

# ELI professor examines how senior immigrants coped during pandemic

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The ELI professor Dr. Bahar Biazar's research project, *Senior Newcomers Coping with Crisis*, was recently featured in [Toronto.Com](#).

When Seneca College professor Bahar Biazar partnered with not-for-profit organization Intercultural Iranian Canadian Resource Centre (I2CRC) on a research study last year, the focus was to record the plight of senior immigrants during COVID-19 lockdowns.

But following the first few interviews, she said, her team realized “something more systemic and deeply rooted” was revealing itself.

“And what we ended up with is a deeper realization of how migration works and what it looks like when it happens later in life and what resettlement looks like when it happens later in life,” said Biazar, a professor at the English Language Institute at Seneca’s Newnham campus and the study’s principal investigator.

“We realized that, yes, the pandemic did magnify these problems, but these problems existed prior to the pandemic, mostly because this population had not resettled within their host country of Canada because of specific reasons particular to their age, because of how they came and the services that were available at the time.”

The applied research project, called *Senior Newcomers Coping with Crisis*, took place between January and October 2021. As part of the study, open-ended interviews were conducted with women in their 80s and 90s who had immigrated to Canada from Iran in their 60s.

Though they’ve been living in Toronto for more than a decade, they still hadn’t fully settled, Biazar said. “They hadn’t learned the language, they didn’t know bus routes, they didn’t know how to navigate day-to-day life,” she said, noting many resettlement services are focused on younger adults and workplace readiness.

As well, many seniors were sponsored by their adult children to help raise *their* children, so the seniors often didn’t have time to attend English classes.

Another common scenario found during the study: when the grandchildren reached school

age and no longer needed the full-time care of the grandparents, the newcomer senior no longer qualified for newcomer services. Also heard were stories of adult children who years later moved away from Toronto while the seniors stayed behind not having learned the language.

But the pandemic experience varied among senior immigrants. “We found that those participants who had more digital literacy and knew how to connect with the virtual world were busier. They were happier,” said Biazar, noting social isolation was a recurring theme. “Some of them didn’t see one person for two to three months. One participant said when they went into lockdown, she had about 15 books in her place and she read each one of them five or six times.”

The study also revealed participants’ creative coping strategies. “One of them had an imaginary conversation with a therapist,” said Biazar, adding another took up drawing, which was how that senior also coped with childhood abuse.

Biazar said she hopes to expand the research to look at other ethnic groups.

She stressed more language and technology education and resettlement services specific to seniors is needed.

“We hope to run senior specific English language classes that work with technology and we hope to pilot these courses and ... share them with the City of Toronto and organizations that service senior newcomers,” Biazar said. “I hope that more and more of these projects will come out so we can have scientifically framed approaches for meeting the needs of senior immigrants.”

I2CRC president Afkham Mardukhi said the findings of the research project have helped improve her volunteer-based organization’s service delivery.

“The conversations, the digging, the probing around the hows and whys has enriched our view on how to improve on our service delivery model,” she said, adding having academia working with grassroots community groups such as hers helps enrich the lives of community members and contributes to a more inclusive society.

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