

Impact of Transnational Family Separation on Parenting and Psychosocial Well-being of Black African Migrant Parents in Hamilton

Tsinat Semagn, Ingrid Waldron, Allison Williams, Olive Wahoush



Presented by: **Tsinat Semagn, BScN, RN, MSc**
Mary Heersink School of Global Health and Social Medicine,
McMaster University

November 24, 2025

Land Acknowledgement

We are gathered here today in Mi'kma'ki, the traditional land of the Mi'kmaq people. I am grateful for this land for being a gathering place for us today to connect and share knowledge to improve resettlement experiences of migrants from different backgrounds and facilitate harmonious living between newcomers and Indigenous peoples.

Positionality Statement

I am an Ethiopian-Canadian able-bodied and cis-gendered woman and first-generation immigrant. My lived experience as a newcomer is now layered with my academic training as a nurse and Master of Science in Global Health graduate. My positionality is rooted in lived experience, but my advanced training provides the language and credibility which increases my power to influence change in policies and systems.

Outline

1. Introduction
 - a. Key terms
2. Background
 - a. Historical context
 - b. Scoping review gaps
 - c. Research question and objectives
3. Methodology
 - a. Demographic characteristics
4. Results
5. Conclusion
 - a. Limitations and contributions



OIL REFINERY INTRODUCTION

Key Terms

- Family
- Transnational family separation
- Migrant
- Psychosocial well-being
- Sub-Saharan Africa
- “Healthy immigrant effect”



Regions of Sub-Saharan Africa



■ Economic Community of West African States
■ Nigeria ■ Other Sub-Saharan Africa ■ South Africa

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service.

What is sub-Saharan Africa?

- Acronym: SSA
- Region below the Sahara Desert comprised of 46-**49** of the 54 countries in Africa
- Most people living in this region identify as Black and are referred to as **Black Africans** (preferred identification due to implied inferiority associated with the term SSA) (Kajula & Chachage, 2022)

“Healthy immigrant effect”



Describes the change in the health of migrants *after* they settle in a new country. Migrants tend to arrive with better health than those originally living in the host country but their health decreases with time because of stressors involved with migration (attributed to SDOH)

O2

BACKGROUND



Quick Historical Context in Canada and Africa

In 1911, an Order-in-Council barred "any immigrants belonging to the Negro race" (Schwinghamer, 2021) (later rescinded)

Pre-1970s

- Migration from countries in Africa was intra-national or within continent to be able to return home as soon as possible
- Migration to Western countries was rare and usually for educational pursuits

Post-1970s

- Post-independence era
- Migration to Western countries increases due to political unrest and economic instability

What about now?

- Economic immigrants form majority
- Since 2011, African-born Black Canadians have *outnumbered* Caribbean-born Black Canadians for the first time (Statistics Canada, 2024)

Transnational Black African families in Canada

- In 2016, the proportion of immigrants in Hamilton was roughly the same as the national average, despite it being a “second-tier” city
- **Nigeria** is the most common country of origin for African newcomers in Hamilton (2021 Hamilton Census)



Village of Love Canada, n.d.

- Black African migrant families face many barriers to family reunification
- Wait time to reunite with families in Canada (King, 2017)
 - African refugees: 23 months
 - Other refugees: 12 months

Scoping Review Findings

1. Psychosocial well-being or “health” as a culturally embedded concept	Health is understood subjectively. Often, spirituality is interwoven into definitions of health. Subjective understanding of illness leads to misunderstandings with clinicians
2. The politicization of health and its impact on psychosocial well-being	Political discourse around how certain conditions should be treated creates stigma (for HIV, autism) or affects how resources are allocated, affecting emotional and social health for Black African migrant parents
3. Generational dynamics and parenting challenges	Older and younger parents face some unique stressors related to parenting
4. The interplay of trauma and resilience in the resettlement journey	Trauma from their home country carry over into the host country and manifests symptomatically in different ways
5. Agency and resourcefulness.	Leverage informal support systems to respond to specific needs when formal systems fail (e.g. tontines).

Scoping Review

Studies in smaller communities and medium-sized cities in Ontario are needed, since most were located in Toronto.

Perspective of parents separated from their children should also be explored

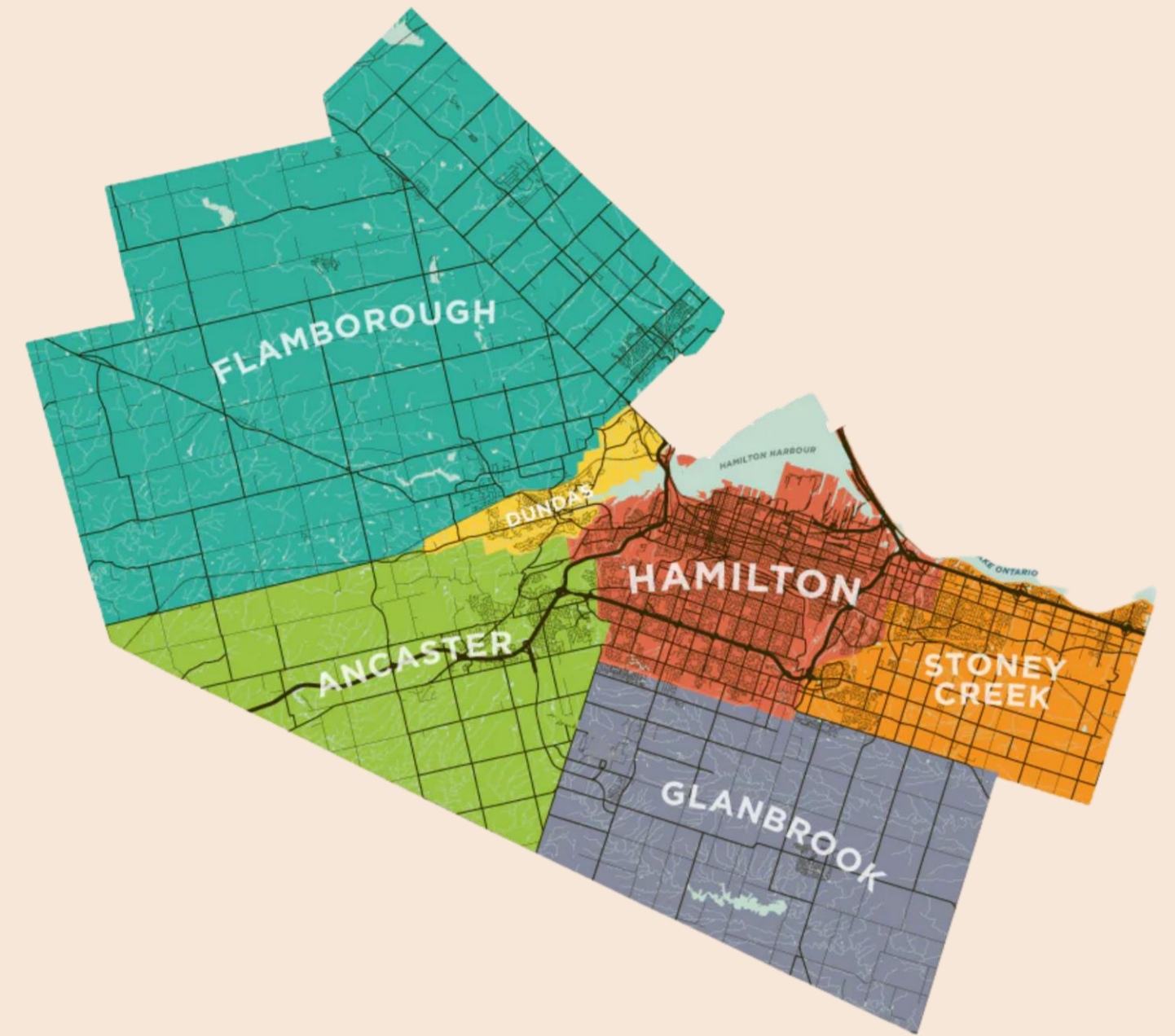
Lack of studies in Ontario focusing on migrants from Western and Southern Africa (about psychosocial well-being)

Parents on study permits neglected in studies in Ontario

Qualitative Study

Qualitative Study

Research question: In what ways does transnational family separation affect the psychosocial well-being of migrant parents from SSA living in Hamilton, Ontario?



03

METHODS



Qualitative Study Methodology

1. Descriptive statistics of participants ($n = 150$) in Hamilton database of National study
2. Maximum variation sampling
3. Recruitment and informed verbal consent
4. Semi-structured virtual interviews
5. Thematic analysis



Demographic Characteristics

- 9 parents
 - 7 from Nigeria, 1 from Uganda, 1 from Sudan
- All identify as Black
- 23.3 months in Canada (average)
- 2.8 children (average)
- 40.5 years old (average)
- Most Christian
- Most economic immigrants (55%) or international students (33%)



O4 RESULTS



Themes

1) Impact of Migration and Family Separation
Stress on Psychosocial Wellbeing

2) Shifting Identities Within Parenting Roles

3) Complexities in Navigating Various Systems
in Canada

4) Adaptive Responses to Stress Caused by
Family Separation and Unmet Basic Needs

Themes

1) Impact of Migration and Family Separation Stress on Psychosocial Wellbeing

"There's also a mental challenge because people back home have certain expectations about your success abroad, and not meeting those expectations can be very disheartening. They often view any difficulties as excuses rather than real challenges."

04 (Nigerian, female, married, international student)



Family separation and cultural expectations intensify grief, anxiety, and isolation (emotional/mental)



Migrant parents face tension between integrating in Canada and meeting family expectations back home (social)



High living costs and credential barriers force many into survival roles, prioritizing basic needs over careers (financial/material)

Themes

2) Shifting Identities Within Parenting Roles

“Taking care of kids here is totally stressful and working...In Uganda, we used to have someone alongside. You could say, ‘Okay, go to your auntie, or your cousins, or the neighbours.’ But here, no neighbours, no friends. Just you, and you alone....In Uganda, kids can even go play around unattended, and nobody would question it...”

03 (Ugandan, female, married, immigrant)



Family separation
reshapes parenting
roles and spousal
dynamics



Loss of community
support intensifies
parenting stress in
Canada



Reunification and
intergenerational
influences create
tension in parenting
approaches

Themes

3) Complexities in Navigating Various Systems in Canada

“The approval [for me] to come here, it didn’t take much time, but for my husband to come here, 5 years. We applied together in 2019. He got approved 2023.

09 (Sudanese, female, married, refugee)

“A couple of times, I’ve attempted to get my family down here... I tried in January, applying for them to come in. But with the new government policy in full force, I didn’t succeed... That moment was a real low point for us as a family. The kids were already so happy, thinking they were coming...”

10 (Nigerian, male, married, international student)



Family separation magnifies stress when navigating Canadian systems



Limited, delayed, or culturally mismatched services deepen emotional and financial strain



Immigration policies prolong reunification, undermining family stability and psychosocial well-being

Themes

4) Adaptive Responses to Stress Caused by Family Separation and Unmet Basic Needs (Daily Stressors)

"We suffer. Men suffer in ways that... we can't... because we have to keep it together."

07 (Nigerian, male, married, immigrant)

"Another thing is thinking about the good memories you have together and making calls... Like when my mom was still alive... I could always call her....That actually helped me cope with the separation."

02 (Nigerian, female, married, international student)



Parents rely on individual coping strategies like acceptance, gratitude, and self-care to manage separation stress



Communal networks and faith-based communities provide belonging, mutual aid, and emotional support



Discursive coping through faith helps parents regulate emotions and sustain hope despite challenges

O5

CONCLUSION

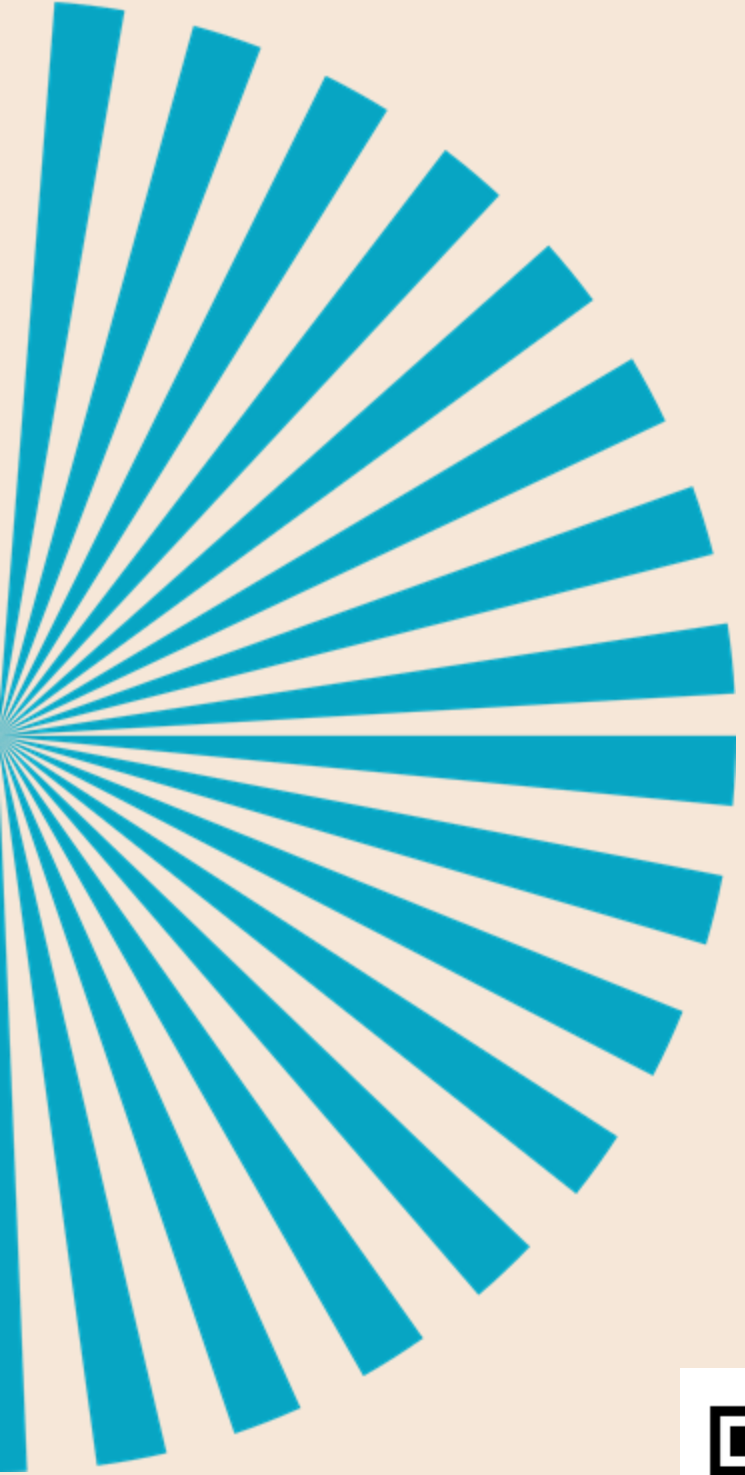


Limitations

- Small sample size and limited diversity of countries
 - Interviews and literature search only in English language
- Findings can suggest association between family separation and psychosocial well-being but cannot be confirmed without quantitative statistical analysis

Contributions

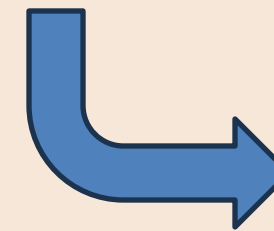
- Identifies crucial connections that can inform **policy and service provision**, specifically for senior care, mental health support, and maternal health, HIV care, and food banks.
- Improved pre-migration training to improve preparedness
- Highlights important gaps for future research, such as transnational grief and its effect on parenting for Black African families



THANK YOU!

Email: semagnt@mcmaster.ca

Connect with me on LinkedIn!



**Link to scoping
review:**



References

Gervais A., & Hansen J. Regions of sub-Saharan Africa. U.S. Department of Agriculture. 2022. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/chart-gallery/gallery/chart-detail/?chartId=104805>

Kajula, L. & Chachage, C. (2022). Whither 'Sub-Saharan Africa' Can We Use the Compass Instead? *CODESRIA Bulletin Online*, No. 14. <https://doi.org/10.57054/cb320222809>

Newbold, B. (2006). Chronic Conditions and the Healthy Immigrant Effect: Evidence from Canadian Immigrants, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 32(5), 765-784. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830600704149>

Semagn, T., Waldron, I., Williams, A., Qureshi, S., & Wahoush, O. (2025). The psychosocial well-being of sub-Saharan African migrant parents in Ontario: a scoping review. *Discover Public Health*, 22(1), 323.

Statistics Canada. (2024). *The diversity of the Black populations in Canada, 2021: A sociodemographic portrait*. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/89-657-x/89-657-x2024005-eng.pdf?st=Mv_JmuxP