THE RESIDENTIAL CROWDING OF IMMIGRANTS TO CANADA

Michael Haan (University of Toronto)

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I argue for an increase in research activity in the area of immigrant residential crowding in Canada. I use the 2006 Census of Canada to suggest that crowding is too complex to label as 'good' or 'bad', and that future work should try to identify how we can distinguish when crowding actually reflects economic constraint.

If you were an immigrant in Canada in 2006, the odds that you lived in a crowded house (defined as one or more person per room[1]) were about 1 in 14; if you were Canadian-born, they were roughly 1 in 60. Residentially speaking, this is probably one of the biggest differences between immigrants (particularly recent immigrants) and non-immigrants,[2] but what is perhaps most interesting about this gap is that researchers don't agree on what exactly it means. Do immigrants have more people in their homes because they want to, or because they have to? Are immigrants crowding because they wish to save money for other things, like supporting family members (here or abroad), starting a business, buying a home, etc., or because they are cash-strapped and crowding to survive? Perhaps there are simply differences in definitions of personal space, so that 'crowded' is subjective and means different things to different groups of people.

Uncertainties like these make it difficult to develop a policy response, or to know whether one is even necessary. Part of the reason for the ambiguity around crowding is that it falls within the purview of housing, and housing in Canada is what Tom Carter calls a 'policy orphan'. Although researchers pay close attention to some housing topics (Enns 2005; Hiebert and Wyly 2006; Mendez, Hiebert, and Wyly 2006; Murdie 2002; Skaburskis 2004; Teixeira and Murdie 1997; Turcotte 2007), for one reason or another crowding has largely fallen through the cracks.

The primary purpose of this article is to: 1) further demonstrate that crowding isn't receiving the attention it deserves, 2) provide an overview and assessment of the potential explanations for the differences in crowding propensities between immigrants and the Canadian-born, and 3) highlight some of the specific knowledge gaps around residential crowding.

WHY CROWDING, AND WHY IMMIGRANTS?

Crowding is an interesting issue partly because it potentially holds both positive and negative consequences. On the positive side, living together in close quarters allows households to pool resources, thereby enhancing their access to things like more desirable schools, neighbourhoods, and business and investment opportunities (Ahrentzen 1996; Haan forthcoming; Van Hook and Glick 2007). In this regard, crowding could reflect an attempt to increase economic, occupational, social and residential mobility. This might be particularly true for immigrants, who often experience less-than-optimal returns to their education and work experience, and must therefore develop alternative strategies for success.

The list of negative outcomes is also lengthy, but could include poor mental health (Gove and Hughes 1983), lower life satisfaction (Gove and Hughes 1983), labour productivity (Hacker 1999), child academic performance (Evans, Lepore, Shejwal, and Palsane 1998 and Palsane, 1998), plus an increase in the risk of tuberculosis, shigellosis, and pneumococcal infections (www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/ccdr-rmtc/03vol29/dr2905ea.html).

Given this, it is important to look more closely at the household density characteristics of Canadian immigrants, and to try to identify why and when crowding occurs. Although there are groups other than immigrants that experience crowding (Aboriginal Canadians, lone parents, etc.), I'm going to focus on immigrants here for the following reasons:

1. Immigrants currently account for roughly 2/3 of Canada's population growth (Statistics Canada 2008), so what's happening with them will increasingly affect what happens in Canada as a whole.
2. It is well-known that Canadian immigrants have experienced pronounced declines in levels of labour market success (for a review, see Picot and Sweetman 2005), and given the negative outcomes associated with residential crowding it is important to determine if crowding should simply be added to the list of consequences of immigrant economic adversity, or if there is more to the story.

3. Given that there are also potential benefits to crowding, it represents an opportunity to study how immigrants employ unconventional strategies to secure social and economic benefits in the face of adversity.

In addition to these specific reasons is a more general motivation. Part of the agreement that we as a society implicitly strike with immigrants when they come to Canada is the unfettered access to the opportunities that the rest of the population already enjoys. Consequently, when differences between immigrants and the Canadian-born surface – particularly when the differences are as large as they are with crowding – it is vital for us as a society to determine whether we are witnessing a breach of our social contract.

MEASURING CROWDING

Before trying to explain the differences between immigrants and the Canadian-born presented in the introduction, it is first necessary to discuss how to measure crowding. The Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) uses what it calls the National Occupancy Standard (NOS) to measure whether or not a dwelling has sufficient space for its inhabitants (this it calls 'housing suitability' (Canada Mortgage and Housing Commission 1991)). The NOS is calculated by looking at how individuals are distributed across bedrooms, and requires that:

1. There are no more than two persons per bedroom
2. Parents have a bedroom that's separate from children
3. Members that are age 18 or older have their own bedroom unless they are married or living common-law
4. Children age 5 or older do not share a bedroom if they are of the opposite sex.

Although this is the 'gold standard' when it comes to measuring crowding, it has its limitations. Notably, it can be difficult to assess with most public-use data, and international comparisons across different data sources are often tricky.

Before the NOS, housing suitability was measured with the number of persons per room,[3] and a dwelling was considered to be crowded when it contained one or more person per room (where all rooms counted, not just bedrooms). Though it is more crude, it has the advantages of simplicity, transferability, and comparability. Researchers that are faced with data constraints, as I am here (it is not possible in the census file to determine who lives in a particular room), must often employ the less sophisticated measure.

CHANGES IN RATES OF RESIDENTIAL CROWDING OVER TIME: HUGE DECLINES FOR THE CANADIAN-BORN, LITTLE CHANGE FOR IMMIGRANTS

Prior to explaining the 2006 differences in crowding, it is useful to look at the trends over time, because the immigrant/Canadian-born differences didn't always exist. In 1971, both populations had crowding rates of about 1 in 13, and, if anything, immigrants had a slight edge over the Canadian-born. Since that time, however, the rate has been stable for immigrants (remember that it was 1 in 14 in 2006), but it has plummeted for the Canadian-born (to 1 in 60). In just 35 years, residential crowding among Canadian-born households has almost ceased to exist, alongside virtually no change for immigrants.

UNDERSTANDING RESIDENTIAL CROWDING: CULTURE VERSUS ECONOMY, OR CULTURE MEETS ECONOMY?

To understand change (or lack of change) over time, it is useful to place crowding in the broader theoretical framework that is often used in housing research (Baldassare 1995; Evans, Lepore, and Allen 2000; Kutty 1998; Myers, Baer, and Choi 1996; Myers and Lee 1996; Rosenbaum and Friedman 2004). Within this framework (a version of the basic consumer choice model), a household's dwelling characteristics are situated at the intersection of its needs, preferences, and (often fiscal) constraints. These characteristics shift over time, reflecting changes in the age composition, educational attainment profiles, marital status, family size, etc. within the household. It should therefore be possible to link a household's dwelling characteristics to its sociodemographic and household composition characteristics. Regarding immigrants, duration also usually matters, since there is often an initial mismatch between immigrants and their residential characteristics (Alba and Logan 1992; Haan 2005; Pitkin and Myers 1994).

As this relates to crowding, once sociodemographic and immigration characteristics are addressed, whatever differences in crowding that persist are usually attributed to economic constraint. This suggests that there is general agreement about what constitutes an appropriate amount of space per person, and that the occurrence of crowding represents a violation of this agreement. Households, be they immigrant or Canadian-born, would create more space for themselves if they could, and that they don't reflects economic hardship. As an extension of this line of thinking, any differences that exist between immigrants and the Canadian-born would also be due to differences in economic standing.

An alternative[4] framework involves a greater recognition of cultural differences (where culture is measured with race/ethnicity). Rather than posit crowding to be a

survival strategy in the face of economic constraint, cultural arguments question the notion that there is universal agreement about what constitutes an appropriate amount of space per person. The argument here is that there are group-specific preferences about how closely individuals, families, and communities would like to live to one another, and that household economic characteristics have little effect on this preference, so there will be group differences no matter what explanatory variables are used (Gillis, Richard, and Hagan 1986).

A third possibility, and one that I explore more fully below, is that it is not just culture versus economics that bear watching, but rather their interaction that is often important. Culture and economics could work together at times to produce different crowding propensities. Imagine, for example, that we have two households from two different, culturally distinct, groups. Further, suppose that each household faces economic hardship, but that neither is currently crowded. We might anticipate one (or more) of (at least) three reactions:

1. No change. Both households continue to live with economic constraint, and do not crowd.
2. One or more household member works longer hours to increase the financial resources of that household. Once again, there would be no change in crowding propensities.
3. The household supplements its income by accepting tenants (related or unrelated, same-group or of no connection at all). This would increase the probability of crowding.

Each of these options is plausible, and there are likely to be cultural patterns in which one we are likely to see. Consequently, rather than pit culture against economy to explain crowding, we might consider the *response* to economic situations to be an area where there are cultural variations.

If we accept this to be true, it is also quite possible that there are cultural differences in crowding even in the absence of absolute economic constraint (ie. when a household is not living below the low-income cutoff point). As mentioned in the introduction, households may use crowding for economic advancement, even when their currently situation dœs not reflect poverty or adversity. They may instead be using residential density to enhance opportunities in the present or future, and this too could vary by group.

To further assess this 'complementarity' perspective, I present some logistic regression results from 2006 census data below. I look first at how standard household demographic and economic variables predict crowding (1=one or more person per room, 0=less than one person per room). I only include members of select ethnic groups (those that identified as Chinese, Colombian, East Indian, Egyptian, Filipino, Iranian, Jamaican, Korean, Lebanese, Moroccan, Romanian or Russian in the census[5]) in the sample to illustrate how crowding propensities differ by group, even after controlling for the factors that are expected to explain most differences in dwelling characteristics. In addition to this, however, I include an indicator for tenure of dwelling in Model 1, because the desire and ability to own a home is both cultural and economic, and therefore allows me to explore the notion of complementarity. In Model 2, I elaborate on the relationship between tenure and crowding by including a series of owner*ethnicity interaction terms.

Most of the results in Model 1 are consistent with what we might expect to see under the basic framework discussed above. Crowding propensities decline as age, education, and time spent in Canada increase. Economic factors also matter, with not-surprising relationships between employment status, living below the low-income cutoff (Statistics Canada 1999), and crowding. There are also some differences across cities, with more expensive cities posting higher crowding propensities

Looking at the differences across groups, even after controlling for the factors above, all groups but Colombians, Egyptians, Iranians, and Lebanese differ significantly from reference group Chinese in their propensity to be crowded. This suggests that there are either other factors that predict crowding but are not mentioned in the model, or that there are cultural differences in the propensity to crowd (and that ethnic identifiers tap into cultural differences).

Tenure of dwelling, the final predictor in Model 1, negatively predicts crowding overall. Although this is consistent with the notion that crowding reflects some degree of economic constraint (assuming that households that own command more resources than those that rent), the owner*ethnicity interaction terms in Model 2 allow us to move beyond this general statement, and determine the extent to which this relationship differs by group. Of the 12 groups used for analysis, roughly half differ significantly from Chinese when they own. For some, such as Colombians, Filipinos, Jamaicans, and Moroccans, there is a significantly higher propensity to be crowded in owned accommodations than for Chinese, whereas for others (Egyptians, Lebanese, and Russians) the odds are lower. What is most interesting about these numbers is that they exist *after* controlling for differences in income, employment status, household composition, year of arrival, and a series of other relevant characteristics. For the remaining groups, there are no detectable differences.

What is also interesting about Model 2 is that, with the addition of interaction terms, it is possible to compare group-specific crowding propensities in rented dwellings (the ethnicity main effect) versus owned dwellings (the

TABLEAU 1: LOGISTIC REGRESSION RESULTS FOR PREDICTING THE RESIDENTIAL CROWDING

	Model 1 odds	Model 2 Odds
2+ Adults without Children	0.264 ***	0.264 ***
2+ Adults with Children	Réf.	Réf.
Lone Parent	0.182 ***	0.185 ***
Age	0.994 ***	0.994 ***
Less than Highschool	Réf.	Réf.
Highschool	0.818 ***	0.817 ***
Post-Secondary	0.641 ***	0.639 ***
University Degree	0.541 ***	0.539 ***
Currently in school	1.312 ***	1.313 ***
China	Réf.	Réf.
Colombia	0.787	0.706*
East India	1.648 ***	1.776 ***
Egypt	1.102	1.393 *
Fillipino	1.902 ***	1.854 ***
Iran	1.072	1.107
Jamaican	0.660 ***	0.614 ***
Korea	1.414 ***	1.493 ***
Lebanon	0.969	1.036
Morocco	0.653 ***	0.622 ***
Romania	0.300 ***	0.320 ***
Russia	0.618 ***	0.755 *
YSM	1.032 ***	1.032 ***
YSM2	0.998 ***	0.998 ***
Enemployed	1.086	1.085
Lives in poverty (below LICO)	1.356 ***	1.358 ***
Montreal	1.398 ***	1.403 ***
Toronto	1.591 ***	1.591 ***
Vancouver	1.536 ***	1.536 ***
All other CMAs	Réf.	Réf.
Owner	0.239 ***	0.249 ***
Owner*Colombia		1.614 ***
Owner*East India		0.875
Owner*Egypt		0.564 **
Owner*Fillipino		1.167 ***
Owner*Iran		0.942
Owner*Jamaican		1.274 ***
Owner*Korea		0.891
Owner*Lebanon		0.828 ***
Owner*Morocco		2.479 ***
Owner*Roumania		0.798
Owner*Russia		0.447 ***
BIC	-1442407	-1442315
Observations	127813	127813

Source: 2006 Census of Canada

interactions). Although there are either no detectable differences for either owned or rented dwellings for Iranians, several groups (notably Colombians, Jamaicans and Moroccans) have lower crowding propensities than the Chinese in rented dwellings, but *higher* propensities in dwellings that they own. For others, the opposite is true; East Indians, Koreans, and Romanians only seem to differ from Chinese when they rent. Others are similar to Chinese when they rent, but different when they own (the Lebanese stand out in this regard).

THE POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF RESIDENTIAL CROWDING RESEARCH

What these results begin to suggest is that groups relate to crowding differently, and that labeling crowding as something that is always good or bad, cultural or economic, loses some of its meaning. It is conceivable that some groups bundle up because they want access to benefits that would otherwise be unobtainable (in addition to home ownership, we could add a long list of other opportunities to the list). At the same time, however, it is not unimaginable that, if these groups were satisfied with their earnings, their access to credit, and other aspects of their financial situation, their differences would be more slight.

These results also highlight the ambiguity around what crowding represents and, at this point, what should be done about it. Demonstrating the interaction between culture and economy is in many ways only the beginning of an adequate explanation. Follow-up studies (many of which would be best done with field research) could look at the reasons behind group-specific differences. Why, for example, do Moroccan owned households have higher adjusted rates of crowding than the Chinese, while their rental units are less likely to be crowded? Why are rented (but not owned) East Indian dwellings significantly different from the Chinese?

Answering questions like these will no doubt point policymakers in different directions. Some of these directions may require no policy response at all, whereas others could highlight numerous potential responses (enhanced support for new arrivals, more transitional housing, etc.). In our era of evidence-based social policy, however, it is important to first identify the factors behind a policy-relevant occurrence before responding to it.

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NOTES

[1] All statistics in this paper refer to urban areas only, where the overwhelming majority of Canadian immigrants live. Consequently, "Canada" is used as shorthand throughout the paper to refer to the country's Census Metropolitan Areas.

[2] As only two instances of the similarities, consider that immigrant homeownership rates (though falling) are currently

very close to those of the Canadian-born, and median dwelling values for immigrant owners are about $50,000 higher than they are for the Canadian-born across Canadian census metropolitan areas.

[3] Where a room is defined as it was by Statistics Canada for the 2001 census. Partially divided L-shaped rooms are considered to be separate if they are considered as such by the respondent (e.g. L-shaped dining-room and living-room arrangements). Not counted are bathrooms, halls, vestibules and rooms used solely for business purposes.

[4] Consumer choice research not related to housing often now has a cultural component built into it, and I'm following the conventions within the crowding literature with this division between culture and economy, even though it is now somewhat outdated.

[5] My choice of groups is somewhat arbitrary, although I did try to select groups with a significant number of recent arrivals. Please contact me for more information on how I created these (or any other) variables.

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