HOW THE EXPERIENCES OF SYRIAN, YAZIDIS, AND AFGHANS CAN INFORM US ABOUT RESETTLEMENT HOUSING

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This article leverages findings from our previous research on Syrian and Yazidi refugees and current survey data from a longitudinal study on Afghan cohorts to elucidate several housing challenges faced by these vulnerable populations after landing in Canada, both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. We highlight how the persistent issues of household overcrowding and unbalanced rent-to-income ratios, as well as Afghan refugees' expressed dissatisfaction with resettlement housing services, collectively contribute to the financial burden of rent experienced by this vulnerable population. Suggestions for the government and the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) agencies to address refugee housing issues are presented in this article.

INTRODUCTION

Securing reliable housing represents a crucial initial step in achieving successful settlement and integration for resettled refugees in host countries. [1,2] (Christ 2020; Sherrell 2017). Without appropriate housing, the integration process is slowed and less optimistic. Drawing upon the resettlement experiences of previous Syrian and Yazidi refugees and our current data on Afghan cohorts,[3,4,5] the present article investigates the housing challenges encountered by these three groups of displaced people who arrived to Canada at different times and under varying conditions. Our goal is to enhance the general public's awareness of refugees' difficulties in accessing affordable and stable housing during the already demanding international migration process. We advocate for alternative and innovative approaches to tackling the systemic problems in Canada's housing market to improve refugees' resettlement experience.

BACKGROUND

The number of people at risk seeking asylum in the global north has grown enormously in recent years due to intrastate/interstate conflict, political persecution, or human rights violations (UNHCR 2021). Research has extensively stressed that providing adequate, affordable housing is paramount in facilitating vulnerable refugees' successful resettlement and integration in receiving countries.[6,7] In Canada, notwithstanding the augmented housing assistance for asylum claimants at the federal level,[8] refugees in the country still encounter obstacles to securing suitable accommodation and meeting the associated costs in terms of rent and utilities.[9,10] Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Canada had already exhibited the lowest rate of new housing starts among the Group of Seven (G7) countries.[11] Contrary to popular belief, the housing crisis is not a new phenomenon; it was already apparent to economists and other economic observers since the early 1990s.[12] Today, politicians and media are quick to link and blame immigration, both temporary and permanent, for these long-standing issues. These are, in turn, promoted by public/political discourse and subscribed to an increased number of Canadians — exacerbating these preexisting social problems and creating additional barriers for newcomers to integrate into the host society.

FINDINGS

ARRIVING DURING A PANDEMIC: CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY AFGHAN REFUGEES

Data collected for our current project involving Afghan refugees reveal that seeking stable housing that simultaneously met their size and space requirements was challenging. When asked to rank the severity of their resettlement challenges, housing ranked #3 and was identified by (13.4%) as problematic regarding their initial resettlement to Canada. Additionally, nearly half (48.6%) of participants claimed receiving more affordable housing options was among their top urgent needs

1 Christ, Simone. The Key to Successful Integration of Refugees in Germany: Language Skills, Housing, Work, Social Participation. Bonn: Bonn International Center for Conversion (BICC), 2020.

2 Sherell, Kathy. "Access to Housing in Canada." In *Structural Context of Refugee Integration in Canada and Germany, edited by Annette Korntheuer, Paul Pritchard, and Débora Maehler, 67–72. GESIS–Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences, 2017.

3 Wilkinson, Lori, Jihad Othman, Abdul-Bari Abdul-Karim, Chenyu Liu, and Kezia Wong. "The Experiences of Arrival and Resettlement of Afghan Refugees to Canada During the COVID-19 Pandemic-Interim Report." Forthcoming. Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada.

4 Wilkinson, Lori, Pallabi Bhattacharyya, Annette Riziki, and Abdul-Bari Abdul-Karim. "Yazidi Resettlement in Canada-Final Report 2018." Technical Report. Ottawa: Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada, 2019.

5 Wilkinson, Lori, Joe Garcea, Pallabi Bhattacharyya, Annette Riziki, and Abdul-Bari Abdul-Karim. "Resettling on the Canadian Prairies: Integration of Syrian Refugees." Calgary: Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada, Integration Branch-Prairies and Northwest Territories Division, and Alberta Association of Immigrant Serving Agencies, 2017.

6 Ager, Alastair, and Alison Strang. "Understanding Integration: A Conceptual Framework." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21, no. 2 (2008): 166–91.

7 Strang, Alison B., and Neil Quinn. "Integration or Isolation? Refugees' Social Connections and Wellbeing." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 34, no. 1 (2021): 328–53.

8 Government of Canada. "More Federal Housing Support for Asylum Claimants." July 18, 2023. Accessed July 22, 2024. www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2023/07/more-federal-housing-support-for-asylum-claimants.html

9 Wilkinson et al., *Technical Report*. Ottawa: Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada.

10 Wilkinson et al., Calgary: Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada, Integration Branch-Prairies and Northwest Territories Division, and Alberta Association of Immigrant Serving Agencies.

11 Perrault, Jean-François. "Estimating the Structural Housing Shortage in Canada: Are We 100 Thousand or Nearly 2 Million Units Short?" Scotiabank, 2021. Accessed July 22, 2024. www.scotiabank.com/ca/en/about/economics/economics-publications/post.other-publications.housing.housing-note.housing-note--may-12-2021-.html

12 Macdonald, David. "Canada's Housing Bubble: An Accident Waiting to Happen." Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA), 2010. Accessed August 13, 2024. https://policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2010/08/Canadas%20Housing%20Bubble.pdf

when considering their resettlement in Canada. Correspondingly, securing suitable housing and paying rent was the second most frequently identified issue (58.7%) that Afghan refugee respondents and their families genuinely encountered after arrival in the host country.

HOUSEHOLD CROWDING ISSUES AND A SCARCITY OF EXTENDED GOVERNMENT SPONSORSHIP

Despite all the housing support provided to the refugees in Canada, evidence has shown that low incomes and high rental costs continue to represent a significant challenge.[13] Issues including finding affordable housing relative to the size of the family unit, proximity to schools, employment and integration services, and other problems have been identified by previous research.[14,15,16] Affordability is a major concern, especially since most refugees are reliant on payments from the federal government or their private sponsors during their first two to five years in Canada. The shelter-to-income ratio, a method developed by Statistics Canada[17] in order to help determine the "affordability" of accommodation, suggests that families devoting more than 30% of their monthly income towards rent are in a crisis.[18] In the case of recent Afghan refugee arrivals, arriving during a pandemic exacerbated the issue of affordability of accommodation, perpetuating household overcrowding problems because of the low number of affordable units available, poor employment outlook and the looming recession which greeted them upon their arrival to the country.

Our survey of Afghan participants included several open-ended questions in which many participants elaborated on their challenges. Many respondents stated that it was challenging to live with several family members together in a crowded accommodation and simultaneously manage the high living costs (e.g., paying rent and utility bills) once the limited-term sponsorship from the federal government ended and they transited to provincial social assistance. More specifically, one Afghan refugee identified the severe overcrowding situation in their home and the financial strain their family faced: "Our rent is so high, and we are living [with] 14 family members in one house and paying $6,000 rent if we don't have IRCC support, so that is very difficult for us." Another respondent's statement echoes the earlier quotation concerning household overcrowding and a lack of adequate government sponsorship in housing:

> "I had a lot of trouble [finding] a house because my family was eight people, and for this number, there are many problems, and the government gives us very little money."

The combination of financial difficulties and the urgent need for extended government sponsorship in housing is also prevalent among the respondents with no large family. One Afghan refugee indicated:

> "After one year of support from the Government of Canada, a number of families like mine are under stress about how we survive and manage life, especially the rent for residence."

The conjunction of overcrowding issues and high rates of housing expenses is prevalent not only among recent Afghan arrivals but also among Syrian and Yazidi cohorts who landed in Canada before the COVID-19 pandemic. Our previous research found that of the Syrian refugees in Alberta and Saskatchewan, approximately 15% of the population expressed that their accommodations were too small for their crowded households.[19] Another 10% of Syrian respondents residing in Alberta and Manitoba were concerned about paying the rent as they perceived it as expensive based on their limited incomes without receiving continuous economic support

13 Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). "Evaluation of the Resettlement Programs (GAR, PSR, BVOR and RAP)." Ottawa: IRCC-Evaluation Division, 2016. Accessed July 22, 2024. www.canada.ca/content/dam/ircc/migration/ircc/english/pdf/pub/resettlement.pdf

14 Francis, Jenny, and Daniel Hiebert. "Shaky Foundations: Refugees in Vancouver's Housing Market." *The Canadian Geographer*, 58, no. 1 (2014): 63–78.

15 Sherell, Kathy. "Access to Housing in Canada." In *Structural Context of Refugee Integration in Canada and Germany*, edited by Annette Korntheuer, Paul Pritchard, and Débora Maehler, 67–72. GESIS–Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences, 2017.

16 Wilkinson, Lori, Jihad Othman, Abdul-Bari Abdul-Karim, Chenyu Liu, and Kezia Wong. "The Experiences of Arrival and Resettlement of Afghan Refugees to Canada During the COVID-19 Pandemic-Interim Report." Forthcoming. Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2016.

17 Statistics Canada. "Shelter-Costs-To-Income Ratio." *NHS Dictionary*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2016. Accessed July 22, 2024. www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/ref/dict/households-menage028-eng.cfm

18 Wilkinson, Lori, Pallabi Bhattacharyya, Annette Riziki, and Abdul-Bari Abdul-Karim. "Yazidi Resettlement in Canada-Final Report 2018." Technical Report. Ottawa: Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada, 2019.

19 Wilkinson, Lori, Joe Garcea, Pallabi Bhattacharyya, Annette Riziki, and Abdul-Bari Abdul-Karim. "Resettling on the Canadian Prairies: Integration of Syrian Refugees." Calgary: Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada, Integration Branch-Prairies and Northwest Territories Division, and Alberta Association of Immigrant Serving Agencies, 2017.

from the federal government.[20]

Resonating with the housing challenges faced by Syrians, Yazidis similarly experience the issue of affordability and suitability of housing in Canada. Wilkinson and Bhattacharyya[21] elaborate on how the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) income support provided to Government Assisted Refugees (GARs) is insufficient to cover the Yazidi families' housing expenses and other costs for life necessities. They indicate that because of these affordability issues, a considerable number of Yazidi refugees in Canada are confronted with acute overcrowding in their current accommodations, with multiple families or unrelated individuals sharing confined living spaces, which inevitably results in suboptimal living conditions. These conditions last a long time, over five years. As proof, their study uncovers how a widowed refugee mother of six resides in a crowded two-bedroom apartment while another single female in Calgary lives with seven individuals in a three-bedroom unit.[22]

LOW SATISFACTION WITH THE HOUSING SETTLEMENT SERVICES

As a project aiming to inform migration and refugee resettlement policy innovations, some of our survey items were designed to comprehensively evaluate the settlement services provided to Afghan refugees since they arrived in Canada. In examining their quality and Afghan refugees' satisfaction, nine settlement services ("Services from the Federal government," "Settlement and immigration services," "Mental health," "Interpretation/translation," "Housing," "Health and medical services," "English language learning," "Employment and/or skills training," and "Education for children.") offered to be respondents were measured on a five-point Likert scale. Our findings reveal that 23.8% of Afghan refugees rated the quality of housing-related settlement programs as poor; it ranked second among the least satisfactory services they received after arriving in Canada. One Afghan refugee expressed their disappointment with the housing resettlement service providers:

> "Because I left [name of a Canadian city], I was not given any kind of expenses. I had to come to [name of a Canadian city] at my own expense, and because of this, they said that you came to [name of a Canadian city] as a random reader; they did not even help me find a house…They didn't even give me a place to stay. I had to live in my brother-in-law's small house to find a house. There were 18 of us living in three rooms."

The findings here starkly contrast with Yazidi refugees' largely positive rapport with the resettlement service providers they interacted with in four studied Canadian cities.[23] Ziersch, Due, and Walsh[24] contend that culturally appropriate and satisfied resettlement services and resources are inseparable from mitigating refugee housing issues in Australia. Given the insights into the poorly rated housing resettlement services received and experienced by recent Afghan refugee arrivals in Canada, it is no wonder that accommodation-related challenges are frequently cited by the respondents in our survey.

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated how an unbalanced shelter-to-income ratio and a lack of extended governmental sponsorship compound the household overcrowding issues encountered by Syrian, Yazidi, and Afghan refugees in Canada. We have also articulated that external factors like large household sizes and the impact of COVID-19 exacerbate the Afghan refugees' financial burden of rent, even though the Canadian government has made efforts to provide housing support. Furthermore, the refugees' dissatisfaction with the offered housing settlement services hinders them from securing affordable accommodation in the host country. It is thus imperative to inform policy innovations that mitigate these housing challenges to better assist the refugees already in Canada and the upcoming new arrivals in integrating successfully into the host society.

First, we recommend that the Canadian government extend the duration of federal housing support for refugees upon their arrival in Canada and increase the funding for provincial social assistance programs. This approach can increase the likelihood that more refugees and their families will be able to secure affordable housing beyond the initial resettlement period and simultaneously offer them a smooth transition before landing a decent job with a salary that can sufficiently afford the related expenses. Second, we suggest that building upon the augmented financial assistance, RAP agencies promote culturally sensitive events and individualized housing support services that can not only be utilized to address the specific needs for suitable accommodation of different refugee populations but also facilitate their overall

20 Ibid.

21 Wilkinson, Lori, Pallabi Bhattacharyya, Annette Riziki, and Abdul-Bari Abdul-Karim. "Yazidi Resettlement in Canada-Final Report 2018." Technical Report. Ottawa: Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada, 2019.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Ziersch, Anna, Clemence Due, and Moira Walsh. "Housing in Place: Housing, Neighbourhood and Resettlement for People from Refugee and Asylum Seeker Backgrounds in Australia." Journal of International Migration and Integration 24 (2023): 1413–36.

integration process. Finally, we urge public and private institutions to help promote the acquisition of open-mindedness and acceptance of Otherness to address the misconceptions about newcomers' impact on the Canadian housing market.

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