

Title of Event: Research Matters Event: Refugee resettlement and the Canada-U.S. Safe Third Country Agreement

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Host of Event: IRCC

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Toplines:

- Refugee resettlement has expanded into many more small and mid-sized Canadian communities, but this creates tension between regional economic goals and refugee protection needs.
- Long-term retention is stronger where refugees are resettled in groups, have co-ethnic community support, and access established settlement services.
- Smaller centres continue to pose major challenges, including weak transportation, limited healthcare access, and serious financial strain for newcomers.
- The Safe Third Country Agreement was intentionally designed by Canadian officials to manage asylum backlogs while meeting legal obligations, rather than simply copying European asylum models.

Presenter(s):

- Jennifer Hyndman (York University)
- Bronwyn Bragg (University of Lethbridge)
- Kiran Banerjee (Dalhousie University)

Circulated Materials:

Recording: <https://events.teams.microsoft.com/event/ee66342e-b484-40e0-b83f-dacd0c2964fe@5694790a-ee7f-4dea-88c0-58988e5f2927?vod&attendeeId=dcccdec1-0826-41c1-845f-b701427f3203>

Key Points:

- **Introduction**
 - The Research Matters events provide a forum for experts and academics to present research findings from different institutions and disciplines, with presentations reflecting the views of the invited speakers rather than Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) or the Government of Canada.
 - Comments and questions submitted through the platform represent the views of individual participants and do not necessarily reflect the views of IRCC or the Government of Canada.
- **Jennifer Hyndman**
 - **Growing Regionalization of Immigration and Refugee Settlement in Canada**
 - Canada has seen significant growth in immigration regionalization, with the number of participating smaller and mid-sized communities increasing from

23 to 46 over the past decade as efforts have expanded to distribute newcomers beyond major urban centres.

- Regionalization builds on earlier initiatives, including refugee dispersal efforts in Quebec during the 1990s and the settlement of Kosovar refugees in British Columbia between 1999–2000.
- Despite its longer history, regionalization remains controversial because it may limit mobility in practice, particularly for government-assisted refugees (GARs), who often have fewer financial resources and rely more heavily on government support when first arriving in Canada

○ **Tension Between Refugee Protection and Regional Development Goals**

- Canadian refugee policy reflects a tension between two objectives: providing protection to displaced and persecuted individuals while also using immigration to support economic and regional development goals.
- Under the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA), refugees are admitted primarily for protection purposes, but immigration policy also emphasizes the distribution of newcomers across regions and their economic contribution after settlement.
- This creates a challenge in balancing refugees' ability to choose where they can successfully rebuild their lives with government efforts to address labour market and demographic needs across Canada.

○ **Retention and Secondary Migration Patterns**

- First-year retention among GARs increased from 71% for the 2000–2004 cohort to 85% for the 2010–2018 cohorts, but smaller communities continue to experience higher rates of onward migration, with only 39–44% of refugees remaining after ten years.
- A combination of employment opportunities, service accessibility, community support, and settlement quality drives retention outcomes.
- Retention is enhanced by cluster resettlement, co-ethnic and linguistic networks, and established Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) infrastructure. In contrast, newer regionalization communities often struggle with infrastructure gaps to support long-term integration.

• **Bronwyn Bragg**

○ **National RAP Survey Findings**

- A national survey of 37 out of 42 operational RAP agencies, led by Linn Biorklund, identified recurring settlement challenges across both large and small communities, including limited service availability, complex healthcare needs, and barriers to accessing care.
- Smaller centres faced particularly acute challenges, including limited or non-existent public transportation, restrictions on driving in some provinces, and reliance on travel to larger centres for specialized services and healthcare,

which constrained access to employment, settlement services, and medical care.

- **Alberta Focus Group Findings**
 - Focus groups conducted in an Alberta case study site in 2025 highlighted the challenges faced by recently resettled Ethiopian women in smaller communities, where most participants arrived as single adults and received low levels of social assistance, which, combined with high living costs, created significant financial strain.
 - Despite perceptions that smaller communities are more affordable, participants described challenges meeting basic needs, including high housing costs relative to their available income.
 - Many participants wanted to leave due to difficulties finding employment but felt unable to relocate because of uncertainty about where to move, limited support networks, and financial barriers.
- **Kiran Banerjee**
 - **Historical Development of the Safe Third Country Concept and Safe Third Country Agreement**
 - The safe third country concept emerged from Canadian policy debates in the 1970s and 1980s in response to rising inland refugee claims, growing backlogs, and concerns that delays could undermine confidence in the asylum system.
 - The development of the Safe Third Country Agreement (STCA) reflected efforts by Canadian immigration officials to balance two competing priorities: managing pressures on Canada's asylum system while maintaining compliance with international refugee protection obligations.
 - These discussions occurred alongside stronger refugee protections following the 1985 Singh decision, which expanded procedural rights for refugee claimants. The concept was later included in Bill C-55 in 1987, although implementation was delayed after the Minister of Immigration imposed a moratorium before the STCA was eventually introduced.
 - **Context and Purpose of the Safe Third Country Agreement**
 - The STCA represents the development of Canada's third-country asylum framework and its implications for refugee protection and asylum policy.
 - The analysis of the STCA focuses on three central questions: how and why the agreement was developed, where the policy framework originated, and what explains its structural and bilateral design features.
 - The STCA emerged from long-term efforts by Canadian immigration officials to address growing inland refugee claim backlogs while maintaining compliance with international refugee protection obligations, reflecting a balance between managing pressures on the asylum system and preserving access to protection.
 - Although often characterized as a product of policy transfer from Europe, the STCA was shaped through “negative” policy learning, with officials adapting the agreement in response to perceived weaknesses in other systems, including

intentionally limiting its initial application to ports of entry to avoid issues identified in the European Dublin system.

- **Effectiveness and Ongoing Challenges of the Safe Third Country Agreement**
 - Whether the STCA is considered successful depends on how its purpose is measured: as a refugee protection mechanism or as a tool for reducing pressure on Canada's asylum system.
 - Changes in asylum claim numbers cannot be attributed solely to the STCA, as they are also influenced by global displacement trends and shifts in U.S. asylum policy.
 - A key limitation of the agreement is the absence of a formal harmonization mechanism ensuring that both Canada and the United States maintain equivalent refugee protection standards.