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A socio-spatial perspective on fostering a sense of belonging among refugee families resettled in Canadian small cities

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ABSTRACT

Fostering a sense of belonging plays a significant role in supporting refugee families' integration into resettlement communities. The spatial dimensions within which refugees live and interact, such as homes, neighbourhoods, communities, and cities are influential in fostering belonging and supporting overall wellbeing. However, a socio-spatial perspective on belonging for refugees remains underdeveloped. To address this gap, we conducted an integrative knowledge synthesis of key sources from 2012 to 2022 contributing to the discourse on fostering refugee belonging via socio-spatial initiatives. Our aims were to highlight elements of belonging for refugee families that inherently embody the importance of place and to make recommendations for resettlement policy and practice. We focus on the size and socio-spatial characteristics of resettlement contexts to foster refugee families' sense of belonging. Acknowledging the interconnectedness of belonging, notions of place, and integration can enhance resettlement processes and support the overall wellbeing of refugee families.

Introduction

The global landscape has experienced an unprecedented increase in forced displacement, resulting from political conflicts, persecution, and environmental challenges. According to the UNHCR, in 2023 over 117.3 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide with about one-third designated as refugees. Of these refugees, more than half originate from just three countries: Syria, Ukraine, and Afghanistan (UNHCR, 2023). As governments across the world respond to the displacement of refugees, improving resettlement experiences and integration outcomes has become a major priority to ensure the wellbeing of newcomers and bolster the economic and social fabric of receiving countries (Walton-Roberts et al., 2022).

Canada is known internationally for its diversity and inclusive policies, and historically it has been a desired destination for refugees seeking safety (Hopkins, 2010). Moreover, Canada is ranked in the top five countries in the world for highly favourable integration, employing a comprehensive approach to integration that upholds equal rights, opportunities, and security for newcomers (Migrant Integration Policy Index, 2020). Post-pandemic, Canada set ambitious targets for population growth, with almost 98 % of this growth in 2023 being accounted for by immigration (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2022; 2024).

While 60 % of newcomers are expected to arrive through the economic class of entry into Canada, support in response to global crises by offering a "safe haven" to those facing persecution has also been highlighted as a tenet of the initiative. Those fleeing war-affected countries can enter Canada as either government-assisted refugees (GARs) or privately sponsored refugees (PSRs). GARs are refugees supported upon arrival by the Canadian government for up to one year, typically chosen by international institutions (such as the UN Refugee Agency) and then referred for resettlement. Private groups sponsor PSRs pledging to support refugees both financially and emotionally for their first year in Canada (El-Chidiac, 2018). These ambitious immigration targets will undoubtedly have implications for future refugee family resettlement, heavily impacting major resettlement hubs (such as Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver) and amplifying existing service gaps in these and other jurisdictions. For example, in 2023, newly arrived refugees were sleeping on the streets of Toronto while waiting weeks for adequate shelter (Freeman, 2023). And in smaller cities and rural locations where formal services for newcomers are typically scant, meeting integration needs are largely dependent upon informal relations with residents

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(Haugen, 2023).

This article explores refugee families' sense of belonging as an important aspect of integration. We uniquely apply a socio-spatial lens to examining refugee family belonging and subsequently illuminate the strengths of this perspective in furthering our understanding of resettlement and belonging as they relate to place. A socio-spatial lens prioritizes the link between social aspects of belonging (such as connections with family members, friends, community members) and the spatial element of place (home, neighbourhood, city, country) and values the concerted role these play in fostering a sense of belonging. While other scholars have advanced the knowledge base on refugee belonging (see Marlowe (2017) and Painter (2013) for example), a socio-spatial perspective on refugee belonging is unique in the scholarship and largely absent from practice and policy discussions. To address this gap and further the discourse, we conducted an integrative knowledge synthesis review (Toronto & Remmington, 2020) to highlight elements of belonging for refugee families that inherently embody the importance of place. We assert that a socio-spatial understanding of place is critical to fostering a sense of belonging in resettlement contexts for refugee families who have been forced to flee their beloved homes and communities. We begin by highlighting elements of refugee belonging and the role of place in fostering belonging, drawing from the last decade of scholarship. We then consider the potential application of these spatial elements to enhancing relevant policy and practice in Canada, focusing on impacts in rural locations and small- to medium-sized cities, as recent discourse has highlighted the promise of these settings in facilitating newcomer integration.

Sense of belonging for resettled refugee families

Resettlement can have a destabilizing effect on refugee families, amplifying feelings of isolation and detachment. Displacement and resettlement in another place far from their country of origin has important consequences in virtually every aspect of refugee families' socio-spatial environments including cultural norms, religious traditions, and support networks (Hopkins, 2010; Oudshoorn et al., 2020). In addition to facing psychological stress upon resettlement, refugee families face further challenges such as poverty (Paling, 2020), isolation (Drolet & Moorthi, 2018; Stewart et al., 2015), language barriers (Stewart et al., 2012), and disconnection from their cultural identity (Ager, 1999; Akesson et al., 2017). However, fostering a sense of belonging can counter these challenges. A sense of belonging nurtures psychosocial wellbeing and paves the way for active participation in the social, economic, and cultural environments of the receiving community (Kitchen et al., 2015).

Definitions of belonging are complex, nuanced, and multifaceted, incorporating both social and contextual factors. Chen and Schweitzer (2019) characterize the experience of belonging as "a transactionary and mediated process that is undertaken with others in the environment" (p. 1987). According to Eltokhy (2020), belonging is both an individual and collective issue, and a precondition to quality of life. Other sources also highlight the multidimensional nature of belonging, and indeed the expansive body of knowledge on belonging touches on issues of power, class, emotions, race, economics, citizenship, and legal rights (Marlowe, 2017; Painter, 2013). Additionally, belonging has taken on greater importance in an ever-increasing digital world in which feelings of isolation and loneliness are on the rise (Vigneau et al., 2024; Walton--Roberts et al., 2022) and preferred methods of service delivery have shifted from in-person to virtual following the COVID-19 pandemic, ultimately decreasing the opportunity for human connection and contributing to a greater sense of isolation (Paling, 2020).

A strong sense of belonging to one's community is a marker of positive social integration and is associated with positive quality of life indicators such as a hopeful outlook for the future and good physical and mental health (Statistics Canada, 2022). Everyday activities like talking to neighbours and walking to the market are vital for establishing social connections and feelings of belonging (Herslund, 2021; van Liempt & Staring, 2021; Wessendorf, 2019). The spatial dimensions within which these everyday activities take place, such as homes, neighbourhoods, communities, and cities are influential in fostering a sense of belonging and supporting overall wellbeing. For refugee families, who have had to flee familiar spaces and places of home and country, re-establishing a sense of familiarity and feeling securely attached or rooted to a new physical place is integral to developing a sense of belonging (Akesson et al., 2017).

The role of place in fostering a sense of belonging

There is much interest in the influence of place characteristics, such as the size and quality of the resettlement community to contribute to positive resettlement experiences for refugee families. Current trends in Nordic countries, like Sweden and Finland where refugee integration is among the best in the world, have progressively seen more refugees resettle in regional towns and rural areas (Herslund, 2021). In Canada there is also recent attention to dispersal policies, such as the Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot (Government of Canada, n.d.), that see refugee families resettling in smaller communities both to address local labour gaps and manage the resettlement needs of incoming future citizens (Hynie, 2018). The appeal of this resettlement strategy is also the assumption that resettlement in smaller cities is associated with better integration outcomes. Integration indicators such as employment and income, as well as stable housing, are regarded by many as necessary precursors to a sense of belonging and wellbeing (Eltokhy, 2020; Hart, 2021). A positive sense of belonging is also associated with home ownership and full-time work among immigrants settled in small- to medium-sized cities (Kitchen et al., 2015). In general, a stronger sense of belonging is seen among rural residents (56 %) in Canada than their urban-dwelling counterparts (45 %) (Statistics Canada, 2022).

The success of this dispersal strategy is also predicated on retaining newcomers in their places of resettlement. The evidence so far appears mixed with the literature citing characteristics of rural and small localities that both help and hinder integration. For example, El-Bialy and Mulay (2015) describe resettlement environment characteristics (such as the weather, urban design, or ethnic diversity) that were perceived by refugees to both support and detract from their integration and wellbeing. The direction of these influences was also reported to change over time in relation to increasing familiarity with the resettlement context experience.

To illuminate the impact of designated destinations, among other social and contextual factors, on the success of retaining GARs in their original resettlement communities in Canada, Gure and Hou (2022) examined the mobility patterns of refugees after their initial resettlement. In Canada, Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) has a direct role in determining the resettlement destination of refugees. In particular, refugees resettled as part of the GARs Program are assigned to designated communities across Canada prior to their arrival. The dispersion of refugees across Canada is a key component of IRCC's overall objective of encouraging a more balanced geographic distribution of newcomers. Maintaining GARs in their original resettlement communities was positively associated with the presence of co-ethnic communities and an increased number of refugees resettled in the same community in the same year (referred to as cluster resettlement). The availability of resettlement services in their community, specifically Resettlement Assistance Program Service Provider Organizations (RAP SPOs), was also associated with high retention rates (Gure & Hou, 2022).

In their study of 100 Syrian refugees resettled in Alberta, Drolet and Moorthi (2018) report that refugees who resettled in smaller cities had greater connections to the community and social service organizations; however, refugees in their study also noted the limited availability of ethno-cultural resources. In van Liempt and Miellet's (2021) exploration of dispersal practices on refugees' place attachment, larger cities were

perceived to hold greater opportunity for employment, education, and co-locating with other residents of the same ethnicity. Limitations to smaller towns and rural areas included fewer public transit options, lack of affordable housing, and the temporariness of living in a smaller town. For example, in a study of belonging in rural settings, Herslund (2021) reports that half of refugees relocated to larger cities and towns within a few years. Herslund concludes that a sense of belonging is impacted by the structural characteristics of small towns (e.g., available housing types, public transit options) and that belonging is difficult to build and sustain in a place that may be temporary. Feeling rooted in a new place or developing attachments to resettlement contexts like a new home, neighbourhood, and broader community takes time. According to Lewicka (2011a), place-attached individuals, compared to non-attached ones, demonstrate a higher sense of coherence or continuity of identity, develop stronger social bonds and neighborhood ties, and experience more satisfaction with their life overall.

Theories of place: place attachment, place identity, and placemaking

A socio-spatial framework integrates both the social (people) and spatial (place) dimensions, recognizing that belonging and wellbeing emerge through interactions between individuals and their physical and social environments. For refugee families—who have been displaced from their countries of origin and must rebuild their lives in unfamiliar settings—this connection between people and place is particularly significant. While stable environments can foster safety, security, and social cohesion, certain social and physical conditions may also contribute to isolation and loneliness, limiting opportunities for integration. By employing a socio-spatial perspective, we can deepen our understanding of how place influences belonging, ultimately informing strategies that promote social cohesion and enhance the wellbeing of refugee communities. Our socio-spatial framework is informed by theories of place—namely place attachment, place identity, and placemaking—each of which we will describe in more detail below.

Place attachment occurs when one feels securely attached and rooted in a physical place (Akesson et al., 2017; Tuan, 1979). Attachment to place is considered to be equally as important as attachment to people, addressing the fundamental need of human belonging (Relph, 1976). For refugee families, who have been uprooted from their familiar places (such as home, school, and country of origin) due to displacement, place attachment may take longer to develop since they are initially unfamiliar with the new place of resettlement.

Feeling securely attached to place is also considered a necessary requirement for maintaining a positive sense of self in relation to place (Altman & Low, 1992). Memories, thoughts, values, emotions, and meanings are inseparable from the everyday physical environments in which they occur (Proshansky et al., 1983). This weaving of place and self gives rise to individual place identity. Collective place identities emerge from the discursive co-constructions concerning place and the unique cultural, historical, and political factors contributing to the meanings one attaches to place (Dixon & Durrheim, 2000). Place identities often remain unexamined unless there is change, such as that brought on by displacement from one's familiar place and resettlement in an entirely new environment.

Placemaking is the way that one connects with others and creates a sense of community, thereby creating a place for oneself in the world (Schneekloth & Shibley, 1995). Examples of placemaking may include building physical structures, organizing spaces, and creating neighborhood communities. Placemaking is not only the act of changing and maintaining the physical world where one lives (e.g., a physical house, a neighborhood, etc.); it is also the way that one connects with others and creates a sense of community, thereby creating a meaningful place for oneself. For refugee families, "places of belonging" are not necessarily bounded by the geographic parameters of their countries of origin. Rather, "their lives straddle a host of places of belonging" (Schneekloth & Shibley, 1995, p. 217). The process of journeying from one place to another—as is the case among refugee families who have resettled in Canada—can be an important exercise in place attachment, place identity, and placemaking.

Our analysis is based on the contention that a socio-spatial understanding of place is critical to refugees who have been forced to flee their homes and communities. In addition to recognizing the integral role place plays in the displacement and resettlement experience, a socio-spatial approach also acknowledges the multidimensional nature of belonging. This knowledge synthesis highlights elements of belonging that inherently embody the importance of place and how these elements are impacted by the size of the city where refugee families are living. Integrating evidence from the literature specific to refugee families, our knowledge synthesis furthers our understanding of the place-based complexities of resettlement in an effort to create and reinforce more relevant strategies to support refugee wellbeing in Canada. Focusing on the size and socio-spatial characteristics of resettlement contexts, in particular rural settings and small- to medium-sized cities, we conclude with some policy and practice considerations for fostering refugee families' belonging and wellbeing as recent discourse has highlighted the promise of these settings in facilitating newcomer integration.

Methodology

This work was completed as part of the Knowledge Synthesis Grant program jointly offered by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRCC) and Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC). Their impetus for the call was to foster a more comprehensive understanding of the state of knowledge on Canada's identified future challenge of the emergence of an asocial society in which feelings of disconnection, isolation, and loneliness are on the rise in Canadian society (Policy Horizons Canada, 2018). As such, our project objectives were threefold: (1) to describe the state of knowledge on socio-spatial approaches to fostering belonging among refugee families in resettlement communities; (2) to uncover key components of refugee families' sense of belonging amenable to socio-spatial initiatives, and; (3) to make practice and policy recommendations that incorporate family-focused and place-based considerations to foster a sense of belonging and wellbeing for refugee families in Canada.

Our process began with an initial focusing strategy in which we surveyed the existing landscape on socio-spatial perspectives of refugee families' sense of belonging by manually reviewing the titles and abstracts of articles appearing in prominent refugee studies peer-reviewed journals from January 2012 to August 2022. A retrospective 10-year window was deemed sufficient to capture the still burgeoning evolution of a socio-spatial consideration to refugee resettlement and belonging. Our initial hand search revealed a dearth of studies taking a similar approach to considering how to foster refugee belonging from a socio-spatial perspective. As such, we set out to fill that knowledge gap by conducting an integrative review of the limited evidence available. An integrative review is a type of knowledge synthesis that allows for the review of a breadth of resources (such as empirical or theoretical literature) and methodologies (quantitative and qualitative studies) to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of a complex issue (Toronto & Remington, 2020). It can be particularly useful for exploring emerging issues and the development of concepts, such as the as the intersection of place and refugee families' sense of belonging (Broome, 2000; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). Our aim was to offer a novel view of the research landscape on refugee resettlement that considers the influence of place on refugee belonging in the pursuit of recommendations for practice, policy, and research in the Canadian context.

Our focusing strategy also served a dual purpose of establishing the broader search parameters and inclusionary criteria for potential sources. Titles and abstracts of sources appearing in relevant journals were screened by the first author and two research assistants resulting in a list of 13 flagship articles. These flagship articles, determined to have high relevance and significance to the topic by our research team, were mined

for keywords to inform our search criteria and their reference lists were reviewed to find additional articles for consideration. Final inclusionary decisions were made in consultation with the second author who has subject matter expertise in socio-spatial perspectives and refugee studies. Search terms including key concepts of "belonging", "refugee", and "socio-spatial", as well as their variations, were applied to article titles and abstracts. See Table 1 for selection and search parameters.

We developed a data matrix using a spreadsheet format to organize relevant information from each included source. Sources included academic literature, policy documents, and grey literature. In addition to basic information such as the citation, sample, methods, results, and conclusions, we collected specific details about descriptions of refugee 'belonging', the presence and description of a place-based approach, and any socio-spatial considerations for policy and practice. Once the data matrix was populated with included source content, we analyzed the matrix for aggregate patterns in descriptions of socio-spatial elements of refugee sense of belonging and policy and practice considerations for fostering a sense of belonging.

A quick and clear conclusion we arrived at was the observation that utilizing a socio-spatial lens to examine the practices and policies that contribute to refugee families' sense of belonging in Canada is clearly in its infancy. In particular, we found that most of the studies incorporating socio-spatial elements (such as place, place making, and spatial methodologies) were small qualitative studies. We included 54 sources in our integrative knowledge synthesis. Most sources were qualitative studies (90 %) with individual qualitative interviews being the most frequent primary data collection method (53 %). Other qualitative methods included observation (20 %), reviews (14 %), case studies (10 %), and Delphi (1 study). See Table 2 for more details. In these sources, socio-spatial approaches encompassed *locations* (37 %) such as dwellings, community centres, green spaces; *activities* (24 %) like homemaking, family practices, and everyday interactions with others; or *methodological approaches* (9 %) such as spatial analysis and ethnographic fieldwork. As such, relying on an emerging body of literature made up of primarily small qualitative studies requires us to consider the tentativeness of any patterns or recommendations for practice or policy. We must also acknowledge that we only reviewed and included sources available in English within a 10-year span for feasibility of the study given project funding and timelines. Despite these constraints, our knowledge synthesis holds value as a novel integration of sources that reflect current thinking on the role of place in fostering a sense of belonging for refugee families.

Table 1
Search parameters.

Time Frame	Published or made available from January 2012 to August 2022
Language	English
Search Terms	Belonging connection, connected disconnection, disconnected (Antonym) community, (sense of) community integration isolation, isolated (Antonym) Refugee war-affected forced migrant forced migration Socio-spatial Place place-making place attachment emplacement home home-making
Key electronic sources and databases searched	Campbell Collection Cochrane Library EbscoHost, *selected databases:* Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL) eBook Academic Collection eBook Collection Education Source ERIC Social Work Abstracts European University Institute Research Repository (https://cadmus.eui.eu) European Website on Integration (https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration) Government of Canada–Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada Research Reports (https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/reports-statistics/research.html) Migrant Integration Policy Index (https://www.mipex.eu) Proquest, *selected databases:* APA PsychArticles PsychBooks PsychINFO Canadian Research Index International Bibliography of the Social Sciences PTSDPubs Publicly Available Content Database Sociology Collection-ASSIA Sociological Abstracts Sociology Database New Zealand Immigration (https://www.immigration.govt.nz) Statistics Canada–Analytic Studies Branch Research Paper Series (https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/catalogue/11F0019M)

Findings and discussion

Given the complexity of refugee families' displacement and resettlement journeys, it is paramount to acknowledge a sense of belonging as a nuanced and multi-faceted construct that spans place and time and can be influenced by external factors. We found Lähdesmäki et al. 's (2016) five thematic elements of belonging useful for informing our analysis of socio-spatial elements and their relation to refugee belonging in resettlement contexts. They describe a "spatiality of belonging" that is relevant to experiences of migration, mobility, and displacement. The spatiality of belonging considers the roles of place attachment and place-making' in refugees' everyday lives. "Intersectional and multiple belonging" recognizes that identities and belonging are temporal and situational, with refugees belonging to a variety of people and places simultaneously (such as their homeland and resettlement country) and changing over time. The way in which people make contact with their physical surroundings and how these contacts can contribute to their sense of belonging to a place or to a community they refer to as the "materiality of belonging". Finally, the notion of "non-belonging" implies the process of inclusion and exclusion, acknowledging the politics and power inherent in the granting of belonging.

Davis et al.'s (2018) notion of "contested belonging" is equally as informative to our analysis and recommendations, as they challenge us

Table 2
Methodology in reviewed sources.

Type of Source	n	%
Qualitative	49	90%
Individual Interviews (53%)	26	
Observational (20%)	10	
Reviews (14%)	7	
Case Studies (10%)	5	
Delphi (3%)	1	
Quantitative (All surveys)	2	4%
Mixed Method (both qualitative and quantitative)	3	6%
Total	54	100%

to think about belonging outside of its traditional parameters in which belonging develops by being rooted to a particular singular place or group. Instead belonging is multi-scalar and multi-locational. Multi--scalar suggests, for example, that refugees may feel safe and welcomed in their local neighbourhoods but simultaneously excluded at a national level due to anti-immigrant sentiment. Their multi-locational understanding of belonging suggests that refugees can be attached to more than one environment, and also more than one ethnic identity, and that belonging is better understood as relational, situational, and layered. Davis et al. (2018) advance current understandings of belonging by considering our ever-changing social and spatial realities in which sense of belonging, integration, and feelings of 'other' are shaped by the fluidity and mobility of alternative spaces and connections (e.g. virtual, symbolic, or remembered communities).

Socio-spatial elements of belonging for refugee families

Transnational belonging

Belonging to both their country of origin and resettlement country is common for families forced to flee their home country without choice or much forethought. Attachments to families' homes, neighbourhoods, and social networks do not abruptly stop when one is forced to leave. Indeed, it is possible and perhaps beneficial for refugee families' continuity of cultural identity to hold attachments to both places. A sense of belonging for refugee families can straddle two countries or cultures: a family's homeland and adopted land (Magan & Padgett, 2021). This "transnational belonging" (Kim & Hocking, 2018) or biculturalism is reportedly common among refugee families and is linked to wellbeing and positive adjustment of refugee families in their resettlement communities. In their qualitative exploration of place attachment and identity, Nicolais et al. (2021) describe the identity of the "successful refugee" as "…an identity that does not deny its origins and roots, but which has now settled in a new place, […] and therefore feels that it belongs there." (p. 17) Families continue to practice cultural traditions, speak their preferred language, and recall memories and stories of home, all while forging new connections to their resettlement community. Vasta (2013) explains that refugee families can "…maintain transnational identities, multiple geographical sites that they call home, multiple belongings and engagement without any sense of confusion or divided loyalties" (p. 210).

In a similar vein, refugee families also often connect to their own ethno-cultural community within the resettlement country. Drolet and Moorthi (2018) note the importance that refugees placed on social connections with their ethnic communities in the resettlement country of Canada. In their study of social networks, social support, and social capital among 100 Syrian refugees arriving in Canada during 2015–16, 88 % of refugees identified the importance of the Syrian diaspora community in Canada. Refugee families may rely on local or online networks such as WhatsApp group chats for connection and belonging in their ethno-cultural group. This connection can be important for sharing information and resources with others and for socialization or support (Strang & Quinn, 2021). Connections with specific groups such as friends and family members or to memories of their countries of origin are tied to feelings of belonging (Chen & Schweitzer, 2019). However, a reality of smaller cities is that refugee families' ethno-cultural group may not be large or even present in the community. While this could be regarded as an impediment to fostering refugee belonging, low ethnic diversity in the host community had a perceived positive effect of requiring newcomers to build social ties with locals who knew the city's social and physical dimensions thereby increasing place familiarity and belonging (El-Bialy & Mulay, 2015). Refugees who resettled in smaller cities had greater connections to the community and social service organizations and reported higher levels of belonging. While encouraging, Drolet and Moorthi (2018) also noted that engagement with others was largely focused on settlement needs or linking to one's own socio-cultural community. Interestingly refugees in smaller cities had lower rates of participation in recreation or religious activities, posing an important consideration when determining the potential of specific place-based outreach strategies and their impact.

Feelings of safety and security

Refugee families often flee violence, persecution, and instability in their countries of origin. These experiences influence their search for belonging in a new place impacting multiple areas of their lives and leaving families questioning the stability of their future (Eltokhy, 2020). Feelings of instability and lack of safety carried over as memories from families' countries of origin and transit locations (such as internally displaced persons camps and refugee camps) can impede place attachment and belonging, consequently challenging the effectiveness of resettlement practices and policies geared toward successful integration. A sense of safety and stability in the physical environment is integral to fostering belonging for refugees (Chopra & Dryden-Peterson, 2020; Kauko & Forsberg, 2018). Dromgold-Sermen (2022) explains

> …secure belonging is a foundational dimension of their [refugee] individual and familial sense of belonging. Particularly in experiencing resettlement as families, parents prioritise secure belonging when considering their children and family's current and future wellbeing, life circumstances and overall sense of belonging… (p. 643).

One of the few narrative reviews we examined by Chen et al. (2021) on the impact of the built environment on children's physical activity underscored issues of safety and the importance of informal spaces for spontaneous play, which may be preferred by refugee parents who want to closely supervise their children in an unfamiliar place. Their review also revealed the limited availability of indoor space within the home for refugee children to play and limited access to large parks with sports areas and playgrounds where they can engage in formal places of play. According to Chen et al. (2021): "…refugee children need to adapt to new, unfamiliar environments when they come to their host country. Since they may have escaped from war situations or have experienced military occupation…, they may be more cautious and sensitive about safety issues than non-refugees" (p. 6). Rural settings and small cities may more easily offer a perceived sense of safety and stability in the physical environment both due to low crime rates and an increased level of comfort in seeing the same people repeatedly without incidents of discrimination, for example (El-Bialy & Mulay, 2015).

Resettlement environments that offer safety and security provide refugee families with a "safe space" in which to focus on everyday activities such as attending school, working, or envisioning the future. Refugee families also endeavor to create their own sense of safety in a new place. According to Muir and Gannon (2016), for refugees to "… regain control and independence in certain places, even domestic micro-spaces of belonging may help to promote feelings of safety and relaxation" (p.286). Other ways refugee families work to bring stability and safety into their daily lives include developing "…structures of solidarity and networks of support (i.e. sporting clubs and community offices), which are crucial sites for individual and collective attempts to 'feel at home' while on the move…" (Castillo, 2016, p. 287).

The power of everyday activities

In forced migration there is a loss of familiar routines and everyday places of common activities for refugee families. These mundane activities, such as walking to the market and talking to neighbours along the way, are vital for social connection and belonging (Herslund, 2021; van Liempt & Staring, 2021). Upon resettlement, refugee families begin to reconfigure their everyday lives by re-establishing routines or creating new ones (Kim & Hocking, 2018). Refugee families' belonging is forged through repetitive activities, routines, and encounters with others in everyday life. These activities can be shared by family members in the home such as mealtimes or impromptu interactions with others in the neighbourhood. And while on the surface they seem like small unremarkable actions, the effect of these interactions cannot be

overstated. Repetition of daily routines like mealtimes, sleep, and social activities foster predictability and familiarity (Kauko & Forsberg, 2018) and help build more connections to people and places.

Picton and Banfield (2020) connect belonging to these routines, or what Bourdieu (1990) has called the "habitus" of daily life. In this sense, creating belonging is inherently carried out in refugee families' everyday interactions, banal intercultural interactions, and mundane activities (Wessendorf, 2019). As refugee families explore and interact within their neighbourhood to make it familiar or "make it their own", they begin to develop attachment to the new place (Muir & Gannon, 2016). These neighbourhood places are sites where refugee family belonging can arise in social encounters and everyday interactions with others. Smaller cities or towns with fewer places to visit (such as only one or two local grocery stores, community centres, or parks) may afford greater ease of developing belonging through routines and everyday encounters by solidifying connections to place through familiarity (El-Bialy & Mulay, 2015). However, rural settings where basic services or one's closest neighbour can be a great distance away may impede the frequency and duration of these vital social interactions and lead to feelings of isolation. Furthermore, the functionality and structural factors of small towns, such as the absence of shared spaces or public transit, truncate potential opportunities to carry out everyday activities with and among other residents thus inhibiting place attachment and belonging (Herslund, 2021).

Policy and practice considerations for fostering refugee families' sense of belonging in rural and small city settings

Based on our analysis, we suggest several salient place-focused considerations for policy and practice with the potential to foster refugee families' sense of belonging to their resettlement communities. While doing so, we keep the following in mind. Feelings of simultaneously belonging to more than one place, in essence both families' country of origin and resettlement country, allow families to hold attachments to both places and is important for maintaining cultural identity and wellbeing. Building a sense of safety and security in the new physical environment is foundational for establishing belonging. And finally, through everyday encounters, routines, and repetitive activities, refugee families develop familiarity and attachment to people and places. Resultingly, initiatives that optimize place attachment through place familiarity and homemaking, support the continuity of family identity, and incorporate refugee families' perspectives on place and belonging are promising in their application within resettlement contexts of all sizes.

Refugee families' belonging is fostered in repetitive activities, routines, and encounters within everyday life. The impact of what can be perceived as mundane or banal components of everyday life should not be underestimated (van Liempt & Miellet, 2021). Indeed, Kitchen et al. (2015) argue that speeding up the process of newcomers better knowing their neighbourhoods and communities in small- to medium-sized cities can enhance the development of a sense of belonging. Policies that create stable and secure living circumstances such as housing and employment support refugee families' feelings of belonging and place attachment. Family-focused programs and events that reflect the day-to-day activities of families (e.g., mealtimes, religious gatherings, holidays) are critical for creating a sense of belonging. Emphasis on these everyday family practices can help support families by creating a space for family members to connect and engage in activities that are important to them.

Homemaking or making "a place of one's own" also involves gaining knowledge of a locality (e.g., the neighbourhood of resettlement), involving both private and public places such as the corner market, community park, or nearby mosque. Local public spaces, as shown by van Liempt and Staring (2021) in their study utilizing walking interviews and photos with Syrian refugee families resettled in Dutch neighbourhoods,

> …play an important role in refugees' homemaking processes, because they facilitate attachment to places and are also vital in the process of claiming control over new lives. …it is both the claim to belong as well as the claim to exert control over their own lives that plays an important role in newly arrived Syrians' homemaking processes (p. 322).

Homemaking is an active process on the part of refugee families to create familiarity and security in their new living contexts. Rural and small city localities have the potential to build greater place familiarity and attachment through repetitive interactions with fewer locations. However, it is more than just the size of a community, as Lewicka (2011b) points out the importance of differences in landscapes, service availability, and ethnic diversity to developing place attachment in these contexts.

Practice and policy can play a role in either inhibiting or supporting the homemaking efforts of refugee families (van Liempt & Miellet, 2021). For example, housing options for larger refugee families tend to be rental units that are typically too small and mismatched for the family's needs. Dwellings often have little to no privacy and limited space, requiring rooms to be dual purpose (e.g., dining or living room areas are transformed to sleeping quarters at night). Indoor spaces within the home may be too small for play and parents in apartments may have trouble keeping children quiet enough indoors to minimize disturbing other residents. Outdoor spaces may be perceived as unsafe places to play for a variety of reasons including unfamiliarity (Chen et al., 2021). In Herslund (2021), when larger more suitable housing was found by the municipality for refugee families it was often in a larger town and required relocation. Having to move frequently, often between sub-par accommodations, can place additional stress on already-displaced refugee families, in turn affecting other life domains such as health, employment, and family planning (Eltokhy, 2020). Policies that prolong a sense of unfamiliarity, such as the frequent relocation of refugee families as they seek adequate housing, overlook the importance of making a home to foster a sense of belonging in refugee families (Kauko & Forsberg, 2018). Therefore, resettlement policies should aim to minimize the number of times families are relocated, perhaps by first ensuring that the site of resettlement is suited for the family. This can be done through active consultation with the family before resettlement.

It is reasonable to expect that refugee families might move locations in the future and doing so is a natural part of the resettlement process. However, as noted above, relocation may be more likely when families are dissatisfied with their assigned location and want to self-correct the mismatch between their family's needs and place resources (van Liempt & Miellet, 2021). Lack of culturally relevant resources, inadequate housing options, and lack of job opportunities in rural and small-sized localities may push families out of these regions. If refugee families feel they were assigned a resettlement destination with little input, it may impact their commitment to build attachment and subsequently belong to a place that lacks meaning for their family. Their intention may be to move as soon as they are able to relocate to other cities where they have existing family or friends, where culturally specific services are more available, or where there are greater opportunities for work. Moreover, policies like Canada's federal Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) and the location of Service Provider Organizations (SPO) in bigger cities tend to encourage resettlement enclaves, which does not bode well for the dispersal and retention of refugee families in smaller cities often less resource rich by exclusion. Obviously, it is not feasible fiscally or practically to put RAP SPOs in all communities. As such, smaller communities may be more dependent upon the patchwork of local resettlement service providers, grassroots organizations, and volunteers to support and hopefully retain refugee and immigrant families.

While the countries that refugee families find themselves fleeing from are often vastly different from the receiving resettlement countries, localities could be matched to optimize refugee families' familiarity

with the geography or environment. For example, resettling urbanites to larger cities and farmers to rural locations may facilitate the process of belonging by way of increasing place familiarity and continuity of family identity. Albers et al. (2021) also highlights the familiarity of parks and greenspaces for newcomers who may have come from more rural areas. Additionally, participating in community activities like gardening may promote connections to the resettlement community for refugees who were farmers in their country of origin (Albers et al., 2021). Community gardens in particular can help refugees create "more inclusive places that reflect their cultural practices, identities, and presence in the city" (Strunk & Richardson, 2019, p. 30). Greater involvement of refugees in settlement case planning and choosing their resettlement locations to best match their needs is recommended (Moorthi et al., 2017).

While our proposed policy and practice recommendations emphasize the importance of place attachment, stability, and cultural familiarity in the resettlement of refugee families, their feasibility is constrained by funding limitations, institutional barriers, and regional disparities in resettlement resources. Financial constraints at federal, provincial, and municipal levels may restrict the expansion of housing supports, tailored resettlement programs, and culturally relevant services, particularly in smaller communities. Institutional challenges, such as bureaucratic inefficiencies and a lack of coordination between government agencies and grassroots organizations, can also hinder the implementation of family-centered resettlement strategies. Additionally, inter-provincial and regional differences in available resources mean that larger urban centers tend to have more comprehensive support networks, while smaller or rural communities may struggle to provide adequate employment opportunities, housing, and culturally appropriate services. Though increasing refugee input in resettlement planning and matching families to more suitable localities is an ideal approach, practical constraints—such as the centralized nature of RAP and uneven distribution of SPOs—make broad implementation difficult. Addressing these challenges will require targeted investments, inter-agency collaboration, and policy adjustments that recognize the diverse needs and capacities of different resettlement regions across Canada.

A socio-spatial approach recognizes the bidirectional nature of the relationship between people and place. We often think of places impacting people, but people undoubtedly also influence places. The potential of refugee families to positively affect their environments and drive social and cultural transformation is often undervalued or neglected yet presents an underutilized resource in the resettlement process (McAreavery & Argent, 2018). For example, refugee families actively shape their environments through participation in informal networks, such as relationships with neighbors, involvement in cultural associations and mutual aid groups, which contribute to placemaking and social cohesion. Albers et al. (2021) assert that “refugees should be involved in the development of interventions as much as possible. This will increase their sense of autonomy and relatedness in their integration process" (p. 7). Refugee families’ belonging can be encouraged with practices and policies that recognize the contributions refugee families make to their everyday environments through acts of placemaking, building familiarity to places of resettlement, and thus easing the place-bonding process (Albers et al., 2021). Local networks comprised of grassroots organizations, religious groups, neighbourhood and community associations, and volunteers have the capacity to empower refugee families by providing support and spaces for collaboration, skill-sharing, and cultural exchange, thus enhancing their autonomy and agency within resettlement contexts. Policies that strengthen partnerships with local organizations would do well to amplify community-driven resettlement initiatives and ensure that refugee families are included in decision-making processes related to the places where they endeavour to belong and secure their futures.

It is noteworthy that the perspectives and voices of refugees were well represented in the resources we reviewed. For example, methodologies included qualitative open-ended or semi-structured interviews, observational data of participants’ lives and use of space, and creative methods such as refugees taking photos of locations important to them. These are also all more accessible and inclusive ways to amplify the voices of marginalized groups. These participant-focused methods generated valuable information on refugee families’ own notions of belonging. Indeed, the strength of this developing body of knowledge is its nuanced and participant-driven representations of belonging. For example, feelings of safety and security are intertwined with belonging, simultaneously belonging to one’s place of origin and resettlement environment is common and often preferred, and everyday activities and mundane routines allow for belonging to grow in organic ways. Understanding these socio-spatial influences on refugee families’ sense of belonging has the potential to make initiatives more culturally relevant, responsive to daily realities, and ultimately more effective. While Canada is one of the world leaders in immigrant and refugee integration, future policy, practice, and research should more fully incorporate the direction and input of refugee families.

Conclusion

Our analysis shows that the displacement and resettlement of refugee families in unfamiliar places cause complex socio-spatial transformations that can impact cultural norms, religious practices, support networks, feelings of belonging, overall wellbeing and notions of place. The multi-faceted nature of these experiences calls for nuanced approaches to refugee integration and policy interpretation. As refugees negotiate their identities and navigate resettlement environments, it becomes apparent that understanding their journeys requires recognizing the deep-rooted connections among space, culture, and community. By advancing socio-spatial initiatives that respect and accommodate these interconnections, receiving communities can facilitate more effective resettlement processes and support the wellbeing of refugee families.

Ethics statement

As this study was a knowledge synthesis analysis of existing literature and no primary data were collected, we did not require ethical approval to complete this research.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Karen M. Frensch: Writing – original draft, Visualization, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Bree Akesson:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper

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