CCIS
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Sport for Settlement Program (2023-2025):

Summary Report






Introduction

The Sport for Settlement program was delivered by Calgary Catholic Immigration Society (CCIS) in Calgary from March 2023 to August 2025. The purpose of the Sport Canada-funded pilot was to test how free, culturally responsive sport programs, offered early in the settlement journey of refugee youth (14-24 years old), could promote settlement outcomes and bridge youth to mainstream sport opportunities.

This summary report provides a snapshot of what the pilot program involved, the outcomes achieved, and practical recommendations for sport and settlement providers.

About the Program

This section outlines the core component of the Sport for Settlement Program, which included a series of 8-10 week registered programs as well as a series of drop-in opportunities. Programs were offered throughout the city, in collaboration with recreation facilities and sports centres. Sports offered included soccer, volleyball, basketball, badminton, and swimming - these offerings were based on common sports in Canada and informed by youth interest. Drop-in days introduced youth to the program and to other opportunities such as skating.

The following aspects of the program design centred refugee youth experience, cultural responsiveness, and accessibility:

- *Free: Cost is a main barrier to access for newcomer youth. Programs were offered at no charge.*
- *Transportation support: CCIS arranged chartered buses, taxis, or rideshare for hard to reach facilities, and helped youth navigate public transit.*
- *Recruitment: Internal referrals from resettlement and case-management staff at CCIS were the main pathways for recruitment of eligible youth, early in their settlement journeys, complemented by referrals from partner organizations and word of mouth referrals of friends and family members of engaged youth.*
- *Supported engagement: Program schedules were adjusted around competing priorities, such as exam weeks or cultural holidays, and had proactive follow up when youth were absent. This was important to understanding why youth did not attend (for example caring for younger siblings, In addition to registered programs, occasional drop-in program days offered low-pressure first exposure to sport in Canada.*

- *Co-delivery: Program delivery paired CCIS facilitators with a qualified community coach to combine settlement expertise, first-language capacity, and sport-specific coaching. This also helped youth connect to mainstream sport clubs and facilities.*
    - *Coach recruitment and upskilling: Coaches were recruited through multiple, community-driven pathways. CCIS prioritized those from participants' cultural or linguistic communities, or with experience working with newcomer youth.*
- *Dual-language facilitation: Sessions ran concurrently in English and first languages such as Arabic, Dari, Tigrinya, Amharic, Somari and French, facilitated by first-language CCIS facilitators. This supported youth engagement while building English language learning.*
- *Gender-specific options: While some programming was mixed, gender-specific programming was most successful for engaging girls. This was most culturally appropriate to the cohort of youth arriving in Calgary at the time; furthermore, girls were less likely to have prior experience with sport as compared to boys.*

> *"Having a mixed group or even [boys and girls] on the same field, decreases the number of girls that attend. So we've seen really high participation among girls in girls only programming. So having it gendered has been really successful, like in swimming." (Staff interview)*

- *New and familiar sports: Familiar sports (most often soccer) drew youth to the program and allowed them to maintain activities that were important to them in their country of origin. New sports helped youth orient themselves to local facilities, opportunities, and sport culture.*
- *Bridging to mainstream sport: Help with information, system navigation, and registration for mainstream community sports programs were offered to interested youth. This was supported by offering programs in community facilities and in collaboration with community coaches.*

Program Highlights and Outcomes

347 unique refugee youth, aged 14-24	**22** countries of origin	**20** 6-10 weeklong registered programs across 5 sports	**1,108** program registrations

Following participation in one or more (average 3) registered programs, youth (via survey and first-language focus groups; supplemented by facilitator and coach interviews) reported the following outcomes:

Sport outcomes	*Settlement outcomes*
As a pilot aimed at early settlement for refugee youth, youth gained access to sport early in their journey, often for the first time. The program helped them build skills, desire, knowledge and confidence that support longer-term participation in sports and activity. ● *79% learned a new sport. For many girls, this was their first opportunity to participate in sport.* ● *89% were more interested in playing sport.* ● *85% improved their sport-specific skills.* ● *83% felt more confident in their physical abilities.* ● *75% of youth increased their sport-specific knowledge, including sporting norms in Canada.* ● *62% gained knowledge of where to continue to engage in sport & 32% were supported with registration.* ● *57% were encouraged to join or try out for a team.* ● *17% of participants became engaged in mainstream sport (for example community or school teams), with many others stating their intent to join or try out when the season opened.*	*The program proved effective for helping youth connect to their local community, including familiarity with the geography of the city, using public transportation, making friends, learning English, and fostering a sense of belonging.* ● *87% felt more welcome and comfortable in Calgary.* ● *87% reported an improved mood.* ● *82% strengthened social connections.* ● *83% reported an increased sense of wellbeing.* ● *By offering dual language facilitation and building in opportunities for gradual language acquisition through informal, low-pressure interactions, youth gained exposure to and confidence in speaking English.* *"It is a good program for newcomers that are feeling lonely or depressed as you get to know people, places, and make friends." - Youth participant* *"Making new friends and playing*

• *Interest in soccer was so strong combined with high skill levels, that two entirely new teams made up of newcomer refugee youth were registered in Calgary's Minor Soccer League.*	*sports increases your self-confidence, and even causes my mood to improve." (Youth focus group)*
Coaches and facilities also built lasting capacity to deliver culturally responsive programming, including through engagement and communication approaches as well as built environment.	

"I was always interested in sports from back home and when I found out there was something for girls I joined." - Youth participant

"Many have developed a love of the sport. There are two girls who want to continue playing volleyball. I would take her on a team, she could play competitively if she wanted." – Coach



Conclusion and Recommendations

Overall, the pilot found that, yes, tailored sports programming is an effective modality for engaging with newcomer, refugee youth early in their arrival. The pilot supported positive settlement outcomes, increased readiness to participate in mainstream sports opportunities, and, for many youth, resulted in connections to community sport.

Key recommendations for similar programs include consistent staff who are familiar with the needs of the population group (or have lived experience) and are skilled at relationship-building with youth, first or dual language programming, co-facilitation with program staff and community coaches, readiness to adapt to skill levels and differing motivations of youth, exposure to both new and familiar sports, gender-based programming considerations, and actively mitigating known barriers to participation such as cost, transportation, equipment, and registration barriers.

Systems also need to adapt by increasing the cultural sensitivity and responsiveness of programs, facilities, and coaches. Tailored programming in-community and in partnership with community facilities and coaches was effective in enhancing the awareness and readiness of those involved.

Funders and settlement organizations should recognize that sport can be a legitimate part of settlement infrastructure. It fosters community engagement, language learning, social connections, and the development of trusting relationships that enhance assessment of and responsiveness to the needs of newcomer youth and their families.





















