EXITING HOMELESSNESS: COMPARING FOREIGN BORN AND CANADIAN BORN INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES OVER TIME

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The Panel Study on Homelessness in Ottawa is one of only a few Canadian studies to investigate longitudinally the experiences of diverse individuals who were homeless upon initial contact. In earlier reports and articles, we described key components of the study, including significant differences in the characteristics of respondents who were born in Canada and those who were not. In this essay, we report on what happened to these individuals over time, drawing upon both quantitative and qualitative components of the study (Klodawsky et al, 2004; Klodawsky et al 2005; Klodawsky et al, 2007).

Very briefly, after interviewing 412 individuals in five approximately equal size subgroups (single men, single women, adults living with at least one child under 16, male youth and female youth) in 2002/03, we followed up with 255 of the same individuals two years later. Our goal was to explore the extent to which individual, interpersonal, and community-level resources contributed to a successful exit from homelessness, and to assess the relationship between housing stability and health. The relationship of respondents' sex, age, family status and citizenship to successful exits, was also explored.

As Table 1 summarizes, the proportion of Canadian born to foreign born respondents remained roughly comparable at the second interview. And, when we compared multiple characteristics of Phase 1 and Phase 2 respondents, few significant differences emerged, although the tendency for Phase 2 respondents to have lived in Ottawa for a longer period of time suggests the possibility of a smaller proportion of recently arrived newcomers at Phase 2 than at Phase 1.

In the study overall, 76% of respondents were considered stably housed at the time of the second interview by virtue of having been in their own housing for 90 or more days. However, significant variability in housing stability emerged among the subgroups. Almost all the families (97%) were housed and had been housed for longer periods (avg. = 646 days) than those in other groups. Conversely, less than half of the single men (47%) had exited homelessness and, on average, they had been housed for a shorter period (avg. = 265 days) than the others. Adults in families at 77% and single women at 47% were the two subgroups most likely to report living in subsidized housing. In contrast, no men reported living in subsidized housing (Aubry et al, 2007).

The average number of moves per year for respondents, in the period between the initial and follow-up interviews, was also calculated. Adults in families were the most stable group: 53% reported moving only once within the two year period, typically from an emergency shelter into permanent housing. Single women were less stable than families but more stable than the other subgroups, with an average of approximately 1.5 moves per year. Single men, and male and female youth were more frequent movers, reporting an average of 2 or more moves per year.

There were similar results when the average number of new homeless episodes per year between interviews was examined. Adults in families reported significantly fewer new episodes of homelessness than did any of the other subgroups. Only six of the 58 adults in families (10%) experienced homeless episodes after being housed, and each of them experienced only one episode of homelessness. In contrast, 33 of the 48 male youth (71%) experienced homelessness during the study period after being housed, and 15 of these individuals (31%) experienced two or more homeless episodes. These results are in keeping with the overall findings of the study which indicate that adults in families tend to be the most stably housed of the subgroups (Aubry et. al., 2007).

TABLE 1

	Phase One	Phase Two – Respondents	Phase Two – Non-Respondents
Canadian Born	313 (75%)	197 (77%)	116 (74%)
Foreign Born	99 (25%)	58 (23%)	41 (26%)

As indicated in the earlier reports, the foreign born respondents predominantly consisted of adults with children and single women. While the Canadian-born

group consisted of approximately equal numbers of women and men, among the foreign-born group, 79% were women. These foreign-born women included 84% of the refugees and 74% of the immigrants that were interviewed. Many of them were mothers living with their children – in fact, foreign born respondents included 53% of all of the adults with children in the overall sample.

As such, their housing trajectories reflected the relative success in the study of single women and particularly, adults with children to exit homelessness. However, the question remains: is country of origin a factor in the relative success of Canadian born and foreign born respondents who have been homeless and then found stable housing? To answer this question, we compared a sample of foreign born study participants with a sample of Canadian born participants matched in terms of sex, age, and family status. When we compared these samples of foreign-born respondents (n=46) and Canadian-born respondents (n = 46) with regard to three characteristics – housing stability, number of moves per year, and number of days housed – there were no statistically significant differences between the two groups' (see Table 2).

TABLE 2

	Housed 90 days or more	Number of moves/year	Number of days housed
Foreign Born N=46	85%	1.2	545 days (74% of study period
Canadian Born N=46	79%	1.5	494 days (65% of study period)

We also examined the relative success of immigrants and refugees and, based on comparisons between 13 refugees and 13 immigrants, matched by age and sex, and again found that there were no statistically significant differences (see Table 3). However, we caution that this is a weak analysis based as it is on very small numbers.

TABLE 3

	Housed 90 days or more	Number of moves/year	Number of days housed
Immigrants N=13	92.5%	0.9	571 days (75% of study period
Refugees N=13	92.5%	1.04	612 days (84% of study period)

Nonetheless, these results reflect the broader statistical findings in the study as a whole. Despite the considerable diversity of respondents, among individual differences only sex and family status were able to predict who achieved housing stability at follow-up. Otherwise, the most significant explanatory variables were level of income and access to subsidized housing (Aubry et al 2007).

As well as these quantitative analyses, the Panel Study also incorporated a qualitative component. Based on individuals' own responses, it is clear that foreign-born and Canadian-born respondents become homeless for somewhat similar reasons, mostly having to do with economic barriers and family conflicts. Among the latter though, being new in Canada adds additional levels of stress and challenge, as the following quotes indicate:

> *The reason that I am here is I couldn't find an affordable place to rent. Also, I am new to this country and that makes things more difficult. I did try to find an affordable private place, but I couldn't find one (Adult in Family, ID 505).*
>
> *Her mother died back home, and her Uncle lived here in Canada. Was only surviving relative, so she moved here so that he could take care of her, only he can't take care of her, so she became homeless (Youth Female, ID 478)*

Also consistent among respondents is the variability in how and why social services are beneficial. Many foreign-born respondents reported the equally important albeit distinctive, roles of housing, legal aid and public health supports when asked about how services are helpful. For example, for refugees, Reception House and Immigrant Women Services were particularly important but other services also were appreciated. According to one woman from Ethiopia:

> *I was working in the embassy and I was being abused by my employer. A friend told me about Immigrant Women's Services and they helped me to escape. I am now in a shelter for abused women, they are very helpful. St. Jœs - computers; workshops; meals; shelter; Housing Help for info (Adult Woman, ID 144).*

The key finding from this analysis is that the ability to find stable housing after being homeless is affected by gender and family status, regardless of country of origin. This is the case mostly because governmental rules that govern access to vital resources such as income support and subsidized housing, also differ on this basis. In Ottawa, access to subsidized housing is much easier if you are homeless with a child than if you are alone, or if you are a single woman with a mental illness or someone who is fleeing domestic abuse. Much of Ottawa's supportive and supported housing is specifically for individuals with

severe and persistent mental illness and thus provides a route for accessing subsidized housing. In addition, priority status for social housing is available to individuals, usually women, escaping spousal abuse. Despite the significant differences between foreign born and Canadian born respondents in terms of health, education and ethnicity, what seems to count has much more to do with individuals' ability to access income and subsidized housing than it dœs with their country of origin.

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