Building a New Life in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Humanitarian Migrants

David Marshall

Building a New Life in Australia: the Longitudinal Study of Humanitarian Migrants (BNLA) is following a large cohort of recently arrived humanitarian migrants as they settle into life Australia.

BNLA was established to help the government better understand the factors that aid or hinder successful settlement of humanitarian migrants during their first five years in Australia. The data collected will provide a significant contribution to the evidence-base around refugee settlement and assist in developing improved policies and programmes.

Data collection for BNLA is occurring across five annual Waves. The first, third and fifth waves are conducted in the participants home face-to-face using tablet computers. Questionnaires are translated into a large number of languages enabling most participants to complete the survey in their native language. The second and fourth waves are shorter telephone interviews with bilingual interviewers. The questionnaire covers a broad range of settlement related issues including personal backgrounds, migration pathways, housing, language, employment, education and related social and economic issues.

Who is participating in BNLA?

A total of 2,399 recently arrived humanitarian migrants were recruited to the study. To be selected, participants needed to hold a permanent protection visa and have arrived in Australia or been granted their visa between May and November 2013. Participants were recruited from eleven sites across Australia, encompassing major cities and regional centres. The cohort includes persons from a diverse range of backgrounds and migration pathways.

- 84 per cent arrived through the offshore migration programme[1].
- 16 per cent of participants secured visas through the onshore humanitarian programme[2].
- 10 per cent reported spending time in immigration detention, 4 per cent in community detention, and 12 per cent on a bridging visa before receiving their permanent visa.
- 54 per cent of participants are male and 46 per cent female.
- 43 per cent arrived alone while nearly 50 per cent of migrating units include children.
- 64 per cent had been in Australia less than six months and 83 per cent less than one year.
- There are 35 different countries of birth represented in the cohort with Iraq (39 per cent), Afghanistan (25 per cent) and Iran (10 per cent) being the three largest groups.
- 49 different languages are spoken at home by participants including Arabic (22 per cent), Assyrian (15 per cent) and Persian (11 per cent).
- Most participants live in a major state capital with 33 per cent in Sydney, a further 30 per cent in Melbourne and just 11 per cent in a regional area.
- Nearly half (47 per cent) of the cohort are aged between 18 and 34 years of age. A further 22 per cent are aged 35 to 44. Just 10 per cent are aged 55 years or older.

---

[1] This includes refugees identified and referred to Australia by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Special Humanitarian Programme migrants who have been sponsored by a family member in Australia.

[2] The onshore component of the Humanitarian Programme provides options for people to apply for protection (or asylum) after arrival in Australia. This can include those arriving with a valid visa (e.g. student or tourist) as well as those who arrived by boat without a visa.

For queries regarding this research, please email **NCLD@dss.gov.au**.

Page **1** of **4**

What does the Wave 1 data tell us?

Wave 1 data was collected in late 2013 and early 2014. The resultant dataset provides a critical baseline against which all future data can be compared to assess changes over time. It also gives an insight to the lives of the participants prior to their arrival in Australia including personal circumstances in their home country, experiences en route to Australia, and pathways taken during the migration process.
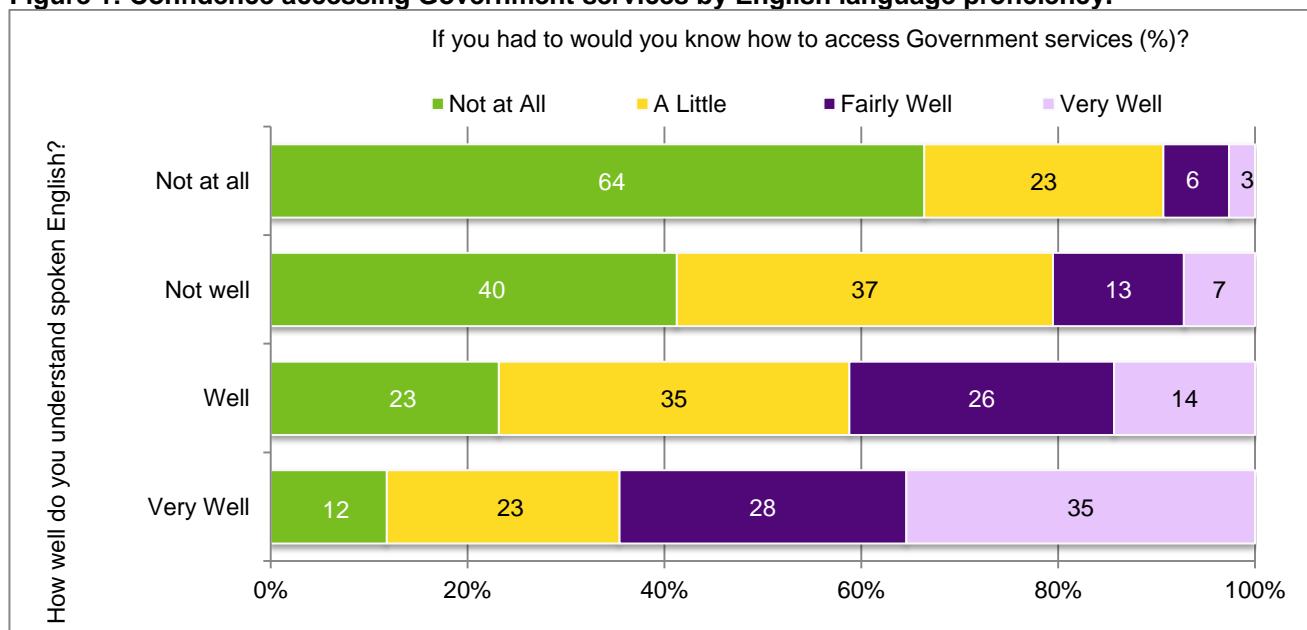
Importantly however, the dataset gives an initial insight to the levels of disadvantage and vulnerability amongst the study participants soon after settling in Australia. As Table 1 shows, it is clear that many of our participants arrived in Australia with considerable levels of background disadvantage, particularly the females in the cohort. Amongst the adult females, 67 per cent have never undertaken paid work (24 per cent for adult males), 44 per cent did not understand spoken English prior to arrival (33 per cent of males), 23 per cent are illiterate in their own language (17 per cent of males) and 20 per cent have never attended school (13 per cent of males). As a comparison, less than
one per cent of the total Australian adult population has never attended school[3].

Table 1: Indicators of background disadvantage. Education, work experience and language.

Measures of Disadvantage	Males	Females
Never attended school (Aged 18 or older)	13%	20%
Never undertaken paid work (Aged 18 or older)	24%	67%
Did not understand spoken English at all before arrival	33%	44%
Illiterate in own language (cannot read or write own language at all)	17%	23%

Figures such as those in Table 1 highlight why the settlement process could be very difficult for large portions of the participants in this study. However, over 80 per cent of participants said their overall settlement experiences were good or very good and the same percentage said they felt welcome always or most of the time. In addition 69 per cent reported a sense of belonging in Australia always or most of the time. The data shows a strong relationship between lack of English language and knowledge of how to access Government services (Figure 1). Over 64 per cent of respondents who do not understand spoken English also reported that they wouldn't know how to access Government services if they needed to. Those who are more proficient in English tended to indicate a greater confidence in their abilities to access such services.

Figure 1: Confidence accessing Government services by English language proficiency.

If you had to would you know how to access Government services (%)?

■ Not at All   ■ A Little   ■ Fairly Well   ■ Very Well

How well do you understand spoken English?	Not at All	A Little	Fairly Well	Very Well
Not at all	64	23	6	3
Not well	40	37	13	7
Well	23	35	26	14
Very Well	12	23	28	35

---

[3] Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011, National Census of Population and Housing.

For queries regarding this research, please email **NCLD@dss.gov.au**.

Page **2** of **4**

In addition to existing disadvantages in terms of education, and work experience, many participants also need to overcome physical and mental health challenges. As detailed in Table 2, gender differences are also evident on health issues with higher proportions of female participants reporting poor health than amongst their male counterparts. Of particular concern is that 46 per cent of females have been experiencing moderate to high levels of psychological distress, as have 35 per cent of males. By way of comparison, estimates for the Australian adult population are that just 11 per cent of females and seven per cent of males fall into these categories[4]. Furthermore, 62 per cent of females have been prescribed medication for physical conditions since arrival in Australia (54 per cent of males) and nearly one in five rate their recent health as poor or very poor.

Table 2: Indicators of mental and physical health concerns amongst the BNLA cohort

Measures of Physical and Mental Health	Males	Females
Poor or very poor health over previous 4 weeks	12%	18%
Moderate or high psychological distress (Kessler 6)	35%	46%
Current health worse or much worse than the 6 months pre-arrival	10%	14%
Prescribed medication for physical health since arrival	54%	62%
Prescribed medication for emotional health since arrival	12%	16%

It is also apparent that humanitarian migrants in the study have economic and social challenges to overcome during their settlement process. When asked about finances, more than 17 per cent of households reported difficulty paying household bills and more than 11 per cent had problems meeting their rent/mortgage payments. Nearly one quarter of households said they could not afford to heat or cool their homes (compared to 3 per cent of Australian households[5]).

In terms of social and cultural issues, more than half of all participants reported problems. As indicated in Figure 2, females appear slightly more likely to experience difficulty on this front with 53 per cent saying they had difficulty understanding Australian ways, 53 per cent finding it hard to make friends and 65 per cent reporting problems communicating with their Australian neighbours.

Figure 2: Persons experiencing difficulty with social interactions by gender.

---
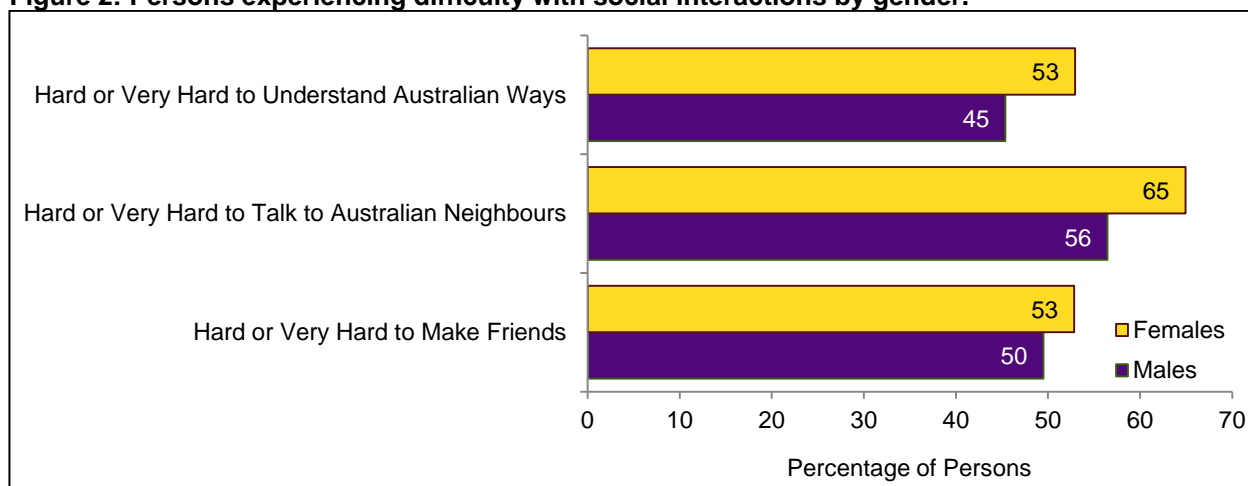
[4] Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007, National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing.
[5] See Data Highlights No. 1/2014: Financial Hardship in Australia.

Conclusion

The first Wave of the BNLA study provides an important insight to the diversity, disadvantages and potential vulnerabilities and challenges facing refugees and asylum seekers settling in Australia. While the vast majority report positive settlement experiences, many participants have significant disadvantages to overcome during their settlement journey. For some this includes limited or no education, and lack of work experience prior to coming to Australia. For others compromised physical or mental health will be key issues. These initial findings give insight to the difficulties that these new Australians face.

Key Statistics

- **44 per cent of females and 33 per cent of males did not understand any spoken English prior to arrival**
- **64 per cent of those who do not understand spoken English do not know how to access Government services**
- **46 per cent of females and 35 per cent of males report moderate or high levels of psychological distress**
- **17 per cent of households have difficulty paying bills and 11 per cent have trouble paying rent/mortgage**
- **About half of respondents have difficulty understanding Australian ways, making friends or talking to their neighbours**