LEGAL STATUS, PLACE, OR SOMETHING ELSE? THE HOUSING EXPERIENCES OF REFUGEES IN WINNIPEG AND VANCOUVER[1]

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ABSTRACT

The housing difficulties facing many low income Canadians today is well documented. For newcomers, and particularly refugees, these challenges may be amplified. This paper considers the influence of legal status and place in the housing outcomes of government-assisted refugees and refugee claimants in Vancouver, BC and Winnipeg, MB. Results from the study indicate that while claimants in Vancouver face a more difficult 'pathway to permanent housing' than do government-assisted refugees, the same is not true in Winnipeg. More alarmingly, certain refugee groups face barriers beyond legal status and place, owing to characteristics of the group itself.

The housing difficulties facing many Canadians today is well documented: inadequate social assistance rates, falling vacancies, rising rents, and a decline in the stock and construction of social housing, have contributed to affordability challenges faced by low income households in Canadian cities (*cf.* Hulchanski 1997; Murdie 2004). For newcomers, and particularly refugees, these challenges may be amplified by limited English language proficiency, a lack of (recognized) human capital and scarce financial resources (Hiebert et al. 2005; Murdie and Teixiera 2001). Following calls from Renaud, Piche and Godin (2003) for attention to the specificity of refugee settlement, researchers have demonstrated refugee claimants face a more 'difficult pathway to housing' than do sponsored refugees, including government-assisted and privately-sponsored refugees (Murdie 2008, 2005; *cf.* Sherrell et al. 2008; Rose and Ray 2001). To date, much of this research has been constrained to the context of one city or one group; yet, multiple geographical dimensions are inherently implicated in housing outcomes.

Drawing upon 20 key informant interviews and 80 interviews with refugees conducted between March and September 2007, this paper considers the influence of legal status and place in the housing outcomes of government-assisted refugees (GARs) and refugee claimants (RCs) in Vancouver, BC and Winnipeg, MB. Previous research has identified differential access to social capital and settlement services owing to legal status as a key factor in settlement and housing outcomes (cf. D'Addario et al. 2006; Murdie 2008; Ray 1998). After briefly examining the current housing situation of GARs and RCs in Winnipeg and Vancouver, this paper explores the influence of social capital and barriers to housing in both the public and private housing markets that influence housing outcomes of refugees in Vancouver and Winnipeg. In so doing, it asks the question of what influences housing outcomes: is it legal status, place, or something else? Results from the study indicate that while RCs in Vancouver face a more difficult 'pathway to permanent housing' than do GARs, the same is not true in Winnipeg. More alarmingly, group characteristics emerge as significant barriers to housing among some GARs.

Forty refugees were interviewed in each city, with an effort to interview equal numbers of GARs and RCs.[2] Afghanistan and Sudan were the top two countries of origin for GARs, while Mexico and Somalia were the top two countries of origin for RCs in the study.[3] With the exception of refugee claimants in Winnipeg the majority of respondents are female and arrived with other members of their family. By contrast, refugee claimants in Winnipeg were more likely to be young males who arrived by themselves. Respondents in Winnipeg arrived more recently than those in Vancouver, a finding more pronounced among GARs than RCs. The level of education differed significantly between the two groups: while GARs in both cities were more likely to report having either no formal education or not attended beyond primary school, RCs overwhelmingly reported having attended or completed either high school or post secondary studies.

INCOME SECURITY AND HOUSING OUTCOMES: THE DIFFERENCE LEGAL STATUS MAKES

> *"If you want to rent a house you need a job. But without Canadian experience you can't get a job, so you can't get housing" (Abuali)*

For respondents, questions about housing are intricately linked to issues of employment and income security. High unemployment and reliance on government transfers (e.g. Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) and provincial social assistance) are prevalent among respondents in Winnipeg and Vancouver, particularly for government-assisted refugees. Approximately 70% of all respondents interviewed in this study were not employed at the time of the interview. More troubling, many have never obtained employment in Canada. Participants identified a number of familiar obstacles to employment, including: English language barriers, problems of foreign credential recognition, lack of Canadian job experience, unfamiliarity with Canadian job finding methods and, for refugee claimants, SIN tagging.[4] In spite of increased access to settlement services that include language programs, lack of English language proficiency was identified by GARs in Winnipeg and Vancouver as the most important barrier to obtaining employment. Those who are illiterate in their first language face even greater challenges in learning English. For refugee claimants, delays in obtaining work permits, a process which may take as long as five months, left many feeling they were in a state of prolonged limbo, unable to work or attend school. Those respondents who obtained employment often did so in low paying jobs with limited security, no benefits and little opportunity for advancement.

Over half of all respondents lived in households dependent upon provincial social assistance as the primary source of income.[5] Almost 75% of Afghan GARs reported living in households dependent upon social assistance; when RAP is included the proportion increases to 90% overall and 100% in Winnipeg. At the time of the research a single, employable individual dependent upon social assistance in Winnipeg would receive $466 per month, while in Vancouver the same individual would receive $610 a month (MFSH 2007, MHSD 2007). In Canada, housing is considered affordable if it accounts for <30% of monthly household income, yet high rental rates and inadequate social assistance benefits mean, households dependent on basic social assistance benefits in both cities are forced to allocate between 58% to 115% of annual household income on housing.[6]In Winnipeg average housing costs account for 58% – 90% of annual social assistance benefits, while in Vancouver recipients allocate 95-115% of social assistance income to housing. While these rates draw upon basic social assistance rates and average rents, they provide additional insight into the barriers facing the high number of households in the study who are dependent upon social assistance as the primary source of household income. Those households who receive Canada Child Tax Benefit (CCTB) are forced to use those funds for food, clothing, and other necessities.

The difficult financial situation of newcomer households is reflected in current housing outcomes: affordability is a central concern for respondents, regardless of legal status or city of settlement. Three-quarters of all respondents did not meet national affordability standards (NAS) at the time of the interview.[7] The proclivity of households to experience housing stress or critical housing stress – defined as spending upwards of 31% or 51% of monthly household income on housing respectively – varied according to both city and legal status. Although fewer households were experiencing housing stress in Vancouver than in Winnipeg, owing in large part to the increased tendency for Sudanese GARs to be meeting NAS, the affordability problems were more severe. Alarmingly, almost one in five respondents in Vancouver allocates over 75% of monthly household income on housing, leaving them at significant risk of absolute homelessness. Refugee claimants in both cities were most likely to be experiencing critical housing stress. As vacancy rates decline and rents continue to increase in both cities it has become more difficult to procure adequate and affordable housing.[8] Anecdotal evidence suggests that staying with friends has become much more common because it is getting harder to find housing within limited social assistance budgets.[9]

Overcrowding and pooling of incomes are two of the ways in which households attempt to reconcile low incomes and high housing costs. Although overcrowding was evident in all groups it was most prominent among Afghan GARs in both cities, many of whom have larger than Canadian average households. Over 70% of Afghan participants reported households of 6 or more persons. Refugees claimants in Winnipeg were the least likely to be experiencing overcrowding; in many cases RCs in Winnipeg frequently spoke of renting a one (or in some cases two) bedroom apartment with one other person. In contrast, RC households in Vancouver frequently spoke of renting single rooms in houses. One family of three, for example, rented two rooms in a house (for which they were charged $700), while another family of three was charged $800 to rent one room in a house in Burnaby. In both cases the houses themselves were shared with upwards of ten other residents. Another respondent spoke of having shared her initial housing (a one bedroom apartment in Vancouver) with six other roommates, while another family of four rented a 7' x 10' room when they

first arrived. The extent to which these strategies have successfully enabled families to cope with the challenges of obtaining adequate and affordable housing remains to be seen. Although a number of households in both cities reported pooling (adult) incomes to make housing more affordable, all but one continue to experience significant affordability problems. Further, (critical) housing stress and overcrowding are often concurrent conditions, with families of 6 or more renting a one or two bedroom apartment.

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND ACCESS TO SETTLEMENT SERVICES: THE DIFFERENCE PLACE MAKES

While GARS in both Vancouver and Winnipeg receive a similar level of services (e.g. orientation services, temporary accommodations, one year of RAP funding), the same is not true for refugee claimants. Unlike RCs in Vancouver, RCs in Winnipeg have access to the same orientation services and temporary accommodations available to GARs.

The majority of respondents have been able to access assistance in obtaining housing (e.g. temporary accommodations, assistance in finding permanent accommodations), information and transportation. Findings from the 2005 *Study on the Profile and Extent of Absolute and Relative Homelessness among Immigrants and Refugees in the GVRD* (Hiebert et al. 2005) indicate that refugee claimants were less likely to have access to established social networks upon arrival, a condition associated with more precarious housing situations. The ability to access social capital in Vancouver continues to be differentiated according to legal status. While 90% of GARs interviewed have been able to obtain assistance from family, friends and/or co-ethnics to find housing, the same is only true of 9 of the 18 RCs interviewed. Although the extent to which RCs in Vancouver have accessed social networks is higher than may be expected by the findings of the 2005 study, it is important to note that the assistance received was overwhelmingly short-term and geared towards meeting immediate needs (e.g. initial shelter).

In Winnipeg, the capacity of newly arrived RCs to access social capital may be amplified by the ability of refugee claimants to access temporary accommodations, financial assistance and full orientation services immediately upon arrival. Provision of these initial services provides a stable base from which to look for housing and connect with existing co-ethnic communities. In contrast, RCs in Vancouver experience a gap between arrival and ability to access services such that recently arrived RCs are left with no immediate financial and/or housing assistance. Consequently, while RCs in Winnipeg reported high levels of assistance, refugee claimants in Vancouver were the least likely of all respondents to report having access to social networks. In the absence of pre-existing social networks and a lack of information upon arrival, RCs in Vancouver are reliant on chance encounters (e.g., with taxi drivers, people on the street) to obtain information about where to get help or how to find housing.[10]

Proximity to family, friends and co-ethnics was a central concern for GARs in both cities with respect to reasons for initially choosing the housing, as well as staying in that location. In Winnipeg, nearness to service agencies and employment is an important consideration for RCs seeking to minimize transportation costs, and is reflected in the concentration of RCs in low quality housing within the Downtown core. In contrast, the pressure of finding housing, frequently in the absence of information and assistance, has meant that many RCs in Vancouver have settled wherever housing is found regardless of location. The propensity of claimants in Vancouver to report having found their housing by walking around and 'knocking on doors' of places advertising vacancies meant they were the most dispersed of all participants. The search for affordable housing, however, has meant that many of the respondents in Vancouver, both GARs and RCs, have had to move far from the primary refugee-serving organizations. Lower housing costs, however, have been accompanied by higher transportation costs for those respondents needing to access services (both settlement and CIC) in person, aggravating an already difficult financial system.

BARRIERS TO ENTRY: PUBLIC AND PRIVATE MARKET HOUSING

Challenges in reconciling low incomes and expensive rents, cited by respondents as the most significant challenge in obtaining housing, are exacerbated by barriers arising in both the public and private rental markets. While access to social housing was greater in Winnipeg, owing to a larger stock of housing particularly in the downtown core, respondents in Vancouver face long waitlists for social housing. Households attempting to alleviate high housing cost burdens by renting smaller, more affordable units face difficulties owing to strict adherence to national occupational standards, which regulate the number and age of persons sharing a bedroom, in the public, and to a lesser extent private, housing markets.[11] For large families in both cities these difficulties are compounded by the combination of limited supply and low turnover among 4 and 5 bedroom units.[12] Other problems arise for multi-generational families and households with children over 18 who are accustomed to living together, yet prohibited by rules in social housing units.

While rental assistance programs are in place in both Manitoba and BC to aid low income families in reducing housing cost burdens, those receiving Income Assistance, and/or living in subsidized accommodations are not eligible (MFHS 2006a, 2006b; BC Housing 2006a, 2006b). Further, in BC applicants must have been a resident of the province for the full twelve month period directly preceding the application (BC Housing 2006b).

Strict adherence to national occupancy standards, lack of stock of adequately sized housing and long waitlists in the public housing market are aggravated by the sporadic and unequal application of national occupancy standards within private rental market. Landlords and building managers in the private and to a lesser extent the public, housing markets play a significant role in shaping housing outcomes among respondents.

While refugees in both cities spoke of the difficulties of obtaining adequately sized housing, respondents in Vancouver frequently encountered informal 'no children' rules in many buildings. In spite of signs advertising vacancies households with children were repeatedly told no units were available. In some cases, landlords openly informed respondents that they would not rent to families with children, while in others landlords refused to rent units above the first floor to families with children owing to the potential for noise complaints from neighbours and excessive wear and tear on the units. Reflecting on the difficulties encountered in trying to procure housing one respondent noted that 'the most incredible thing is that they prefer to accept pets not children.' As vacancy rates have fallen in both cities it appears that landlords have more freedom to select tenants, exacerbating an already difficult situation for low income families, particularly those with many children, to obtain housing. For GARs in both cities, access to a housing search assistant was integral in obtaining housing as the individual was able to advocate on their behalf; RCs in Vancouver, however, have no access and were most likely to report problems with no children policies. For many, the result was living in overcrowded, and frequently substandard, housing, particularly in unregulated basement suites.

Problems with landlords, while cited by GARs and RCs alike in both cities were more pronounced amongst RCs. While GARs were more likely to speak of problems with landlords revolving around failure to (promptly) complete repairs, RCs spoke of more abusive relationships. In Winnipeg, problems with landlords involved racist comments or actions, and taking advantage of newcomers. While in Vancouver complaints about landlords centred upon respondents being asked to sign contracts from landlords requiring the tenant to pay for repairs.

LEGAL STATUS? PLACE? OR SOMETHING ELSE? THE ALARMING HOUSING EXPERIENCES OF AFGHAN GARs

Low employment participation, high housing prices and insufficient social assistance rates mean that GARs and RCs are experiencing significant housing affordability problems in both Winnipeg and Vancouver, a problem that is most severe in Vancouver.

Previous research on the housing trajectories of refugees in Vancouver, Montreal and Toronto have found refugee claimants face a more difficult pathway to permanent housing owing to factors associated with their legal status. Lack of information and limited access to social capital, for example, have been associated with more precarious housing situations among these groups (cf. Murdie 2008, 2005; Sherrell et al. 2008; Rose and Ray 2001). Results from Winnipeg problematize these findings. Not all RCs face significant difficulties in obtaining adequate and affordable housing, a finding which points to the need for consideration of local variation in the provision of settlement services, and housing environment. While the results of the research confirm RCs in Vancouver face a more difficult pathway than do GARs, access to temporary accommodations, financial assistance and settlement services immediately upon arrival provide claimants in Winnipeg with a stable base from which to make connections to existing community and find permanent accommodations. RCs in Vancouver experience greater difficulties owing to lack of information and support on arrival. While GARs tend to fare better overall, some groups face difficulties owing to characteristics of the group itself. This finding underscores the need for more equal settlement environment across Canada, as well as the benefits of early assistance.

While findings such as the higher affordability problems in Vancouver and differing outcomes of GARs and RCs point to the importance of legal status and provincial context in housing outcomes, characteristics of particular groups emerged as a new concern. Consideration of the experiences of Sudanese and Afghan GARs in Vancouver suggests that while place plays a key role in housing outcomes (e.g. the effects of an unforgiving private rental market in Vancouver), certain groups face barriers beyond legal status and place, owing to characteristics of the group itself. Those households with larger than Canadian average families; low literacy; health concerns; single headed households experience barriers that are difficult, if not impossible to overcome. Access to English language classes and/or employment, for example, is difficult for single mothers of large families. Further, in Vancouver group characteristics intersect with local context (low vacancy rates, rising rents, small stock of 4 and 5 bedroom units) to create additional problems for large households.

The shift in admission groups arising from the 2002 implementation of the Immigrant and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA) has resulted in increased number of GARs matching this description. Alarmingly, the experiences of (post-IRPA) GARs in both cities require further consideration. In light of the expectation for low employment outcomes amongst 'high needs' GARS there is a need to reconsider the provision of financial assistance. If Canada is to continue accepting 'high needs' refugees as our humanitarian commitments require, it is not ethical to continue providing insufficient support to enable long-term integration.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND AREAS OF FUTURE RESEARCH:

Current housing situations: income security and housing outcomes

1. The current waiting period to obtain working permits is problematic. There is a need to eliminate the waiting period for work permits so as to facilitate the ability of RCs to obtain employment and achieve financial self-sufficiency.
2. Low employment participation among the majority of participants is a significant cause for concern. Given the simultaneous need for Canadian experience it would be beneficial to provide some type of employment training in conjunction with English classes so as to enable newcomers to practice what they are learning.
3. Low employment expectations among 'high needs' GARs necessitates consideration of new approaches to service delivery and the development of new programs and approaches (e.g., pre-literacy programs).
4. Require access to affordable housing either through housing units or subsidies. Yet, while Rental Assistance Programs (RAP) is in place in both provinces, access is limited by occupancy requirements (1 year) and the limitation that no part of household income is obtained from social assistance). While some GARs have achieved financial self-sufficiency the one-year occupancy requirement is problematic for newcomers.

Settlement services and social capital

1. The provision of settlement services, temporary accommodations and immediate financial assistance to refugee claimants in Winnipeg is beneficial in providing a secure foundation from which to begin the refugee claim process and integration into the wider community. At the minimum, refugee claimants in Vancouver should be given access to immediate financial assistance and settlement services to assist in obtaining housing in Vancouver.
2. There is a need among respondents for up-to-date, accurate and easily accessible information about housing, including information on housing availabilities, areas of the city, and the rights and responsibilities of both tenants and landlords. Whenever possible this information should be available in first language.

Barriers to housing in public and private housing markets

1. The National Occupancy Standards are used by landlords in both public and private housing markets to regulate the size and composition of households. Yet these standards were developed with culturally specific understandings of the nuclear family, an understanding which may not be suitable for families arriving in Canada. As such there is a need to reconsider the NOS, giving consideration to alternative understandings of family (e.g. multigenerational living, adult children) as well as the ways in which these standards may be used to deny housing.
2. The role of landlords and building managers in influencing housing outcomes is an under-researched area that requires further consideration.

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NOTES

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[2] While efforts were made to restrict participants to GARs and RCs, a small number of interviews were conducted with privately sponsored refugees (PSRs); the responses of these 4 individuals have been omitted from analysis.

[3] To facilitate analysis on the effect of place, attempts were made to interview the same groups in each city; difficulties in identifying RCs from Mexico led to recruitment of Somali claimants in Winnipeg. The ability to interview Afghan participants in both cities enabled a more detailed, group specific analysis.

[4] SIN numbers beginning in '9' indicate temporary status. While employers may not be aware of the meaning, respondents asserted SIN tagging influenced whether or not they were hired.

[5] In recognition that gender may influence workforce participation (e.g. owing to childcare requirements) source of income has been examined at the household level.

[6] Data on average rents in Vancouver and Winnipeg CMAs are drawn from CMHC Rental Market reports (CMHC 2007a, CMHC 2007b).

[7] Individuals who were unsure of their household monthly income or who had no permanent accommodations at the time of the interview have been excluded from analysis and subsequent discussion of issues of housing stress.

[8] While rents themselves may not be unaffordable, the additional burden placed on households by high utility costs pushes some into critical housing stress and/or forces them to move into less expensive and frequently lower quality, accommodations. Problems associated with mould, broken windows, unsafe piping, cockroaches and mice were examples reported by respondents in both cities.

[9] Three participants in this research were homeless at the time of the interview; each was staying with friends.

[10] The November 2008 introduction of First Contact in Vancouver promises to reduce this problem by increasing the availability of information to refugee claimants.

[11] According to the National Occupancy Standard (CMHC 1991), housing is considered suitable if there are sufficient bedrooms for all of the household members. Cohabitating adult couples, unattached individuals 18 years of age and older, two same-sex children under 18, and two opposite-sex children five years of age and younger are permitted to share a bedroom under these regulations. It is understood that bachelor suites are meant to be occupied by one individual

[12] Of the 84,166 BC Housing units available in all of BC, for example, 1,621 are four-bedroom or more.