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Article abstract

For over 40 years, Canada's Joint Assistance Sponsorship Program has combined government financial assistance, professional settlement services, and private sponsor settlement support for refugees identified as having "special needs." With high public and private involvement, the program offers another potential model for sponsorship, yet existing knowledge about the program is limited. This article explores the historical development of the program, highlighting three time periods: 1979–1981, when it launched; 1998–2001, when it welcomed thousands of Kosovars and expanded as selection criteria prioritized vulnerability; and 2014–2019, as it increasingly competed with other sponsorship programs.

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Equally Public and Private Refugee Resettlement: The Historical Development of Canada's Joint Assistance Sponsorship Program

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ABSTRACT

For over 40 years, Canada's Joint Assistance Sponsorship Program has combined government financial assistance, professional settlement services, and private sponsor settlement support for refugees identified as having "special needs." With high public and private involvement, the program offers another potential model for sponsorship, yet existing knowledge about the program is limited. This article explores the historical development of the program, highlighting three time periods: 1979–1981, when it launched; 1998–2001, when it welcomed thousands of Kosovars and expanded as selection criteria prioritized vulnerability; and 2014–2019, as it increasingly competed with other sponsorship programs.

KEYWORDS

Joint Assistance Sponsorship; private refugee sponsorship; resettlement; Canada; disabilities; Kosovars; Yazidis; women at risk; refugee history

RESUMÉ

Pendant plus de quarante ans, le Programme de parrainage d'aide conjointe canadien a combiné l'aide financière du gouvernement, les services professionnels de réinstallation et le soutien à la réinstallation dans le cadre de parrainages privés pour les réfugiés identifiés comme ayant «besoins spéciaux». Avec une grande implication publique et privée, le programme offre un autre modèle potentiel de parrainage, mais les connaissances actuelles sur ce programme sont limitées. Cet article explore le développement historique du programme en mettant l'accent sur trois périodes: 1979-1981, quand il a été lancé; 1998-2001, lorsqu'il a permis l'accueil de milliers de Kosovars et s'est élargi au fur et à mesure que les critères de sélection donnaient la priorité à la vulnérabilité; et 2014-2019, où il est entré en concurrence croissante avec d'autres programmes de parrainage.

INTRODUCTION

With over 2 million refugees identified by the UNHCR as needing resettlement in 2023 and growing global displacement, there is an urgent need to expand opportunities for resettlement (UNHCR, 2022). Canada's refugee sponsorship programs are recognized worldwide as a unique way to support resettled refugees, to engage civil society in resettlement, and potentially to increase resettlement spaces. Like other resettled refugees, upon arrival in Canada, sponsored refugees gain the legal status of permanent resident. Refugee sponsorship has been defined as "a public–private partnership between governments who facilitate legal admission for refugees and private actors who provide financial, social and/or emotional support to receive and settle refugees

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into the community" (European Resettlement Network, 2017, p. 11). In Canada, the distribution of responsibilities has been a point of contention between the government and private sponsors since the earliest sponsorship-like programs (Cameron, 2020, p. 33; Labman, 2019, p. 91). As sponsorship has expanded around the world in recent years, debates about the public versus private role in resettlement have continued. For example, scholars in the United Kingdom and Australia have criticized emerging sponsorship programs in their countries for being too privatized (Dajani, 2021; Hirsch et al., 2019). Some countries are reluctant to introduce sponsorship programs because of concerns around privatization, in particular, about sponsors financially supporting resettled refugees. For example, "such models of community sponsorship where private individuals or organisations pay for the refugees' housing or other services in the early stages of integration … are not compatible with Finnish society" (Turtiainen & Sapir, 2021, p. 61). For sponsorship to be accepted in Finland, "the role of the public sector in the reception and integration of refugees would not be reduced" (Turtiainen & Sapir, 2021, pp. 61–62).

In contrast to sponsorship models that envision a limited role for government, Canada's Joint Assistance Sponsorship (JAS) Program combines high public and high private involvement. While many details have changed over more than 40 years, the basic responsibility-sharing model has remained the same: the Canadian federal government provides financial support while private sponsorship groups work together with government-funded professional settlement services to provide settlement, social, and emotional support. This model is distinct from Canada's Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) Program, introduced in 2013, since that blended

funding model splits financial support between the government and sponsors.

JAS targets refugees identified as having "special needs." The language used—especially in historical documents—often has negative connotations. In different time periods, "special needs" has been interpreted to include different individual characteristics or circumstances, such as refugees with physical disabilities, refugees who have experienced significant trauma, or refugees with limited education. In disability scholarship, an individual model of disability has been critiqued by the social model, which essentially argues that people are not disabled by their individual impairments but by disabling barriers in society (Oliver, 2013, p. 1024).

Despite its unique public–private model, JAS has received limited attention from the government and researchers. In over 40 years, it appears that the program was only formally reviewed once. Archival documents mention a 1990 review, conducted by a government-commissioned academic consultant, but it is unclear whether a copy still exists. The Canadian Council for Refugees criticized the government for omitting JAS from the 2007 evaluation of the sponsorship program, thus failing to acknowledge JAS as an important contribution of the private sponsorship community (Canadian Council for Refugees, 2007). The 2016 government evaluation of the resettlement programs once again excluded JAS (IRCC, 2016). One overview of the development of private sponsorship discusses JAS, but it is now dated (Treviranus & Casasola, 2003). Academic research is limited to a few studies on the experiences of Kosovar refugees who were sponsored through JAS in 1999, but these studies mostly reflect on specific settlement challenges for the Kosovars (e.g., employment, health) rather than the public–private model (Abu-Laban et al., 2001; Centre for

Refugee Studies [CRS] & Joint Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Settlement [CERIS], 2001; Derwing & Mulder, 2003; Fowler et al., 2005; Sherrell & Hyndman, 2005, 2006). Most research on sponsorship does not acknowledge the program's existence, or mentions it in passing, as in one recent study on the resettlement of refugees with disabilities in Canada noting that the program "is now rarely used" (Korntheuer et al., 2021, p. 7).

This article seeks to fill this gap in knowledge, providing a broad overview of the program's historical development and assessing how it fits into the Canadian resettlement system. It focuses on three time periods, each significant for different reasons. First, the launch of the program from 1979 to 1981 demonstrates its two original goals: to support specific demographics of refugees and to facilitate admission of these refugees in a more restrictive legislative context. Second, from 1998 to 2001, the program's role changed within a broader shift towards vulnerability-based selection of refugees. It also supported thousands of Kosovar refugees in 1999. Finally, from 2014 to 2019, the program struggled to distinguish itself and recruit sponsors in an increasingly competitive program environment. Potential JAS sponsors now face competing demands from the introduction of the BVOR Program in 2013, rising numbers under the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program, and a pull to offer volunteer support to groups of Government-Assisted Refugees, such as Yazidis, outside of formal sponsorship.

METHODOLOGY

Publicly available information on JAS—either historical or contemporary—is extremely limited, leading to a reliance on Access to Information requests and interviews. In of-

ficial government resettlement statistics, including the annual report to Parliament, JAS cases are counted as Government-Assisted Refugees (GARs). The number of refugees who are eligible for JAS varies from year to year, making it impossible to create an annual target like the other resettlement programs. However, there is no retrospective reporting of how many GARs each year have received additional support from a sponsor, meaning that no public statistics for the program exist. From a government perspective, categorizing JAS cases as GARs makes sense because the government makes a full financial commitment to these refugees through income support and funded services. However, as Treviranus & Casasola (2003) suggest, it is not possible to fully understand sponsorship simply by looking at private sponsorship numbers, since the "time and commitment" of JAS sponsors are "hidden in the statistics" (p. 199). None of the sources reviewed for this research included statistics for all years of the program, so the statistics in this paper come from different sources depending on the time period.

The analysis of the launch of the program from 1979 to 1981 draws on archival documents from Library and Archives Canada obtained through an Access to Information request. These documents are institutional records from the Department of Employment and Immigration covering 1979–1995, including sporadic statistics. In addition, the author conducted an interview with a civil servant (now retired) who was involved in developing the program. For 1998 to 2001, information was obtained by requesting documents through Access to Information about the Kosovar initiative and by reviewing government webpages (mostly archived on the web). Archival documents covering 1998–2001 were obtained from UNHCR Canada's office in Ottawa, which included statistics

for non-Kosovar refugees arriving through JAS. The analysis of 2014–2019 draws on multiple sources. Program statistics came from a custom statistics report prepared for the author by Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). In some cases, numbers are rounded for privacy reasons. Documents on the Yazidi initiative in 2017 were obtained through Access to Information requests. The Refugee Sponsorship Training Program (RSTP) promotes anonymized profiles of JAS cases to potential sponsors through e-newsletters, which are archived on their website from 2014 onwards (RSTP, 2021). An analysis of all the profiles promoted to sponsors from 2014 to 2020 (108 profiles in total) revealed reasons for referral to the program and the types of support sponsors are asked to provide. Although this is not a random sample, and some of the refugees profiled may not have been successfully matched with sponsors, the profiles provide rich qualitative data in the absence of other information about who is referred to JAS and why.

Finally, the author conducted 10 key informant interviews, primarily virtually, with participants in multiple Canadian provinces. Ethics clearance was obtained from the author's university Research Ethics Board. Eight interviews between December 2019 and February 2020 asked about JAS within a broader study about public and private actors within Canada's resettlement programs. Two additional interviews in summer 2021 specifically addressed JAS: the historical interview mentioned above with a retired civil servant and an interview with an IRCC representative who is currently involved with the program. Participants gave permission to use direct quotes and are identified according to their desired level of anonymity.

While the study aimed to provide a broad overview of the program's historical devel-

opment, it was limited to policy documents and interviews, which primarily reveal government perspectives. Some interviews were with the staff of Sponsorship Agreement Holders (organizations that have an agreement with the government of Canada to sponsor refugees) or settlement agencies, but the study did not include sponsors or refugees. Since little is known about the experiences of newcomers, sponsors, or settlement agency staff within the program, understanding these experiences would be a useful direction for future research.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF JOINT ASSISTANCE SPONSORSHIP (1979–1981)

The 1976 Immigration Act established a legal provision for refugee sponsorship, but prior to 1976, there had been various one-time sponsorship initiatives (Cameron, 2021). The sponsorship provision in the legislation was vague, leaving civil servants to determine what forms sponsorship would take (Molloy & Madokoro, 2017). Retired civil servant Mike Molloy explained in an interview that the idea of JAS emerged as civil servants designed the sponsorship program more broadly. It was a "logical step, or next step, given the idea at the time [that] the sponsorship program would not only allow us to take more cases; it would allow us to take more needy cases." He suggested that there was already some precedent for resettling refugees with disabilities through the federal–provincial Handicapped Refugees Program, which at the time had existed as a small government resettlement program for over 10 years.

In order to be admitted into Canada, immigrants were required by the 1976 Immigration Act to "be able to become successfully established in Canada." Migration officers were instructed to consider the availability of

public assistance and the support of sponsors in deciding whether a refugee could "successfully establish" (Molloy & Madokoro, 2017, p. 58). The JAS program intended to support refugees in meeting this requirement for admission:

> Major selection criterion for this program will be the potential of the refugee(s) to establish successfully in Canada with the assistance available from the federal government and the assisting group. The specialized help provided by the group will thus enable us to select refugees requiring more assistance than could be provided by a sponsoring group or the federal government alone.
>
> (Department of Employment and Immigration, 1979–1989, W. K. Bell to Arthur Driedger, Mennonite Central Committee, March 3, 1980)

The original sponsorship agreements (signed in 1979 primarily with religious organizations) included provisions related to JAS and a general understanding of shared responsibility:

> The individual sponsoring groups provide day-to-day hands-on care [for sponsored refugees under all streams] … . The Department would provide an overall structure that included language training and allowances and a willingness to take over from the sponsors [i.e., convert to JAS] any cases that were exceptionally costly or requiring unusual professional services.
>
> (Molloy et al., 2017, p. 76)

Several organizations also signed follow-up agreements specifically on JAS. For many refugees facing particular challenges, JAS "became the norm" with "a mix of Departmental money and hands-on care provided by sponsors" (Molloy et al., 2017, p. 76). In an interview, Molloy suggested that the logic behind this distribution of responsibilities is that it took advantage of the strengths of each partner: "What the sponsors do best is tender loving care, and plugging people in locally. What we do best sitting in Ottawa is provide money."

In December 1979, sponsoring organizations wrote to the government urging "full implementation of [JAS] so that there may be an increase of refugees accepted who are most in need of resettlement" (Department of Employment and Immigration, 1979–1989, Standing Conference of Canadian Organizations concerned for Refugees to government officials, December 11, 1979). In January 1980, the government sent sponsoring organizations a working paper outlining the details of the proposed JAS program and asking for feedback, suggesting that JAS "reflects our shared concern about these difficult resettlement cases and our commitment to ensure that a wide cross-section of refugees are given the chance to start a new life in our country" (Department of Employment and Immigration, 1979–1989, W. K. Bell, Deputy Executive Director Refugees, Immigration & Demographic Policy to Master Agreement holders, January 17, 1980). The working paper proposed that refugees could be eligible either because of a physical disability or because of a "resettlement problem relating to socio-economic difficulties" such as lack of education or family configuration.

Based on the letters in the archives, sponsoring organizations had mixed reactions to the government's proposal. While they expressed positive feedback about the general idea, there were some concerns around responsibilities and selection criteria. For example, one organization concluded that they would not participate in the program as described and emphasized that "ALL expenses incurred should be the responsibility of the Canadian government" (Department of Employment and Immigration, 1979–1989, Archbishop of Ottawa to W. K. Bell, February 11, 1980). Although sponsorship groups assumed financial responsibility under private sponsorship, they were unwilling to assume any financial responsibility for JAS cases.

Sponsors and advocates also argued that "a strictly applied criterion of eventual economic self-sufficiency presents a restriction for the selection officers which would be totally out of keeping with an appropriate response by Canadians to the most severely affected refugees in the camps" (Department of Employment and Immigration, 1979–1989, Canadian Council of Churches to W. K. Bell, February 21, 1980). Despite these concerns, JAS was implemented. By March 1981, 129 refugees had arrived (Department of Employment and Immigration, 1979–1989, W. K. Bell to Guy Ouellette, Information Officer, UNHCR Canada, March 19, 1981). The program became a small pilot within a much larger resettlement initiative, as over 60,000 Indo-Chinese refugees resettled in Canada in 1979 and 1980 (Molloy et al., 2017, p. 477).

THE VULNERABILITY SHIFT IN RESETTLEMENT POLICY AND REFUGEES FROM KOSOVO (1998–2001)

Following the Indo-Chinese resettlement initiative, overall Canadian resettlement numbers dropped significantly, but refugees came from a broader geographic area. In the mid-1990s, fewer than 100 refugees came through JAS each year (Treviranus & Casasola, 2003, p. 191). For the first two decades, JAS continued its dual purpose to facilitate entry and to provide support after arrival. The program description from 1999 explains:

> [JAS] enables organizations to assist in the settlement of disadvantaged persons who would otherwise be considered inadmissible because of their special needs or circumstances … . There are persons who find themselves in circumstances that will likely prevent them from establishing within a year without extra emotional support and assistance, but given the extra attention can reasonably be expected to resettle within two years. The program includes special needs cases such as Women At Risk, victims of torture, elderly

persons, unaccompanied minors, long stayers at refugee camps, certain medically inadmissible persons.

(Citizenship and Immigration Canada [CIC], 1999d)

Since the establishment of the Women at Risk Program in 1988, this demographic has been an important part of JAS (CIC, 1999a). The Women at Risk Program began "to offer resettlement opportunities to women in perilous or permanently unstable situations who do not have the resettlement potential usually required" (CIC, 1999a). A refugee woman "without the normal protection of a family unit who finds herself in a precarious situation whereby the local authorities cannot ensure safety for her and any dependants" could be eligible (CIC, 1999a). Although these women could arrive as GARs or privately sponsored refugees, the government acknowledged that because of their circumstances and traumatic experiences, most of the women would require JAS (CIC, 1999a). In the first 11 years, over 1,000 women at risk arrived (CIC, 1999a), but it is unclear what percentage were sponsored through JAS.

As refugee selection policy more broadly shifted towards vulnerability as the guiding principle, the role of JAS in facilitating admission became largely unnecessary. During the legislative review process leading to the development of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (passed in 2001), the government commissioned a report that proposed future directions for Canadian refugee resettlement (CIC, 1998). The report recommended "relaxing the requirement that refugees be able to settle within a year" (p. 39) and "shifting the balance toward protection rather than the ability to settle successfully in selecting refugees" (p. 43). This recommendation aligned with the demands of refugee advocates and the UNHCR, who opposed selection criteria based on integration potential and who saw resettle-

ment as a form of protection (Garnier, 2018, pp. 123–124; Labman, 2019). Today, "vulnerability" guides both UNHCR and the government of Canada's selection of refugees for resettlement (Garnier, 2018; Kaga et al., 2021, p. 26). Formally, the criterion of successful establishment in Canada remained in the Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations (Garnier, 2018, pp. 119, 123). However, refugees who are deemed "vulnerable" or in "urgent need of protection" are now legally exempted (Government of Canada, 2022, s. 139[2]). Overall, "ability to establish" became less important to refugee selection, with administrative guidance directing Canadian officers to consider a three- to five-year time frame, prioritize protection, and focus on vulnerability (Casasola, 2016, p. 46; Garnier, 2018, p. 124; Kaga et al., 2021, p. 20). As the legislation was implemented, settlement workers noticed changes in the demographics of their refugee clients: lower levels of literacy and formal education, more physical and mental health issues, and larger and more single-parent households (Labman, 2019, p. 65).

Since migration officers were encouraged to select refugees with "special needs," the number of requests for JAS increased (Treviranus & Casasola, 2003, p. 191). The number of arrivals under JAS increased to 405 persons in 1998, 489 persons in 1999, and 521 persons in 2000, not including the Kosovar evacuation (UNHCR Canada, 2001). These numbers represented between 5% and 7% of GAR cases and between 4% and 5% of total resettlement arrivals in these years (Treviranus & Casasola, 2003, p. 181). By 2003, it was estimated that about 10% of GAR cases were receiving sponsor support through JAS (Treviranus & Casasola, 2003, p. 191). The program had also become global, with Canadian visa offices in 19 different countries processing cases (UNHCR Canada, 2001). In addition to the financial support, many sponsors were interested in JAS at the time because these cases were pre-approved and would arrive quickly, in contrast with high refusal rates and long processing times under Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) (Treviranus & Casasola, 2003, p. 198).

In 1999, policy-makers chose JAS as a tool to support thousands of Kosovar refugees. In response to an urgent appeal from the UNHCR, Canada accepted more than 7,000 refugees from Kosovo, including about 5,000 refugees through an emergency evacuation program (IRCC, 2020b). In addition to the evacuation, the government established a fast-track process for two groups of Kosovar refugees in Albania and Macedonia: those who had relatives in Canada, and a smaller group who had "special needs" and were referred by the UNHCR (CIC, 1999b). Reports coming from workers in the refugee camps emphasized the trauma the refugees had experienced (Treviranus & Casasola, 2003, pp. 192–193). The government decided to accept these refugees, including those with family members in Canada, under JAS "because the resettlement for these individuals may be difficult due both to the trauma they have experienced and a potential lack of marketable skills" (CIC, 1999b). The government provided 24 months of income support and the option of being matched with a sponsor (CIC, 1999b). In May 1999, the government issued an appeal for sponsors (CIC, 1999c). Given the media attention and the efforts of coordinators who were tasked with recruiting sponsorship groups, within a few weeks, about 1,000 groups had responded to the government's call for sponsors (Treviranus & Casasola, 2003, p. 192). Ultimately, more sponsorship groups expressed interest than needed. Although sponsors provided valuable support, it was difficult to train so many new sponsors in a

short period of time (Abu-Laban et al., 2001; CRS & CERIS, 2001).

## THE CONTEMPORARY JOINT ASSISTANCE SPONSORSHIP PROGRAM (2014–2019)

The contemporary JAS program exists alongside four other resettlement programs: Government-Assisted Refugees (GAR), Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR), Visa Office-Referred (VOR), and Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR), which started in 2013. Figure 1 positions these programs in relation to private and government support. The Canadian province of Quebec runs its own resettlement and sponsorship programs, so BVOR and JAS only exist outside of Quebec.

PSR, as the name suggests, is characterized by high private support and low government support. Sponsors are responsible for financial and settlement support for the first year. It is most accurate to identify low rather than no government support, since the government still processes applications for free and PSRs are still eligible for a range of government-funded services that are available to all permanent residents, including language classes and health care. The VOR program has the same distribution of responsibilities as PSR and would be counted under that program, but refugees are identified by the UNHCR and Canadian visa offices rather than by sponsors. The VOR program still exists, but it has been overshadowed since 2013 by the introduction of the BVOR program. Like VOR, BVOR referrals come from Canadian visa offices, but the program's blended funding model is distinct. Private sponsors fund start-up costs and six months of income support, while the government funds the other six months of income support. Private sponsors take primary responsibility for settlement support, though like PSRs, BVOR refugees may access

government-funded language classes and other services. As a result, BVOR can be characterized by medium private support and medium government support. The GAR program is characterized by low private support and high government support. The government covers financial support and funds settlement agencies to provide initial reception and ongoing settlement support. Sometimes volunteers are involved in limited ways.

Finally, JAS is characterized by high private and high government support. A "sponsor's role is to provide orientation, significant settlement assistance and emotional support" for two years rather than the standard one year (IRCC, 2017c) while the government provides two years of financial support. Unlike PSR and BVOR, which are open to different types of sponsors, JAS is open only to Sponsorship Agreement Holders and their associated local groups (constituent groups). Under JAS, refugees receive the same government-funded orientation services and intensive case management as GARs, something that is not provided through BVOR. Within the government, JAS is colloquially known as "GAR-plus" since it takes the GAR program and adds intensive settlement support from private sponsors.

In the contemporary JAS, BVOR, VOR, and GAR programs, all refugees are initially referred by the UNHCR according to seven categories: "legal and/or physical protection needs, survivors of torture and/or violence, medical needs, women and girls at risk, family reunification, children and adolescents at risk, and lack of foreseeable alternative durable solutions" (UNHCR, 2011, p. 37). There is some overlap between these UNHCR referral categories and the JAS "special needs" criteria. As a result, many UNHCR-referred refugees are potentially eligible for JAS. The current Immigration and Refugee
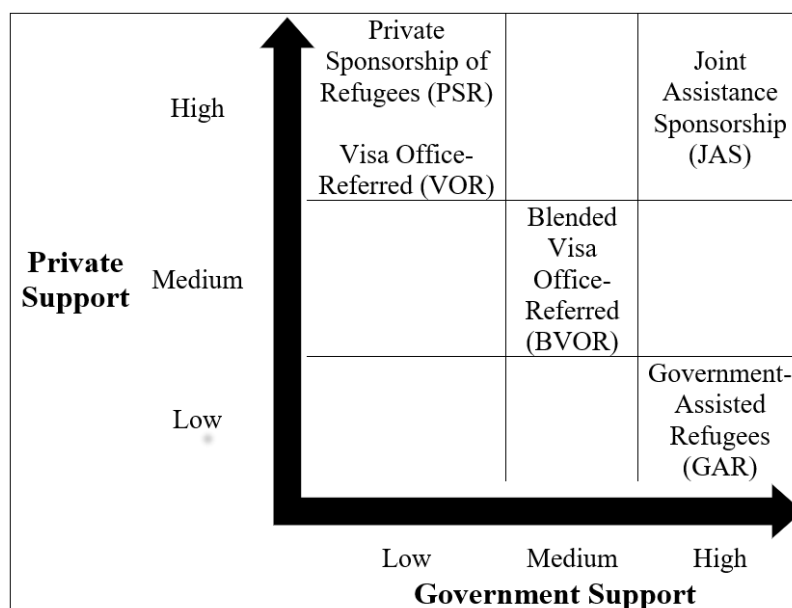
Figure 1 Private Versus Government Support in Canada's Resettlement Programs.
Note. Created by the author based on publicly available program information (IRCC, 2017c).

Protection Regulations (last revised in 2022) define a refugee with "special needs" in the context of JAS as

> a person [who] has greater need of settlement assistance than other applicants for protection abroad owing to personal circumstances, including (a) a large number of family members; (b) trauma resulting from violence or torture; (c) medical disabilities; and (d) the effects of systemic discrimination.
>
> (Government of Canada, 2022, s. 157[2])

Other program documents elaborate these criteria:

> emotional problems resulting from the refugee experience which could include incidents of trauma or torture; physical or mental disability which could require treatment in Canada; unusual family configuration such as elderly parents, single-parent families with several young children or families consisting only of siblings, one or more of whom has assumed parental responsibilities; [and] separated minors.
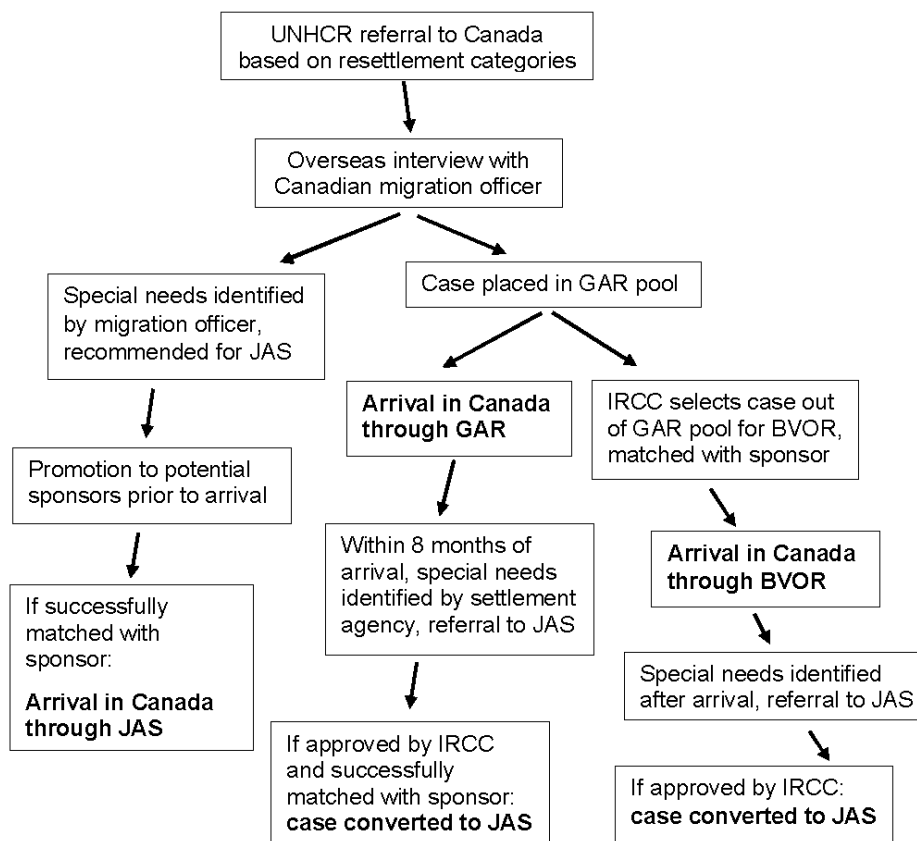>
> (IRCC, 2017c)

Some JAS cases also continue to be women-at-risk cases (IRCC, 2020d). According to an interview with a representative from IRCC, refugees accepted under JAS generally meet a combination of the criteria. For example, a refugee who has a large family but does not meet any other criteria would be unlikely to be accepted. A more typical candidate for JAS may be a single mother with many young children, with experiences of trauma and limited education. Figure 2 presents the three referral pathways into the contemporary JAS program.

Historically, as in the first pathway in Figure 2, JAS referrals have identified refugees overseas. A Canadian migration officer overseas determines following an interview that this person or family has "special needs" and would benefit from the additional support of a sponsor. If successfully matched with a sponsor, the refugee arrives through JAS. Sponsors, settlement agency staff, and local representatives of IRCC meet (in person or virtually) prior to the arrival of refugees to identify the roles of responsibilities of each partner (IRCC, 2011, p. 3).

Starting in 2013, the Canadian government introduced in-Canada referrals, allowing GAR or BVOR cases to be converted to JAS after arrival. According to a representative from IRCC, the government piloted

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                    ┌─────────────────────────────┐
                    │     UNHCR referral to Canada │
                    │  based on resettlement categories │
                    └─────────────────────────────┘
                                    │
                                    ▼
                    ┌─────────────────────────────┐
                    │     Overseas interview with  │
                    │   Canadian migration officer │
                    └─────────────────────────────┘
                        │                        │
                        ▼                        ▼
```

Special needs identified by migration officer, recommended for JAS

Case placed in GAR pool

Arrival in Canada through GAR

IRCC selects case out of GAR pool for BVOR, matched with sponsor

Promotion to potential sponsors prior to arrival

Within 8 months of arrival, special needs identified by settlement agency, referral to JAS

Arrival in Canada through BVOR

If successfully matched with sponsor:
Arrival in Canada through JAS

If approved by IRCC and successfully matched with sponsor: **case converted to JAS**

Special needs identified after arrival, referral to JAS

If approved by IRCC: **case converted to JAS**

Figure 2 Three Referral Pathways into the Contemporary JAS Program.

Note. JAS = Joint Assistance Sponsorship; GAR = Government-Assisted Refugees; IRCC = Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada; BVOR = Blended Visa Office-Referred. Figure created by the author based on IRCC program information (IRCC, 2017e) and an interview with an IRCC representative.

in-Canada referrals in two cities in 2013. Following positive feedback from these pilots, in-Canada referrals were formalized and made permanent. In one in-Canada pathway, refugees initially arrive as GARs. IRCC observed that "the special needs of some refugees may become apparent only after the clients have arrived," and given that settlement agencies conduct a "detailed post-arrival needs assessment" for all GARs, they "may be best placed to recommend which high-needs clients would benefit from the extra support of a sponsoring group" (IRCC, 2017e). A representative from IRCC explained that within the first eight months following arrival, settlement agencies can refer a case to JAS if they feel that the refugee meets JAS criteria and that the extra support of a sponsor would be beneficial. If approved

by IRCC, the case is promoted to potential sponsors for a maximum of four months (IRCC, 2017e). If matched with a sponsor, the settlement agency and sponsor work together closely to support the refugee(s). In 2017, IRCC stated goals "to improve the overall outcomes of the refugees by providing them with the appropriate level of support they require to successfully integrate" as well as "to increase the overall number of JAS referrals nationally" (IRCC, 2017e). In the other in-Canada pathway, refugees arrive through BVOR, so they already have a sponsor (IRCC, 2017e). After arrival, the sponsor or a settlement agency identifies "special needs" and "exceptional circumstances" (IRCC, 2017e). If the conversion to JAS is approved, the BVOR sponsors no

longer have financial responsibilities but continue to provide settlement support.

Between 2014 and 2019, 132 sponsorship groups sponsored 365 refugees through JAS (IRCC, 2020c). Of these sponsorships, 255 persons were sponsored following an overseas referral, while 110 persons were sponsored following an in-Canada referral (IRCC, 2020c). These refugees originated from 16 countries of origin and also consisted of stateless individuals (IRCC, 2020c). The largest number came from Syria (155 persons), Iraq (65 persons), Colombia (40 persons), Eritrea (25 persons), and Sudan (20 persons), with fewer than 20 persons from each of the other 11 countries (IRCC, 2020c). It is not surprising that Syrians are the largest group, given that this time period overlaps with the resettlement of over 25,000 Syrian refugees in 2015 and 2016. In the context of Canada's overall resettlement, these numbers represent only about 0.2% of total resettlement and 0.5% of GAR cases, since during this period, Canada admitted 163,579 resettled refugees: 87,358 through PSR, 67,371 through GAR, and 8,850 through BVOR[1] (IRCC, 2016, p. 14; IRCC, 2020e).

Since the Syrian initiative, another notable resettlement initiative welcomed Yazidis and other vulnerable survivors of Daesh (also known as ISIS or the Islamic State). This initiative raised questions about the potential role of the JAS program in responding to groups of refugees. In October 2016, the House of Commons voted to bring "1,200 vulnerable Yazidi women and children and other survivors of Daesh" who were at the time internally displaced persons within Iraq (IRCC, 2017b). By July 2018, 1,400 survivors of Daesh had resettled as GARs (IRCC, 2018). Yazidis experienced significant pre-arrival trauma, as many women had been captured by Daesh as sex slaves and relatives were

often missing or had been killed. As a result, Yazidis faced significant challenges and experienced severe mental health issues. A ministerial briefing in advance of their arrival recognized that because of trauma, many survivors would "require extended income and health support above the one year normally provided" (IRCC, 2017a).

Prior to the House of Commons motion, one non-governmental organization submitted a proposal to the government to bring 400 Yazidi women and their families (around 1,600 individuals) to Canada through JAS, and it already had a list of interested sponsors (El Shafie, 2016). Similarly, in July 2016, a private sponsorship group in Winnipeg (Operation Ezra) proposed a hybrid resettlement program for Yazidis (Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, 2016). Despite these calls from civil society to bring all members of this group as JAS cases—similar to the Kosovar initiative in the 1990s—the government opted to bring survivors of Daesh as GAR cases. Although the Yazidis would appear to be ideal candidates for JAS given their profiles, a representative from IRCC explained that the JAS program was at the time being used for individual cases only. As a result, although 44 of the 1,400 refugees from this initiative were eventually supported through the in-Canada JAS program (IRCC, 2020c), some civil society organizations intensively supported Yazidi GARs outside of formal sponsorship in response to perceived shortcomings in GAR support. In Winnipeg, Operation Ezra began as a private sponsorship group for Yazidis and evolved into a broad coalition of volunteers and organizations supporting over 300 Yazidi GARs and PSRs (Pearlman, 2020). In an interview, the chair of Operation Ezra explained how volunteering responds to the limits of formal settlement services: settlement workers work nine-to-five, whereas "volun-

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[1]Calculated by the author.

teers work at night and volunteers work on weekends." In Toronto, Project Abraham created a welcome team for each Yazidi GAR family, noting that settlement workers "can each have more than 70 families in their case load" so they have limited time for each family (Rose & Rose, 2017, pp. 4, 5).

A representative from IRCC explained that many other referred Yazidi cases were not successfully matched with sponsors. It was more difficult to find sponsors for this group, for reasons including a limited number of destination cities, the small size of the Yazidi community in Canada, the capacity of sponsors, and this group's significant mental health challenges. The statistics and the RSTP bulletins also indicate that the cities where civil society organizations were actively supporting Yazidis were not the same cities where JAS sponsors were needed (IRCC, 2020c; RSTP, 2021). In the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration's study (2017) on Yazidi resettlement, one witness noted that civil society groups who were supporting Yazidis either were not aware of JAS or not able to participate. Witnesses encouraged expanding and promoting JAS for more Yazidi families (Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, 2018, p. 26). With few opportunities to participate formally in JAS, some civil society organizations mobilized to support Yazidis in other ways.

DISCUSSION

JAS started with two original purposes: to facilitate the selection and admission of refugees who would otherwise be refused entry to Canada and to support them following arrival, with an emphasis on informal social and emotional support. Facilitating admission continued to be important for the first two decades, but it lost its relevance after a shift towards vulnerability in resettlement

selection criteria. A JAS sponsorship is no longer required for certain refugees to gain admission to Canada. Today, many GARs and BVOR refugees meet at least one of the JAS criteria, though current practice targets refugees who meet multiple criteria. Although JAS remains a unique public–private model targeting a unique demographic, over time, it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish the profiles of these refugees and the program in general from Canada's other resettlement programs.

The second original purpose of JAS—providing informal settlement support—remains highly relevant but raises broader questions about the roles of private versus public actors in resettlement. Labman (2020) has suggested that prioritizing protection in resettlement "may require aiming Canadian volunteerism more toward community hosting and supporting successful refugee claimants and government-assisted refugees" (p. 314). JAS can clearly promote this goal, but it may also be pursued in other ways beyond formal sponsorship. As explained above, the government initially saw JAS as a way to draw on the unique strengths of the government (funding) and the sponsors (social support).

Studies reflecting on the Kosovar initiative appear to support this distribution of responsibilities. Sponsors of Kosovars in one study reported that "they had considerably more energy to devote to helping refugees without the demands of fundraising" (Derwing & Mulder, 2003, p. 231). The authors of that study argued that "without a financial commitment, sponsors could concentrate on their primary purpose: to assist with social integration" (p. 236). In addition, the absence of a financial requirement made it easier to recruit many new sponsors during the Kosovar initiative (Treviranus & Casasola, 2003, p. 193). However, it also created confusion about requirements for other kinds of

sponsorship, since sponsorship through PSR requires a financial commitment (Treviranus & Casasola, 2003, p. 193).

Sponsorship is sometimes celebrated as an alternative to professionalized settlement support models (Bond & Kwadrans, 2019), yet JAS effectively combines the informal support of sponsors with professional settlement, psychological, medical, and other services. Beyond JAS, it is increasingly recognized that all sponsored refugees can be best supported when sponsors offering informal support work together with professional settlement services (Allies for Refugee Integration, 2021). Settlement workers offer valuable expertise, information, and connections to resources and services, yet sponsor–settlement collaborations can be challenging, including due to confusion around roles and responsibilities (Allies for Refugee Integration, 2021). Meanwhile, sponsors offer forms of support that are difficult for settlement workers to provide. In the profiles used to recruit sponsors for in-Canada JAS referrals (RSTP, 2021), the referrals request similar support from sponsors to what family members may traditionally provide, such as assisting with childcare, providing transportation, accompanying refugees to medical appointments, supporting children's education, and offering ongoing companionship.

With the government retaining financial responsibility, JAS escapes some of the criticisms about financial privatization that have been directed at the BVOR program and other sponsorship programs in other contexts (Canadian Council for Refugees, 2018; Hirsch et al., 2019; Labman & Pearlman, 2018). In the current Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations, JAS is framed as making "the financial assistance of the Government of Canada available for the purpose of sponsorship" (Government of Canada,

2022, s. 157[1]). However, JAS can still be questioned through the lens of the principle of "additionality," which is understood as a foundational principle to sponsorship more broadly and describes the idea that sponsorship should be separate from and supplementary to government resettlement commitments (Labman & Pearlman, 2018, p. 442). JAS was originally designed to complement the government resettlement and private sponsorship programs, primarily by diversifying refugee profiles. However, JAS sponsorships still come out of GAR numbers. JAS does not decrease GAR numbers—as the BVOR program controversially did in the year it was first introduced (Canadian Council for Refugees, 2018; Labman & Pearlman, 2018)—but nor has it increased the numbers, with the exception of the Kosovar initiative, which was an addition to prior government commitments for that year. With the introduction of the in-Canada referral pathway, refugees may even start as GARs and then transition categories to JAS within their first eight months in Canada.

The decline in JAS sponsorships over time and the challenges in recruiting sponsors raise questions about the program's long-term sustainability. As described above, the numbers of JAS cases have declined from about 5% to 10% of GAR cases in 1998–2003 to only about 0.5% of GAR cases in 2014–2019. Referrals have declined in part because not all refugees who could be eligible are referred; focus is placed on those who meet multiple criteria. In some cities that receive GARs, there were no in-Canada JAS cases from 2014 to 2019 (IRCC, 2020c), suggesting that some settlement agencies may rely on other ways to support refugees with similar profiles beyond formal JAS sponsorship. In addition, only individual cases are referred, so the group referral process for the Kosovars

was not repeated with the Yazidis or other groups.

The numbers have also declined because of challenges in recruiting sponsors. According to a representative from IRCC, in recent years, less than 50% of JAS cases (both overseas and in-Canada referrals) have been matched with a sponsor. The government is trying to address this issue. For overseas referrals, if a sponsor is not found after four months, the case is sent back to the migration officer, who decides whether the applicant(s) can be resettled as a GAR (IRCC, 2020a). For in-Canada referrals, if a sponsor is not found after four months, IRCC and the local settlement agency continue to work together to provide financial and settlement supports as needed, but refugees do not benefit from the additional social support of a sponsor.

Finding JAS sponsors is challenging for several reasons. First, sponsors face competing demands. Beyond major resettlement initiatives like the Syrian initiative, sponsors are primarily motivated to facilitate family reunification through PSR (Labman & Pearlman, 2018). In the 1990s, sponsors had the option to name refugees for consideration under JAS (Canadian Council for Refugees, 1997), which may have motivated some sponsors to participate. However, now all referrals for the program come from UNHCR, making it a "sponsor-the-stranger" program. Brian Dyck, the national migration and resettlement coordinator for Mennonite Central Committee Canada, explained in an interview that the sponsorship community largely sees resettlement as "two commitments": the first to the PSR program driven by Canadians wanting to reunite with refugee relatives, and the second to UNHCR-referred refugees, which involves the GAR, BVOR, and JAS programs. A "limited pool of groups" is interested in sponsorships of UNHCR-referred refugees, with the same groups considering

both BVOR and JAS. The RSTP's bulletin to sponsors from April 6, 2018, asked sponsors to consider 114 BVOR cases, 44 VOR cases, and 38 in-Canada JAS cases. Within the same year, the government set a target for the sponsorship of 18,000 PSRs (IRCC, 2017d). Sponsorship Agreement Holders, who supervise the majority of sponsorships in Canada without government funding and often without paid staff, and individual sponsorship groups need to balance demands from the PSR, BVOR, and JAS programs.

Other challenges in recruiting sponsors are unique to the program. Because of the small numbers in relation to Canada's overall resettlement commitments, the absence of public statistics, minimal public information, and a lack of promotion, JAS is not very well-known among the sponsorship community and is essentially invisible to the broader public. In addition, prospective JAS sponsors "are advised to demonstrate that they have sufficient experience to accommodate the refugee's special needs and that their community offers settlement services that are well-suited to the particular needs of the refugee" (IRCC, 2017c). Many potential sponsors may not have the experience, time, or capacity to support JAS refugees, or they live too far away from specialized medical facilities or other services. Given that JAS is a "GAR-plus" program that includes the initial reception services provided to GARs, sponsors need to be located in one of the limited number of cities with a GAR-receiving program. The BVOR program has been particularly popular among sponsors in small and rural communities outside of GAR-receiving cities (McNally, 2020), but these sponsors would not be able to participate in JAS. For in-Canada referrals, refugees are already living in one of the GAR-receiving cities, limiting the pool of potential sponsors even further to those living in that city. Sponsors

may also be reluctant to support refugees who have already arrived in Canada as GARs. Overall, the government cannot always rely on a pool of sponsors who are available, interested, equipped to support complex needs, and located in the right cities.

In contrast to the social model of disability (Oliver, 2013), which emphasizes societal barriers over individual characteristics, the JAS program continues to frame "special needs" primarily as a list of individual characteristics, such as disability, family size, or trauma. Limited consideration is given to how societal barriers make resettlement especially difficult for certain refugees or how in some cases, resettlement policy may reinforce these barriers. A good example is how separation from extended family members and friends exacerbates challenges for vulnerable refugees. Examining the case profiles promoted to potential sponsors (RSTP, 2021), over one third (34%) of the in-Canada and overseas referrals include single mothers. It is evident from the profiles of in-Canada referrals that these GARs lack extended family and other social networks. For 23 (26%) of the cases referred after arrival in Canada, the profiles explicitly mentioned newcomers feeling isolated. One profile explains that the mother is struggling with "her responsibilities of raising four children alone in an unfamiliar environment. She has no extended family in Canada who are able to support her." Other individuals arrived in Canada as single adults without any family members. One newcomer "does not have any friends or family with her and often feels isolated as a result of her medical conditions." Another suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder that is said to be exacerbated "by the lack of family support in Canada."

It is possible that for some refugees referred to JAS, extended family reunification would better address their lack of kinship networks. GARs are at a disadvantage for accessing extended family reunification, since they do not have a sponsorship group who could potentially facilitate family reunification through the PSR program (Morris et al., 2021, p. 143). One of the lessons learned from the Kosovar initiative was the benefit of bringing extended families together and reunifying families quickly (Abu-Laban et al., 2001; Treviranus & Casasola, 2003, p. 193). This lesson has not been fully integrated into Canadian resettlement practice. Examining why refugees are referred to JAS can move beyond simply identifying "special needs" to exploring what barriers these refugees face and how best to address these barriers.

CONCLUSION

Since 1980, the Joint Assistance Sponsorship Program has welcomed refugees alongside Canada's other resettlement programs, yet it has been largely overlooked. This article has presented an overview of the program's historical development and current challenges. Initially, JAS was designed to facilitate admission to Canada for refugees whose "special needs" would otherwise make them inadmissible and to provide social support upon arrival. With the shift to refugee selection based on vulnerability, the role of JAS in admission became irrelevant, though that role may still be relevant in other national contexts with more restrictive selection criteria. The program has supported individuals of various nationalities and demographics, including women at risk, single mothers, and refugees with disabilities. The Kosovar initiative showed the potential to support larger groups, while the initiative to welcome Yazidis and other survivors of Daesh raised questions about whether JAS could be expanded in similar future initiatives.

This paper has provided a foundation for future research on JAS by situating the pro-

gram within Canada's resettlement system, past and present. More broadly, the existence and development of the JAS program shows that resettlement models can be equally public and private, contributing to the international debate about the role of public and private actors in resettlement and sponsorship programs. The unique combination of government financial assistance, professional settlement services, and informal sponsor support arguably draws on the strengths of each partner while minimizing concerns about the privatization of resettlement. However, the future sustainability of this program is unclear. Today, JAS competes with other Canadian resettlement programs, especially BVOR, for the attention and time of potential sponsors. With limited public information about JAS, no comprehensive statistics, and minimal research, it is difficult to promote participation to potential sponsors or to assess whether it represents a promising model for other countries exploring sponsorship.

Given that this study primarily examined policy documents and policy-makers' perspectives, future research into the program should prioritize the perspectives of those directly involved in JAS sponsorships: refugee newcomers, sponsors, and settlement workers. Future research may also consider the multi-faceted reasons that lead refugees to require support under the JAS program, such as separation from kinship networks and social service limitations. In addition, the government should consider publishing JAS statistics each year and formally evaluating the program to recognize the contributions of sponsors, publicize the program, assess its strengths and weaknesses, and clarify its role within the Canadian resettlement system.

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