

# LEARNING FROM THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF AGING IMMIGRANTS: FINAL REPORT



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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank our funders and organizational partners for their support of this project. We would also like to thank all the stakeholders who attended our forums and provided their valuable insights on the issues faced by aging immigrants in Canada.

## PROJECT FUNDERS

SSHRC Connections Grant

Michael Smith Foundation for Health Research

Centre de recherche et d'expertise en gérontologie sociale (CREGÉS)



Social Sciences and  
Humanities Research  
Council of Canada

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in Social Gerontology



# INTRODUCTION

This report presents the results of a series of Stakeholder Outreach Forums held over 2018-19 in four regions across Canada – Greater Montréal, Québec City, Calgary, and Greater Vancouver. The outreach forums provided an opportunity for discussion of issues faced by aging immigrants in Canada. This project was supported by a SSHRC Connections Grant. The project was led by Drs. Shari Brotman (McGill University), Sharon Koehn (Simon Fraser University), Ilyan Ferrer (University of Calgary), Émilie Raymond (Laval University), and Pam Orzeck (McGill University). Please see appendix 1 for a list of the full project team members.

The forums built upon a SSHRC Insight Development Grant titled *Intersecting Identities and Interlocking Oppressions*, led by Drs. Shari Brotman, Sharon Koehn, and Ilyan Ferrer. This research resulted in the development of a narrative photovoice exhibit entitled *The Lived Experiences of Aging Immigrants*.

Our outreach forums brought together stakeholders from multiple sectors to share information and strategize about the actions necessary to improve recognition and support for aging immigrants. Strategic theme areas were chosen for the forums in consultation with community partners, based on findings from the research project. *The Lived Experiences of Aging Immigrants* photo exhibit and short presentations by key community leaders served as a catalyst for discussions at the forums. The discussions at the forums drew on participants' decades of knowledge and action around various forms of exclusion and precarity experienced by older immigrants. This report summarizes discussions at the forums on four key theme areas: 1) caregiving; 2) social inclusion; 3) housing; and 4) transportation.

The purpose of this report is to provide insight into common problems faced by older immigrants in urban areas in Canada and to inform community action and policymaking at municipal and provincial levels of governance.



Greater Montréal

## THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF AGING IMMIGRANTS (2014-2017)

Following the successful completion of the *Intersecting Identities and Interlocking Oppressions* research project, the stories and photographs of participants were showcased as part of a dynamic photo exhibit entitled *The Lived Experiences of Aging Immigrants* available in [English](#) and [French](#).

The exhibit contained 19 photovoice stories representing the lived experiences of immigrant older adults from Korean, Filipino, Latin American, Caribbean, Afghani and Pakistani communities. The project purposely highlighted stories from immigrant groups on which very little research has been conducted in Canada.

The exhibit presented older immigrants' challenges (e.g., trauma, poverty, housing, discrimination, and family disruptions) as well as their celebrations (e.g., building community, caring for family, faith, and resilience). The stories and photographs provided meaningful insights into how past and present experiences, as well as immigration and labour policies, intersect with health and social relationships. Moreover, the exhibit illuminated the complex ways that structural discrimination across the life course, particularly discrimination associated with immigration, shapes older adults' interactions with family, community, and formal services.

The project used an intersectionality framework centring on two important concepts: 1) individual life experiences are shaped by social structures experienced over the life course; and 2) identity is complex, connected, intersectional and incorporates the multiple social categories that people belong to (e.g., age, gender, class, race, citizenship, ability, etc.).



Greater Vancouver

## **STAKEHOLDER OUTREACH FORUMS (2018-2019)**

A series of Stakeholder Outreach Forums were held in Greater Montréal (including one event in Laval), Québec City, Calgary, and Greater Vancouver, focusing on central themes emerging from our previous research: 1) Caregiving, Family, and Home Care; 2) Housing and Transportation; and 3) Social Inclusion and Community Engagement. The sites interpreted these themes in ways that were unique and relevant to their context. The outreach forums targeted stakeholder groups who were interested or already engaged in policy, practice, and community development with and about immigrant older adults, their families, and communities.

Stakeholders were invited to participate in the forums based on their expertise on the specific forum themes. Efforts were made to ensure stakeholders represented a broad and diverse range of experiences and perspectives (e.g., municipal services; advocates and volunteers; older adults; service providers; immigrant serving organizations; community groups; academics). Participants included both people who already were working with immigrant older adults and those who had an interest in doing so.



Québec City

Invited speakers gave short presentations on the forum themes that provided context and inspiration for the discussions about issues faced by aging immigrants. Forum participants had the opportunity to view *The Lived Experiences of Aging Immigrants* photo exhibit and to reflect on the stories of aging. After viewing the exhibit, attendees participated in a World Café style forum that sought to further enhance knowledge, collaboration, and the development of strategies for action. The facilitated discussions at the outreach forums addressed the following knowledge mobilization questions:

- How can city planners, health authorities, and community services collaborate to meet the growing needs of our diverse communities?
- What lessons can we learn from *The Lived Experiences of Aging Immigrants* photo exhibit?
- What actions need to take place to address the issues that older immigrants face in Canada? Who should be responsible for these actions?
- How can stakeholders across academic, community, service provision, and policy arenas collaborate to improve access and equity?



Calgary

# CONTEXT: AGING IMMIGRANTS IN CANADA

In Canada, 31% of older Canadians are immigrants (1). Notably, there is significant heterogeneity in the older immigrant population regarding income, language abilities, and family and living arrangements. Recent immigrants in particular experience circumstances that may present challenges later in life (see table 1).

**Table 1. Profiles of Immigrant Older Adults Based on Years in Canada**

	1-10 years	11-20 years	21-30 years	31-40 years	40+ years
Low-income	24%	26%	27%	18%	11%
Post-secondary education	45%	37%	38%	46%	48%
Speak neither French or English	54%	45%	32%	15%	5%
Sponsored immigrants	86%	72%	45%	32%	n/a
Live alone	5%	11%	15%	20%	25%

Data adapted from Kei, Seidel, Ma, Houshmand (1)

The four regions in which outreach forums were hosted (Greater Montréal, Québec City, Calgary, and Greater Vancouver) were strategically chosen to reflect the diversity of both older adults (65+) and immigration patterns across Canada (see table 2).

**Table 2. Profiles of Populations in Selected Regions**

	<b>Greater Vancouver</b>	<b>Calgary</b>	<b>Greater Montréal</b>	<b>Québec City</b>	<b>Canada</b>
<b>% of immigrants in population</b>	41%	31%	23%	7%	22%
<b>Largest immigrant source countries</b>	China, India, Philippines, Hong Kong, United Kingdom	Philippines, India, China, United Kingdom, Pakistan	Haiti, France, Morocco, Algeria, Italy	France, Colombia, Morocco, Algeria, China	India, China, Philippines, United Kingdom, United States
<b>% of older adults in immigrant population</b>	22%	15%	19%	10%	22%

Data adapted from Statistics Canada (2)

The diversity of aging and immigration within these four regions draws attention to regional variations in populations, public policy, and service delivery across Canada. We believe that the development of cross-sectoral and cross-regional collaboration, networking, and information-sharing can result in new and innovative approaches to action. Immigrant and ethnocultural minority older adults have demonstrated strength and resilience in the face of many challenges throughout their lives. The process of immigration shapes their experiences over the life course and into old age. This is true whether they immigrated in the past as young adults or more recently as older adults, and whether they came to Canada as independent class immigrants, refugees, temporary workers, live-in caregivers, or sponsored members of families. Unfortunately, most research on immigration and aging does not leave room for people to relate what is meaningful to them. Policymakers and service providers need to grapple with the complexities of providing meaningful support to older immigrants.

We anticipate that our project will contribute to advocacy efforts directed at better supporting aging immigrants across Canada. In the following sections we discuss common challenges immigrant older adults encounter in the four theme areas and offer some recommendations for addressing these challenges.

# THEME 1: CAREGIVING

In this document we use the term “carers” to refer to people (including family, friends, and community members) who engage in unpaid and volunteer care provision and support to older adults. Other commonly used terms for carers include caregivers, informal carers, and family caregivers.

## *What We Heard at the Forums*

In all three provinces (B.C., Alberta, and Québec) a lack of symbolic and practical support for carers was reported. Carers are underrecognized and undervalued in society. Participants at the forums reported on the negative impacts of declining access to formal services due to service cuts and austerity measures. Within these already challenging circumstances, immigrant older adults face additional difficulties due to cultural and familial expectations, language and cultural barriers within formal services, discrimination within society generally and formal services specifically, including eligibility restrictions, limited outreach to communities and assumptions about ethnocultural minority and immigrant groups by service providers, and sponsorship rules which restrict access and increase burden on families.

Immigrant families are expected to possess the relational, financial, and spatial means (proximity and enough living space) to care for older parents, thus “naturally” enacting various cultural forms of filial piety. If a parent is sponsored to come to Canada, sponsorship rules require that the family commits to providing shelter, financial support, basic necessities, and health care services not provided by the public system for a period of 20 years. While in many non-Western cultures caring for aging parents is a cultural norm, intergenerational conflicts can occur when older and younger generations have different perspectives on caregiving responsibilities. Older immigrants living with their children may experience tensions due to their status as dependents and generational gaps in values and expectations. Research has also shown immigrant older adults who are dependent on family also are more vulnerable to elder abuse (3).



Many older immigrants are themselves carers for either other older friends and relatives or grand/children. However, due to immigration they often are disconnected from a community of support (i.e., close friends, neighbours, community organizations) and may have difficulties accessing the resources that could support them (e.g., community groups, social workers, financial benefits, health care). Older immigrants may not be aware of the services available to them or may not identify as carers.

Health and social care systems are complex and difficult to navigate. Being an older immigrant adds additional layers to this complexity. Language was an issue frequently raised at all four sites, as immigrant older adults do not necessarily speak or understand French or English (especially those who immigrated in later life as sponsored immigrants or those who had limited access to language instruction across the life course). Racism, discrimination, and assumptions about ethnocultural minority groups (i.e., they take care of their own) can hinder the ability of immigrants to access formal services. Stigma also can be an issue in immigrant communities, and due to cultural and familial expectations individuals may feel ambivalent about requesting formal services.

Perceptions that older immigrants are a homogenous group – when in fact they are very heterogenous – mean that services rarely are designed to meet the unique needs of different immigrant groups. Professionals and providers working within the health and social care systems often lack the knowledge and skills required to effectively support immigrant older adults. Participants noted that formal services have not done enough to adapt their services to meet the needs of older immigrants.

## ***Recommendations***

In order to care for Canada's aging population, it is clear that greater investments need to be made into formal community-based, home, and long-term care services for older adults. In addition, the following are recommendations for improving access to, navigation, and delivery of health and social services for older immigrants and their carers:

- **Translation and interpretation services:** Good communication and shared understandings are essential for successful interactions between older immigrants, their carers, and services providers. To address language and cultural barriers, funding and resources are required to support translation and interpretation services.
- **Awareness-raising and reducing stigma:** Older immigrants and their families need to be made aware of the formal and community services available for older adults and their carers. Local community organizations can play a key role in assisting with outreach and education. Information should be disseminated in clear and easy to understand language and through culturally appropriate mediums (e.g., ethnic newspapers, radio programs, community sessions). Education should be provided on services available and also focus on reducing the stigma of using formal services.
- **Culturally-safe services and knowledgeable and skilled staff:** Employees working in the health and social care systems should be required to complete training on providing culturally safe care. Efforts should be made to increase the diversity of staff working in health and social care systems.
- **Culturally relevant policies and programs:** Formal services (e.g., home care, long-term care) and community programs should adopt policies that respect the needs of immigrant older adults. For example, providing culturally appropriate food, inviting family members to participate in care planning meetings, and providing funding for interpreters/translators. Government needs to provide sustainable funding for community-based organizations providing supports to carers.

# THEME 2: SOCIAL INCLUSION

## *What We Heard at the Forums*

When immigrants move to Canada, they leave behind their community, family, and friends. Establishing new social networks can be challenging, particularly later in life. The social isolation of older immigrants may be reinforced by linguistic isolation (i.e., inability to speak English or French). While language courses are available, the need to juggle multiple responsibilities and restrictive rules for some courses (e.g., expelling students for too many absences) can make learning their new language a challenging task. In the forums held in the Province of Québec, participants noted that even if immigrants can speak English, feelings of isolation may occur due to the inability to speak French.

Participants at multiple sites noted that culture shock is a common experience when immigrants first arrive in Canada, and expectations about life in Canada versus the reality of life in Canada are often very different. In particular, it was highlighted that difficulties having their educational/professional credentials recognized and failure to secure expected employment can contribute to feelings of disappointment and exclusion for immigrants. Society needs to become more inclusive and welcoming towards newcomers to Canada. For example, by making it easier to have foreign credentials recognized, providing increased integration and linguistic supports, and implementing policies to fight racism and discrimination.

Experiences of ageism, racism, and discrimination within Canadian society can prevent older immigrants from participating in the community. Immigrant older adults may feel mistrustful of public institutions due to past experiences (e.g., if they are a refugee or emigrated from a country with an oppressive government). Organizations and services that are ill-equipped to meet the needs of immigrants (i.e., inaccessible, non-representative, and not culturally-safe or relevant) also preclude their participation.

Cultural norms about gender roles in some communities may deter women from participating socially outside of the home or leave them with little time to do so. Social participation is difficult for some immigrant older adults due to the fact they are expected to act as carers for their grandchildren, confining them to the domestic sphere. In some cases, older immigrants may be required to engage in paid work outside of the home in order to contribute to their family's finances.



Local community and faith-based organizations that offer culturally and linguistically relevant programming can play a key role in making immigrant older adults feel included in society. However, such organizations are not present in all communities and older immigrants may lack awareness of the organizations and programs available to them. Community organizations are also often underfunded, which limits their ability to engage in outreach and offer free programming (4). Transportation plays a key role in connecting older adults to their community, and as will be described later in the transportation section, there are multiple mobility barriers that immigrant older adults may encounter.

Income may also be a barrier for the social participation of immigrant older adults. The costs of public transportation and program fees can be unaffordable for recent immigrants (particularly those who are sponsored or hold visitor's or other temporary visas) who are not eligible to receive Old Age Security and rely on their family for financial support.

## ***Recommendations***

Promoting the social inclusion of immigrant older adults within society requires actions that not only target older immigrants, but promote social inclusion at earlier stages of the life course. The following are recommendations to promote the social inclusion of immigrant older adults and eliminate barriers to their social participation:

- **Low-barrier programming:** Programs that are offered in the community should be as low-barrier as possible to facilitate the participation of immigrant older adults (e.g., free of charge, take place at easily accessible locations, etc.).

- **Family-based approaches:** The incorporation of family into outreach and social activities acknowledges the important cultural role of family in many immigrant communities. Immigrant older adults may feel they require the approval of family members before participating in social activities. Intergenerational programs can facilitate the participation in programs of older adults who have childcare responsibilities.
- **Culturally safe and appropriate provision of information:** Information about programs and activities should be shared using simple language and when possible transmitted in multiple languages and through both written and alternative mediums. Organizations should make use of alternative communication mediums (e.g., ethnic-specific TV channels, radio) as well as community members and community organizations to share information.
- **Inclusive spaces and organizations:** Institutions and organizations need to take steps to ensure they are being inclusive of immigrant populations. For example, recognizing and valuing cultural practices; offering multilingual resources and programming; and respecting cultural and religious norms. The cultural and linguistic diversity of organizational staff and boards needs to be increased. Organizations also need to take time to build bonds of trust with older immigrants through for example friendly visits, peer support programs, and outreach at places of worship.
- **Community development and capacity-building:** The resilience and abilities of immigrant communities should be enhanced, and financial support should be provided to build the capacity of community organizations and older immigrants to engage in advocacy and be leaders in their communities.
- **Newcomer support programs:** Recent immigrants are particularly vulnerable to social exclusion, and initiatives to support immigrants should begin upon arrival in Canada. Programs to develop language skills and enhance systems literacy (knowledge of how to navigate government systems) should be made available to older immigrants. These programs should be free of charge, highly flexible in recognition of the challenging realities older immigrants may face (e.g., financial insecurity, caregiving responsibilities, poor health), and adapted to meet the learning needs of older immigrants (i.e., potentially lower literacy and education levels).

# THEME 3: HOUSING

## *What We Heard at the Forums*

There is a housing crisis in Canada, and in all regions housing was highlighted as an important issue for immigrant older adults. Factors contributing to the housing crisis include the gentrification of neighbourhoods, speculation in the private rental sector, and the lack of social and affordable housing. Waitlists for social housing were noted to be several years long in Greater Vancouver, Québec City, and Greater Montréal. Immigrant older adults are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of Canada's housing crisis. Language barriers, lower literacy levels, challenges accessing services, financial precarity, and racial discrimination may act simultaneously as barriers to obtaining safe and affordable housing.

Navigating the housing market is difficult, particularly as a newcomer or immigrant older adult. Older immigrants may be unaware of their rights and options for legal recourse should a landlord discriminate against them, fail to properly maintain the property, or attempt to evict them. Participants at the forums noted that there are community organizations offering supports to immigrants to navigate the housing market; however, these organizations are underfunded, overworked, and not necessarily inclusive of older immigrants.

Racism, discrimination, and higher rates of poverty often push older immigrants and their families into secondary housing markets, where prices can be high but dwellings poorly maintained. Low quality and poorly maintained dwellings can be deleterious to an individual's health. Overcrowding is another common problem, particularly if there are multiple generations living in the same household. Additionally, housing is usually inaccessible to older adults with disabilities. While purpose-built seniors housing and care facilities do exist, older immigrants may be reluctant to move into these buildings if they do not meet their cultural needs (e.g., do not serve food they are used to, staff do not speak their language, far from their community). It was noted at the Greater Montréal forums that some community organizations wish to develop culturally appropriate seniors housing; however, bureaucracy and red tape at the municipal and provincial levels mean new projects are difficult to initiate and take a long time to progress.



Greater Montréal

Immigrant older adults who arrive in Canada as sponsored immigrants usually live in multigenerational households. While there are many benefits of multigenerational living, dependency on family can create tensions within the family that can produce conditions for victimization or neglect. Recent immigrants may not be eligible for Old Age Security if they have been living in Canada for less than 10 years (5), and sponsored immigrants are further hampered by their Undertaking of Assistance. Undertaking of Assistance requires the sponsors financially support their parent or grandparent for 20 years, during which the sponsored immigrant is ineligible for government income transfers, subsidized housing, and housing benefits (6), (7), (8). Therefore, recent and sponsored immigrants have few options if they desire more independence in life or their relationship with their family is conflictual.

## ***Recommended Actions***

Metropolitan centres in Canada have experienced a crisis in housing affordability over the past decade, and a broad range of multilevel and multisectoral interventions are required to address the problem. The following are recommendations to improve access to affordable, accessible, and appropriate housing for immigrant older adults:

- **Increasing housing stock:** Government urgently needs to increase its investments in social housing. This should include the development of larger units suitable for housing multigenerational families and accessible units suitable for people with disabilities.
- **Housing policy and legislation:** Government policies should promote the development of affordable, accessible, and appropriate housing units for low-income older adults. For example, policies can be implemented requiring that a certain percentage of units in new developments are affordable housing.
- **Innovative housing models:** Development of ethnocultural-specific housing (including long-term care facilities) and multigenerational housing were recurrent demands from community groups. Government needs to be more accommodating and willing to work with communities that wish to develop innovative housing models, including ethnocultural-specific seniors' residences and multigenerational housing models.
- **Support community programs:** More financial support needs to be provided for community programs that support immigrant older adults to navigate the housing system (e.g., translation and interpretation services, housing navigation, legal support).
- **Financial supports for immigrant older adults:** Many of the housing challenges experienced by older immigrants are intimately tied to financial precarity and economic dependency in later life. Government should reconsider current eligibility requirements for Old Age Security and rental assistance programs that exclude sponsored and/or recent immigrants.

# THEME 4: TRANSPORTATION

## *What We Heard at the Forums*

Transportation is essential to the lives of older adults and keeps them connected to their community and family. The accessibility and quality of public transportation services is particularly salient for immigrant older adults, as many do not drive, particularly if they arrived in Canada later in life.

Navigating the public transportation system can be difficult for immigrant older adults, particularly if they are living with a disability. There is a lack of public transportation education and outreach for older immigrants who are new transit users. Furthermore, accessible transportation services generally do not meet the needs of older immigrants.

Lack of quality transportation services in some areas hinders the social and civic participation of older immigrants. Important locations within a city (e.g., grocery store, place of worship, community centre) may be inaccessible due to lengthy and challenging commutes on public transportation or lack of public transportation routes altogether.

Communities and built environments (e.g., sidewalks, housing, shops) are often poorly adapted to meet the needs of older immigrants, particularly those living with a disability. Suburban areas often lack access to resources and services (community organizations, health care institutions, social housing, shops). In Greater Montréal and Greater Vancouver, gentrification has begun forcing older immigrants outside of traditional neighborhoods in the urban core where immigrant communities have developed for decades (e.g., Parc-Extension in Montréal). As a result, older immigrants are disconnected from the communities that provide them with a sense of familiarity and belonging, and may have to travel long distances to access culturally safe and relevant services (e.g., religious institutions, shops, etc.). Gentrification also affects the commercial presence in a neighborhood, with mom-and-pop shops and small businesses no longer being able to afford rent. New businesses that enter these neighbourhoods are usually oriented towards a more affluent customer base.



Financial precarity can add another layer of complexity to the accessibility of urban environments for older immigrants. Many immigrant older adults have limited incomes and may rely solely on family for financial support. Participants at the forums noted that bus passes may be difficult to obtain for older immigrants due to administrative and financial reasons. In both Greater Vancouver and Greater Montréal groups have been advocating for the provision of free bus passes for older adults.

## ***Recommended Actions***

Broadly, within society greater investments need to be made into developing public transportation systems and moving away from our current car-dominated culture. Government at all levels must increase their support for public transportation systems. The following are recommendations to increase the accessibility and affordability of public transportation services for immigrant older adults:

- **Transportation routes:** When planning public transportation improvements local communities should be consulted about routes. Steps should be taken to ensure important community sites are easily accessible (e.g., places of worship, community centres) and suburban and newly developed areas are serviced. Consideration should also be given to developing senior-specific bus services that travel to locations frequented by older adults (e.g., seniors housing, senior centre, grocery store).
- **Education and outreach for new transit riders:** Outreach sessions and education can be used to increase the awareness and comfort of older immigrants with using public transportation. Educational materials and sessions should be available in multiple languages.
- **User-friendliness of service:** The user-friendliness of public transportation services for older adults (e.g., signage, safety, accessibility for mobility device users) should be evaluated. This should include evaluation of needs specific to immigrant older adults (e.g., signage in multiple languages).
- **Affordability:** Free or highly subsidized transit passes should be provided to all older adults, including immigrant older adults.

# CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the stakeholder outreach forums held in Greater Montréal, Québec City, Calgary, and Greater Vancouver, common challenges experienced by immigrant older adults in the four theme areas were identified. It is important to note that many of the challenges encountered by immigrant older adults are crosscutting and the result of larger structural factors that need to be addressed within society. This report elucidates some of the key structural factors contributing to the challenges experienced by immigrant older adults: linguistic and cultural barriers; experiences of racism and discrimination over the life course; rigid labour, financial, and immigration policies; and systems that are inflexible and poorly designed to meet the needs of immigrant older adults.

While some recommendations for action have been made in this report, long-term, intersectoral collaboration is required to fully address the challenges experienced by older immigrants. We believe that this project has provided useful insights for policymakers, service providers, and advocates and will serve as a springboard for the larger discussions that are needed on issues faced by aging immigrants in Canada.

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# APPENDIX 1. PROJECT TEAM

## GREATER MONTRÉAL

### ORGANIZERS

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## APPENDIX 2. PROJECT PUBLICATIONS

Brotman S, Ferrer I, Koehn S, Delgado P. L'isolement sociale chez les immigrants âgés: Une question des droits. *Revue de La Ligue Des Droits et Liberté*. 2019; 38(1(Printemps)), 37–40. <https://liguedesdroits.ca/lisolement-social-chez-les-immigrant-e-s-ages-au-canada-unequestion-de-droits-de-la-personne/>

Brotman S, Ferrer I, Koehn S. Situating the life story narratives of aging immigrants within a structural context: the intersectional life course perspective as research praxis. *Qual Res*. 2020;20(4):465-484. doi:10.1177/1468794119880746

Ferrer I, Grenier A, Brotman S, Koehn S. Understanding the experiences of racialized older people through an intersectional life course perspective. *J Aging Stud*. 2017;41:10-17. doi:10.1016/j.jaging.2017.02.001

Koehn S, Ferrer I, Brotman S. Between loneliness and belonging: Narratives of social isolation among immigrant older adults in Canada. *Ageing Soc*. 2020;1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X20001348>



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French: [www.creges.ca/personnes-agees-immigrantes](http://www.creges.ca/personnes-agees-immigrantes)



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