

Summary: ‘The Causes and Consequences of Administrative Burdens in the Canadian Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program’

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The Causes and Consequences of Administrative Burdens in the Canadian Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program

Executive Summary

- Research about refugee sponsorship has largely focused on settlement outcomes of newcomers; sponsor profiles and motivations; and relations between sponsors and refugees, but little research has explored state-sponsor interactions in refugee sponsorship programs.
- Filling this gap is important because the administrative burdens of engaging in sponsorship may impact sponsors' willingness to participate in refugee sponsorship.
- This study examines the administrative burdens that sponsors face in the Canadian Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program (PSRP). Administrative burdens comprise the learning, compliance, and psychological costs sponsors experience in dealing with the state. These burdens are distancing the PSRP from its goal of engaging civil society in resettlement work.
- Over the past four decades, the application process has become more onerous for sponsors, undermining positive sponsorship experiences.
- The article adds to existing administrative burdens research and proposes changes to simplify the application process and ensure continued interest in the PSRP.

Theoretical Framework

- The authors draw from administrative burden scholarship, which has examined the sources, causes, and consequences of bureaucratic hurdles on individuals engaged in government-led programs, noting that this scholarship has yet to consider refugee sponsorship programs.

The Canadian Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program

- There are three sponsorship streams under the PSRP:
 - Sponsorship Agreement Holders (SAH): organizations that have signed agreements with the government for repeated sponsorships;
 - Groups of Five (G5): five or more citizens or permanent residents signing a one-time sponsorship agreement with the government;
 - Community Sponsors (CS): organizations, associations, and corporations.
- Sponsors from all streams submit their applications to the Resettlement Operations Center in Ottawa (ROC-O), a branch of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). If sponsors meet the program requirements and the refugee applicant is deemed eligible, the ROC-O will forward the application to a Canadian Visa Office abroad to confirm eligibility through an interview. Refugees must also undergo medical, security, and admissibility checks before being accepted to Canada.
- The unique “naming principle” of the PSRP, which allows sponsors to identify the refugees they would like to assist, has resulted in persons engaging in the PSRP to sponsor relatives.

- Research has shown two trends of sponsors: (1) retired Canadians motivated by religious or global justice commitments and (2) recent immigrants seeking to reunite with displaced family members. Both groups face and handle administrative burdens in different ways.

Data and Analysis

- The authors conducted interviews with individual sponsors and SAH representatives who identified concerns with the paperwork, sponsorship requirements, and processing times of the PSRP. Subsequent interviews further investigated these burdens, their impacts on sponsors, and the potential consequences for the PSRP.
- To better explore administrative burdens and how they changed since the program's implementation in 1979, the authors used archival data such as application forms, guidelines and manuals for sponsors and governmental staff, and program evaluations. The authors also used media publications to explore changes that took place due to the Program Integrity Framework.

Results and Discussion

- Administrative burdens in the PSRP have significantly increased over time due to changes to the sponsorship application package and the requirements for sponsors and organizations.

Administrative Burdens in the PSRP Application Package

- The PSRP application was initially simple to complete (a one-page application form, a one-page notice of intent to sponsor form, and a one-page undertaking form). The application forms now are lengthy, time-consuming to complete, and difficult to read and understand.
- In 2012, a regulatory amendment required sponsors to submit refugee applications alongside sponsor applications. This change has caused sponsors to become responsible for collecting extensive information about applicants' lives, while often facing a language barrier.
- Sponsors from the G5 and CS streams have struggled to obtain details from applicants due to a lack of support from the government.

Administrative Burdens in Sponsorship Requirements

- Initially, participation requirements for sponsors were minimal other than demonstrating financial capacity. The financial requirements have become more stringent over time, such as disclosing the income of each G5 member and creating a trust account for each sponsorship.
- IRCC's introduction of random sponsorship checks in 2021 has resulted in SAHs imposing stricter financial and reporting requirements on sponsorship groups in case they are audited.
- The long processing times are discouraging for sponsors who question the need to submit proof of financial support upfront, which may significantly increase, if for example, the refugee family has more children in two to three years after the application is submitted.
- The requirement for sponsors to submit criminal background checks with their application has also been critiqued as group members' status can change by the time the family arrives.

- Sponsors have also expressed concerns about confidentiality as group members can no longer submit their financial forms separately but must submit them in one package.

The Consequences of Administrative Burdens for Sponsors and the PSRP

- Older sponsors remarked that the paperwork takes away time and energy from the more important contributions of welcoming and supporting refugee newcomers. Interviewees commented on the extensive paperwork shifting the PSRP away from its original objective by requiring sponsors to involve third parties like lawyers to navigate the process.
- Repeat sponsors expressed being less likely to reengage in the PSRP due to the paperwork, feeling that they had already proven themselves by completing multiple sponsorships.
- Recent arrivals who engage in sponsorship face higher learning, compliance, and psychological costs because they are not as well-settled in Canada and have limited resources, time, English language skills, and experience with sponsorship. This group of sponsors often cannot submit an application without help from a third party, but they are willing to go to extra lengths (and pay more money) because they are sponsoring loved ones.
- For Canadian sponsors, the cost of non-participation in the PSRP is lower because they can shift their attention to other initiatives. For those sponsoring displaced family members, the cost of non-participation is higher because they may face continued separation from their loved ones or feelings of guilt or self-blame. The drive of the latter group ultimately explains the continuous uptake of the PSRP despite its growing administrative burdens.

Conclusion, Recommendations, and Suggestions for Future Research

- The authors highlight the need to consider non-participation costs as well as participation costs when examining the link between administrative burdens and program uptake.
- The authors offer several recommendations:
 - The PSRP should be made more accessible to potential sponsors irrespective of their human, social, or administrative capital;
 - The application process should be more user-friendly;
 - Opportunities for cross-checking information between government agencies should be explored, such as IRCC running criminal background checks;
 - Researching the sources of the identified administrative burdens could provide further insight about why changes were made to the PSRP requirements.