link inviting SAHs to distribute the survey to their sponsors who might be willing to complete the survey, indicating clearly that the survey was being conducted by independent researchers. Invitations were also extended to all sponsorship organizations known to the authors through their personal and professional circles, with a call to circulate across all national networks. Another invitation was issued on the Canadian Council of Refugees listserv, again with a stipulation that the link be shared with any interested sponsors.

We were confident that this multiple-point of entry recruitment approach would reach a wide range of respondents. When the survey closed in April 2018, we found that the 530 sponsors who finished the English-language survey had responded online from all over Canada, though the majority of sponsors reside in Ontario, Toronto in particular. (In December 2017, the authors finalized and launched a Quebec version [in French] of the survey adapted to the specificities of the Quebec model of private sponsorship; the results from QC are not included here).

To the best of the authors' knowledge, this 500+ person survey constitutes the largest data set to date about refugee sponsors. Since participants self-select, the survey does not purport to offer a comprehensive profile of refugee sponsors as such. We cannot ascertain how representative the sample of survey respondents is in relation to the number of Canadians involved in sponsorship of Syrian refugees (whom we conservatively estimate at approximately 40,000<sup>11</sup>). However, anecdotal evidence leads the authors to hypothesize that survey respondents are likely drawn from among those who dedicated comparatively more time to sponsorship activities than other sponsors. If this is a plausible assumption, then the findings of the survey may fairly represent the characteristics, experiences and perceptions of that segment of refugee sponsors located at the more active end of the spectrum.

Private sponsorship has operated 'on the books' since the late 1970s and through informal and ad hoc mechanisms for decades prior to that. The present moment shares two distinctive features with the pivotal Indochinese resettlement of 1979-81: first, a sizeable proportion of sponsors of Syrian refugees were participating in private sponsorship for the first time. Second, while some Syrian refugees had kin in Canada, many did not. For at least two decades prior to the private sponsorship of Syrian refugees, a significant segment of private sponsorship had evolved into an avenue for extended family reunification through refugee resettlement (Labman and Pearlman 2018). Private sponsors would nominate relatives of previously resettled refugees (who also qualified as refugees). This pattern became known as the 'echo effect' (Chapman 2014). While our dataset provides evidence that many PSR and BVOR sponsors were asked to consider additional family members for future sponsorship, illustrative of this 'echo effect', we do not explore these data here.

Below we focus on three aspects of the survey data: first, survey respondents' demographic profiles; second, their motivations for embarking on refugee sponsorship and third, the process by which they formed or joined a sponsorship group.

## PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

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### *Who Sponsors?*

Formal eligibility to participate in private sponsorship requires access to funds and

sufficiently robust social networks to form a sustainable sponsorship group. Functionally, performance of the myriad tasks associated with newcomer settlement and integration also demands time, flexibility, and a range of interpersonal and intercultural skills. It also requires a willingness to leverage social capital in the form of connections, information and ‘know how’ on behalf of the sponsored refugees. What we present here are demographic data that begin to give insight into who engages in these efforts as indicated by those who responded to our invitation to take the survey.

The 530 respondents who completed the survey represent a particular slice of the Canadian population. They were likely to be highly educated, older women of European ancestry, many of whom had before-tax household incomes well above the Canadian 2015 median of \$70,336 (Statistics Canada 2017c). Because we do not know who constitutes the entire body of sponsors in Canada, we cannot determine whether highly educated, older white women were simply more likely than others to respond to the online survey.

Women represent almost three-quarters of survey respondents (74%), and almost three-quarters (74%) of respondents were over 50 years of age. The income and education levels of survey respondents suggest they are largely upper middle class. Of the 479 respondents who chose to answer the question, more than half (54%) had before-tax household incomes above \$100,000 with more than half of those having incomes above \$200,000. Slightly more than half (52%) of respondents earned at least part of their income through employment (32% worked more than 30 hours a week). This income did not result solely from employment: the largest group of respondents, more than a third, identified as retired (36%) or semi-retired (7%).

The respondents were highly educated. More than 84% of those who filled out the question about educational attainment had obtained a BA or above (with the largest group, 35%, earning an MA or equivalent degree). This is a significantly larger proportion than the 29% of all Canadians ages 25-64 who have earned a Bachelor’s degree or higher (Statistics Canada 2018).

In terms of cultural and ethnic background, the survey respondents also represent a fairly homogeneous group. The majority of our respondents identified as ‘European heritage’ (88%), with 11% of the remainder of the respondents identifying as ‘visible minority’ and 2% as Indigenous. Again, this is not representative of the Canadian population at large, where the last census reports that 22% of the Canadian population identified as ‘visible minority’ and 5% as Indigenous (Statistics Canada 2017a; 2017b). A disproportionate number of respondents are from Ontario, and Toronto in particular (though almost all provinces and territories are represented in the sample). Both Ontario and Toronto are far more diverse than Canada in general, suggesting that survey respondents are even less representative of the cities and towns where they live than the aggregate numbers reveal.

These numbers also suggest that many of those who sponsor Syrian refugees are building relationships that bridge outwards from their own ethnic and cultural heritage groups. Indeed, while people of Arab or non-Arab Middle Eastern descent combine to be the second largest category in our survey, they constitute only 3% and 2% of respondents respectively (5% total).

The religious identity of the respondents is not as homogeneous. Christians make up the largest category amongst survey respondents at 47%. An almost equivalently large percentage identifies as non-religious, agnostic, or atheist (combined 38%), with the remainder of respondents identifying as Jewish (6%) or Muslim (2%).

The survey assesses formal connection to Canada through questions on country of birth and citizenship status. More than three-quarters of survey respondents were born in Canada, making them *jus soli* citizens (79%); 21% of respondents were born outside the country. This does not differ dramatically from the overall Canadian population, of whom more than one in five is foreign born (Statistics Canada 2017b). However, in our survey, of the 21% born outside the country, 90% are citizens (by naturalization). Only 9% of respondents were permanent residents. This suggests that our survey respondents have firm citizenship ties to Canada, and the majority of respondents are unlikely to have direct personal experience as immigrant or refugee.

Eighty percent of sponsors in our survey are first-timers. What is noteworthy is that half of all respondents indicate a willingness to sponsor again, though at this stage we do not know how many have already initiated a subsequent sponsorship. The 20% of sponsors with prior experience tended to have a similar demographic profile as the survey respondents taken together. They were mostly older women, though with a slightly higher proportion of men (28% versus 25% in the group as a whole – see Table 1), highly educated (see Table 2), and even more likely to be retired compared to the survey respondents as a whole (54% were retired versus 36% in the overall survey – see Table 3). While first-time prospective sponsors will know the formal requirements, they may be less prepared for the functional and temporal demands than are ‘repeat players’ with prior experience of refugee sponsorship. However, the largely overlapping demographic profile of first-timers compared to those having sponsored at least once before, suggests that those in our survey who are first-timers share many demographic characteristics of repeat sponsors. Age and stage, together with time and resources, are clearly important factors shaping people’s desire and ability to undertake sponsorship.

Politically, respondents situated themselves as centrist or left, with 53% voting for the Liberal Party and 25% for the NDP in 2015, parties that respectively won 39% and 19% of the popular vote in that federal election. Particularly striking is the low number of Conservative Party voters amongst the respondents (6%), a party

**TABLE 1.** Gender identification by first-time sponsorship

Gender identification	First-time sponsor?		Overall
	No	Yes	
Men	28%	24%	25%
Women	70%	75%	74%
Trans	0%	0%	0%
Decline to answer	2%	1%	1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

**TABLE 2.** Highest level of education achieved by first-time sponsorship

Highest level of education	First-time sponsor?	
	No	Yes
Some high school	0%	0%
High school (equivalence)	2%	3%
College, CEGEP or non-university certificate or diploma (other than trade or diploma)	9%	9%
Registered apprenticeship or other trade certificate	0%	1%
University certificate or diploma below bachelor’s level	7%	2%
Bachelor	30%	31%
Master	35%	34%
Professional degree	8%	10%
Doctorate	8%	9%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

that won 31% of the popular vote. Conservative Party representation among survey respondents is outstripped by the proportion of Green Party voters in our survey (7%) who took only 4% of the popular vote in 2015 (Canadian Broadcasting Company 2015).

**Why Sponsor?**

What do our preliminary findings indicate about what motivates people to sponsor Syrian refugees? The survey asked respondents to consider a series of reasons behind

**TABLE 3.** Employment situation by first-time sponsorship

Employment situation	First-time sponsor?		Overall
	No	Yes	
Employed full time (30 hrs/wk)	20%	35%	32%
Employed part-time (<30 hours/wk)	10%	6%	7%
Social assistance, disability, workers comp or other income support	1%	1%	1%
Not employed outside the home	1%	3%	3%
Other	3%	1%	1%
Retired	54%	31%	36%
Seeking employment	2%	0%	0%
Self-employed	4%	16%	14%
Semi-retired	6%	7%	7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>101%</b>

their decision to sponsor Syrian refugees, and to check off how important each was for them. The reasons included the impact of media coverage; the image of Alan Kurdi; past personal experience with immigration; personal connection to the region; prior sponsorship experience; and experience with community advocacy. These are shown in Table 4. A cross-tabulation of this ‘ethical’ motive by the basis of group formation (discussed in the next section) shows that respondents in groups that formed based on faith-based connections and those in groups that came together based on family, friendship and neighbourhood networks hold these values in very similar and high regard (see Table 5).

Media coverage in general was cited as an important motivation for sponsorship, with 76% of respondents ranking this as very important and only 2% saying it was not at all important. The role of previous sponsorship experience emerges as a potentially distinguishing factor here. For first-time sponsors, media coverage was more important than for experienced sponsors (80% vs. 60% respectively).

Although the image of Alan Kurdi shocked and transfixed many, its role in mobilizing sponsors is ambiguous. Survey responses suggest the impact of Alan Kurdi’s image was mixed and comparatively less important compared to ethical concerns and general media coverage: 37% of respondents ranked it as very important, 46% as somewhat important, and 16% as not very important. Prior sponsorship experience matters somewhat here. Experienced sponsors were less likely to report being strongly motivated to sponsor Syrians because of Alan Kurdi’s image, perhaps because experienced sponsors’ commitment preceded the Syrian crisis.

**TABLE 4.** Sponsorship motivation by first-time sponsorship

Sponsorship Motivation	First-time sponsor?		
	No	Yes	Overall
<b>“It’s the ethically right thing to do” (n = 519)</b>			
Very	88%	90%	90%
Somewhat	11%	10%	10%
Not at all	1%	0%	0%
<b>Death of Alan Kurdi (n = 444 )</b>			
Very	27%	40%	37%
Somewhat	47%	46%	46%
Not at all	27%	14%	16%
<b>Past experience of sponsorship (n = 180 )</b>			
Very	80%	28%	58%
Somewhat	18%	33%	24%
Not at all	2%	39%	18%
<b>Past experience community advocacy (n = 397)</b>			
Very	59%	38%	43%
Somewhat	35%	51%	48%
Not at all	6%	10%	9%
<b>Personal or family history of migration (n = 318)</b>			
Very	34%	32%	33%
Somewhat	34%	46%	43%
Not at all	31%	22%	24%
<b>Personal connection to region by first-time sponsorship (n = 224)</b>			
Very	11%	20%	17%
Somewhat	18%	22%	21%
Not at all	71%	58%	62%
<b>Invited to join a group by first-time sponsorship (n = 366)</b>			
Very	60%	67%	66%
Somewhat	19%	24%	23%
Not at all	21%	9%	11%
<b>Information session by first-time sponsorship (n = 294)</b>			
Very	29%	44%	41%
Somewhat	29%	41%	38%
Not at all	42%	16%	21%

**TABLE 5.** Sponsorship Motivation: “It’s the ethically right thing to do” by type of sponsorship association

Sponsorship Motivation	Type of sponsorship association					Overall
	Civic, community or advocacy association <sup>a</sup>	Employment-based	Faith-based <sup>b</sup>	Family, neighbourhood or friendship-based	Other	
“It’s the ethically right thing to do” (n = 519)						
Very	96%	100%	90%	89%	80%	96%
Somewhat	4%	0%	10%	10%	17%	4%
Not at all	0%	0%	0%	0%	2%	0%

<sup>a</sup> immigrant/ethnic association, local school, university.

<sup>b</sup> church, mosque, synagogue, temple, gurdwaras, etc.

The importance of prior collective organizing (in various forms) warrants attention. A high number of respondents indicated prior experience of community advocacy (n=397). Among the number of respondents who replied to the query on prior sponsorship experience (n=180), a majority (58%) ranked having had such experiences as a very important motive for their current sponsorship.<sup>12</sup>

The survey reveals that personal or family history of migration are important motivators for sponsorship. Three out of four respondents (76%) stated that a personal or family history of migration was either somewhat or very important (43% and 33%). However, having a personal connection to the region was not as important a motivation for sponsorship. These findings are interesting, given the demographic profile of the sample (older, wealthy, educated, retired and white). The relative importance of personal or family history of migration may be a result of sponsors being children or grandchildren of immigrants. The significance attached to prior migration warrants further exploration. It may underwrite cosmopolitan affinity with the outsider, as sponsors recall themselves or their ancestors as once having been outsiders to Canada. It may also be the personal expression of Canada’s national narrative as a ‘country of immigrants’, to the extent that sponsors may interpolate refugee resettlement into that narrative. Canada’s official policy of multiculturalism may play a supporting role as well. Amarasingam et al. (2016) argue that multiculturalism can be understood as an expression of ‘banal nationalism’ among refugees to Canada, conceptually linking it with rooted cosmopolitanism (Kymlicka and Walker 2012).

The limited significance to sponsors of a personal connection to the region suggests that repeat sponsors continue to sponsor without needing a connection to the region. Among sponsors with prior experience, 71% said personal connections to the



region were not at all important. In contrast, the comparable figure for first-time sponsors was 58%. This figure is notable, potentially in terms of motivation among the majority of sponsors in our survey, and demands further scrutiny and research.

Social networks can play a role as stimulus or catalyst to sponsor, and warrants examination when considering how groups form and how people engage in sponsorship activities. Invitations matter. An invitation to join a sponsorship group was cited as very important by 66% of respondents and as somewhat important by 23%. Information sessions were rated less highly as motivations for sponsorship. These data suggest that personal invitations or direct network contact is an important catalyst for sponsorship. The second phase of the project will allow us to further explore the connections between the social networks that facilitate sponsorship and the broader normative commitments that frame motivation (e.g., faith, nationalism, cosmopolitanism).

### ***How to Sponsor?***

Prospective sponsors can fulfil their intention to reach beyond borders to assist refugees only because the state has created the institutional apparatus to operationalize it.<sup>13</sup> Requirements such as minimum group size and financial criteria regulate eligibility to privately sponsor. The survey sought information about the nature of the linkages around which sponsorship groups coalesced. In addition, we gathered data about the category of private sponsorship (SAH group, Group of 5 (G5) or Community Group (CG)) as well as the category of sponsored refugee (privately-sponsored refugee (PSR) or blended visa office-referred refugee (BVOR)). Sponsorship groups organized through a SAH had the benefits and constraints of the SAH's guidance and rules, while G5s and CGs did not. PSRs could be selected by the sponsorship group, whereas BVORs could not, but BVORs imposed less of a financial burden than PSRs on the sponsorship group.

In response to a question about how the respondent's sponsorship group came together, the most frequent response was "family, friendship and neighbourhood networks" (43%), followed by shared faith (38%). Among shared faith-based sponsors, the majority reported being part of a Christian denomination (83%); followed by small shares of Jews (7%), Muslims (2%) and other religions (not Christian, Jewish or Muslim) (6%).

The aggregating role of family, friendship and neighborhood networks versus faith-based connections may be related to the high proportion of first-time sponsors in our sample. The prevalence of the former signals a potentially significant distinction between experienced sponsors and first-timers. As noted earlier, eight out of ten respondents were first-time sponsors (n = 424 of 530 responses). A cross-tabulation of basis of group formation and prior sponsorship experience suggests, not surprisingly, that prior sponsorship experience is associated with faith as a basis of sponsor-

**TABLE 6.** Type of sponsorship association by first-time sponsorship

Type of sponsorship association	First-time sponsorship?	
	No	Yes
Civic, community or advocacy association (immigrant/ethnic association, local school, university)	8%	9%
Employment-based	2%	2%
Faith-based (church, mosque, synagogue, temple, gurdwaras, etc.)	60%	33%
Family, neighbourhood or friendship-based	21%	49%
Other	9%	8%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

ship group formation, and first-time sponsorship is associated with family/friendship/neighborhood and civic bases of group formation (see Table 6). Approximately half of first-time sponsors were in groups that came together based on family, friendship and neighbourhood networks (49%), whereas 60% of those with prior sponsorship experience came together based on shared faith.

We anticipated that some survey respondents would not know the type of sponsorship that their group engaged in, and this was true for about 7% of respondents (n=37). Among those able to identify the type of sponsorship, private sponsorship accounted for over half of all sponsorships in our sample (56% or 275) with the remainder (44% or 218) choosing the BVOR option. Most sponsors were part of SAHs (72% or 319 people), followed by community groups (16% or 73), and Groups of 5 (12% or 52). IRCC data indicates that between 2010 and 2014, SAHs accounted for an average of 66% of sponsorships, Groups of 5 for 31% and Community Sponsors for 3% (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada 2016a). In October 2012, the regulations were changed so that groups other than SAHs could only sponsor refugees recognized by the UNHCR or a state (Government of Canada 2012). This created a significant impediment to private sponsorship. In December 2016 IRCC announced a temporary suspension for two months that allowed G5 and CG sponsors to sponsor 1,000 Syrian and Iraqi applicants without individualized Convention refugee recognition. During this time, IRCC accepted group or *prima facie* refugee designation (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada 2016b).

## CONCLUSION

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Based on 530 completed responses from active refugee sponsors, we can provide the following profile of survey respondents: Sponsors are disproportionately white, well-educated, middle to upper class women over fifty. Many are retired. The formal requirements for sponsorship favour those with financial resources, and the functional requirements favour those with time and social capital. Repeat sponsors will know about the time commitments demanded of sponsorship, whereas new sponsors may not. The large share of first-time sponsors among respondents (80%) suggests that this is a new cohort or generation of sponsors. Will these first-time sponsors become repeat performers, part of the new face of sponsorship, driven less by the faith and infrastructure of religious organizations? The social networks that produced recent sponsorship groups vary considerably in type, strength, and duration. This invites inquiry into whether continuity of sponsorship as ongoing practice requires or benefits from being institutionally embedded. Further research into the similarities and differences between first-timers and repeat sponsors may yield a more nuanced portrait.

Another question raised by our data concerns the fact that a third of survey respondents are employed more than 30 hours a week. This suggests that a relatively large number of sponsors find time to dedicate to sponsoring despite significant work responsibilities, and we aim to better understand how many hours they spend on sponsorship, and the division of labour in their groups. A related question is whether those who are employed provide relatively more financial resources while those who are not engaged in paid employment contribute relatively more time.

The disproportionate representation of women among sponsors is significant and parallels the overrepresentation of women in the non-profit immigration settlement sector, albeit the settlement sector is also highly racialized and not highly paid. Over a century ago, the settlement house movement featured upper and upper-middle class white women, often women of means with high levels of education, finding employment in settling newcomers. The gendered and racialized dimension of unpaid and paid settlement work warrants closer study.

In terms of motivation, some may respond to a spiritual commitment to 'welcome the stranger'; for others, hospitality is filtered through an ethic of humanitarianism, international solidarity, or a belief that it instantiates Canadian identity, which in turn may be connected to personal, familial, or national narratives of migration history. Given the salience of a negative securitization discourse that represents refugees as undeserving and/or as threats (in Canada and elsewhere), we are curious about how sponsors imagined Syrian refugees in the course of deciding to sponsor. We do not presume to exhaust the possible reasons for action, nor deny the possibility of multiple and coexisting motives.

Preliminary findings regarding motivation do hint at possible clusters of motivating factors, along axes of spiritual/secular, connected/unconnected and apolitical/political. In terms of group formation, we observe that the institutional centrality of faith-based institutions among SAHs (and the dominance of SAHs in private sponsorship) does not necessarily correspond to faith as the glue binding sponsorship groups together. First-time sponsors are less likely to form or join groups that come together based on faith-based institutions and more likely to do so based on friendship and place-based networks. Whether this will affect people's long-term engagement with sponsorship, and if so, how, remains to be seen.

The relatively weak representation of Conservative voters among sponsors is interesting. As a general matter, one might expect that at least some who identify as politically conservative would favour private philanthropy and volunteerism as a preferred vehicle for redistribution over public mechanisms. Private sponsorship as a mode of assisting refugees should appeal to such individuals because it relies on private rather than public support.<sup>14</sup> It is possible that the Conservative government's increasingly overt anti-Muslim and anti-refugee stance before and during the 2015 election campaign drove some previous Conservative voters to cast their ballot for other parties in 2015, while remaining Conservative voters were more likely to support the government's position toward Muslims and refugees. More research is required. Our survey did not inquire into pre-2015 voting patterns, so we cannot test this hypothesis. One might also wonder whether the political context in which private sponsorship surged during and after the 2015 federal election permits a reading of that spike as a form of protest against the Conservative government's disregard for Syrian refugees, and its lack of consideration of Alan Kurdi's family's appeal. It is equally possible that some Conservative voters were disinclined to participate in an initiative so tied to the new Liberal government.<sup>15</sup>

The data included here represent a first look into selected dimensions of sponsorship, with the caveat that it only surveys the sponsors. We anticipate that the clarity and breadth of this preliminary discussion will be enhanced by the nuance and depth that interview data can furnish.

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## NOTES

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1. The Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative, a collaborative project supported by the government of Canada, legal experts, the UNHCR and civil society donors, has developed a platform to explain and export the Canadian model Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative, <http://www.refugeesponsorship.org> (accessed 11 December 2017).

2. An early attempt to profile private sponsors from the Indochinese refugee resettlement (1979-81) foundered on an inability to gain access to the relevant files in the National Archives (Fine-Meyer 2002, vii-ix)

3. For a brief explanation of these categories, see text and links in Refugee Sponsorship Training Program, 'The Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program', <http://www.rstp.ca/en/refugee-sponsorship/the-private-sponsorship-of-refugees-program/> (accessed 8 January 2018).

4. *Refoulement* is the technical term for returning a refugee to the place where s/he fled due to a well-founded fear of persecution.

5. Most refugees are eager to access the security of citizenship status, and are most likely to naturalize compared to all other immigrant groups in Canada. Thus, both a successful asylum claim and resettlement in Canada are pathways to the acquisition of citizenship (Griffith 2018).

6. The contrast between public and private is admittedly stylized. It would be more accurate to describe private sponsorship as akin to a public-private partnership, where the private partner is not a profit-seeking corporate entity, but rather an other-regarding collective formed for the specific purposes of refugee sponsorship. Note that the BVOR model represents a recent variant on the configuration of public and private responsibilities.

7. Like all non-citizens, children are entitled to primary and secondary education.

8. In this context, it is noteworthy that a sponsor interviewed about church-based sponsorship reported that refugee sponsorship strengthened the congregation because "we worked together on a tangible goal" (McKinlay 2008, 44).

9. Survey content was translated into French and modified slightly for Quebec because the rules governing the formation of private sponsorship groups in Quebec are established by the province and vary slightly from the federal model.

10. The survey is limited to private sponsors of Syrian refugees who came to Canada after November 4, 2015, when the Liberal Government led by Trudeau was elected and executed its election promise of bringing 25,000 Syrian refugees to Canada. Initially, the pledge was for this to happen by December 31, 2015, but the Government extended its deadline to February 28, 2016.

11. We arrive at this number through an admittedly impressionistic calculus: We start with the total number of sponsored Syrian refugees (approximately 25,000), divide by the estimated average number of Syrians per family (5), for a total of about 5,000 families. We conservatively estimate an average number of 8 sponsors per group, and  $8 \times 5,000 = 40,000$  sponsors.

12. These are presumably respondents who had sponsored before, although the number that responded to this item is higher than the figure that reported having previous sponsorship experience ( $n=106$ ).

13. The centrality of public power over private sponsorship is also evident in the government's tight grip on the number and origin of privately sponsored refugees resettled to Canada each year as seen in the significant shift in private sponsorship numbers following the change of government in 2015.

14. The same logic would predict that private sponsorship would not appeal to those who see it as inappropriately devolving a public responsibility to the sphere of private charity.

15. The focus on Syrian resettlement in our survey does not offer insight into the broader private sponsorship of other nationalities in the same time frame. A total of 18,362 refugees were privately sponsored in 2016 while the total number of Syrians privately sponsored between November 4, 2015 and January 29, 2017 was 14,274 (Government of Canada 2017a; Government of Canada 2017b).

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