

# How Ethnic Congregations Help Immigrants Integrate into Canada

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When adjusting to Canadian culture, immigrants have to create new social networks for support. This is a problem when they face language and culture barriers. Many immigrants overcome this problem by joining religious congregations of their own ethnic background. Such congregations are an initial safe haven where people can build new social networks, speak their language, and retain their culture. Many ethnic congregations also facilitate immigrants' integration into Canadian society through their volunteer programs in language and education. New immigrants may also become volunteers in these programs, which can further facilitate their integration into Canada. We investigated this important role of ethnic congregations in our study.

## The research

Our research, which was supported by the Knowledge Development Centre, examined whether new immigrants volunteered within religious congregations serving their ethnic group. The research examined the motivations for volunteering, and what people perceived as the benefits of volunteering within the congregation. The study surveyed 834 individuals, held 33 focus groups, and spoke to clergy and administrators at 34 congregations. The congregations represented eight faith groups and 16 ethnicities in five Canadian cities.

Of those who responded to the survey:

- 84% volunteered at their congregation. The average volunteer contribution to the congregation was 364 hours per year.
- 34% who volunteered at their congregation also volunteered at other organizations.
- Only 3% did not volunteer at their congregation, but volunteered elsewhere.

## Why do people volunteer in their ethnic congregation?

The five most important reasons respondents gave for volunteering were:

- to satisfy their religious beliefs;
- to make social connections in the congregation;

- to make social connections in the local community;
- because they had time available; and,
- because they were personally asked to volunteer.

New immigrants are initially active by participating at services and religious gatherings. Later, they volunteer more formally in other congregational activities.

**Table 1: Motivations for why immigrants volunteer**

Motivations for volunteering	% of respondents answering YES
To satisfy my religious beliefs	63
To make social connections in congregation	50
To make social connections in the community	45
I was personally asked to volunteer	37
I had some free time and so I volunteered	36
Volunteer in a program where my friends volunteer	30
I am encouraged by clergy to volunteer	28
To obtain job training skills/ professional reasons	26
To volunteer in an organization close to home	24

## How do ethnic congregations recruit recent immigrants as volunteers?

Ethnic congregations recruit volunteers primarily by:

- making recent immigrants feel welcome and accepted;
- determining the needs of recent immigrants;
- matching their skills with existing programs or with programs where they can learn new skills;
- using formal and informal organizing techniques; and,
- recognizing the achievements of volunteers.

## What roles do volunteers play within ethnic congregations?

The five most common volunteer activities were:

- *Helping maintain ethnic, cultural, and linguistic identity.* This includes preparing and sharing food; teaching a language, music, and dance to young people; and organizing public cultural festivals.
- *Providing regular weekly programs for children.* These include programs such as religious and language instruction as well as cultural and sport events.
- *Providing programs for seniors.* This includes visiting seniors, organizing social and recreational programs, and providing transportation.
- *Providing programs for the disadvantaged.* This includes providing clothing and food for the needy, offering soup kitchens, organizing international disaster relief, offering programs for disabled people, and assisting immigrants and refugees.
- *Providing educational programs.* This includes education, tutoring, computer training, and scholarship for youth and adults. Support programs for immigrants include English classes, translation services, and information about finance (Canadian money, banking, etc.) and housing.

## How do immigrant volunteers benefit from their involvement?

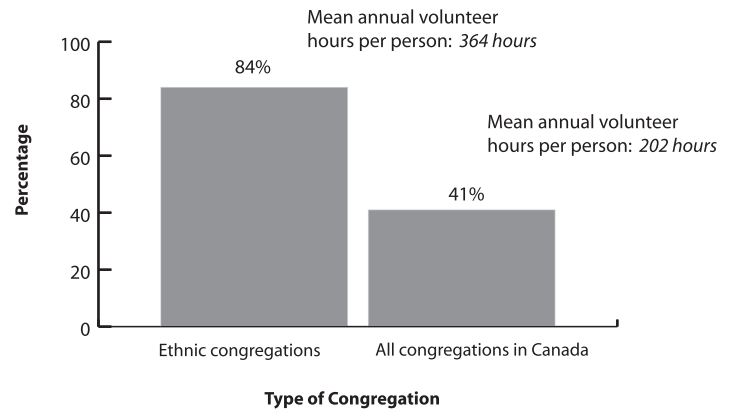
Respondents ranked the benefit of different aspects of volunteering on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 representing not at all beneficial and 5 meaning extremely beneficial. The five most important benefits of volunteering (with rankings in parentheses) were:

- meeting new friends (4.2);
- making social connections (4.1);
- learning new skills (4.0);
- improving language skills (3.4); and,
- learning more about Canada (3.0).

Volunteering within their congregation gives new immigrants a place to belong and develop new social networks. These relationships replace the social connections they may have lost in the process of migration. Volunteering also helps people develop skills which aid their integration into Canadian society.

## How do immigrant volunteer rates compare to volunteer rates for all Canadians?

Members of ethnic congregations are twice as likely to attend weekly religious services and volunteer as compared with other Canadians who attended religious services.<sup>1</sup>



## Conclusions

In our study of new immigrants and their association with volunteerism in ethnic congregations, we found such activities do enable newcomers to Canada to build social connections that aid their integration into their new society. The congregational volunteer programs assist new immigrants directly as clients in terms of improving their language acquisition and access to information about Canadian society. Many volunteer programs also extend their services beyond the congregation. For those new immigrants that volunteer for such activities, it provides a way to make connections to people and social groups in the community beyond the congregation.

This study has tried to highlight the importance and the role that ethnic congregations play in the process of adjustment to a new country.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Statistics Canada (2001). The Publication Highlights of the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada. [www.statcan.ca:8096/bsolc/english/bsolc?catno=89-611-X](http://www.statcan.ca:8096/bsolc/english/bsolc?catno=89-611-X) (Last retrieved June 1, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> The complete report, *The Role of Ethnic Congregations in Volunteering* is also available at [www.kdc-cdc.ca](http://www.kdc-cdc.ca).