Foundations for Belonging 2022 reports on a third phase of research carried out with newly arrived refugees in Australia. This research has explored refugees’ social connections, their access to rights and fulfilment of responsibilities. The research also explored the impacts of COVID-19 on family separation and reunion, and other hardships faced by refugees in their everyday lives.

The research reflected the cultural diversity of refugees and in this phase, the most common countries of origin were Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan. Refugees had on average lived in Australia for about four years.

### Key findings

- Alongside cultural background and settlement location, gender and age emerge as strong predictors of differences in social and civic participation.

- Newly arrived refugees have been resilient in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, COVID-19 has exacerbated family separation for refugees with evidence of increased psychological and financial stress.

- Refugees reunited with family in Australia had more positive settlement and integration outcomes.

- There is continuing high levels of trust among refugees in government.

- Difficulties in using technology, alongside language difficulties, remains one of the most common barriers to accessing essential services.

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Recommendations

Integration is a two-way process that relies on shared responsibility and actions by everyone including new arrivals, the broader community and government.

Family is a cornerstone

- The Australian Government should examine ways to expedite humanitarian visa processing and expand family reunion pathways to reduce the negative impacts of ongoing isolation and uncertainty, exacerbated by the pandemic.

Digital inclusion is key

- The ongoing digital transformation of government services should be anchored in policy that promotes equitable access by refugees.
- Digital inclusion – access, affordability, and skills – should be embedded into government and settlement policy.
- Education policy at the jurisdictional level should ensure equitable access for refugee children to the devices they need (i.e., laptops/tablets) for optimal school learning.
- Mainstream service providers should develop stronger links with settlement providers to improve digital communication so that newly arrived refugees can access the services they need.

A focus on refugee women

- Digital and blended modes of essential service delivery should be culturally responsive to refugees’ needs and preferences to minimise the twin challenges of language barriers and weaker digital skills, which persist for refugees, especially women, even with longer residency in Australia.
- Settlement programs should continue to foster community engagement and opportunities for informal meeting and exchange for refugees, with a focus on women, at the local level, both within and between communities.
- Strengthening the digital skills of refugees, particularly older women, should be prioritised.

To read the research paper in full, and the actions that governments, policymakers, service providers and civil society can pursue to strengthen their contribution to settlement and integration, visit ssi.org.au/ssi-insights

The Foundations for Belonging research is conducted by Settlement Services International in partnership with the Institute for Culture and Society, Western Sydney University.