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Foundations for Belonging 2022

Insights on newly arrived refugees: Family separation and reunion during the pandemic

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Settlement Services International and its subsidiaries (SSI Group) acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the Land. We pay respect to Elders past, present and emerging and the continuation of cultural, spiritual and educational practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Ancestors have walked this country, and we acknowledge their special and unique place in our nation's historical, cultural and linguistic identity.

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Insights on newly arrived refugees: Family separation and reunion during the pandemic

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Key Messages

Findings

Foundations for Belonging 2022 reports on a third phase of research carried out with newly arrived refugees in Australia. As with the two previous phases, this phase explores refugees' social connections, their access to rights and fulfilment of responsibilities.

This phase maintains a focus on refugee women and digital inclusion, building on the findings from earlier phases of this research. The data was collected in surveys and family interviews in late 2021, at a time when major COVID-19 restrictions on local daily life had eased but there was considerable uncertainty about the future. Since early 2020, the pandemic has resulted in various forms of separation from loved ones. A key facet of this separation for refugees at the time of the survey was uncertainty on a timeline for the easing of the international border restrictions and the resumption of Australia's Humanitarian Program. Consequently, in this phase of *Foundations for Belonging* we explored the impacts of COVID-19 on family separation and reunion, and other hardships faced by refugees in their everyday lives.

In this phase of the research, of the more than 300 refugees who participated in the survey, the most common countries of origin were Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, and refugees had on average lived in Australia for about four years.

Overall, this latest phase of the research provides further evidence of the interdependencies between various social and civic participation measures and refugees' overall experience of settlement and their sense of welcome and belonging. Newly arrived refugees are culturally diverse, and participants in this research have reflected that diversity. However, across the three phases of this research, alongside cultural background and settlement location, gender and age emerge as strong predictors of differences in social and civic participation measures.

Despite the upheaval and uncertainty of the pandemic, the findings across the dimensions of social connections and rights and responsibilities were largely stable compared to the previous phases of this research – or have shifted in the direction that would be expected with longer residence in Australia. Despite reporting COVID-19 related difficulties and hardships, the data from the 2021 survey and family interviews does not signal any fracturing of refugees' sense of welcome and belonging in Australia due to the pandemic.

Integration relies on whole-of-community approaches, and actions from refugees, receiving communities and government at all levels. This research points to a series of actions that governments, policymakers, service providers and civil society can pursue to strengthen their contributions to refugee settlement and integration.

Recommendations

Governments and policymakers

- The ongoing digital transformation of government services should be anchored by policy that promotes equitable access by refugees and capitalises on the continuing high levels of trust among refugees in government.
- Digital inclusion – access, affordability and skills – should be embedded into settlement policy development and addressed in the design and delivery of major settlement programs such as the Humanitarian Settlement Program, the Settlement Engagement and Transition Support Program and the Adult Migrant English Program.
- While refugee households report having sufficient digital devices overall, 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.
- Settlement policy should consider and address gender disparities in light of the continued gaps found among women in relation to social connections and digital skills.

- Settlement policy at all levels of government should expand and incentivise community engagement, particularly at the local neighbourhood level and with a focus on refugee women's participation.
- Settlement policy should continue to support settlement providers to partner with ethnic and religious community organisations especially in the on-arrival phase of settlement, while also encouraging bridges to a wider range of support from other community groups.
- Refugees indicate that they understand the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as the first peoples of Australia; refugee settlement policy at all levels of government should find ways to strengthen this understanding further.
- Family reunion results in positive settlement and integration outcomes. 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.

Essential services and other service providers

- Essential services, including digital and blended modes of 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, despite longer residency in Australia.
- 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.

Settlement services and civil society organisations

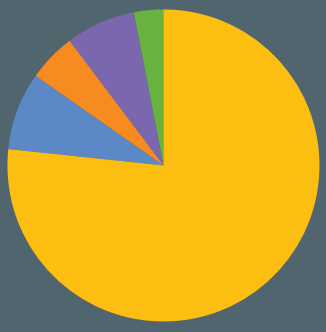
- Settlement programs should continue to foster community engagement and opportunities for informal meeting and exchange for refugees, with a focus on women, at the local level, both within and between communities.
- Strengthening the digital skills of refugees, particularly older women, should be prioritised. This research suggests a potential for structured peer-based learning through younger refugees mentoring older refugees to build capacity to navigate services and other aspects of daily life independently. This could boost participation in skills and knowledge transfer with peers and within families.
- Settlement programs should harness the potential of culturally responsive digital and blended modes of service delivery to improve access to services and information. Programs should pay particular attention to building digital gateways (i.e. websites, apps) that are more intuitive (with less need for digital skills) and that also minimise language barriers (i.e. in-language, plain English).
- Settlement programs should continue to promote a stronger understanding among refugees of the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as the First Nations people of Australia.
- In addition to the existing infrastructure of dedicated torture and trauma services nationally, settlement policy and service delivery should explore strengths-based and innovative approaches to enhance the psychological skills of newly arrived refugees' and address the effects of low to moderate psychological distress arising from family separation on health and wellbeing.

Key Findings – at a glance

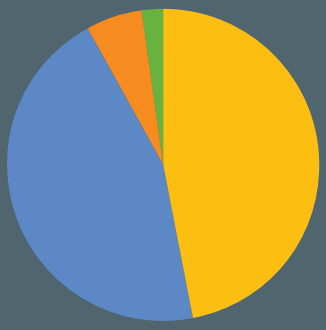
Of 314 respondents:

Gender

Language



Country of birth



On the whole, refugees are tracking well across the dimensions of integration measured in this research. Despite reporting COVID-19 related challenges, there is no indication of any fracturing of refugees' sense of welcome and belonging during the pandemic.

Survey respondents...	Survey 2021 (%)	Survey 2020 (%)	Survey 2019 (%)	Comparison with other refugees in Australia (%)[1]
Receive or feel supported by their ethnic community *(Yes/Sometimes)*	48	89	84	48
Receive or feel supported by their religious community *(Yes/Sometimes)*	36	82	76	47
Find it easy to make friends in Australia *(Very Easy/Easy)*	71	64	66	62
Understand Australian ways and culture *(Very Easy/Easy)*	75	69	69	62
Understand the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as the first people of Australia *(Very Easy/Easy)*	88	72	57	–
Find it easy to talk to their Australian neighbours *(Very Easy/Easy)*	69	56	57	71
Maintain mixed friendship networks	74	53	51	–
Feel part of the Australian community *(Always/Most of the time)*	87	87	87	80
Trust the government *(A lot)*	87	86	85	–
Trust the police *(A lot)*	82	84	88	81
Received support from other community groups *(Yes/Sometimes)*	73	76	76	35

Survey respondents...	Survey 2021 (%)	Survey 2020 (%)	Survey 2019 (%)	Comparison with broader Australian community (%)[2]
Feel that people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds get along in their neighbourhood *(Strongly agree/Agree)*	88	90	90	84
Experienced racial discrimination in the past 12 months *(Always/Most of the time/Some of the time)*	5	6	5	13

1 Comparison with Building a New Life in Australia Wave 4
2 Comparison with Mapping Social Cohesion 2021

Executive Summary

Newly arrived refugees in Australia have been resilient in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic across the social and civic dimensions of integration measured in this research

Foundations for Belonging 2022 reports on a third phase of research carried out with newly arrived refugees in Australia. As with the first two phases of research (Culos, Rajwani et al. 2020, Culos, McMahon et al. 2021), this third phase primarily explores four dimensions of two-way integration:

1. **social bonds**
   (ties with family, friends and other ***people from the same cultural background*** who share ***similar values and norms***);
2. **social bridges**
   (connections with ***people from different backgrounds*** and opportunities for ***cultural exchange***);
3. **social links**
   (two-way ***engagement and interactions with the institutions of society***); and
4. **rights and responsibilities**
   (fulfilling ***social and civic responsibilities*** and access to ***rights and equality***).

The research examines these dimensions from refugees' everyday perspectives of welcome and belonging in the early stages of settlement. A telephone survey (N=314) was conducted in the respondents' preferred first languages in November 2021, followed by semi-structured family interviews. At that time major COVID-19 restrictions on local daily life had eased but there was uncertainty about the future trajectory of the pandemic, and interstate and international travel was still severely restricted.

As with the first two phases of this research, all respondents held a permanent humanitarian visa and more than three quarters arrived in 2017, with an average residency in Australia of 46 months. This is longer, and a key difference, from the first two phases of *Foundations for Belonging*, where respondents were resident between 24-30 months. About 1 in 20 were settled in a regional area, while just over half lived in a household with children under 18.

Despite the upheaval and uncertainty of the pandemic, the findings across the dimensions of social connections and rights and responsibilities were largely stable compared to the previous phases of this research – or have shifted in the direction that would be expected. For example, compared to the earlier phases of this research, refugees in the 2021 survey indicated less reliance on support from ethnic and religious communities. The findings show a consistent change towards development of more mixed friendship networks, understanding Australian ways and engagment with neighbours. In essence, this can be seen as a 'natural' drift from social bonds to social bridges associated with longer residency in Australia. Refugees in this sample report a very strong sense of feeling part of the Australian community and report much higher levels of support from community groups other than their own, when compared to other refugees in Australia. This provides strong evidence for the value of community engagement initiatives in settlement that facilitate meeting and exchange between receiving communities and newly arrived refugees.

When we plotted the relationships between social bridges variables we found a strong correlation between support from other community groups, understanding Australian ways, making friends, talking to neighbours and a sense of people getting along in the local area and feeling part of the Australian community. The overall experience of settling in Australia so far is positively correlated to all of these variables.

Despite reporting COVID-19 related challenges and hardships, the data from the 2021 survey and the family interviews does not signal any fracturing of refugees' sense of welcome and belonging in Australia due to the pandemic.

COVID-19 has exacerbated family separation for refugees with evidence of increased psychological and financial stress

In this latest phase of the research, we assessed the impact on newly arrived refugees of the international border restrictions in place since March 2020. At the time of the survey there was no timeline for the easing of these border restrictions or the resumption of Australia's Humanitarian Program. Predictably, we found that efforts to reunite with family is a crucial issue for refugees, while worry about family overseas is a significant stressor in everyday life, with COVID-19 exacerbating the difficulties of family separation. While digital communication provides some relief from these stressors, international border restrictions meant that refugees had little or no opportunity to visit family overseas, and little or no opportunity for family members to be reunited with them in Australia throughout 2020 and 2021. Family interviews raised a range of living difficulties in Australia and family separation challenges which were made worse by the pandemic. In these interviews, presented as case studies in this report, we see a spectrum of family reunion stories including: experiences of recent reunification in late 2021; stories of delays and disruption to visa processing; and prolonged uncertainty for others who are unsure when or if their applications will be processed.

Unlike most other measures in this research, family separation and associated living difficulties show a strong 'visa divide', with refugees who arrived after being proposed under the Special Humanitarian Program (visa 202) generally reporting less family separation and associated stressors, and significantly less severity in living difficulties.

When testing for relationships between family status (having all or some immediate family in Australia versus no family in Australia) and all measures from social bonds and social bridges domains, we found that being separated from immediate family is a strong predictor for weaker social bonds (e.g. connecting less with family and friends and feeling less supported) and social bridges (e.g. feeling less part of the Australian community), leading to a less positive overall experience of settling in Australia. This tallies with the broad consensus that family separation hampers refugees' settlement and integration.

During various stages of the pandemic there were a range of supports put in place by governments across Australia to alleviate financial hardship caused by public health restrictions. These supports were noted with appreciation in some of the family interviews. However, compared to the general Australian population, this research indicates that refugees experienced greater financial stress during the pandemic throughout 2021 and struggled more than the rest of the Australian community to pay for the necessities of life.

Newly arrived refugees by and large report high levels of digital inclusion, though there are important gaps mainly associated with age and gender

This research lends weight to seeing digital inclusion as integral to refugee settlement and integration. In an increasingly digital world, access and affordability of digital technologies and the skills to use them was threaded across all aspects of social and civic participation in this research. As with the previous surveys, refugees maintain family and social ties through regular contact using various digital platforms to stay in touch, though in 2021 we found some differences between contact with family and contact with friends.

Almost all refugees reported having access to the internet at home and a sufficient data allowance. Likewise, on another measure of digital access, refugee households report having multiple devices. Encouragingly, the average number of mobiles/smartphones and desktop/laptops computers in refugee households was higher in 2021 compared to 2020. Households with children under 18 had slightly more tablets though the number of desktop/laptop computers was similar across households with or without children. This raises a concern, also observed in the 2020 survey, that households with school-aged children may not have sufficient devices (i.e. laptops/desktops/tablets) to engage optimally in education. This concern, of multiple children sharing devices, has been raised by settlement services in consultations with peak bodies such as the Settlement Council of Australia (Settlement Council of Australia 2020). As our survey question on access to devices is different to the annual Australian Digital Inclusion Index, direct comparisons with a recent dataset of the Australian population were not possible. It was therefore also not possible to benchmark refugee households against the general population and validate this concern.

While refugee women and men are adept at connecting digitally with family and friends they are weaker in terms of engaging with commercial and government services online, revealing a gap in digital skills, particularly for women and older age cohorts. Younger refugees fare better across all measures of digital skills, with older age associated with poorer digital skills.

In the 2020 phase of this research we conducted focus groups with women. Finding assistance in using technology was one of the most discussed topics in those focus groups. This encompassed, for instance, assistance with access, like borrowing a laptop from a family member, and assistance with use, like having a friend help to complete an online form. Older women reported they relied on young people in their household to assist with online access to services, which demonstrates the potential for social bonds to reduce knowledge and skills gaps among this vulnerable cohort of refugee women. Social bonds between refugee women and their friends and family can be enabling, as peers and family members support each other in accessing and learning how to use technology.

Critically, and mirroring the findings of the first two phases of this research, this 2021 survey highlights difficulties in using technology remains one of the most common barriers, alongside language difficulties, to government services that refugees need. In fact, reported difficulties using technology to access essential services has increased compared to the two previous surveys. This points to a persistent trend of “twin access” challenges, particularly for women and older refugees, that need to be addressed in the continuing shift to digital and online modes of service delivery: building digital gateways (i.e. websites, apps) that are more intuitive (with less need for digital skills) and also minimise language barriers (i.e. in-language, plain English).

The interdependence of digital skills was evident when we examined the relationship between three clusters of variables included under social links: digital skills, sense of trust, and difficulty or ease of access to government services. Most variables correlated positively with other variables in their clusters. If refugees reported trust in one group, they are more likely to have trust in other groups. If they find it easy to access one government service, they are likely to find it easier to access others. And if they have the ability to access one service online, they are likely to be able to access others. This interdependence across a range of critical settlement indicators draws attention to finding ways to expand digital skills early in settlement.

Refugee women report major strengths in social and civic participation. They also report some challenges in areas that warrant more focused attention throughout the settlement journey

Consistent with the previous phases of *Foundations for Belonging*, gender influences social bonds, with women significantly more likely to report stronger support from their national/ethnic and religious community than men (though this support has substantially declined in women and men in the 2021 sample, likely due to longer residency in Australia). In this survey, women were more likely than men to report difficulties making friends in Australia and talking to their Australian neighbours, which more or less matches what women reported in the previous phases of the research.

It follows that women in this survey also reported slightly less mixed friendship networks compared to men. Among women there is a strong relationship between age and friendship networks: younger refugee women are more likely to have mixed friendship networks and friends from other ethnic/religious communities, though this is not consistent across all age bands. Refugee women are equally likely as men to receive support from other community groups, to understand Australian ways/culture, and feel a part of the Australian community. They also rated their experience of settling in Australia so far on a par with men.

Women report weaker trust in their neighbourhood and the wider Australian community, weaker digital skills (in all but one measure) and greater difficulties accessing services – especially language barriers, waiting times and transport difficulties – than men. Refugee women had similar levels of trust as men in the government, the police, the media and people they work/study with.

There were no major variations in terms of gender in relation to family separation and financial stress. While women tended to be less likely than men to worry about family back home, they were more likely to rate this as a serious problem.

On the whole, the findings in *Foundations for Belonging 2022* underscore the importance of social connections for refugee women. Even though the 2021 sample of women were resident in Australia for a longer period of time they still report less ease compared to men in making friends in Australia, talking to their Australian neighbours, and on most measures of digital skills. These findings suggest more targeted engagement and support may be warranted for women in the early stages of settlement. The 2020 focus groups with women indicated that social connections expand primarily through everyday encounters and small positive interactions, even where in-depth communication is hampered by language difficulties.

Refugees demonstrate a very high level of trust in institutions and a positive sense of being part of the Australian community. This imbues them with a sense of hope for the future.

Refugees' sense of trust in Australian institutions, particularly the government and the police, remains high even at the relatively later stage of settlement in this 2021 survey. Almost nine in 10 having a strong feeling of being part of the Australian community and over two-thirds of refugees find it easy to understand the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the first people of Australia. In the two previous surveys refugees were overwhelmingly committed (> 95%) to acknowledging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as the traditional owners of Australia, which gives another indication of their commitment to reconciliation.

At the local level, refugees overwhelmingly view their neighbourhoods as places where people from different backgrounds get along – higher than responses to the same measure of the general Australian population.

Refugee women and men feel they are treated with respect and have equal access to government services, that their rights are protected and that they are treated fairly. Consistent with the two previous phases of this research, they report very low instances of discrimination on the basis of cultural or religious background.

Against this backdrop, the most common difficulties in accessing government services were language, use of mobile apps to access services, and waiting times for an appointment. The high levels of reported trust in government institutions provide a strong basis for government departments, essential services and other services to deliver culturally responsive services including in-language support and information to minimise language barriers, which persist for refugees in this sample despite longer residency in Australia. In addition, settlement services and civil society organisations should continue to provide refugees with opportunities to engage and understand Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as the first people of Australia.

There is considerable cultural diversity within Australia's humanitarian intake, and both this survey sample and the two previous samples have reflected that diversity. However, across the three phases of this research, gender and age emerge as strong predictors of differences in social and civic participation measures. In all three phases of the research, while there were some variations across language groups, and some variations among refugees resident in regional locations, these were not pronounced or consistent. In this latest phase of the research, we observed significant changes on some measures which we attribute to the impact of longer residency.

In the 2021 survey we asked respondents to rank options for their hopes for the next 12 months and their longer-term hopes and dreams for themselves and their families in Australia. COVID-19 featured strongly in hopes for the immediate future: maintaining family health and safety, getting support to recover from lockdowns, and gaining secure employment. In the longer-term, family also featured prominently in refugees' hopes and dreams in Australia, followed by children, a good job, peace and safety, housing, and health.

This research provides a third snapshot of settlement and integration among newly arrived refugees. On the whole, refugees are tracking well across the dimensions of integration measured in this research. Despite reporting a range of COVID-19 related challenges, there is no indication of any fracturing of refugees' sense of welcome and belonging during the pandemic.

We found disparities among refugee women in some aspects of social and civic participation which point to the need for a stronger consideration of gender in settlement policy and practice. The research also underscores the value of community engagement initiatives (Settlement Services International 2019), particularly at the local level to foster opportunities for informal meeting and exchange, both within and between communities. The findings indicate a continuing need to address gaps in digital inclusion that builds on refugees' existing strengths (Settlement Council of Australia 2020) and high levels of trust in the institutions of Australia.

Australia has a history of welcoming refugees, and refugees have a proud record of contributing to the social, cultural and economic fabric of Australia. The policy settings, practice and evidence base for refugee settlement in Australia have progressively evolved. This phase of the *Foundations for Belonging* research, along with the two previous phases published in 2020 and 2021, add to that evidence base, highlighting the crucial role of social connections, rights and responsibilities and exploring related topics in settlement, integration and belonging. Critically, the research also provides a window into how newly arrived refugees in Australia are faring during the pandemic. In looking at the multidimensional nature of integration, we seek to further understand the strengths and aspirations of refugees, as well as the complementary roles and contributions of refugees, receiving communities and government at all levels, upon which successful integration and the foundations for belonging depend.

Case Study: Nasima and family

Nasima's family consists of her husband, three daughters and three sons. Currently only her husband and her three young sons are living with her, as her daughters are married. She added that her husband is a pensioner and is not working. Her older son has completed university studies in medical sciences and works in a lab. Her two other sons are enrolled in undergraduate degrees.

In the case of this family, the husband arrived in Australia first, followed by Nasima and the children. They currently have one sister and her family still in Afghanistan (their applications to come to Australia have been delayed due to the pandemic). Waiting with her family in Afghanistan was difficult emotionally and financially as her husband could not send them money until he was settled in Australia and had found a job. In the meantime she continued to work as a schoolteacher even though her wage couldn't cover the expenses of her children. She was also worried about the safety of her children as kidnappings were on the rise in Afghanistan at the time. They had different challenges when they arrived in Australia but Nasima is grateful for the security and that her children are now settled.

During the lockdown in 2021 and related travel restrictions, Nasima's daughters and grandchildren could not visit her husband who is sick. Technology in Afghanistan was impacted due to the lockdown there, affecting communication with relatives. They were also not able to send money to their family in Afghanistan as the local family business suffered financially at this time.

Nasima speaks with her remaining family in Afghanistan using social media and sends them files and pictures. She also finds it easier to send them money through the new technology. She compares this with the time she was making the journey from Afghanistan to Australia to be reunited with her husband and had to struggle to find a landline:

"my past story is about my communication with my husband when there were no mobile phones. I still remember the bad memory when we were travelling from Afghanistan to Pakistan by road to just receive and make a landline call to my husband here. For that reason we travelled long and hard and unsafe locations…But now everything is easy just you can make a call in a few minutes".

Television, mobile phones and computers were also used extensively by their family to get information and updates about the pandemic: "we were able to get the accurate information about the number of cases, areas affected, restrictions, vaccines availability and the services and financial support offered by government. We tried our best to keep ourselves updated and avoid any kind of gathering or any action that could result in a negative impact on our life".

Nasima mentions that she is grateful for the Australian government's financial assistance during COVID-19: "the government was a big supporter for us. If there are circumstances where the people lose their jobs and business and the government does not support financially, it's very hard to cope with the hard time, particularly when there is lockdown and virus restrictions. Therefore, I am very thankful that we are living in a country such as Australia which is very rich and has a good system of governance".

Background

Australia has a long tradition of providing protection and resettlement to refugees under the United Nations Refugee Convention ratified after the end of World War II. In recent years the international community has come together to reinvigorate the governance of migration and responses to refugees, culminating in the adoption of two Global Compacts by the United Nations General Assembly in 2018. Australia is part of the Global Compact on Refugees[3] but did not formally adopt the Global Compact for Migration[4].

The world is experiencing successive waves of the COVID-19 pandemic which has restricted the movement of people across borders and slowed or halted the resettlement of refugees in countries like Australia. The UNHCR estimates that of the more than 82 million people forcibly displaced worldwide, less than 35,000 were resettled globally in 2020 – one third of the number (108,000) resettled in 2019 (UNHCR 2021). From March 2020, the arrival of refugees under Australia's humanitarian program virtually ceased due to international border restrictions. In addition, the Australian Government reduced the annual humanitarian intake in October 2020 budget from 18,750 to a ceiling of 13,750 places over the following four years.

From August 2021, in response to the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan, the Government provided a range of pathways to allow evacuees fleeing the conflict entry into Australia. From November 2021, the Government commenced a staged reopening of international borders and entry under the Humanitarian Program commenced in December. In the May 2022 Budget, the Government maintained the humanitarian program at 13,750 places over the next four years. However, the Government will also provide an additional 16,500 humanitarian places for Afghan nationals across the four years from 2022–23 (effectively this will bring the annual humanitarian intake to 17,875).

In Australia research, policy settings and the practice of refugee settlement has evolved over the past 70 years. *Foundations for Belonging* aims to extend the understanding of settlement through cross-sectional research, gathering the perspectives of refugees and their everyday sense of welcome, participation and belonging as they navigate a new chapter of their lives in Australia. This current research builds on the findings of two earlier phases of *Foundations for Belonging* research published in 2020 and 2021 (Culos, Rajwani et al. 2020, Culos, McMahon et al. 2021). In this report, *Foundations for Belonging 2022*, we present findings from a survey with a third group of refugees and family interviews conducted in late 2021.

3 https://www.unhcr.org/en-au/the-global-compact-on-refugees.html
4 https://www.iom.int/global-compact-migration

Each phase of *Foundations for Belonging* research is guided by overarching research questions of the social and civic dimensions of settlement and integration to build on previous findings while also addressing research gaps. For example, the first phase of the research indicated gender differences (Culos, Rajwani et al. 2020) which were explored in more depth in the next phase of the research (Culos, McMahon et al. 2021). Likewise, the acceleration towards digital modes of education, employment and access to essential services necessitated by COVID-19 from 2020 onwards resulted in the second phase taking a closer look at digital inclusion among newly arrived refugees (Culos, McMahon et al. 2021). In a similar vein, border restrictions throughout 2020 and 2021 have prompted a focus of this latest phase of the research on the impacts of family separation and family reunion on newly arrived refugees.

Each phase of *Foundations for Belonging* uses consistent research methods (Culos, Rajwani et al. 2020, Culos, McMahon et al. 2021), to strengthen the reliability and validity of the findings. These methods include a random stratified sampling strategy from a pool of former SSI clients, data collection in refugees' preferred first language, and, where possible, direct comparisons with large existing datasets (Culos, Rajwani et al. 2020, Culos, McMahon et al. 2021). In addition, each phase of the research has included a qualitative component to explore and corroborate the survey findings in more depth. Nonetheless there are research limitations, and these are described alongside an overview of the research methods for this phase of the research elsewhere (available online in Appendix 1).

There is considerable debate around refugee integration and settlement in Australia and internationally

Australia's recent history includes countless stories of refugees who have contributed to the social, cultural, civic and economic fabric of the country. Australia's migration policy strives towards successful settlement and integration of migrants and refugees (Fozdar and Hartley 2013). These policy settings are underpinned by a commitment to multiculturalism that supports newcomers to integrate and participate in Australia rather than placing the onus on migrants and refugees to assimilate (Department of Social Services 2017). The Australian Government's multicultural policy prioritises the economic and social integration of refugees and other newcomers, which contributes to their sense of worth and belonging, allowing newcomers to thrive (Department of Social Services 2017, p.17). Ultimately, settlement and integration are determined by the extent to which refugees "are able to become a valued citizen within their new country" (Correa-Velez, Gifford et al. 2010, p. 1406). As such, integration is not only about addressing needs; it is also about having "the opportunity to flourish, to be at home, to belong [which] is powerfully shaped by the prevailing social climate and structures that are openly inclusive or exclusive" (Correa-Velez, Gifford et al. 2010, p. 1406).

Integration is a much-debated topic, with challenges in terms of definition and measurement. International bodies like the OECD define integration as a two-way process of adaptation involving newcomers and receiving societies – a process involving rights, obligations, access to services and the labour market, and identification of and respect for a core set of values that bind newcomers and receiving communities for common good (OECD 2011). At a policy level, there are various ways to gauge settlement and integration. A prominent measure is the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX), an international benchmark that assesses countries against eight domains including education, labour market mobility, access to citizenship and family reunion, political participation and health (MIPEX

2020). Australia is ranked sixth overall out of 56 countries assessed under the MIPEX criteria, with strong results for policy settings in education, health and pathways to citizenship, and weaker results in labour market integration and pathways to permanent residence (MIPEX 2020). Most research attention focuses on the functional aspects of integration – employment, housing, education and health (Cheung and Phillimore 2017) – whereas *Foundations for Belonging* focuses on the social and civic dimensions of settlement and integration.

In recent years the role of gender has gained traction in refugee integration and settlement

While women represent an equal proportion of those forced to flee war and persecution, considerations of gender have often been inadequately addressed in refugee research, policy and practice (Cheung and Phillimore 2017, Hennebry and Petrozziello 2019). Historically deliberations of refugee integration were gender-blind, and thus "ignore[ed] the ways in which gender shapes migration, in particular the gendered realities and risks for women" (Hennebry and Petrozziello 2019, p. 117). For example, specific challenges that female refugees face include lower levels of education and proficiency in host community languages, lower labour market participation as well as increased care and domestic responsibilities (Albrecht, Hofbauer Pérez et al. 2021). However, some progress has been made in recent years in the development of the Global Compact on Migration and the Global Compact on Refugees to foreground gender (Hennebry and Petrozziello 2019), though it is too early to say if this will lead to substantive change.

The UNHCR Women at Risk Program is one longstanding area of gender-responsive approaches to refugees and is designed to fast-track protection for women and girls, albeit at a small scale. Australia has a Woman at Risk visa for women and their dependants who are subject to persecution or are of concern to UNHCR, who are living outside their home country without the protection of a partner or relative and who are in danger of gender-based victimisation (Settlement Services International 2014). Pre-COVID-19 a quota – of around 1,000 places – was set aside for Woman at Risk visa holders (Department of Home Affairs 2020).

Research on gender and refugee integration has often been limited to mainly qualitative research or, in the case of quantitative studies, limited in the exploration of the multidimensional aspects of integration (Cheung and Phillimore 2017). *Foundations for Belonging* aims to address this research gap with mixed methods research that sheds light on refugee women's experiences of integration across multiple domains in Australia (Culos, McMahon et al. 2021).

This research is framed by a comprehensive and multidimensional framework of settlement and integration

An influential framework of integration originally developed by the UK Home Office in 2004 guides this research. The framework was developed through a rigorous consultation process with migrant and refugee communities, settlement sector organisations and policymakers (Ager and Strang 2008). An updated and expanded version of the framework was released in 2019 (UK Home Office 2019), following an additional consultation process.

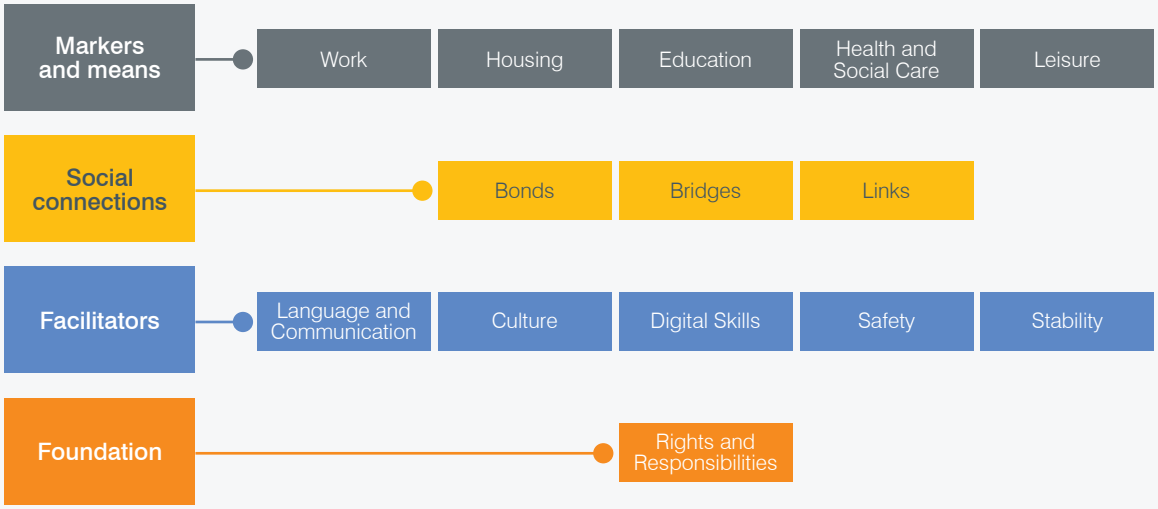
The key principles underpinning the framework are:

- *Integration is multidimensional* and depends on multiple factors encompassing access to resources and opportunities as well as social mixing.
- *Integration is multidirectional* and involves mutual adaptation by everyone in a society or community.
- *Integration is a shared responsibility* that depends on everyone taking responsibility for their own contribution, including newcomers, receiving communities and government at all levels.
- *Integration is context-specific* and needs to be understood and planned in relation to its particular context which influences the timeframe of outcomes (UK Home Office 2019).

The interdependencies between domains in this framework are vital to understanding the process and mechanisms of integration. To illustrate, there is evidence of social connections assisting refugees to gain employment (Arian, Gavranovic et al. 2021); improve health and local language proficiency in terms of employment pathways (Brell, Dustmann et al. 2020); and improve a sense of competency with independent living skills and belonging (Williams, McMahon et al. 2021). Similarly, the domain of rights and responsibilities provides a basis for full and equal engagement within society. This can be in terms of uptake of citizenship (Rezaei, Adibi et al. 2021) or volunteering (Culos, McMahon et al. 2021), with flow-on impacts to other domains including health and education (Ager and Strang 2008).

The structure and the domains of the Framework of Integration

(UK Home Office 2019)



The next frontier of thinking on integration seeks to extend and draw attention to the role of the host community in shaping refugee integration and notions of belonging (Phillimore 2020). Antonsich (2010) theorises belonging along two intersecting axes: a personal axis, and a social and political axis. The personal sense of being 'at home' in a place – "which is built up and grows out of everyday practices" (Antonsich 2010, p.646) is closely aligned to identity, including citizenship, and ethnic and national identity. The social and political axis of belonging includes group membership (or exclusion from membership) and a tension between "the side that claims belonging and the side that has the power of 'granting' belonging" (Antonsich 2010, p.561). Adding a further layer in the current era of migration and digital connectedness is the concept of transnationalism, which involves people maintaining multiple identities and ties as they navigate life in different places and contexts (Levitt and Jaworsky 2007, Antonsich 2010).

Foundations for Belonging is focused on social connections, including their facilitation by digital technologies

The role of social connections in integration includes three related aspects: bonds, bridges and links. For refugees, social bonds involve the strengthening of relationships with their ethnic and cultural communities. Strang and Ager (2010, p. 598) note the "importance of bonds as a source of emotional support, self-esteem and confidence". Social bonds created and maintained (either in-person or online) through places of worship, family gatherings, and community events and organisations, imbue refugees with confidence in their identity and a sense of feeling at home in their new environment (Strang and Ager 2010, Elliott and Yusuf 2014, Refugee Council of Australia 2014).

Social bridges involve forming networks with other groups in the broader community in everyday encounters, for instance at events, sports and leisure or school activities. For refugees, social bridges and social bonds are equally important, as acquiring both strikes "the balance between adapting to life in a new setting whilst paying homage to one's homeland" (Elliott and Yusuf 2014, p. 104). Expanding refugees' social networks also develops trust in institutions (Strang and Ager 2010) and, unsurprisingly, has also been shown to have benefits in terms of mental health (Nickerson, Byrow et al. 2019).

Social links, the third aspect of social connections, involves engaging with the institutions of society such as all levels of government and non-government organisations. The role of these institutions in facilitating the integration of migrants and refugees is rarely examined in research (Grzymala-Kazlowska and Phillimore 2018). Social links connect refugees with institutions and structures in society so they can contribute and benefit in a mutual exchange (UK Home Office 2019). Conversely, social links can be undermined through experiences of discrimination or perceived unfair treatment (Elliott and Yusuf 2014).

Digital technologies can enhance integration by developing and maintaining social bonds, bridges and links. Technology allows refugees to maintain contact with friends and family in their homeland and around the world (Andrade and Doolin 2016), with resulting positive impacts on wellbeing and reduced negative feelings arising from family separation (Shariati 2019). Technology also facilitates social bonds within cultural, ethnic and religious communities in the host country which are often geographically dispersed, along with the sharing of settlement experiences and advice between newly-arrived and longer-resident refugees and social bridges with other community members (Shariati 2019).

Refugees are increasingly reliant on digital technologies to develop social links in everyday situations such as transport (Massmann 2018), health check-ups, online banking and job searches (Andrade and Doolin 2016), and local language learning (Massmann 2018), as well as to acquire knowledge about the receiving society including laws and regulations (Lloyd, Kennan et al. 2013, Andrade and Doolin 2016). This reliance underscores the need for the ability to navigate these everyday tasks, with indications that older refugees and refugee women in Australia have less digital skills (Alam and Imran 2015, Shariati 2019, Culos, McMahon et al. 2021)

Foundations for Belonging is also focused on the foundational level of rights and responsibilities and tracking digital inclusion among newly arrived refugees

The foundational domain of rights and responsibilities foregrounds access to rights, security and equality and the opportunity to contribute and fulfil responsibilities to strengthen belonging (Strang and Ager 2010). At a core level, the refugee experience has been characterised as "one of being cast out, of being socially excluded, where belonging – to family, community and country – is always at risk" (Correa-Velez, Gifford et al. 2010, p. 1399). Ager and Strang note that the rights and responsibilities domain focuses on "the extent to which refugees are provided with the basis for full and equal engagement within society" (2008, p. 176). This echoes how the OECD defines a socially cohesive society which "works towards the wellbeing of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalisation, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust, and offers its members the opportunity of upward mobility" (OECD cited in Fonseca, Lukosch et al. 2019). Secure residency status is critical to substantive rights. Permanent residency is "in itself, instrumental in enabling integration, emphasising the […] foundational place of policy on rights and citizenship on refugee integration […] and belonging" (Strang and Ager 2010, p. 596). At one level permanent residency is a legal status that confers eligibility and access to employment, education, health care and the social safety net. At a deeper level, however, secure residency intersects with belonging: "where you belong is where you are safe; and where you are safe is where you belong" (Ignatieff (1994) cited in Antonsich 2010, p. 649).

Technology has transformed almost every aspect of people's daily lives and COVID-19 has accelerated this change. Digital inclusion encompasses the ability to effectively use "technologies to improve skills, enhance quality of life, educate, and promote wellbeing, [and] civic engagement […] across the whole of society" (Thomas, Barraket et al. 2020, p.8). Digital inclusion for newly arrived refugees is "a

critical aspect of social inclusion" (Alam and Imran 2015, p.2), a point which has been underscored in recent consultations by peak bodies with settlement services in Australia (Settlement Council of Australia 2020). In an increasingly digital world, access and affordability of digital technologies is integral to being able to fulfil rights and responsibilities. The Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) (Wilson, Thomas et al. 2019, Thomas, Barraket et al. 2020, Thomas, Barraket et al. 2021) which measures digital inclusion across the Australian community each year reveals a digital divide. The divide largely follows the contours of intersectional barriers, especially income, employment and education (Thomas, Barraket et al. 2020), meaning that "students, younger people, employed, higher-educated, and higher-income individuals are more likely to use the internet than lower-educated and lower-income individuals" (Felton 2012, p. 5). The most recent ADII indicated that although the pandemic might be "… a driver of digital transformation, it will not necessarily prove to … [be] a significant driver of digital inclusion" (Thomas, Barraket et al. 2021, p.18).

Among refugees in Australia, similar differences in terms of digital inclusion have been related to gender, age and education (O'Mara, Babacan et al. 2010). Levels of inclusion can vary widely. Some refugees have very advanced competencies on arrival in Australia, whereas others have limited digital skills (Shariati 2019), with Lloyd et al. (2013) finding that many need assistance to build those skills. Some differences with regards to digital inclusion have also been linked to cultural backgrounds, with Emmer et al. (2020) finding that participants from Syria and Iraq were more likely to use techology prior to and throughout their settlement journey than refugees from central Asia.

Family reunification continues to be a pressing issue for refugees who settle in Australia and border restrictions due to COVID-19 have exacerbated family separation

Families constitute a critical foundation of support and connection in society. The challenges inherent in fleeing persecution and conflict means that for many refugees prolonged separation from family members is an all too frequent reality. Whilst there is no formal binding right to family reunion, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) urges countries to respect and enforce the 'principle of the unity of the family' set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). This principle states that "the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State" (UN Human Rights 1976, Article 23.1). However, definitions of who belongs to a family unit vary and are culture- and context-dependent, which creates issues for refugee families. Although international consensus exists that the nuclear or immediate family should be preserved – including spouses and dependent children – some countries only consider minor children as part of the nuclear family. UNHCR (1983) guidelines advocate for the inclusion of other dependent family members such as adult children or single siblings who were previously living with the family unit. In Australia, there have been continuing concerns at the application of a narrow definition of family, especially in relation to the adult children of refugees (Wilmsen 2011, Refugee Council of Australia 2016).

Globally, there is a trend towards more restrictive policies around family reunion of refugees, and arguably Australian legal and policy frameworks also make it difficult for resettled refugees to reunite with family members (Okhovat, Hirsch et al. 2017). The principal pathway for refugees in Australia to reunite with family is through the Special Humanitarian Program (SHP), which provides resettlement to people fleeing persecution that amounts to a significant violation of their human rights (Okhovat, Hirsch et al. 2017). Thus, the SHP allows refugees in Australia to be a proposer of relatives who may not

meet the definition of a refugee but are still in need of protection. Proposers undertake to meet family reunion costs – which can be substantial, including airfares and legal fees – and to provide settlement support. Each year the demand for SHP visas consistently outstrips the number of available places (Refugee Council of Australia 2016). Based on data from the fourth wave of the BNLA study, Wickers et al. (2019) found that 51 per cent of respondents were waiting for family members to come to Australia.

There is a consensus that family unity can assist with refugee settlement and integration (Refugee Council of Australia 2016, Wickes, van Kooy et al. 2019), and minimise the negative health, social and economic impacts of separation. Poorer mental health associated with family separation has been well documented in multiple Australian studies (Schweitzer, Melville et al. 2006, Nickerson, Bryant et al. 2010, Wickes, van Kooy et al. 2019, Liddell, Byrow et al. 2020, Liddell, O'Donnell et al. 2021). A study of the impact of the pandemic on refugees in Australia conducted in 2020 found that while worry about family was frequently nominated as a difficulty, COVID-19 triggering memories of past traumatic events was the strongest predictor of poorer mental health (Liddell, O'Donnell et al. 2021). Other studies which used the BNLA dataset have pointed to the negative impacts of worry about family overseas living in dangerous situations on mental health, especially among women and older refugees (Fogden, Berle et al. 2020). Similarly, qualitative research has highlighted the everyday impact of family separation on wellbeing such as "worry, sleeplessness and nightmares, poor concentration, guilt, health, financial responsibility, looking forward and planning for the future"(Wilmsen 2013, p. 248).

Family separation has also been reported to negatively impact the economic prospects of refugees. For example, it has been estimated that around a third of refugees in Australia send remittances to family overseas (Wickes, van Kooy et al. 2019). Wilmsen (2013) found refugees were sending between 19 and 65 per cent of their income to family overseas. A potential downside of remittances is that resettled refugees put their own integration and advancement on hold in order to financially support family overseas (Refugee Council of Australia 2016). Indeed Wickes et al.'s (2019) analysis of refugees in a large longitudinal study, BNLA, found that refugees in Australia separated from family were less likely to be engaged in study or job training.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused various forms of separation from loved ones. A key facet of this separation for refugees, and many other Australians, stemmed from international border restrictions. From March 2020 until late 2021, most Australian permanent residents and citizens required exemptions to depart and travel to Australia. During this time the number of refugees coming to Australia was reduced to a trickle (apart from people who were evacuated from Afghanistan from August 2021 onwards). It was estimated that about 10,000 refugees who had been granted a permanent protection visa offshore were unable to come to Australia during this period of international border restrictions, which were only eased from December 2021 onwards (Human Rights Law Centre 2021, Refugee Council of Australia 2021). COVID-19 has also potentially created a range of other difficulties and hardships for newly arrived refugees. There is emerging research that has explored mental health difficulties among refugees in Australia in the context of COVID-19 (Liddell, O'Donnell et al. 2021). Ongoing research tracking poverty in Australia indicates that the pandemic created cycles of decline and recovery in 2020 and 2021. Initial income support in 2020 substantially decreased poverty and inequality (Davidson 2022). However, in 2021 when the second/Delta wave caused widespread disruption income support measures had been wound back resulting in increased poverty (Davidson 2022). As far as we are aware, there is little empirical evidence to date of these hardships among newly arrived refugees during the pandemic. Consequently, in this phase of *Foundations for Belonging* we aimed to generate insights into the impacts of COVID-19 on family separation and reunion among refugees as well as other difficulties and hardships in their everyday lives.

Case Study: Zoran and family

Zoran is the oldest in a Kurdish family of three that live in a regional location in northern NSW. The family arrived in Australia in 2018 when Zoran was 19 years old, and his two younger siblings were also teenagers. Another older married brother lives in the same town, while their parents and two married sisters and their respective families are still stranded in Iraq.

Their sisters had applied for visas, but their applications have been put on hold until further notice due to COVID-19 border closures: "COVID has created a huge impact in our life and in my family's life. My overseas family had applied and was approved for visas to come and live in Australia since February 2020. However, a month later the international border was closed, and the application was placed on hold which meant that due to the closures caused by COVID-19, our family was not able to come and live with us in Australia". Zoran and his two siblings living with him would also consider visiting their family overseas after they receive their Australian citizenship as they are eligible to apply from February 2022.

The young family struggled to socialise with high school peers due to language difficulties: "my younger siblings were towards the high school stage of their academic careers without having any knowledge in the English language. This itself was a big struggle and it created a barrier for us in terms of being able to socialise with the people around us as we did not understand those people and they didn't understand us either".

They also faced emotional and financial distress as they were separated from their parents and older siblings at a young age: "it does start to become lonely and not having our parents or our other older siblings to live with us and guide us makes living alone in Australia much harder both emotionally and financially".

For this family, the COVID-19 pandemic has increased their worries for their family members that are living overseas. This is because they are living in a country that is war-stricken, the government is unstable, and access to reliable medical advice is difficult. They are also from a persecuted minority group. Hence, the risk to their family's health is even greater as they don't have access to the sort of medical support that Zoran and his siblings do in Australia.

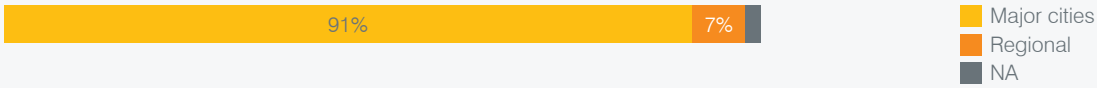
Zoran says that technology has given them the ability to communicate with their family and relatives who reside overseas (through calls, messages and FaceTime) and this has somewhat improved their emotional wellbeing. Technology gave them the ability to attend their schooling online so that they were able to learn English and other subjects.

In terms of local connections, their married brother who lives in the same town is their main source of support. Zoran and his family are also grateful for the Australian government's financial support during COVID and more generally since arrival, as this has allowed them to focus on their studies and establishing themselves. Zoran expressed faith in the Australian government's visa process for his remaining family members' reunification: "we have faith in the government the same way we had faith for when they accepted us to enter and live in their country after our own country failed us".

Findings

Survey Sample Demographics

Fig.1 Place of residence of survey respondents



Of the 314 survey respondents, 170 (54%) were female, and 144 (46%) were male.

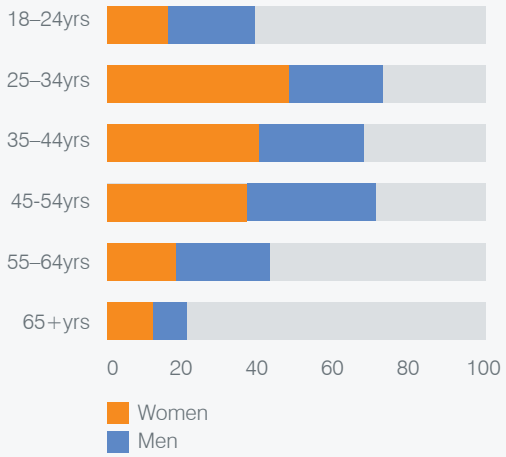
The respondents lived mostly in major cities with about 7% residing in a regional location of NSW (using Australian Bureau of Statistics definitions)[5] (Fig. 1) and were predominantly (67%) between 25–54 years of age (Fig. 2).

All respondents held a permanent humanitarian visa and most arrived in Australia in 2017 (80%), with an average residency in Australia of 46 months at the time of the survey. This is a key difference with the sample in the first two phases of *Foundations for Belonging*, where survey respondents had an average residency of 24 months (Culos, McMahon et al. 2021) and 30 months (Culos, Rajwani et al. 2020).

More than 7 out of 10 (73%) arrived through the Special Humanitarian Program (SHP) visa (subclass 202), supported by a proposer (typically a relative) in Australia, and the sample included 8 (3%) Woman at Risk (subclass 204) visa holders (Fig. 3).[6]

The most common citizenships in the sample were Iraq (147, 47%) and Syria (141, 45%), followed by Afghanistan (20, 7%) and others (6, 1%).

Fig.2 Age and gender of survey respondents
(by number)



5 The Department of Home Affairs, and the Humanitarian Settlement Program, follows a different method of classifying regional areas of Australia.

6 Survey respondents in this research arrived on one of the following visa types:
- Refugee visa (subclass 200) for people who the UNHCR has referred to Australia for resettlement;
- In-country Special Humanitarian visa (subclass 201) for people who are still living in their country and have been unable to leave;
- Woman at Risk visa (subclass 204) for women who do not have the protection of a partner or a relative and are in danger of victimisation; and
- Special Humanitarian Program visa (subclass 202) for people subject to substantial discrimination amounting to a gross violation of human rights, and with a proposer in Australia.

Fig.3 Visa type of survey respondents

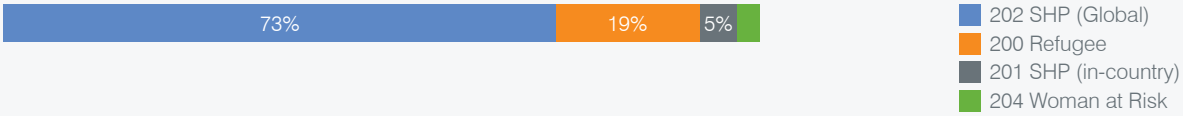
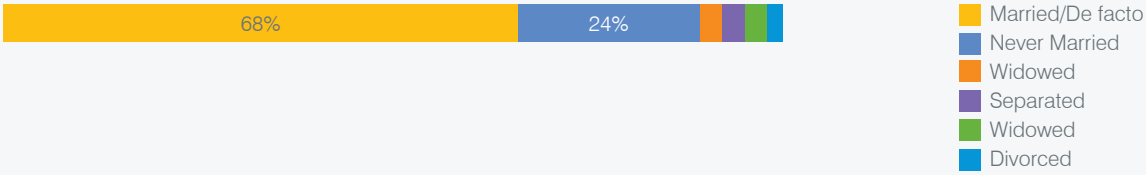


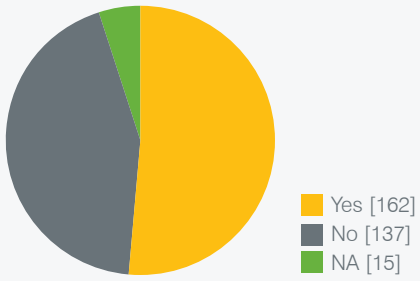
Fig.4 Relationship status of survey respondents



Respondents spoke a wide variety of languages (the telephone survey was conducted in more than 10 different languages), with the most common first languages in the sample being Arabic (240), Assyrian (26), Kurdish/Kurmanji (22), Dari/Farsi (17) and other (9).

Just under one-quarter (24%) reported having never been married (Fig. 4) and just over half of the respondents (52%) had children under 18 living with them and one in six (18%) reported having pre-school children under 5 living with them.

Fig.5 Household composition of survey respondents
Living with children under 18yrs



Family Interviews

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted in late 2021 with seven families who arrived in Australia on humanitarian visas in the last 3-4 years. The interviews focused on understanding their experiences of family reunion and/or separation, how these plans have been impacted by COVID-19, the broader impact of the pandemic on their families' lives and livelihoods, and whether lockdown and related restrictions had any bearing on their settlement and integration.

The interviews were conducted in-language by bilingual research assistants online and preferably involved at least two family members. As such, it is not possible to report on the demographics of the family interview participants but they had diverse language backgrounds (including Arabic, Assyrian, Dari, Hazaragi and Kurdish/Kurmanji), and were predominantly born in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan.

Case Study: Faiza and family

Faiza is in her late 30s and she and her husband have two teenage children. They are from northern Iraq and speak the Syriac/Aramaic dialect at home After arriving in Australia, Faiza studied English and acquired qualifications in business and retail from TAFE. Currently, she is the primary carer for her father and would like to work part-time. Her husband works in the construction industry.

Faiza was reunited in Australia with her parents and her sisters in 2018. Prior to this, she lacked emotional support, and felt this lack acutely when she had a miscarriage close to full term and her mother couldn't be by her side. They all now live in the same suburb which Faiza sees as: "I cannot describe the feeling that I had [when they were reunited] … everything changed. The feeling of alienation stopped since their arrival, and I began to feel that there was no difference between my country of origin and Australia. Australia is even better because it gave me and my family a sense of safety and decent life that we had been missing".

Faiza's husband mentioned that he was especially saddened when his father died in Iraq, as according to custom he is the eldest son and should have been by his side. When the family obtained Australian citizenship, they applied for an Australian passport to visit the husband's mother and siblings who live in Iraq but couldn't do so due to border closures. They were also planning to apply for his mother to come to Australia but haven't been able to make progress on that front either. When his mother caught COVID-19 in Iraq, Faiza's husband felt helpless as he was unable to care for her.

For this family, social media and technology, such as Facebook, Messenger and Instagram, have positively contributed to easing feelings of separation, being virtually part of family gatherings, and sharing snippets of daily life: "seeing family members and hearing their voices day by day was and still is the only way to convince ourselves and relieve the feeling of separation and alienation. But social media also had negative effects, for example seeing family members in difficult situations and not being able to help".

Another aspect of technology for this family was home-schooling during lockdown: "our children started studying from home through the Zoom application, and this was an added responsibility. We had to be with our children step by step to encourage them to complete their studies and not lose the desire to learn…they prefer to go to school not only to study but to meet their friends and do sports as well".

They also discussed information and advice on how to cope with self-isolation, following safety instructions, eating healthy, and trying to encourage each other to be patient during these online gatherings: "fortunately, my mother was cured after her desperation from the severe pain she faced. We were using social media with our people here in Australia, seeing them on camera, discussing the situation of Corona and ways to prevent it". The family did not seek help from their friends and neighbours during the COVID-19 lockdown but did provide food and other supplies to older family members living nearby.

Faiza mentioned that the COVID-19 lockdown interrupted services for refugees, and this had a direct impact on refugee families who had recently arrived in Australia and did not have relatives or close friends to turn to: "what would have happened to my family if we weren't here. They do not speak the English language, they do not drive, and they have many health problems. For refugees arriving prior to the events of COVID-19, maybe they felt separated, scattered, and neglected".

Social Bonds

Social bonds relate to the connections people have with others from the same cultural background. Supportive relationships with people who share similar values, norms and expectations about life are an important initial step to establish connections in a new country. These bonds (either in-person or online) are generally – but not always – formed with family and friends who share the same culture, language and faith, and contribute to a sense of belonging.[7]

A minority of respondents, around 4 in 10, reported being given support in Australia from their national or ethnic community, and around 3 in 10, from their religious community (Table 1). This was a sharp fall, of about half, on these measures from the findings of the two previous surveys in 2019 and 2020 (Table 1). As outlined above the average length of residency in the 2021 survey was almost four years, compared to around two years in the 2019 and 2020 survey samples. This might explain the drift in support from these parts of the community as refugees strengthen connections – their social bridges – with other communities over time. Indeed, Building a New Life in Australia (BNLA[8]) respondents with an average residency of 4 years reported almost identical rates of support from the community on these two indicators (Table 1), compared to the 2021 survey *Foundations for Belonging* respondents.

Despite the drift away from national, ethnic or religious community supports, family remains central to bonds. The families we interviewed mentioned relying on family members based in the same suburb or city for essential supplies during the lockdowns of 2021. These local sources of familial support were especially important in the case of elderly relatives or when family members contracted COVID-19. For instance, when all the members of an Assyrian family tested positive in mid-2021, their brother's family provided them with essentials and food during several weeks of mandated isolation.

Women were more likely to report stronger support on these two measures of social bonds – support from national/ethnic and religious community – than men (Fig. 6, Fig. 7), and this was statistically significant. This large difference between women and men is consistent with the findings from the previous 2020 survey (Culos, McMahon et al. 2021). We can speculate that women are more engaged in caregiving for children and older people which perhaps involves greater engagement with this community infrastructure.

One noteworthy finding in this category was a significant difference in language groups on support from the national community, where Arabic and Dari/Farsi-speaking respondents felt less supported, with 'Other' languages category also following this trend.

Age did not significantly impact these measures, apart from respondents aged over 65 who reported less support on both measures – the opposite of what was observed in our 2020 survey (Culos, McMahon et al. 2021). There was no significant variation by location of residence (i.e. regional or metropolitan) or visa type.

Table 1: Do you feel that you have been given support/comfort in Australia from…? (by survey, percentage)

	Your national or ethnic community				Your religious community			
	Survey 2021	Survey 2020	Survey 2019	BNLA	Survey 2021	Survey 2020	Survey 2019	BNLA
Yes	38	75	73	27	27	66	65	26
Sometimes	10	14	11	21	9	16	11	21
No	52	11	16	51	64	18	24	53

7 UK Home Office Indicators of Integration Framework 2019.
8 The BNLA comparison group is with Wave 4 respondents. For more information on the BNLA (National Centre for Longitudinal Data, 2017) comparison group used in this study, see Methods in Appendix 1 available online.

Fig.6 Have you been given support in Australia from your national and ethnic community? (by gender)

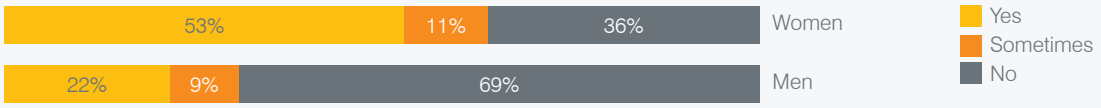
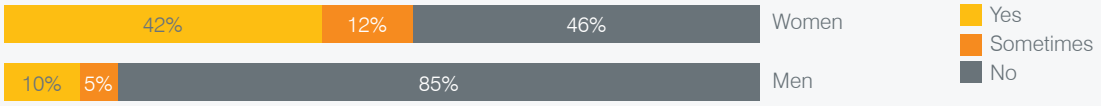


Fig.7 Have you been given support in Australia from your religious community? (by gender)



Maintaining regular contact with friends and family members is an important aspect of social bonds. Consequently, questions about contact with family and friends have been included in the two previous surveys in 2019 and 2020. In the 2021 survey we retained the broad questions but separated out contact with family from contact with friends, to get more nuanced insights into the social bonds of refugees.

Almost all respondents in the 2021 survey spoke on the phone, used social media and exchanged text messages to stay in touch with family at least weekly (Table 2). The frequency of reported contact with friends was lower, but still high (Table 2). Refugees are likely to have family members in countries of origin, countries of displacement, other countries and other parts of Australia, and all three communication methods were frequently used. We observed an increase in the use of these digital modes of communication from 2020 onwards, which might be related to a higher need for contact with family and friends due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic around the world and the restrictions on travel. Indeed all of the families interviewed for the case studies for this report remarked on how they were able to communicate regularly with their family in Australia and overseas via messages, audio and video calls, and other platforms during the pandemic.

Table 2: On average, how often do you .... with family members or friends? (percentage)

	More than once a week	About once a week	More than once a month	Less than once a month
Family				
Speak on the phone or video	76	13	5	6
Use Social Media	75	10	5	10
Exchange text messages	74	11	4	11
Friends				
Speak on the phone or video	52	20	13	15
Use Social Media	51	18	15	16
Exchange text messages	56	18	12	16

Table 3: On average, how often do you … with family members and friends?
(percentage)

Family & friends combined	More than once a week	About once a week	More than once a month	Less than once a month
Speak on the phone or video	79	13	4	5
Use Social Media	76	13	4	7
Exchange text messages	79	10	4	8

When we recombine contact with family and friends (Table 3) in comparison to the two previous surveys in 2019 and 2020, respondents to 2021 survey talk slightly less frequently, and use social media less frequently, with family and friends on a weekly basis, but report using text messages more often in 2021.

There is a statistically significant correlation between gender and maintaining contact with friends, where men are more likely to maintain contact more often via all three forms of communication – calls, social media and text messages – than women (Figures 8, 9, 10).

Fig.8 On average, how often do you speak on the phone or video with friends? (by gender)*

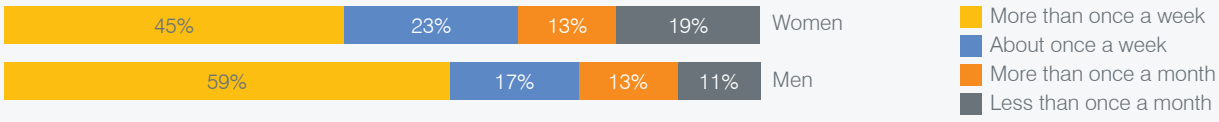


Fig.9 On average, how often do you use social media with friends ? (by gender)*

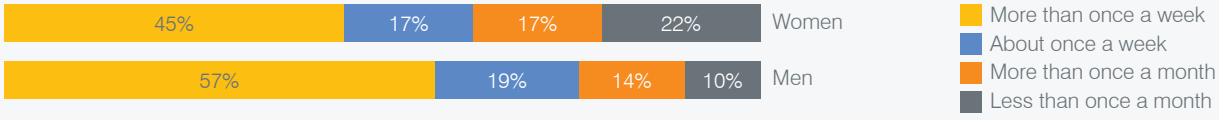
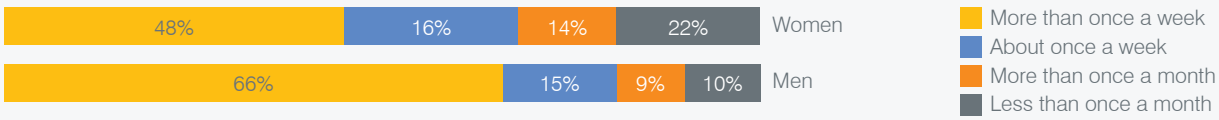


Fig.10 On average, how often do you exchange text messages or instant messages with friends? (by gender)*



* Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding

There is also significant difference by language groups in contact with family and friends (in the use of social media and exchanging text messages), where the Dari/Farsi and Kurdish/Kurmanji respondents had less frequent contact.

Age plays a significant role in reported preferences for communication with friends, with younger respondents tending to use social media and text messages more often.

Respondents with a 202 visa tend to contact family and friends via text and social media more than respondents with other visa types and this was statistically significant.

Table 4: Would you say that your friends in Australia are…? (by survey, percentage)*

	Survey 2021	Survey 2020	Survey 2019
Mostly from my ethnic/ religious community	29	37	38
Mostly from other ethnic/ religious communities	1	6	6
A mixture	62	53	51
I do not have any friends in Australia yet	8	3	5

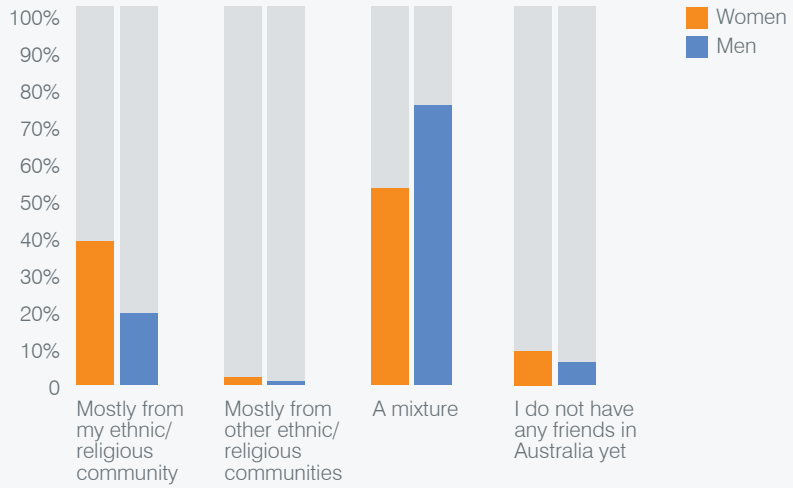
* Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding

In family interviews COVID-19 increased the need for contact with family overseas but, at times, this was also disrupted. In the case of an Afghan couple, they couldn't work during the lockdown and were thus unable to provide financial support to family members in Afghanistan. Their regular communication with family in Afghanistan was also affected by the COVID-19 situation there and by the conflict that led to the evacuation of Kabul in August 2021 where electricity supply, internet and telephone services were disrupted or stopped entirely.

When asked about their friendship networks in Australia (Table 4), more than 60% of respondents reported relations to a mix of people from other communities as well as their own ethnic/religious community, which is higher than the previous *Foundations for Belonging* surveys. At face value, this is to be expected given that the average length of residency of 2021 survey respondents is much longer than the two previous surveys, and we anticipate that longer residency should result in more diverse friendship networks. It was not possible to compare our 2021 survey with BNLA respondents, who were resident in Australia for a similar length of time, to corroborate this interpretation, as this question was not asked in the comparable wave of that longitudinal research.

In the 2021 survey, women were slightly less likely than men to have a mixed friendship network (Fig.11), which echoes the finding from the 2020 survey (Culos, McMahon et al. 2021). For women and men, there is a significant relationship between

Fig.11 Would you say that your friends in Australia are…?
(by gender)



* Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding

age and friendship networks, with younger respondents more likely to have mixed friendship networks and friends from other ethnic/religious communities – which is also consistent with the 2020 survey findings (Culos, McMahon et al. 2021). However, the age trend is not uniform, with women and men in some age bands reporting a greater likelihood of having mixed friendships.

In terms of visa types, respondents other than those with a proposer prior to arriving in Australia (i.e. those with a 202 visa) reported less diversity in their friendship networks.

In the 2021 survey we added a new measure of the geographic proximity of friendship networks to better understand their spatial distribution and three quarters of respondents (76%) reported their closest friends live in the same city, town or neighbourhood (Table 5).

However there are interesting differences between women and men. Female respondents have more friends in their neighbourhood as well as more in other parts of Australia compared to males. Meanwhile men report their closest friends are nearly twice as likely to be in the same town/city (63% to 32%) (Fig. 12). This may be because men are more likely to develop friendships through work, education or other associations – beyond their immediate neighbourhood, but still in the same town or city. Dari/Farsi and Kurdish/Kurmanji respondents reported more friends living overseas than other language groups, while Arabic speakers are the least likely to have their closest friends either overseas or in the same neighbourhood – their friendships are also more likely to be spread across the town or city in which they live.

Taking all of the main variables in social bonds into account, the significant relationships are plotted in the matrix below (Fig. 13). The larger size of the circles and the darkness of the colour indicates the strength of the correlation, with orange indicating a positive relationship and blue (not present in this Figure) a negative relationship. An '–' indicates no statistically significant correlation.

The three clusters of social bonds variables – support from national/ethnic/religious community, contact with family, and contact with friends – are strongly and positively correlated. Measures of contact with friends and family also correlate, but less strongly, suggesting that people who communicate regularly do not always do so with both friends and family.

Table 5. My closest friends mostly live in…
(percentage)

The neighbourhood where I live	29
The city/town where I live	47
Another place in Australia	10
Overseas	14

Fig.12 My closest friends mostly live …?
(by gender)

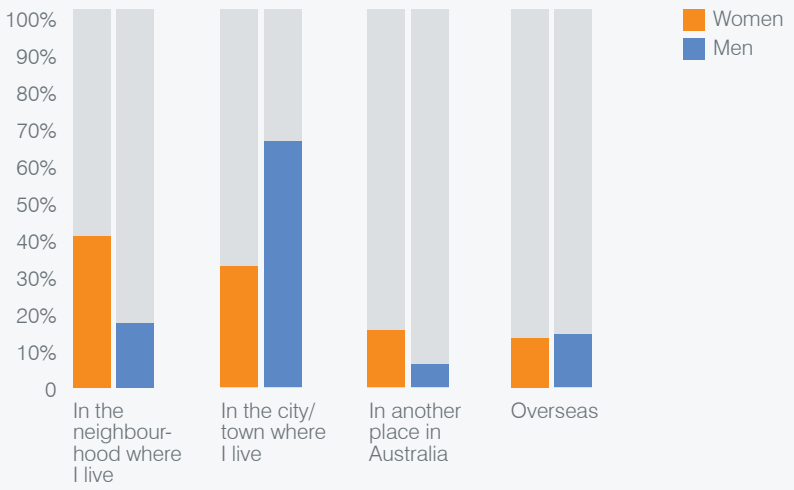
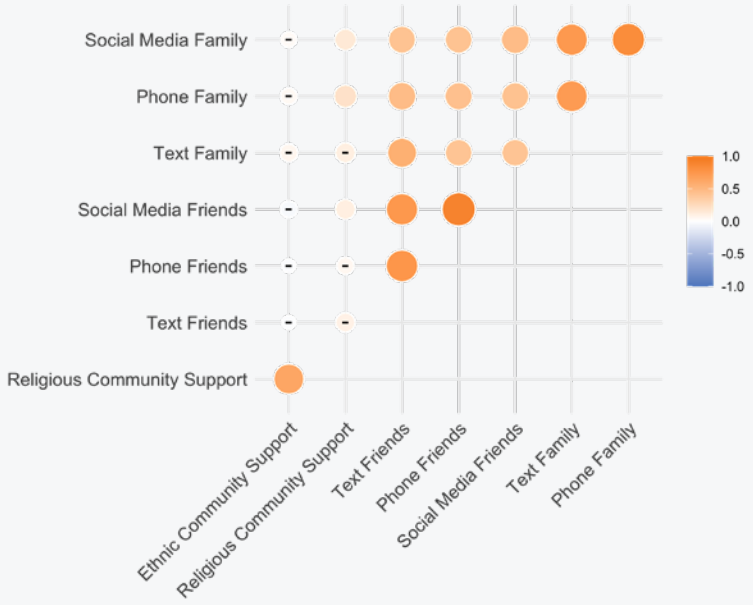


Fig.13 Correlation between measures of social bonds



Social Bonds
Key Points

- On the whole these findings build on the results from the two previous phases of this research (Culos, Rajwani et al. 2020, Culos, McMahon et al. 2021), with differences on some measures which we attribute to the longer residence in Australia – on average, about 4 years – of the 2021 sample compared to the two previous samples.
- One notable difference was a sharp decrease in refugees' reported support from their national, ethnic and/or religious communities, which was not surprising given that we would expect longer residency to facilitate a wider set of community supports.
- Another difference, also pointing to an expanding social network, was that six in 10 refugees in 2021 had mixed friendship networks (higher than the two previous surveys), while less than a third had networks that were mainly with their own national/ethnic community. Groups with least association with their own national/ethnic community include 202 and 204 visa holders; men; young (18-24) and, interestingly, middle-aged (45-54) respondents; and Arabic and Assyrian speakers.
- As with the previous surveys, refugees maintain family and social ties through regular contact using various digital platforms to message or speak to families and friends, though in 2021 we found some differences between contact with family and contact with friends.

Women

- Consistent with the previous phases of *Foundations for Belonging*, gender influences social bonds, with women significantly more likely to report stronger support from their national/ethnic and religious community than men.
- Women also reported slightly less mixed friendship networks compared to men.
- Among women there is a strong relationship between age and friendship networks: younger refugee women are more likely to have mixed friendship networks and friends from other ethnic/religious communities. This relationship was also found among younger men, though it is not a consistent one across all age bands – younger respondent groups do not always report stronger mixed friendships than older ones.

Overall, the findings indicate that:

- Interactions with and support from ethnic and religious communities are a bedrock for social bonds among newly arrived refugees, though this seems to decrease in importance and wane with longer residency in Australia.
- As refugees settle they develop more mixed social networks, likely due to longer residency.
- Women from refugee backgrounds in particular may need different forms of support at different ages to build and sustain mixed friendship networks.
- Digital platforms are significant to the maintenance of social bonds both locally and transnationally with friends and family, indicating the potential for local ethnic and religious community organisations and others to tap into digital communications to reach newly arrived refugees.

Case Study: Jamila and family

Jamila's family consists of her husband and three children. Her elder son and his wife who had recently arrived in Australia from Jordan also joined her for the interview. They hail from Iraq where her husband worked as a panel beater, and she was employed in accounting. She is in her 50s while her children are in their 20s.

Jamila first experienced family separation when she, her husband and children fled to Jordan, but her daughter got married and immigrated with her partner to Australia. The next family separation occurred when her older son got married in Jordan and could not join them as they made their way to Australia. At the time of the interview, she was living in an apartment with her husband and younger son. Her husband is now retired while her son is working.

Their older daughter lives in the same suburb as them and now has a young baby. Jamila mentions that while she was delighted with the arrival of her grandchild and grateful for all the opportunities they have received in Australia, she is saddened by the family not being together: "we feel that the decision to leave our country was not ours, but rather imposed on us. Our brothers and sisters, relatives, and friends over the years – have lost them. We lost our job".

She adds that COVID-19 made the family separation more difficult due to delays and restrictions: "first, the COVID-19 isolation laws did not enable me to perform my role properly towards my daughter, and secondly, my son was stuck in Jordan, and he was not among us to be happy with the arrival of the first grandchild, and I always think that my grandchildren will be raised away from our families around the world". Jamila's elder son added that when they were approved to come to Australia as refugees, they were unable to book tickets because the border was closed. When the borders finally reopened at the end of 2021, they were again afraid of booking tickets as Jordan would not allow them back.

The family use technology to connect and have their own family group chat where they meet every day and tell each other what they have cooked and where they have gone. They also used the chat room to discuss the COVID-19 crisis and precautions to take: "thinking of my son made me and my husband get sick, we always asked them not to go out of the house, not to mix with people. But seeing them everyday and talking to them through social media, knowing that they are accepted as refugees and that it is a matter of time, knowing that they are in good health and that they are implementing safety laws in the required form has eased our anxiety from the severity of the crisis".

During the 2021 lockdown, their daughter who lives in the same suburb helped by dropping off food and medicine at their apartment door. She also followed up with their doctors' and specialists' appointments. They were only able to meet with her in local parks, and this provided comfort. Jamila mentioned that her younger son lost his job during the pandemic but received income support from the government. The newly-arrived couple felt optimistic and grateful to the Australian government: "I feel safe now, I am no longer afraid of my wife going out to study or work, and the law in Australia protects everyone. But I am sorry and saddened by the many families who are still suffering in other countries".

Social Bridges

Establishing social bridges with people from other cultural backgrounds is another important dimension of social connections, and critical to establishing the 'two-way' interaction and exchange at the heart of integration. Creating bridges to other communities opens up opportunities for broadening cultural exchange and understanding, and provides a pathway for refugees to contribute to social and cultural life.

About three-quarters of respondents reported at least some support from community groups other than their own (Table 6), a finding that is higher than but consistent across the 2019 and the 2020 surveys (Culos, Rajwani et al. 2020, Culos, McMahon et al. 2021). This was also a much higher figure compared to Wave 4 BNLA respondents resident in Australia for a similar length of time. Indeed this marked gap between Wave 4 BNLA respondents (with surveys collected in 2017 and 2018) and 2021 respondents was also observed across the two previous *Foundations for Belonging* surveys and Wave 3 BNLA data. A possible explanation for the marked differences on wider community support may be due to the significant global attention on refugees as a result of the various displacements including that of Syrian-conflict refugees in the past five years.

There was no significant difference in terms of gender but respondents in regional areas (79%) were more likely to respond positively about getting support from other community groups, compared to those living in major cities (64%).

There was also variation among language groups, with Dari/Farsi and Kurdish/Kurmanji speakers feeling much more supported than other language groups.

The overwhelming view of respondents in the 2021 survey is that their local area is a place where people from different national and ethnic backgrounds get along well together, a finding similar to the 2019 and 2020 surveys (Table 7). This indicates that the evolving COVID-19 situation has not markedly changed refugees' generally positive feelings about their local community and neighbourhood. This is surprising given the stringent public health restrictions imposed during the Delta wave in Western and South Western Sydney in mid-2021 where many of the survey respondents live. One of the Afghan families interviewed reported communicating more with their neighbours during COVID-19 as more people were staying at home or working from home, thus providing the time and opportunity for casual interactions.

Table 6. Do you feel you have been given support/ comfort in Australia from other community groups? (by survey, percentage)

	Survey 2021	Survey 2020	Survey 2019	BNLA
Yes	66	59	62	16
Sometimes	7	17	14	19
No	27	24	24	65

Table 7. My local area is a place where people from different national or ethnic backgrounds get along well together (by survey, percentage)

	Survey 2021	2020 Survey	2019 Survey	MSC Nov 2021
Strongly agree/ Agree	88	90	90	84
Neither agree nor disagree	8	10	9	2
Disagree/ Strongly Disagree	4	0	1	14

This survey question is taken from Mapping Social Cohesion (MSC), a major annual survey of Australian community attitudes on a range of social issues. In comparison to the broader community sample in MSC, refugee respondents in this study were less likely to express disagreement with these statements and indicated a more positive sentiment about their local area than other Australians (3%, Disagree/Strongly Disagree compared to 14% in MSC 2021)[9]. We can speculate that this variation might be influenced by newly arrived refugees having potentially experienced significant conflict and discord in their neighbourhood prior to arriving in Australia.

Nearly three-quarters of respondents in the 2021 survey found it very easy/easy to make friends in Australia, understand the Australian ways/culture and talk to their Australian neighbours (Table 8). These measures are higher than the 2019 and 2020 survey cohorts which points to the effect of longer

9 Mapping Social Cohesion 2021, The Scanlon Foundation/Monash University

Table 8. Since you came to Australia, how easy have you found it to...? (by survey, percentage)

		Very easy	Easy	Hard	Very hard
Make friends in Australia	Survey 2021	10	61	22	7
	Survey 2020	9	55	33	3
	Survey 2019	14	52	29	5
	BNLA	14	48	31	7
Talk to your Australian neighbours	Survey 2021	16	53	24	7
	Survey 2020	5	51	38	5
	Survey 2019	9	48	3	9
	BNLA	15	56	24	5
Understand Australian ways/culture	Survey 2021	15	60	20	5
	Survey 2020	8	61	27	4
	Survey 2019	9	60	29	2
	BNLA	15	47	30	8

residency on these three indicators. The 2021 respondents expressed much greater ease than BNLA respondents on making friends in Australia and understanding Australian ways, and expressed similar ease in terms of talking to their Australian neighbours (Table 8).

In this survey women were more likely to have difficulties in making friends in Australia and (consistent with the 2020 survey results) talking to their Australian neighbours than men (Fig. 14).

There were some variations across language groups, with Kurdish/Kurmanji and Assyrian speakers finding it harder and Dari/Farsi and Arabic-speakers finding it easier to 'understand Australian ways/culture'. Respondents who speak Kurdish/Kurmanji and Dari/Farsi were also more likely to find it harder to make friends in Australia. In terms of visa types, respondents who arrived on a 202 visa were more likely to find it easier to make friends in Australia. Age plays a significant role in facilitating the approach to neighbours and understanding Australian ways, with increasing difficulties for older age groups.

Almost nine out of 10 respondents reported feeling part of the Australian community always or most of the time (Table 9), consistent with the findings from the 2020 and 2019 surveys and in line with BNLA respondents.

There was no difference by gender, or other demographic variables, apart from Kurdish/Kurmanji speakers feeling less connected to the Australian community than other language groups.

Fig.14 Since you came to Australia, how easy have you found it to …(by gender)

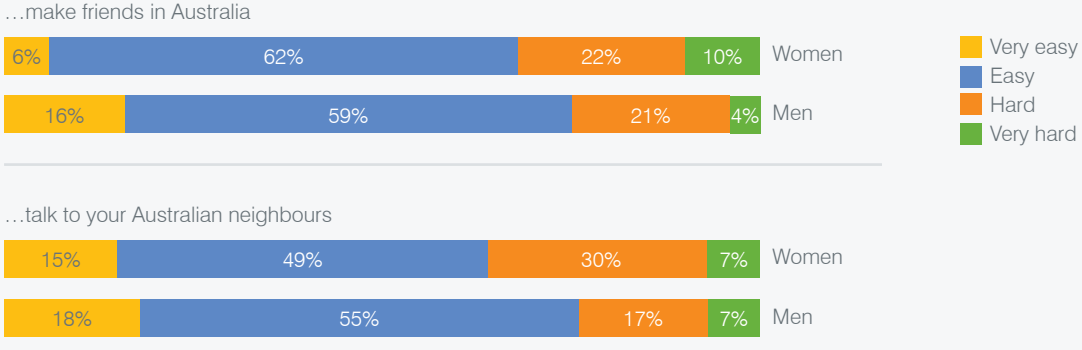


Table 9. Do you feel a part of the Australian community? (by survey, percentage)*

	Survey 2021	2020 Survey	2019 Survey	BNLA
Always	62	65	62	53
Most of the time	25	22	25	27
Some of the time	10	11	11	17
Hardly ever	3	1	1	1
Never	0	0	0	2

* Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding

For the first time in the 2021 survey, we asked participants to rate their overall experience of settling in Australia (using a question taken from BNLA). *Foundations for Belonging* respondents (83%, Very good/good) gave a very similar rating to Wave 4 BNLA respondents (86%, Very good/good) who were resident in Australia for similar length of time (Fig.15).

We found no significant differences between women and men. Holders of 200, 201, and 204 visas indicated a more difficult settlement experience: 200/201/204 visa holders (30%, Hard/very hard) compared to 202 visa holders (12%, Hard/very hard) who arrived with a proposer, usually a relative, already in Australia. Likewise, Kurdish/Kurmanji and Dari/Farsi speakers indicated a harder settlement experience so far compared to other language groups.

The correlation matrix below (Fig. 16) plots relationships between social bridges variables. As before, larger circles/darker colour indicate the strength of the correlation, with orange a positive, blue a negative relationship and a dash '–' no statistically significant correlation. There is a strong

Fig.15 Overall has your experience of settling in Australia so far been? (by survey)

Fig.16 Correlation between measures of social bridges

correlation between support from other community groups, understanding Australian ways, making friends, talking to neighbours and a sense of people getting along in the local area and feeling part of the Australian community. The overall experience of settling in Australia so far is positively correlated to all of the variables. Surprisingly, responses to the question about whether respondents have received support from other community groups do not align with what we would expect in responses to similar questions about belonging. For instance, 21 per cent of the sample said they always felt part of the Australian community, yet had not received support from other community groups. This may be because 'other community groups' is interpreted in a very specific way (for example, other ethnic or religious groups), or because a sense of belonging to the Australian community does not imply receiving support from other community groups.

Simon Scott Photo

Social Bridges
Key Points

- At a broad level the 2021 results validate and extend the findings from the two previous phases of research (Culos, Rajwani et al. 2020, Culos, McMahon et al. 2021), indicating that refugees are forming social bridges with the wider community.
- The findings show a consistent change towards development of more mixed friendship networks, understanding Australian ways and engaging with neighbours. In essence, this can be seen as 'natural' drift from social bonds to social bridges associated with longer residency in Australia and there are no indications that this has been set back by the upheavals of COVID-19.
- Refugees report a very strong sense of feeling part of the Australian community and report much higher levels of support from community groups other than their own, when compared to other refugees in Australia.
- Encouragingly, refugees overwhelmingly view their local areas as places where people from different backgrounds get along – higher than responses to the same measure in an annual national survey of the general population in Australia.
- In the 2021 survey, refugees were asked to rate their experience of settling in Australia so far. Holders of 202 visas who arrived with a proposer already in Australia were more likely to rate their settlement experience more positively than all other visa types.

Women

- Women are equally likely as men to receive support from other community groups, to understand Australian ways/culture, and feel a part of the Australian community. They also rated their experience of settling in Australia so far on a par with men.
- In this survey, women were more likely than men to report difficulties making friends in Australia and talking to their Australian neighbours, which more or less matches what women reported in the previous phases of the research.

Overall, the findings indicate that:

- Refugees are developing social bridges through friendship networks and have a positive engagement with their neighbours and neighbourhoods at this stage of settlement. This provides strong evidence for the value of community engagement initiatives that facilitate meeting and exchange between receiving communities and newly arrived refugees.
- Even with longer residence in Australia refugee women report less ease compared to men in making friends in Australia and talking to their Australian neighbours, which suggests more targeted engagement and support may be warranted for women in the early stages of settlement.
- Social bridges among refugees are grounded in the support offered by the broader community and perceptions of safety at the local neighbourhood level, alongside a strong feeling of being part of the Australian community.

Case Study: Ashur and family

Ashur and his family of five, who are Assyrian from Iraq, live in Western Sydney. Ashur is in his 50s, his wife in her 40s, two children aged in their twenties and one almost 18. They arrived in Australia in 2017.

Ashur's family was reunited with his sister's family in Australia two years ago and they now live in the same suburb. Prior to being reunited, a lack of emotional support was the biggest challenge as the two families were very close in Iraq and lived in the same house (as per local custom). Ashur's family also provided financial support to his sister's family while they were stranded in Turkey and on their arrival in Australia. He expressed trust in the Australian government because of his own experience and that of his sister's family: "we absolutely trust Australian government to support reunion with our family. When we applied for Australia, we had confidence we will be accepted because both me and my wife had so many family members in Australia. Australian government is helping refugees and considering their situation as humanitarian and helping them to grant them visas".

Other siblings of Ashur family live in Melbourne and, during travel restrictions imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Ashur's family was not able to visit them. They suffered emotionally and worried for their family. Ashur's 23-year-old son was not able to work during this time and that caused some stress and worry. They mainly provided emotional support and locally-sourced medical information to their family overseas, many of whom contracted COVID at some stage.

When Ashur's family themselves tested positive to COVID, their sister's family provided them with essentials and food. They were also very grateful to the Australian government for the financial support provided during lockdown: "the way of life and the government support granted to us by the Australian government is very generous and has helped us extensively as it has ensured that we ourselves are not put in financial and emotional distress".

When they were self-isolating after contracting COVID, the government also provided them with food, oxygen and temperature devices. NSW police visited every day, and NSW Health called daily to provide health advice which they appreciated.

For this family, technology was essential for their children to access school and TAFE during the 2021 lockdown in NSW. It also enabled them to learn English and send money overseas. They were able to communicate with their family in Australia and overseas via messages, calls and FaceTime, watch films and attended Mass online. It provided them with health and medical advice, restrictions and rules, vaccine availability, testing stations, contact tracing and other health support services.

Social Links

Social links refer to engagement with the institutions of society, such as government and non-government services, adding a third dimension to social connections in settlement and integration. Social links exist where a person is able to engage with and benefit from essential and other government services, and is able to develop a sense of independence and trust in the institutions of society. Increasingly, social links rely on digital technologies and skills to interact with these institutions.

More than eight in 10 respondents stated they had 'a lot' of trust in the police and the government (Table 10). By combining 'A lot' and 'Some' responses in relation to trust, a similar proportion of respondents, about eight in 10, trusted the people they work and study with. Trust in people in the neighbourhood, the wider Australian community and the media was lower, at about six in 10 respondents. Similar levels of trust and a similar ranking order were found in the 2019 and 2020 surveys. While the ranking order across Foundations of Belonging 2021 sample and BNLA Wave 4 respondents was similar, levels of reported trust were generally lower in our sample, apart from trust in the police. These levels of trust in the institutions and social infrastructure of Australia are likely to be related to refugees comparing life here to their past experiences of war,

Table 10: How much do you trust the following groups of people...? (by survey, percentage)[10]

		A lot	Some	A little	Not at all
People in your neighbourhood	Survey 2021	27	38	25	10
	Survey 2020	28	42	21	9
	Survey 2019	28	48	18	6
	BNLA	41	42	12	5
People in the wider Australian community	Survey 2021	31	30	22	17
	Survey 2020	24	45	21	10
	Survey 2019	21	47	23	9
	BNLA	40	46	10	4
The police	Survey 2021	82	14	2	2
	Survey 2020	84	12	3	1
	Survey 2019	88	9	2	1
	BNLA	81	15	3	1
People you work/study with	Survey 2021	40	36	16	8
	Survey 2020	50	33	12	5
	Survey 2019	45	35	11	9
The media	Survey 2021	28	38	22	13
	Survey 2020	39	41	15	6
	Survey 2019	43	40	13	4
The government	Survey 2021	87	10	1	2
	Survey 2020	86	11	3	1
	Survey 2019	85	12	2	1

10 BNLA Wave 4 data is available for comparison for only some of the metrics in this question.

conflict and state-based persecution, including persecution based on gender, ethnicity or religious affiliation.

This interpretation is borne out in the family interviews we conducted for the case studies in this report. All of the families, including those awaiting the outcomes of visa applications for their family members to join them in Australia, expressed appreciation to the Australian government and other governments for living in relative safety during the pandemic. They were thankful for the social safety net and pandemic-related financial support for lost work or additional support for education during the pandemic response.

In the case of one family, when they tested positive to COVID-19 during the Delta wave, they reported being provided with food, oxygen and temperature devices and receiving daily welfare checks from the police and daily phone contact from public health staff with health advice. Likewise, an Ezidi family was thankful for support since their arrival as this has allowed them to focus on their studies and establishing themselves in Australia, where this had been almost impossible prior to arrival due to conflict and persecution. Conversely, for some families, as in the case of an Iraqi family, COVID-19 lockdowns resulted in a reduction of in-person support for refugees, and this had a direct impact on families who had recently arrived in Australia and did not have relatives or close friends in Australia to turn to.

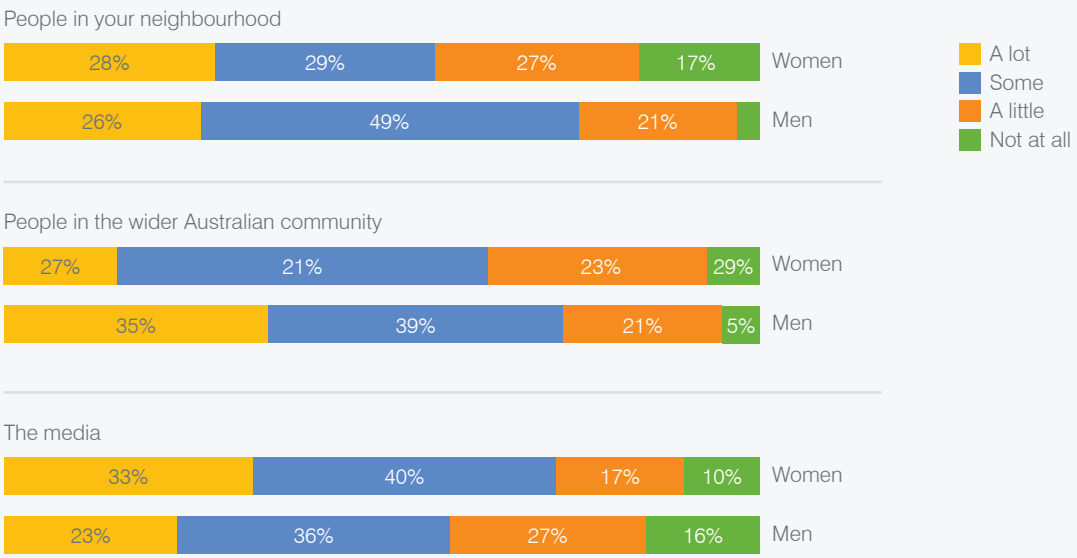
Women have less trust in people in the wider Australian community and people in the neighbourhood compared to men, while they trust the media more than men (Fig. 17). Levels of trust in government, the police and people they work/study with were similar between women and men.

There were differences by language groups with respondents speaking Kurdish/Kurmanji having significantly less trust across all elements compared to other language groups. Respondents living in regional areas, mostly Kurdish/Kurmanji speakers, have less trust in the wider community than respondents living in major cities, as was found in the 2020 survey findings.

Age influences trust in the wider community, with older people more trusting towards the wider community.

As with the two previous phases of the research this survey explored ease of access to government services, and the most common difficulties in this sample were using mobile apps for online essential services and language difficulties (Table 11). The question on 'finding and using mobile apps for services you need' was added to the 2021 survey to replace the more generic 'online/internet difficulties' used in the 2019 and 2020 surveys. The key change of the commonly nominated difficulties across the three surveys is that language difficulties and waiting times for an appointment fell sharply in 2021, whereas difficulties using technology to access essential services has risen (38% in 2019, 29% in 2020, to 48% in 2021).

Fig.17 How much do you trust the following groups of people? (by gender)



* Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding

Table 11: Now thinking about government services (e.g. Medicare, Centrelink, public housing, hospitals), have any of the options below, if any, made it difficult to get help from these services?
(by survey, percentage)

		Yes	No
I did not know where to get help	Survey 2021	21	79
	Survey 2020	12	88
	Survey 2019	21	79
Transport difficulties	Survey 2021	14	86
	Survey 2020	15	85
	Survey 2019	18	82
Language difficulties	Survey 2021	47	53
	Survey 2020	68	32
	Survey 2019	59	41
I had to wait a long time for an appointment	Survey 2021	22	78
	Survey 2020	40	60
	Survey 2019	49	51
I asked for help but did not get it	Survey 2021	8	92
	Survey 2020	9	91
	Survey 2019	15	85
I haven't used any Government services	Survey 2021	6	94
	Survey 2020	6	94
	Survey 2019	10	90
Difficulties finding or using mobile apps for the services you need (e.g. MyGov, Medicare) *Asked as 'Online/ internet difficulties' in 2019 and 2020 surveys	Survey 2021	48	52
	Survey 2020*	29	71
	Survey 2019*	38	62

The families we interviewed noted how digital platforms provided them with health and medical advice, updates on restrictions and rules, vaccine availability, testing locations, contact tracing and other support services. Technology also enabled children to access school and adults to access TAFE during lockdowns. For an Afghan couple, social media enabled them to keep updated on Australia's policies and changes regarding visa applications before, during and after the evacuation of Kabul in August 2021. Email and other messaging platforms allowed them to follow up the family's visa application for relatives with a lawyer.

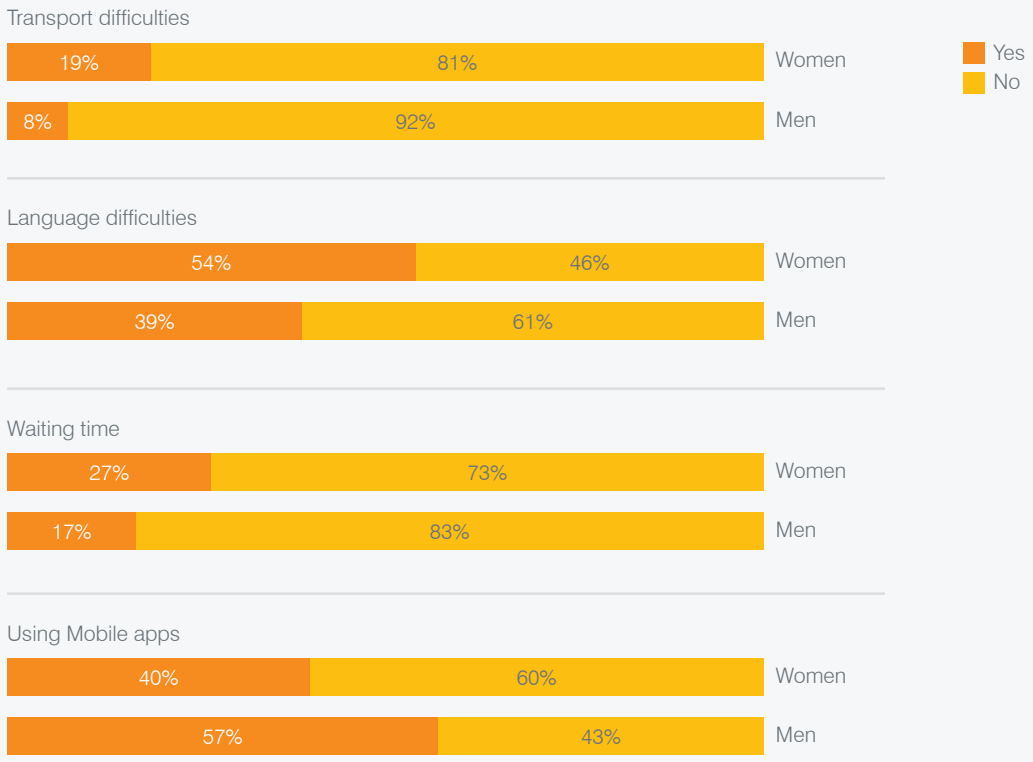
Women were statistically more likely to report difficulties in terms of transport, language difficulties and waiting times when accessing government services (Fig. 18). Somewhat surprisingly, men were statistically more likely to have difficulty in finding and using mobile apps to access government services (Fig. 18). This may reflect gender roles with women, especially mothers, managing access to online government portals (e.g. MyGov, Medicare) and therefore having greater ease through more frequent use.

People in regional areas experience greater transport difficulties and waiting times for an appointment than people living in cities. Respondents holding a visa (201,200, 204) other than a 202 visa and Kurdish/ Kurmanji and Dari/Farsi speakers also experienced more transport difficulties. There is some overlap between these categories – all Kurdish/Kurmanji speakers had non-202 visas, and 38 per cent of that same language group lives in regional areas – which help to account for these results. Kurdish/Kurmanji and Dari/Farsi speakers also reported more language difficulties accessing government services.

Age correlates with language difficulties, with older age groups more likely to report this as a barrier to government services. Age does not correlate significantly with using mobile apps to access services, where the age bands reporting more difficulties are 25-34 (57%) and 35-44 (55%). Age also influences use of government services, with older age groups less likely to use these services.

Given the central role of digital technology in daily life we explored digital inclusion for the first time in the 2020 survey. Clearly, the pandemic has been a time of digital transformation but as the annual Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) has pointed out, it is unclear whether this will result in greater digital inclusion (Thomas, Barraket et al. 2021). In the domain of social links we were particularly interested in self-reported digital skills and in this 2021 survey we adapted a question from Wave 5 of BNLA to assess these skills in more detail (Table 12).

Fig.18 Difficulties accessing government services (by gender)



* Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding

Table 12. When you use the internet, how well are you able to …? (percentage)*

	Very well	Fairly well	A little	Not at all
Browse information (e.g. searching for services or learn about services)	33	23	16	28
Pay bills online	28	17	12	43
Connect with family and friends back home	49	27	10	14
Connect with family and friends in Australia	52	22	11	15
Get news from home	45	26	9	20
Access entertainment (listening to music, watching movies, playing games, reading books etc.)	48	24	7	21
Do online shopping or sharing	25	15	13	46
Learn and study English	26	19	13	42
Undertake other study (e.g. TAFE) or to do homework online	26	17	12	45
Access health services (e.g. telehealth with a doctor)	30	22	14	34
Access welfare and social services (e.g. Medicare, Centrelink, settlement services)	29	30	15	26

* Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding

Some broad patterns emerged with respondents reporting stronger digital skills in connecting with family and friends, getting news from home and accessing entertainment. They reported weaker skills in online study, shopping and paying bills, and moderate skills in accessing health and welfare and social services. While comparisons with the 2020 survey are not possible (as we assessed digital skills differently), that survey also indicated that refugees used the internet less for shopping, paying bills and health services compared to the wider Australian population (Culos, McMahon et al. 2021).

Gender and age play a significant role in knowing how to access welfare and social services. In the chart below (Fig. 19) we can see how women tend to report lower skills levels then men. Older age is also associated with poorer digital skills, with participants over 55 having more difficulties with digital skills.

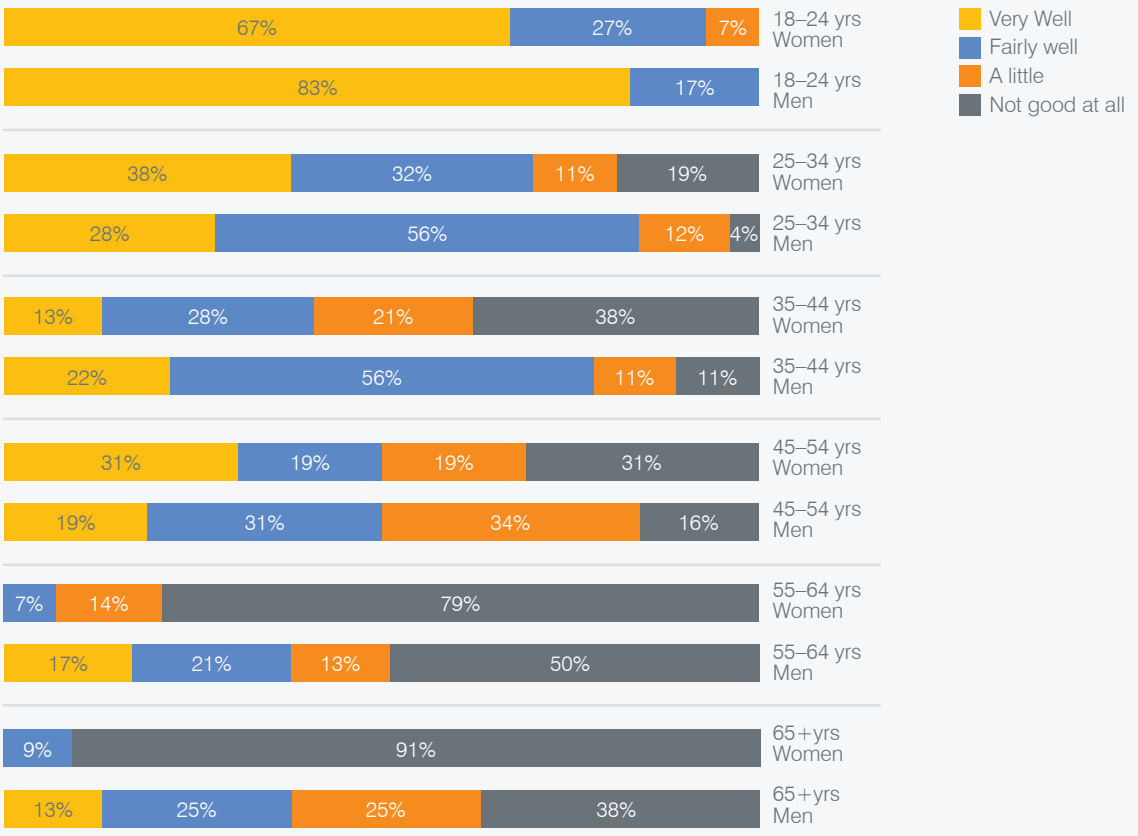
Similarly, women are more likely to report less digital ability to connect with family and get news from home.

Age has a strong influence on all of the digital skills measures and is statistically significant on all measures. The skills to learn and study English online start to decline among the age bands over 35-44 years of age. Likewise, the ability to access health services online declines for older age bands.

Respondents with other visa types (200, 201, 204) reported significantly higher digital skills than 202 visa holders for online study (e.g. English), accessing health services and online shopping. They reported stronger skills, although not significantly, on the other digital skills measures, like connecting with family and friends and getting news from home.

While we did not specifically explore digital skills in family interviews, technology featured prominently as a means to provide emotional support to their family overseas, and to share medical information obtained locally with overseas family members who contracted COVID-19.

Fig.19 When you use the internet, how well are you able to access welfare and social services? (by gender and age bands)

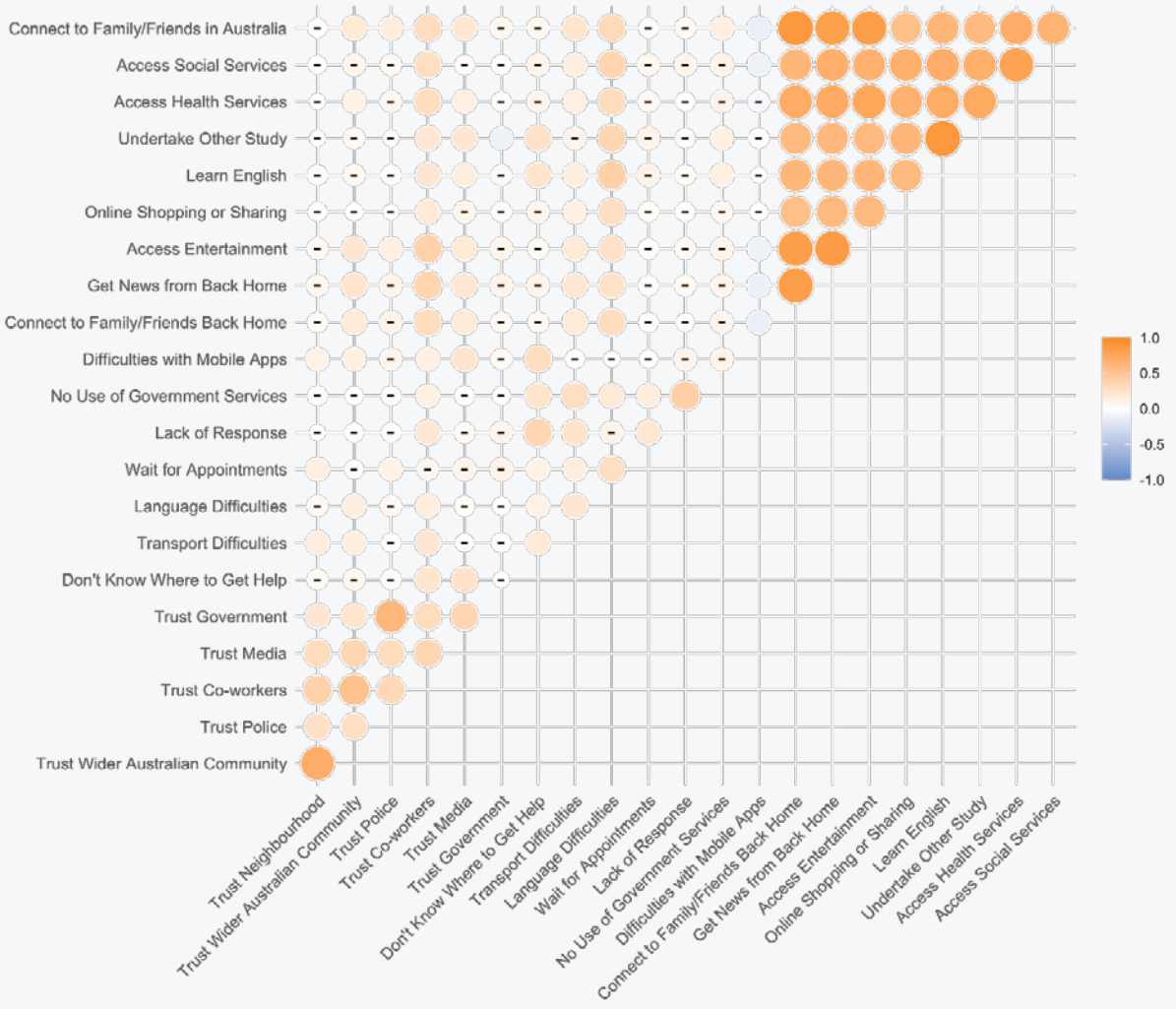


The chart below (Fig. 20) plots correlations between coded versions of the three clusters of variables included under social links: sense of trust, difficulty or ease of access to government services, and digital skills.

Most variables correlate positively with other variables in their clusters. If people have trust in one group, they are more likely to have trust in other groups. If they find it easy to access one government service, they are likely to find it easier to access others. And if they have the ability to access one service online, they are likely to be able to access others.

Relationships between different types of social links measures are less strong. Perhaps surprisingly, trust in people at work/study seems to correlate with nearly all other links questions, and might make a good predictor for the strength of social links generally. Similarly, and less surprisingly, greater ease with English (i.e. less language difficulties) also corresponded with greater ability to use digital technologies to access services.

Fig 20. Correlation between measures of social links



Social Links
Key Points

- Overall these results validate the findings from the two previous phases of this research (Culos, Rajwani et al. 2020, Culos, McMahon et al. 2021), in terms of how refugees are strengthening links to, and benefiting from, the institutions and social infrastructure of Australia.
- Refugees report a deep level of trust in the police and the government and, to a lesser extent, people they work or study with. Trust in people in their neighbourhood and the wider Australian community was weaker, especially among women. Trust in the media was also weaker overall, but there was no variation by gender on this or other measures (i.e. government, police, co-workers). Where it was possible to compare our results with other refugee groups who were resident for a similar length of time, trust was weaker in our sample, apart from trust in police.
- Against this backdrop of trust, the most common difficulties in accessing government services were language, use of mobile apps to access services, and waiting times for an appointment.
- As with the two previous phases of this research, this 2021 survey highlights online/internet difficulties as a barrier to government services that refugees need.
- Overall, refugees' digital skills were stronger in terms of connecting with family and friends but weaker in terms of online study, shopping, paying bills and accessing health, welfare and social services. There were also some differences in digital skills across visa types.
- Younger refugees fare better across all measures of digital skills. Older age is associated with poorer digital skills.

Women

- Women reported the same main difficulties when accessing government services as men but were more likely to report language barriers, waiting times and transport difficulties. Surprisingly, women were less likely to report difficulties in using mobile apps to access services.
- Women report weaker trust, weaker digital skills (in all but one measure) and more difficulties accessing services than men in virtually all aspects of social links.

Overall, the findings indicate that:

- The high levels of reported trust in government institutions provide a strong basis for government departments, essential services and other service providers to deliver culturally responsive services including in-language support and information to minimise language barriers, which persist for refugees in this sample despite longer residency in Australia.
- Refugees are adept at connecting digitally with family and friends but weaker in terms of engaging with a variety of commercial and government services online, revealing a gap in digital skills that needs to be addressed in the early stages of settlement, particularly for women and older age cohorts.
- As governments and other service providers build digital and online portals to services, there needs to be continuing emphasis on ways to address language barriers in digital modes of service delivery, particularly for women and older refugees.

Case Study: Hanif and family

Hanif is from Afghanistan and lives in western Sydney with his wife. They were reunited through a humanitarian visa as his wife is an Australian citizen. When the husband was based in Afghanistan, his spouse visa was not being processed for unknown reasons. His arrival in Australia was delayed by three years after their marriage.

The wife's family is their only family in Australia. The prolonged period of separation was very difficult for both of them: "it is hard particularly for the people who live in a country where there is threat of suicide attacks, killing, kidnapping, poverty and injustice. At the same time, you are waiting and dreaming to start your new life in a new country which is safe and has all standards of life and democracy. It's also more painful when you have concern for yourself, the family in Afghanistan and the partner in another country".

For Hanif, his other family members including his father, mother, brothers and sisters are still in Afghanistan and this is of great concern to him due to the worsening political situation there. He has applied for humanitarian visas for them but is awaiting a response from the relevant Australian department. He has not been able to visit them in Afghanistan since his arrival in Australia: "the lockdown and the closure of interstate and international border did not let us plan for any visit to Afghanistan. Since my arrival in Australia, I was not able to go overseas and visit my family or invite them here. The process of visa application has been very slow or in some cases the immigration department is not ready to accept new applications for family reunion".

Hanif was impacted by the COVID-19 lockdown and was thus unable to provide financial support to his family in Afghanistan: "when you are at home and not working, it can have a negative impact. I was receiving government financial support, but it was not enough to support my family in Afghanistan".

They were not able to see the father-in-law who is retired and lives locally on his own. Their regular communication with the husband's family in Afghanistan was affected as due to the COVID outbreak there, electricity distribution, internet and telephone services were slowed down or in some cases stopped entirely.

Nonetheless, Hanif was using social media to stay connected with family and friends overseas: "with the help of social media, video, and messages, I can chat with my family in Afghanistan and offer them emotional support and advice. I can also follow up on the political news about Afghanistan".

Social media also enables Hanif to be updated on Australia's policies and changes regarding visa applications and acceptance caps. He can then follow up his family application with his lawyer through email and other messaging platforms.

For this family, their friends and work colleagues (from other cultures) were in a similar situation because of being in lockdown and forced to stay at home. During phone calls or social media chats, they discussed COVID case numbers, vaccines, quarantine and how to access government services.

Rights and Responsibilities

This domain addresses the extent to which refugees are provided with the opportunities for full and equal participation in Australian society. While all respondents in the *Foundations for Belonging* research are Australian permanent residents, they are still classified as recent arrivals, and consequently are ineligible to apply for citizenship (due to minimum length of residency requirements). Therefore, it is premature to ask questions about registering to vote, political participation and contribution to decision-making for respondents to these surveys. Instead, in this research we assess this domain through perceptions of fairness and equality, experiences of discrimination, and access to and affordability of digital technologies.

In the 2019 and 2020 surveys we had included perceptions of what was required to fulfil civic responsibilities. We found that the responses were overwhelmingly positive (>95%) across several measures of civic participation so we discontinued tracking these in the 2021 survey. Likewise, we had asked about volunteering in the past month in the two previous surveys. At the time of the 2021 survey data collection, most of metropolitan NSW where most of the respondents lived was emerging from a strict lockdown. Consequently, face-to-face volunteering at the time of the survey would have been severely constrained by the impacts of COVID-19, and we did not see merit in asking about volunteering this time.

When asked about experiences of racial discrimination in the past 12 months, 16 respondents (5%) indicated that this had occurred – a similar proportion to the two previous surveys (Table 13). This finding differs from results on the same question in the annual Mapping Social Cohesion national survey across the same three years, where reports of experiences of discrimination in the previous 12 months were much higher (13% in 2021). That said, we do need to interpret this with caution as it may not be a true reflection of experiences of discrimination which are often underreported (Kamp, Dunn et al. 4 August 2021).

Women and men were equally likely to report experiences of racial discrimination, though the numbers are very low.

Respondents were also asked a series of questions on the frequency of experiences of racial discrimination in different settings (both institutional and everyday) and, again, very few respondents

Table 13: Have you experienced discrimination because of your skin colour, ethnic origin or religion over the last 12 months? (by survey, percentage)

	Survey 2021	Survey 2020	Survey 2019
Foundations for Belonging	5	6	5
Mapping Social Cohesion	13	13	19

reported experiencing discrimination in these settings. The most common institutional settings where discrimination was reported were in the workplace and school (4%), online or social media (3%) and in public spaces (3%).

Respondents reported a very high sense of being treated fairly when they access services and support, having their rights protected, and having equal access to services (Fig. 21), similar to the 2020 and 2019 samples. Here we can infer that this sense of equity is likely to be grounded in the fact that all of the respondents in this study had permanent residency, and therefore access to all of the responsibilities and rights that permanent and secure residency entails, including a pathway to Australian citizenship.

Given the high levels of agreement in responses to each of these questions, it is not meaningful to test for differences by gender, age, and other variables. That said, very young (18-24) and older respondents over 55 tended to strongly agree more than other age bands.

Almost seven out of ten of respondents found it easy to understand the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (68%, Very Easy/Easy) as the first people of Australia (Fig. 22), with results in the 2021 survey showing a slight trend towards greater understanding compared to the two previous surveys. We can speculate that this may be due in part to the longer average residency in Australia of the 2021 sample. In the two previous surveys respondents were overwhelmingly committed (>95%) to acknowledging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as the traditional owners of Australia, which gives another indication of their commitment to reconciliation.

Women reported finding it harder than men to understand the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, as did respondents with a visa other than 202 and older age groups (over 45).

Fig.21 As a refugee to Australia… (by survey)

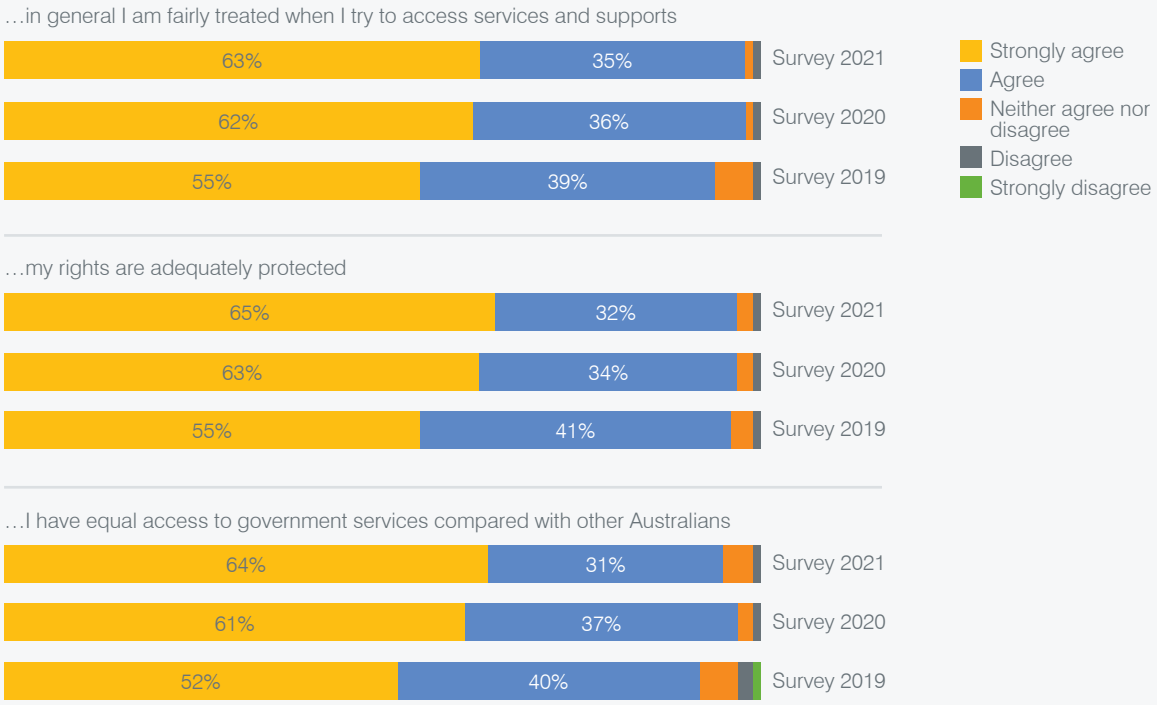


Fig.22 Since you came to Australia, how easy have you found it to understand the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as the first people of Australia? (by survey)

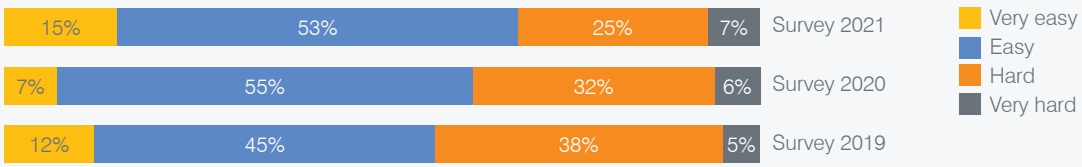


Fig.23 Do you or any member of your household have access to the internet at home, whether through a computer, mobile phone or other device? (by survey)

We explored digital inclusion among newly arrived refugees for the first time in the 2020 survey in light of the digital transformation in daily life, work and study as a result of COVID-19. For the rights and responsibilities domain we were particularly interested in measures of digital access and digital affordability. The 2020 survey provided a baseline and we repeated these measures in the 2021 survey.

Almost all respondents (98%) reported having access to the internet in their household (Fig.23), which is higher compared to other Australian households as measured in the most recent annual Australian Digital Inclusion Index report (88%) in 2020 (Thomas, Barraket et al. 2020).

Fig.24 Does your household have enough data allowance to meet your needs? (by survey)

Respondents who reported having internet in their household were asked if they had sufficient data allowance, and almost all (95%) indicated that they did (Fig. 24).

Given the very low number of respondents without access to the internet and sufficient data allowance it was not meaningful to test for variations by gender, age, or other variables. While the family interviews did not specifically assess these measures it was clear that digital technology was integral to families' lives, with frequent references to digital communications and interactions via text and messaging, social media, apps and websites.

As in the 2020 survey, respondents were asked about the number and type of digital devices in their household, a measure of digital access (Table 14). The average number of mobiles/smartphones and desktop/laptops computers in the households of respondents were all higher in 2021, perhaps again a reflection of longer residency in Australia.

There were no differences in terms of gender but there was a difference in terms of household composition. Households with children under 18 living had more tablets (average 0.9 with children under 18, compared to 0.4 without children under 18) though the number of desktop/laptop computers was very similar (average 1.4 with children under 18, compared to 1.3 without children). Tablets, desktops and laptop computers are vital for remote school education which was in force for several months in metropolitan NSW during the Delta wave of COVID-19 in mid-2021. Our previous findings in the 2020 survey indicated that families with school-aged children had fewer of these devices (Culos, McMahon et al. 2021). Encouragingly, the 2021 survey shows a welcome increase overall, compared to 2020, and that households with school-aged children have slightly more access to these devices. As our survey question on access to devices is different to the annual Australian Digital Inclusion Index, direct comparisons with a recent dataset of the Australian population were not possible to benchmark refugee households against household in the general population.

There were some variations by location, with regional respondents having more mobiles/smartphones (average 3.9) and tablets (average 1.1).

Table 14: Average number of devices used by the household to access the internet by type (by survey)

	Desktop or laptop computer	Mobile or smartphone	Tablet	Internet connected TV	Internet connected music or video player	Internet connected game console
Survey 2021	1.4	3.6	0.7	1	*	0.4
Survey 2020	1.2	3.3	0.8	1	0.3	0.4

* Not asked in 2021 Survey

Respondents were asked the number of people using the internet in each household. The number of people using the internet ranged from one to nine, with an average of 3.9 people per household.

We can infer that almost everyone in the households had access to a mobile or smartphone, while almost in one in three had access to a laptop or desktop computer, and one in six to a tablet.

Relationships between all questions relating to rights and responsibilities shows strong internal coherence between groups of questions (for example, on rights and on discrimination), though fewer relationships between these groups than, for instance, in social links (Fig. 25). As noted above, people responded either high (on rights) or low (on discrimination) to many questions, making correlations more difficult to observe – if a small number of people do not think their rights are protected, these may not be the same people who experienced actual discrimination in the workplace.

At the same time, several trends can be identified. Those who experience discrimination, for example experience it in more than one setting or situation, while those who feel they have equal access to government services also feel their rights are generally protected and that they are treated fairly. Responses to rights questions also correlated with understanding the role of Indigenous Australians and, curiously, with use of a laptop or computer for internet access.

Fig.25 Correlations between measures and rights and responsibilities

Roles and Responsibilities
Key Points

- Overall, these results validate the findings from the previous research (Culos, Rajwani et al. 2020, Culos, McMahon et al. 2021), in terms of rights and responsibilities, with a degree of consistency with the 2020 and 2019 survey data.
- Over two-thirds of refugees find it easy to understand the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the first people of Australia.
- Refugees feel they are treated with respect and have equal access to government services, that their rights are protected and that they are treated fairly.
- In line with this finding, refugees report very low instances of discrimination on the basis of cultural or religious background.
- Refugee households have access to the internet and in terms of affordability, a very high proportion of refugees report that they have a sufficient data allowance.
- On another measure of digital access, refugee households report having multiple devices. Encouragingly, the average number of mobiles/smartphones and desktop/laptops computers in refugee households was higher in 2021 compared to 2020.
- There were some differences in terms of the types of devices by household composition. Households with children under 18 had more tablets though the number of desktop/laptop computers was similar across households with and without children.
- Tablets, desktops and laptop computers are vital for remote school education, which was in force throughout metropolitan NSW for several months in mid-2021 due to COVID-19. Encouragingly, the 2021 survey shows a welcome though small increase, compared to 2020, in the average number of these devices in households with school-aged children.

Women

- There were no major variations in terms of gender across the rights and responsibilities domain indicators with the exception of refugee women reporting to find it harder to understand the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as the first people of Australia.

Overall, the findings indicate that:

- Refugees have a positive sentiment towards Australia around the concepts of respect, rights and equality and low reported rates of racial discrimination even at this relatively later stage of settlement. There was so little variance that gender comparisons were not meaningful.
- Settlement services should continue to provide refugees with opportunities to engage and understand the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as the first people of Australia.
- Refugees by and large have access to the internet and a sufficient data allowance but refugee households may not have enough devices (i.e. laptops/desktops/tablets) to engage in online education opportunities.
- Encouragingly, refugee households with school-aged children showed a slight increase in the average number of laptops/desktops/tablets which are needed for primary and secondary education compared to the 2020 survey.

Family Reunion and Separation and Living Difficulties

Families constitute a critical foundation of support and connection in society. The challenges inherent in fleeing persecution and conflict means that for many refugees prolonged separation from family members is too often part of their lives. Globally, there is a trend towards more restrictive policies around family reunion of refugees in countries of resettlement, despite a consensus that family unity can assist with refugee settlement and integration and minimise the negative health, social and economic impacts of separation. An enduring feature of the COVID-19 pandemic has been various forms of separation for refugees, and other Australians, stemming from international border restrictions. From March 2020 until late 2021, the number of refugees coming to Australia reduced to a trickle. During this period, it was estimated that about 10,000 refugees who had been granted permanent protection visas offshore were unable to come to Australia (Human Rights Law Centre 2021). COVID-19 has also potentially created a range of other difficulties and hardships for refugees. There is a body of research that has quantified the mental health impacts of post-migration difficulties among refugees in Australia (see for example, Liddell, Byrow et al. (2020)) and new evidence of these difficulties during the pandemic (Liddell, O'Donnell et al. 2021).

In the 2021 survey we took items from an existing scale of post-migration living difficulties (Liddell, O'Donnell et al. 2021) to assess these difficulties in the context of COVID-19. We added a scale of financial hardship widely used in surveys of the general Australian community to gauge how newly arrived refugees were faring at this stage of the pandemic. We also explored these issues in more depth in family interviews which are included as case studies throughout this report and threaded into the findings where relevant.

Among our sample, almost two-thirds had family living overseas: 61% (192 respondents) reported at least some of their immediate family was overseas (Fig. 26).

This is statistically correlated with language and visa type: the majority of Kurdish/Kurmanji speakers (64%) and over one third of Dari/Farsi speakers (35%) have no immediate family here in Australia.

Respondents with a visa type other than 202 (i.e. with visa types 200, 201 and 204) are more likely to have at least some immediate family still overseas. This stands to reason as 202 visas require a proposer, usually a close relative, already in Australia.

Siblings, followed by parents and children were the most common family members separated from survey respondents (Fig. 27).

Fig.26 What is your current family status
(regarding immediate family e.g. parents, children, siblings and spouse)

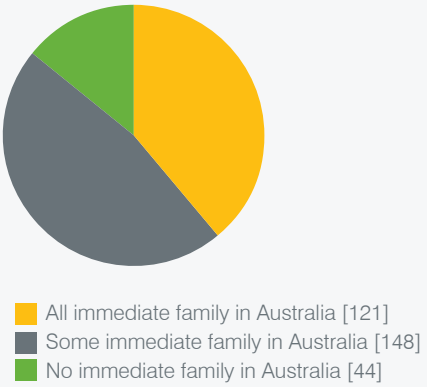
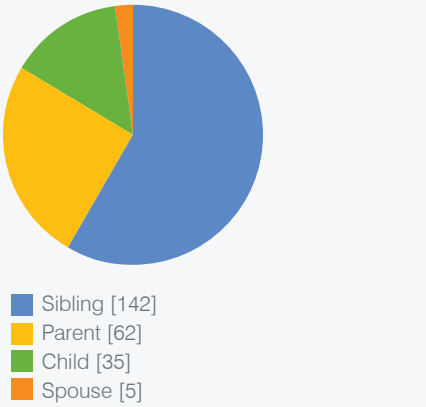


Fig.27 Who are you currently separated from? (n=192)



Over one third of the respondents have applied to be reunited with family members since coming to Australia (Fig. 28) and of those, more than half report that COVID-19 has impacted their visa application process (54%) (Fig. 29).

Language and visa type correlate with being more likely to have applied for family reunion. A high proportion of Dari/Farsi speakers, Assyrian speakers and Kurdish/Kurmanji speakers have submitted applications for family reunion at the time of the survey, and Kurdish/Kurmanji applicants are more likely to report that the visa application process has been impacted by COVID-19.

Holders of visa types 200, 201, 204 are more likely to have applied for family reunion than 202 visa holders and over half of these report that COVID-19 has impacted their visa application.

The family interviews included a mix of experiences in relation to family separation and reunion. An Assyrian family was reunited with their sister's family two years ago and they now live in the same suburb. Prior to this, the disruption to their mutual support was the biggest challenge as the two families were very close in Iraq. There was also a financial challenge as they needed to provide financial support to their sister's family while they were stranded overseas awaiting their visa to settle in Australia. The three Afghan families interviewed were reunited with some family members through the humanitarian program before the pandemic and similarly found the separation period difficult for emotional and financial reasons. Two families reported they had applied for visas for their parents and siblings who are still stranded in Afghanistan, but have not yet heard back from the Department of Home Affairs regarding the progress of the applications.

As was apparent from the surveys, COVID-19 has also delayed the process of family reunion. A Kurdish/Kurmanji resident in regional NSW arrived in Australia with three younger siblings. While he has another sibling married in the same town, their parents and other married siblings and their children are still stranded in Iraq. These siblings have applied for Australian visas, but their applications had been put on hold at the time of the interview until further notice due to COVID-19 international border restrictions. The siblings in Australia are also interested in visiting family overseas when they gain Australian citizenship (they are eligible to apply from early 2022). One of the Iraqi families interviewed was reunited with a son and his wife in the week prior to the interview in late December 2021. Their arrival from Jordan had been delayed due to the pandemic. It is likely that this family was one of the thousands of people granted permanent protection visas offshore who were unable to come to Australia due to the international border restrictions between March 2020 and late 2021.

Respondents were asked to rate the seriousness of a series of post-migration living difficulties in the previous 12 months on a five-point scale from 'Was not a problem/Did not happen' to 'A very serious problem'. For this section of data, we have excluded the option 'Was not a problem/Did not happen' to better visualise the impact of each of the difficulties on the life of respondents. Across each of the five items measuring these living difficulties, 'Was not a problem/Did not happen' accounted for between 29 and 71 per cent of responses.

Fig.28 Have you applied to be, or been, reunited with any of your family members from overseas since coming to Australia?

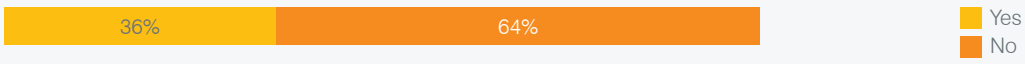
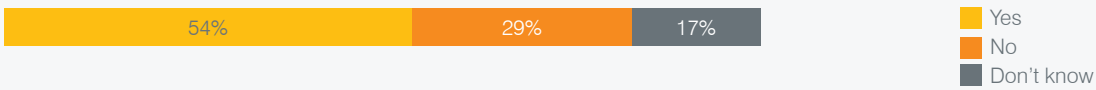


Fig.29 Has COVID-19 impacted your visa application process for family reunification? (n=112)



By far the most common nominated difficulty among respondents (71%) (Table 15) was worry about family back at home and for nearly half of them, this was a serious or very serious problem (Fig. 30). Difficulties with the family reunion process (39%) and separation from family (37%) were the next most common difficulties. For the majority of respondents who indicated separation from family as an issue, this was a serious or very serious problem (Fig. 30).

In terms of gender, male respondents identified worry about family back at home more than women, although women saw this as a more serious problem. Fewer women identified worry about family members in detention than men, although they were also more likely to see this issue as a more serious problem than men.

Holders of visa types 200, 201 and 204 are more likely than 202 visa holders to identify all of the measures as a problem and more likely to identify these as more serious problems. These set of issues are largely what we would expect as 202 visa holders require a proposer/relative already in Australia and therefore have by definition already reunited with some of their immediate family members.

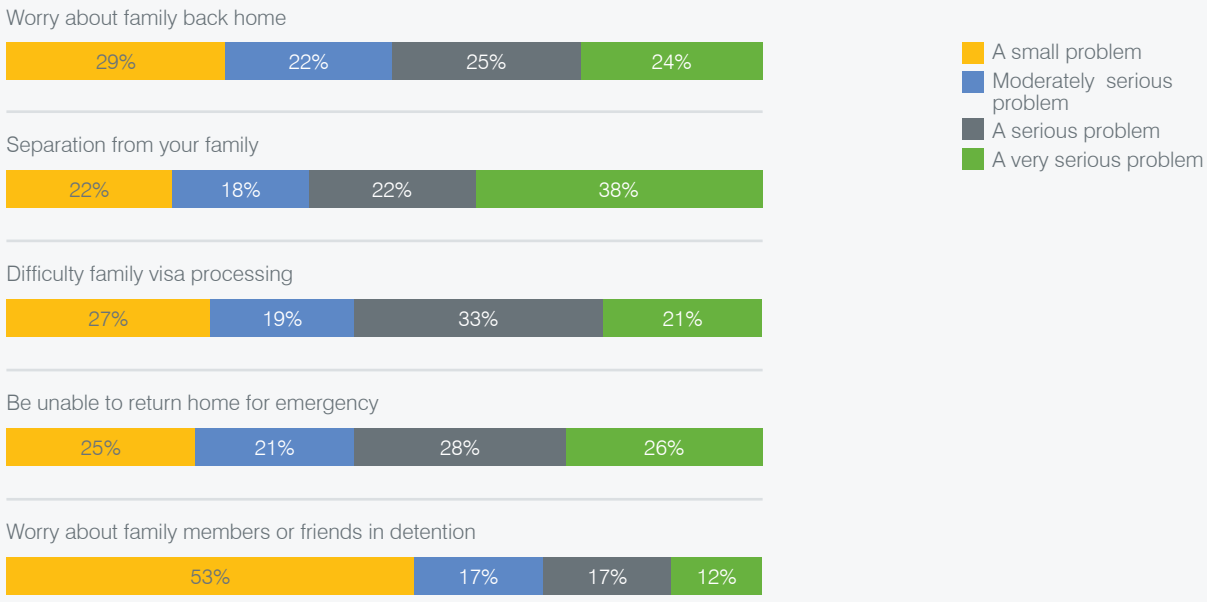
Kurdish/Kurmanji and Dari/Farsi speakers are significantly more likely to identify all of the measures as a problem, compared to other language groups. In particular, all Kurdish/Kurmanji respondents identified worrying for family back home as a problem, and three out of four rated the problem as serious or very serious.

Respondents were also asked to rate the seriousness of three additional COVID-19 challenges relating to family separation in the previous 12 months on a five-point scale from 'Was not a problem/Did not happen' to 'A very serious problem'. For this section of data, we again excluded the option 'Was not a problem/Did not happen' (ranging between 29% and 57% of responses) to better visualize the impact of each of the difficulties on the life of the respondents.

Table 15. In the past 12 months, have any of these difficulties been a problem for you?
(excluding 'Was not a problem/Did not happen') (percentage)

'It was a problem' (small, moderate, serious, very serious)	
Worry about family back at home	71
Difficulties with the family reunion process	39
Separation from your family	37
Worry about family members or friends in detention	30
Be unable to return home in an emergency	29

Fig.30 Severity of living difficulties experienced in the past 12 months (excluding 'Was not a problem/Did not happen')



Similar to the post-migration difficulties, worry about family living overseas during the COVID-19 pandemic is by far the most common (71%) challenge nominated by respondents (Table 16) and for half of these respondents, this is a serious or very serious problem (Fig. 31). Family and friends being unable to travel to Australia (46%) and respondents being unable to travel overseas or within Australia due to COVID-19 restrictions (43%) were also nominated as challenges (Tab.16), but these were nonetheless regarded as a serious or very serious problem for about half of these respondents (Fig. 31).

Male respondents were more likely to identify 'difficulties because family and friends are unable to travel or migrate to Australia' and 'worry about family living overseas during the COVID-19 pandemic' as a challenge than women. However, women were more likely to express their worry about family overseas during the pandemic as a serious or very serious problem.

As with the more general post-migration difficulties there were important differences but similar patterns by visa type when it came to COVID-19 challenges relating to family separation. Respondents with a visa other than 202 (i.e. with visa types 200,201 and 204) were more likely than 202 visa holders to identify families and friends being unable to travel to Australia and they themselves being unable to travel as a challenge, and they also identified these as a more serious problem.

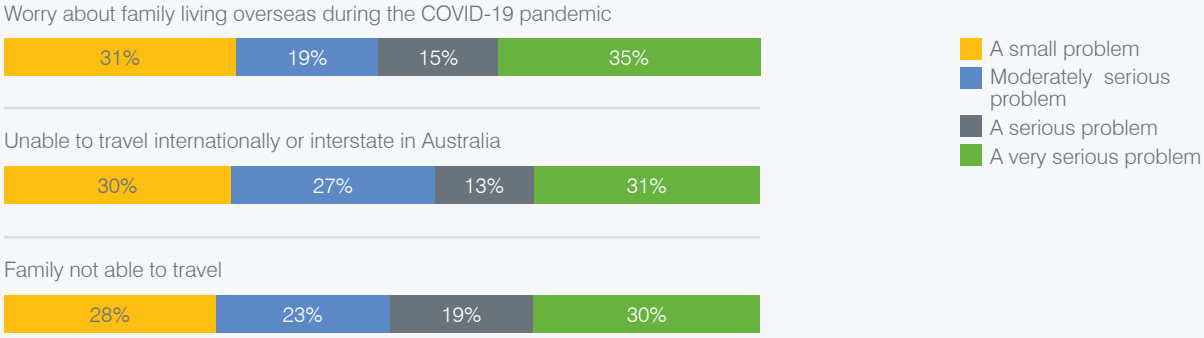
In terms of language groups, Kurdish/Kurmanji and Dari/Farsi speakers were more likely to identify all of the COVID-19 family separation challenges than other language groups, and also to rate them as a more serious problem than other language groups.

Family interviews raised a range of living difficulties in Australia and family separation challenges which were made worse by the pandemic. As with survey respondents, COVID-19 was frequently raised in terms of increasing their worry for family living overseas and being unable to be reunited with them, and this exacerbated emotional and financial distress. An Iraqi mother of three young children mentioned that it was particularly difficult to be separated from her mother when she had a miscarriage in Australia. She reported feeling less alone and isolated when her parents and a sibling were eventually granted protection by Australia. For another Iraqi family, as soon as they were granted Australian citizenship, they applied for an Australian passport to visit parents and siblings who live in Iraq, but were unable to travel due to the international border restrictions. A mother felt that when her daughter gave birth during the pandemic, the

Table 16. I will read a number of challenges that people might experience because of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the past 12 months, have any of these difficulties been a problem for you? (excluding 'Was not a problem/Did not happen') (percentage)

'It was a problem' (small, moderate, serious, very serious)	
Worry about family living overseas during the COVID-19 pandemic	71
Family and friends not able to travel or migrate to Australia due to COVID-19 restrictions	46
I am unable to travel internationally or interstate in Australia due to COVID-19 restrictions	43

Fig.31 Severity of living difficulties experienced in the past 12 months (excluding 'Was not a problem/Did not happen')



restrictions prevented her from fulfilling her duties as a grandmother. She was also saddened that her son was stuck in Jordan, and was unable to be with them to celebrate the arrival of the family's first grandchild.

As shown below (Fig. 32), there is strong correlation between the post-migration living difficulties and the COVID-19 family separation challenges and not being reunited with family in Australia.

When testing for relationships between family status (having all or some immediate family in Australia versus no family in Australia) and all measures from social bonds and social bridges domains, we found that being separated from immediate family is a strong predictor for weaker social bonds (e.g. connecting less with family and friends and feeling less supported) and social bridges (e.g. feeling less part of the Australian community), leading up to a less positive overall experience of settling in Australia. This accords with previous research and community consultations that family separation hampers refugee settlement and integration (Refugee Council of Australia 2016, Wickes, van Kooy et al. 2019).

Fig.32 Correlation between measures of family separation

Financial Hardship

In the 2021 survey we included a scale of financial hardships in the previous 12 months taken from the annual HILDA survey (which has also been used in BNLA). At the outset of the pandemic in 2020 the Australian government bolstered income support payments to citizens and permanent residents. In the first half of 2021, employment recovered and income support measures were wound back. From mid-2021, when about half of the population in Australia was under some form of lockdown in response to the second/Delta wave of the pandemic, income support payments had been tightened in terms of eligibility and size.

The most common financial hardships were not being able to pay utility bills (18%) or heat/cool the home (16%), followed by needing financial help from friends and family (12%) or from a welfare/community organisation (9%) (Table 17).

When comparing our findings to the general Australian population in the HILDA annual survey (where data was collected in 2020), our respondents report more financial hardship in terms of paying utilities on time, heating/cooling their houses, and needing to ask for financial help from welfare/ community organisations.

The HILDA classifies financial stress as occurring when respondents report two or more indicators of financial hardship. Under this classification, HILDA reported around 11% of respondents in financial stress, while in our survey 18% of respondents reported two or more financial hardships (Table 18).

Research tracking poverty in Australia indicates that the pandemic created cycles of decline and recovery (Davidson 2022). Initial income support in 2020 substantially decreased poverty which accords with the appreciation noted in the family interviews. On the other hand, when the second/Delta wave in 2021

Table 18. Number of financial hardships
(by number and percentage)

Number of hardships	Number of respondents	% respondents
0	217	70
1	40	12
2	23	7
3	18	6
4	13	4
5	3	1

Table 17. Since January 2021, did any of the following happen to you because of a shortage of money? (by survey, percentage of "yes" responses)

	Survey 2021	HILDA 2021[11]	BNLA Wave 4 (2016-2017)
Could not pay gas, electricity, or telephone bills on time	18	10	24
Could not pay rent or mortgage payments on time	7	6	12
Pawned or sold something	4	5	7
Went without meals	1	4	9
Were unable to heat or cool your home	16	3	31
Asked for financial help from friends or family	12	12	*
Asked for help from welfare/ community organisations	9	3	14

*Not in BNAL wave 4

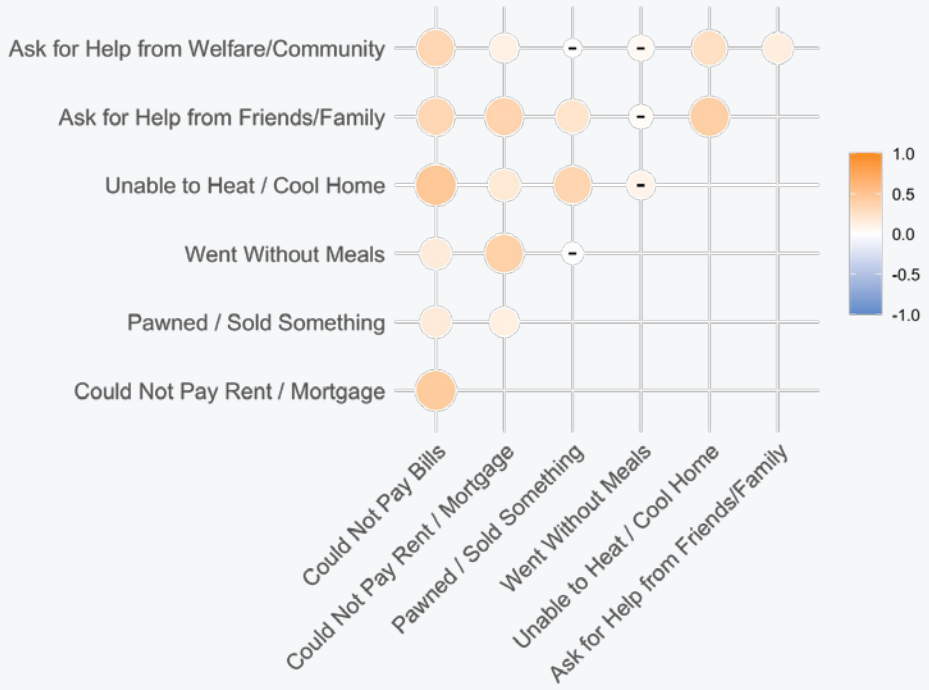
11 https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0009/3963249/HILDA-Statistical-Report-2021.pdf

caused widespread disruption, income support and emergency relief measures had been wound back (Davidson 2022). This tallies with some participants in family interviews pointing to a lack of support.

In comparison to refugees in Wave 4 of the BNLA (where data was collected in 2016 and 2017) our respondents report less financial stress (Table 16). This comparison has a major limitation in that the BNLA data was collected before the pandemic.

In the context of financial stressors, unsurprisingly not being able to pay utility bills is highly correlated with not being able to heat/cool the home and also with requesting financial help from family/friends and welfare/community organisations (Fig. 33).

Fig.33 Correlations between measures of financial hardship



Family Reunion and Separation and Living Difficulties
Key Points

- Overall, these results – in terms of family separation, family reunion and post-migration living difficulties – document a set of social and financial impacts that have often been exacerbated by COVID-19.
- Almost two-thirds of refugees reported at least some of their immediate family members were overseas – mostly siblings, parents and children.
- Over one-third have applied to be reunited with their family since coming to Australia and, of these, more than half reported that COVID-19 has impacted the visa application process.
- Among refugees who reported living difficulties, the most common nominated difficulty was worry about family back at home. All living difficulty measures were less likely among holders of 202 visas, those with a relative sponsor in Australia, compared to other visa holders.
- The severity of these difficulties also varied by visa type, with non-202 visa holders rating all of the living difficulties as more serious problems.
- Among refugees who reported family separation challenges due to COVID-19, worry about family living overseas during the pandemic was the most common.
- Refugees with a visa other than 202 were more likely to identify as challenges families and friends being unable to travel to Australia and they themselves being unable to travel to see family overseas. They also identified these as more serious problems.
- In terms of financial hardships, compared to the general Australian population, refugees in this sample were more likely to report being unable to pay utility bills and heat/cool their home and needing to ask for help from welfare/community organisations.

Women

- There were no major variations in terms of gender in relation to family separation and reunion and financial stress.
- With respect to living difficulties, including family separation challenges due to COVID-19, women tended to be less likely than men to worry about family back home, family members in detention and family dealing with the pandemic overseas. However they were more likely to rate these as more serious problems than men.

Overall, the findings indicate that:

- Family separation and family reunion is a critical issue for refugees, while worry about family overseas appears to be resulting in some psychological distress in everyday life, in many cases exacerbated by the pandemic.
- The presence of psychological distress reported here suggest a role for settlement services to explore strengths-based and innovate approaches to enhance the psychological skills of newly arrived refugees' to address low to moderate psychological distress arising from family separation on health and wellbeing.
- International border restrictions meant that refugees had little or no opportunity to visit family overseas and little or no opportunity for family members to be reunited with them in Australia.
- Unlike most other measures in this research, family separation and the associated living difficulties show a strong 'visa divide', with refugees who arrived after being proposed under the Special Humanitarian Program (visa 202) generally reporting less family separation and less severity in terms of living difficulties arising from family separation.
- Refugees have experienced financial stress during 2021 and have struggled more than the general Australian population to pay for the necessities of life.

Future Hopes

In the 2021 survey we asked respondents to rank options for their hopes for the next 12 months (Fig. 34) and their general hopes and dreams for themselves and their families in Australia (Fig. 35).

When ranking hopes for the immediate future, most nominated being free from COVID-19 ('My family and I are free from COVID-19'), followed by getting support to recover from lockdowns impacts and gaining secure employment. A hope to travel abroad was the least nominated but this may be due to the continuing international border restrictions at the time of the survey. It may also have been dampened by the fact that many respondents would still not be eligible to apply for Australian citizenship (due to minimum length of residency requirements).

In the open-ended question about hopes, a brighter future for the children is the major theme for respondents' hopes and dreams in Australia, followed by family reunion, financial stability with a good job, peace and safety, learning/improving English and health (Fig. 35).

Fig.34 For each of the following options, tell us which is more important to you in relation to your hopes for the next 12 months.

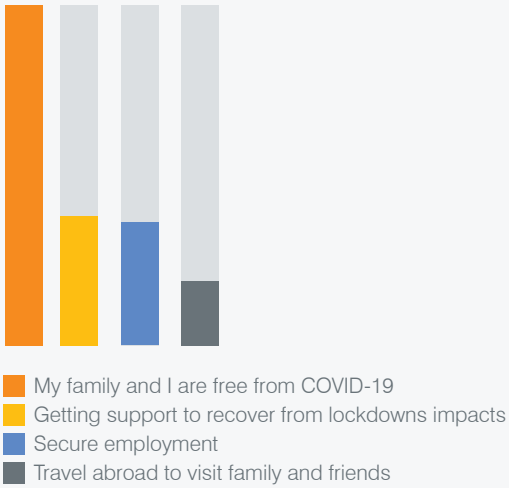


Fig.35 What are the hopes and dreams for you and your family in Australia?


Simon Scott Photo

Conclusion

Australia has a history of welcoming refugees, and refugees have a proud record of contributing to the social, cultural and economic fabric of Australia. The policy settings, practice and evidence base for refugee settlement in Australia have progressively evolved. This phase of the *Foundations for Belonging* research, along with the two previous phases published in 2020 and 2021, add to that evidence base, highlighting the crucial role of social connections, rights and responsibilities and exploring related topics in settlement, integration and belonging. Critically, the research also provides a window into how newly arrived refugees in Australia are faring during the upheaval of the COVID-19 pandemic. In looking at the multidimensional nature of integration, we aim to further understand the strengths and aspirations of refugees, as well as the complementary roles and contributions of refugees, receiving communities and government at all levels, upon which successful integration and foundations for belonging depend.

Links to Appendices

(available in online version at www.ssi.org.au)

Appendix 1. Methods and Limitations

Appendix 2. 2021 Survey

Appendix 3. Family Interview Guide

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