PRECARIOUS BEGINNINGS: THE HOUSING SITUATION OF CANADA'S REFUGEES

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ABSTRACT

The housing experiences of Canada's immigrants have been relatively well documented but much less is known about the housing situation of Canada's refugees. Recent research suggests that refugees, particularly in the initial stage of settlement, are less well housed and experience more affordability problems than immigrants. This article evaluates recent evidence concerning the housing situation of Canada's refugees, including the differential experiences of sponsored refugees and refugee claimants.

The housing experiences of Canada's immigrants, especially during the past decade, have been relatively well documented (see Murdie *et al.* 2006 for a review of this literature). Evidence from the 2001 census for Canada's three main immigrant-receiving centres (Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver) indicates that many immigrants attain homeownership in a comparatively short time period and that the housing situation of immigrants generally improves over time (Hiebert *et al.* 2006). However, immigrants often become homeowners by devoting a very large proportion of their household income on shelter, thereby leaving little for other essential expenses such as food and clothing. The success of some groups of recent immigrants in achieving homeownership has also been confirmed in various case studies, especially for Toronto (e.g., Ferdinands 2002; Oliviera 2004; Ghosh 2006). Nevertheless, there are differences between immigrant groups and many immigrants, especially renters, experience serious affordability problems (Murdie 2003 and 2004). These households are often stuck in deteriorating private rental buildings with few prospects for achieving a progressive housing career. In this respect, marginalized groups such as refugees are particularly at risk.

Much less is known about the housing circumstances of Canada's refugees. Refugees encounter many of the same problems integrating into a new society as other low-income immigrants but they face the additional emotional stress of being displaced from their homeland, usually under traumatic circumstances, and often arrive in Canada separated from their families. Many suffer mental and physical health problems. This article focuses on the housing experiences of Canada's refugees. As context, I first provide a brief overview of the country's refugees and then draw on recent research to examine their housing situation. Consideration is also given to the differential experiences of sponsored refugees and refugee claimants.

CANADA'S REFUGEES

Canada admits refugees under two major categories, sponsored refugees and refugee claimants (asylum seekers). Sponsored refugees are selected overseas and arrive in Canada through government or private sponsorship. The latter can include a faith community, ethnic association, labour union, or a group of individuals. Sponsored refugees receive permanent residence upon arrival and settlement assistance from the government or private sponsor. Refugee claimants enter Canada without refugee status and have their claim adjudicated in Canada, a process that can take many months or even years. In the meantime, they are allowed to work, attend school, and receive medical care. If their claim is accepted they can apply for permanent residence and include immediate family members in their application. Although all refugees experience challenges in the settlement and integration process, including the search for good quality and affordable housing, refugee claimants are especially vulnerable until their claim is accepted and they receive permanent status in Canada.

Between 2000 and 2007, Canada accepted an annual average of 8,000 government-assisted refugees and 3,200 privately sponsored refugees (Table 1).

In addition, an annual average of 26,000 refugees claimed refugee status, either at the border or within Canada. Since the 1980s, the flow of sponsored refugees has declined while the flow of refugee claimants has increased, especially beginning in the 1990s. During the past decade the number of sponsored refugees entering the country has remained relatively constant while the number of refugee claimants has varied widely from year to year. Important source countries during this period included Afghanistan, China, Columbia, Democratic Republic of Congo, India, Iran, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia, Sri Lanka, and Sudan. The countries of origin

TABLE 1:
Average Annual Flow of Refugees to Canada, 1980s-2007

	Government Assisted	Privately Sponsored	Refugee Claimants	Total Refugees
In the 1980s	12,400	9,000	13,800	35,200
In the 1990s	8,000	6,600	29,700	44,300
2000-2007	8,000	3,200	26,000	37,200

Sources: Canadian Council for Refugees, 2008: p. 4; Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2003; Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2007.

vary widely by year, largely as a result of geographic shifts in global conflicts. The vast majority of Canada's refugees settle in Ontario (50-60 percent) and Québec (25-30 percent). Toronto and Montreal are the major receiving cities. Concerning demographic and economic characteristics upon arrival, refugees tend to be slightly younger with lower levels of education than the general immigrant population (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2007). Consequently, they are at a disadvantage in finding well paying jobs and appropriate housing.

HOUSING SITUATION OF REFUGEES: EVIDENCE FROM LSIC

The Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada (LSIC) is arguably the most recent and comprehensive source of information about the housing experiences of Canadian immigrants and refugees. In contrast to retrospective studies that are conducted at a single point in time and ask respondents to recall their housing history, LSIC interviewed a sample of immigrants and refugees at three points in time. The first wave of respondents included a large sample (12,040) of immigrants and sponsored refugees, fifteen years and older, who arrived in Canada between October 2000 and September 2001 and had lived in the country for at least six months. Respondents were re-interviewed two years (wave 2) and four years (wave 3) after their arrival in Canada. For a variety of reasons, the number of respondents declined to 9,322 in wave 2 and 7,716 in wave 3. Data were collected on a wide variety of issues related to immigrant settlement, including housing. Hiebert and Mendez (2008) have recently analyzed all three waves of the LSIC housing module. The data in Table 2 provide a perspective on the experiences of sponsored refugees compared to the total sample of immigrants and refugees for waves 1 and 3 of LSIC, six months and approximately four years after arrival in Canada.

With respect to demographic characteristics, the average size of sponsored refugee households was considerably larger than the total LSIC sample, with little change between waves 1 and 3. The majority of both sponsored refugee households and all immigrant and refugee households comprised a one family couple with children. However, refugee households were much more likely to include lone parent families, partially as a result of family separation and the consequences of spousal abuse, war, and violence in their home countries. Again, there was little difference between waves 1 and 3.

TABLE 2:
Selected demographic, economic, and housing characteristics, Canada's sponsored refugee population, based on waves 1 and 3 of the LSIC survey (six months and approximately four years after arrival in Canada)[1]

Variables	All LSIC respondents		Sponsored refugees	
	Wave 1	Wave 3	Wave 1	Wave 3
Demographic				
Average household size	3.6	3.7	4.4	4.3
% One family household, married couples with children	49.3	61.3	58.4	60.5
% One family household, lone parent	3.4	3.7	11.9	11.3
Economic				
% Individuals 18 years or older employed	45.3	68.3	22.1	56.3
Average family income ($)	18,192	53,157	10,945	33,735
Dwelling Tenure and Type				
% Owned	18.4	51.8	3.1	19.3
% Single detached[2]	30.1	32.4	11.9	13.3
% Low rise apartment[2]	21.8	20.4	42.8	37.2
Housing Suitability and Affordability				
% Crowded households[3]	23.4	15.0	39.9	30.4
% Tenants spending 30% or more of family income on shelter	73.9	39.3	85.2	51.7

Notes:
[1] Refugees include sponsored refugees but exclude refugee claimants. Refugee claimants were not included in the LSIC survey.
[2] Housing type data are for wave 2. LSIC did not collect data on housing type in wave 3.
[3] Crowded households include those with more than one person per room in a dwelling.
Sources: Hiebert and Mendez, 2008, Tables 3, 5, 7, 9, 12, and 14.

Concerning economic characteristics there were substantial differences between refugees and the total LSIC sample, especially in wave 1. In wave 1, only 22 percent of the refugee sample were employed compared to about 45 percent of the total sample. By wave 3 this differential had narrowed considerably: 56 percent of refugees were employed compared to 68 percent of the entire sample. In contrast, the data on average family income are not as encouraging for the refugee group. Although average family income for both groups in wave 3 was about three times their income in wave 1, average family income for refugees in wave 3 was about $20,000 less than the income of all immigrants and refugees ($33,735 versus $53,157). In part, this discrepancy may be attributable to the relatively large number of lone parent families with presumably only one income in the refugee sample.

The relatively weak economic position of the refugee group impacted their housing situation during the period of the LSIC study. As indicated in Table 2, sponsored refugees were much less likely than the total sample to become homeowners. Only about 3 percent of refugees owned houses in wave 1, compared to 18 percent of all immigrants and refugees. Many more members of both groups became homeowners by wave 3, but the differential between the two groups remained substantial, 19 percent of refugees became homeowners compared to 52 percent of the entire LSIC sample. Refugees were also less likely than the entire sample to live in single detached dwellings and much more likely to occupy low-rise apartments.

The differential between the two groups is also reflected in measures of housing suitability and affordability. In wave 1, almost 40 percent of refugees lived in crowded housing conditions compared to 23 percent of the total sample. By wave 3 both groups improved their position on the crowding indicator but almost one-third of refugees were still living in crowded conditions compared to 15 percent of all immigrants and refugees. A higher proportion of refugee tenants also spent more than 30 percent of their family income on shelter. In wave 1, 85 percent of refugee tenants were spending more than 30 percent of family income on shelter compared to 74 percent of the entire sample. Although these percentages declined by wave 3, just over half of the refugees were still spending more than 30 percent of their family income on shelter compared to 39 percent of the whole LSIC sample.

The results from the LSIC survey confirm that sponsored refugees lag considerably behind all immigrants and refugees in homeownership rates and acquisition of a single detached dwelling. Refugees also experience greater levels of household crowding and affordability. The affordability problem that immigrants, and especially refugees, continue to experience in Canada's major immigrant gateways is particularly worrying, a theme that has appeared in much of the literature as the primary barrier immigrants and refugees face in obtaining adequate and suitable housing, especially in high cost Canadian cities such as Toronto and Vancouver.

AFFORDABILITY IS THE MAJOR BARRIER

The difficulties faced by refugees in finding appropriate housing were first raised in the early 1990s in a brief but important study by the City of Toronto Housing Department (City of Toronto 1992). Since then a number of city-specific studies have explored the housing experiences of refugees. The most recent include an evaluation of the role of housing in the settlement of successful refugee claimants in Montreal (Rose and Ray 2001), an analysis of the housing experiences of a group of Afghan refugees in Kitchener-Waterloo (Bezanson 2003), a survey of absolute and relative homelessness of immigrants and refugees in Greater Vancouver (Hiebert *et al*. 2005; D'Addario *et al*. 2007; Sherrell *et al*. 2007), a comparison of the housing experiences of Angolans (mostly refugees) and Mozambicans (non-refugees) in Toronto (Teixeira 2006), a detailed comparative study of the housing experiences and meanings of home for refugee claimants in London (UK) and Toronto (Kissoon 2007), a two-year longitudinal study of the housing experiences of recently arrived refugees in Winnipeg (Carter *et al*. 2008), and a comparison of the experiences of sponsored refugees and refugee claimants in accessing permanent housing in Toronto (Murdie 2008).

Together, these studies conclude that affordability is the major barrier facing newly arrived refugees in their search for good quality housing, even in Montreal and Winnipeg where rents are relatively low compared to Toronto and Vancouver. Many refugees are not working or only working part-time and therefore incomes are very low. Due to long waiting lists for a limited stock of social housing most refugees have to rely initially on the private rental sector. Compared to other immigrants and the general population refugees spend an inordinately high proportion of their income on shelter with the result that little money is left for other essentials such as food and clothing. In addition to affordability, poor-quality housing, safety, and racial and cultural discrimination were frequently mentioned as concerns. Overcrowding is also an issue because refugees often share accommodation as a strategy to obtain secure and affordable housing. The consequences, however, are loss of privacy and additional stress.

Evidence from Toronto and Winnipeg indicates that over time refugees improve their financial position, housing situation, and housing satisfaction (Murdie 2008; Carter *et al*. 2008). Affordability improved considerably in

Winnipeg, where housing costs are relatively low, but in Toronto, where rental costs are higher, about three-quarters of the respondents were still paying more than fifty percent of their household income on shelter. Thus, the success of refugees obtaining adequate and affordable accommodation is largely dependent on the characteristics of local housing markets. In the worst-case scenario refugees experience episodes of homelessness. For example, in Toronto, Kissoon (2007, 189) found that 67 percent of her refugee respondents were (materially) houseless and 60 percent felt (emotionally) homeless at some point since coming to Canada.

SPONSORED REFUGEES VERSUS REFUGEE CLAIMANTS

Evidence from Toronto indicates that refugee claimants experience a much more difficult pathway to housing than sponsored refugees, especially in the initial stage of settlement (Murdie 2008). Both groups faced challenges in finding permanent housing, including high rent, low income, source of income, and the need for a guarantor, but sponsored refugees were more likely to have friends and relatives in Toronto who could assist in the housing search and in some cases act as co-signer for an apartment. Not surprisingly, sponsored refugees obtained permanent housing much faster than refugee claimants – about one month on average versus an average of seven months for claimants. They were also much less likely to share accommodation and more likely to secure a unit in a high-rise apartment and settle in an area of co-ethnics who potentially provide social support. Sponsored refugees also lived in larger units. In contrast, claimants occupied a variety of less desirable dwelling types, including single rooms, basement apartments, and low-rise apartments. Claimants who made contact with settlement agencies obtained permanent housing more quickly than those who did not. For both groups, being able to show income, preferably from employment, was key to a successful search for permanent housing. Although both groups faced precarious beginnings in the housing market, sponsored refugees fared better than claimants.

Over time, refugee claimants improved their housing position and narrowed the gap with sponsored refugees, although their incomes lagged behind. Claimants increasingly occupied more spacious housing and fewer were sharing accommodation. They also moved into areas with more co-ethnics and a small minority obtained social housing. However, housing affordability remained the major problem for both groups. Only about 30 percent were working when interviewed. A majority of both groups spent over fifty percent of their income on shelter and both expressed considerable difficulty paying the rent.

CONCLUSION

Evidence from the limited number of Canadian studies shows clearly that refugees are in a precarious housing situation, at least in the initial stage of settlement. They are, as Zine (2002) puts it, "living on the ragged edges'. The major problem is low incomes and high housing costs that together result in serious housing affordability problems. Both sponsored refugees and refugee claimants experience affordability issues but claimants lack the supports available to sponsored refugees and face more serious problems finding suitable housing, at least in the initial settlement stage.

Participants from the studies reviewed in this paper suggested a number of short and long-term solutions. These include (1) workshops on how to search for and apply for housing, including decentralized mobile housing clinics, (2) a data base of landlords willing to rent to refugees, (3) accompanying refugees in their search for housing, (4) challenging and eliminating systemic discriminatory barriers in the housing market, (5) a start-up allowance to buy furniture and other household goods, (6) the development of more transitional housing that acts as a bridge and source of support between shelters and permanent accommodation, (7) portable rent supplements for private rental housing that are attached to the household rather than the housing unit, and (8) more social housing, including the development of culturally sensitive dwellings that recognize the specific needs of larger refugee households. The first three are being undertaken to some extent by immigrant settlement agencies, although fewer refugees than expected take advantage of the services that are offered. Implementation of these and other initiatives will assist the successful resettlement Canada's refugees and ease their precarious entry into Canada's relatively high-cost rental housing markets.

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