HOUSING CONSIDERATIONS FOR REFUGEE FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN

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Housing is one of the major foundations for settlement, and for large families, the challenge of finding appropriate accommodation can be difficult. Results from a survey of Syrians arriving to Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba indicate that affordability and the shelter-to-income ratio is particularly problematic for newly arrived refugee families.

Le logement est l'une des principales fondations de l'établissement, et pour les familles nombreuses, le défi de trouver un logement approprié peut être difficile. Les résultats d'une enquête menée auprès de Syriens arrivant en Alberta, en Saskatchewan et au Manitoba indiquent que l'abordabilité et le ratio du revenu au logement sont particulièrement problématiques pour les familles de réfugiés nouvellement arrivés.

For refugees "housing represents the foundation upon which settlement unfolds" (Sherrell, 2017: 67), and is an essential factor for successful settlement and integration. Everyone, including refugees, has a right to safe housing, which is an important facet of adequate housing. After all, Canada has pledged to uphold the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and *the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* as two documents in which the right to safe housing for everyone is enshrined. Given the likelihood that the worldwide crisis of displaced persons is unlikely to end soon and Canada continues to perform a notable exemplary role in permanent resettlement, it is important that attention is given to the housing situation of refugees by researchers, policy advocates and policy makers in this country.

For these reasons we examine some of the unique aspects in housing refugee families, particularly those with large numbers of children. In many respects, the housing needs of refugee families are very similar to those refugees arriving on their own. Many of their needs are also very similar to marginalized peoples such as Indigenous persons, low-waged, impoverished, unemployed and persons with disabilities. Refugees, especially the Government Assisted Refugees (GARs), face additional housing problems mainly because they do not have a credit history or co-signers (e.g., private sponsors) who can take responsibility on their behalf either for rents or mortgages. Moreover, for most of them the lack of networks of family members or friends to refer them to reputable landlords over time makes them vulnerable to exploitation within the rental housing market. Having 'too many children' is also a problem for refugees seeking adequate and affordable housing.

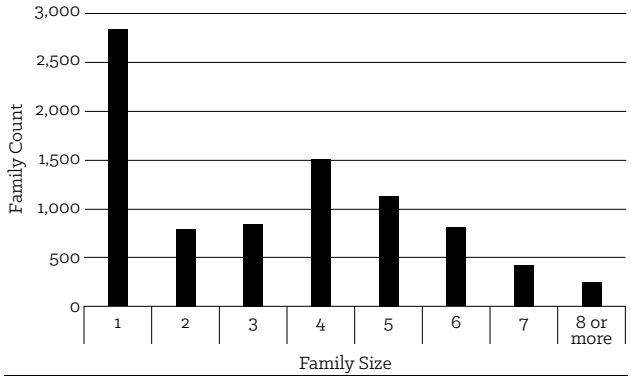
In this paper, we examine data from a survey of 631 newly

arrived adult refugees to Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba collected over a 13-day span in March 2017. Interviews were conducted by settlement workers from 12 of the 13 prairie cities with Refugee Assistance Program contracts (RAP). For this reason, the vast majority of the participants are Government Assisted Refugees (GARs), and only 8% are Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSRs). The survey instrument includes questions about initial housing needs, use of settlement services, language training and employment experiences. Additional information about methodology, valuable partners who contributed to the research project and other findings is located in Wilkinson et al., (2017).

FAMILY COMPOSITION OF REFUGEES

According to a recent study conducted by Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada, nationwide, 53% of GARs arrived as family units as did 43% of PSRs and 44% of Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVORs) program (IRCC 2016a). Table 1 shows that 8,644 Syrian refugee families arrived in Canada and most had large families and Table 2 reveals that over half (52.1%) of all the Syrian refugees arriving to Canada were aged 18 years or younger at the time of arrival (Despite "knowing" that the average Syrian family would be larger than most Canadian families, the federal government was still surprised at how many children eventually arrived).

TABLE 1: COMPOSITION OF FAMILY UNITS AMONG SYRIAN REFUGEES TO CANADA, 2015-2016



Source: IRCC 2016c

ADEQUATE, SUITABLE & AFFORDABLE HOUSING

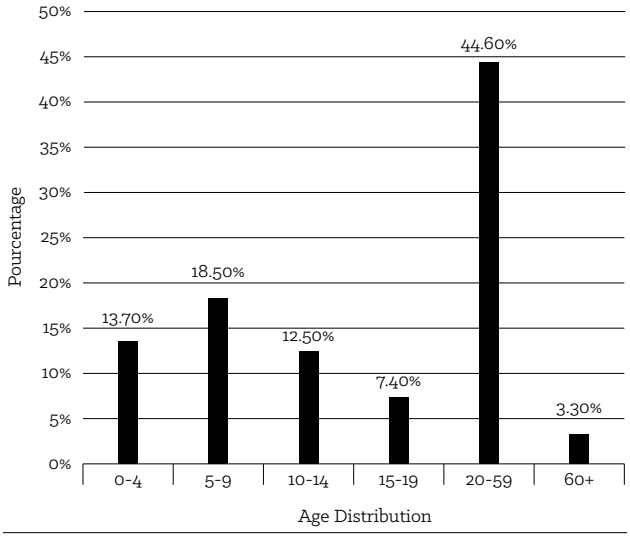
The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) defines adequate, suitable and affordable housing as follows:

- **Adequate** housing does not require any major repairs, according to residents.

- **Suitable** housing has enough bedrooms for the size and make-up of resident households, according to National Occupancy Standard's (NOS) requirements. Enough bedrooms based on NOS's requirements means one bedroom for each cohabiting adult couple; unattached household member 18 years of age and over; same-sex pair of children under age 18; and additional boy or girl in the family, unless there are two opposite sex children under 5 years of age, in which case they are expected to share a bedroom. A household of one individual can occupy a bachelor unit (i.e. a unit with no bedroom).

- **Affordable** housing costs less than 30% of before-tax household income.

TABLE 2: AGE DISTRIBUTION OF SYRIAN REFUGEES ARRIVING IN CANADA, 2015-2016



Source: IRCC 2016b

Statistics Canada has elaborated on CMHC's basic criterion for 'affordable housing' as follows: Affordable housing is defined as rent or mortgage payments, along with the monthly costs of electricity, fuel, water and other municipal services, amounting to 30% or less of the total before-tax household income, commonly known as the "shelter-cost-to-income" ratio (Statistics Canada, 2016). According to Statistics Canada (2017), 11.2% of Canadian households are in severe housing need, devoting 50% or more of their pre-tax income to housing while another 13.9% devote between 30% and 50% of their total income to shelter costs.

HOUSING COSTS FOR REFUGEES

Whereas GARs receive financial support for their first year in Canada or until they are located in jobs, whichever comes first, PSRs receive such financial support from their sponsorship group, BVORs receive a combination of funding from a sponsorship group and the federal government during their

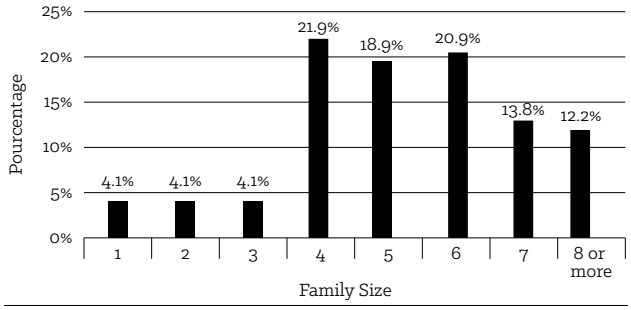
first year in Canada. The amount of these payments is allocated according to where in the country the refugee family is resettled. Those living in major urban centres require more funds to rent their accommodation than those living in smaller centres. The average rent for a single bedroom apartment in the largest 35 Canadian cities is $774 (IRCC, 2016a). This means that the shelter-cost-to-income ratio for many families would far exceed 50% and data supports this. IRCC (2016a) reports that almost two-thirds (62%) of refugees rely on assistance from food banks during their first year in Canada.

A recent evaluation of resettlement conducted by IRCC (2016a) concedes that the payments offered to refugee families are not enough to cover their living costs over the first year and is particularly problematic for larger families including many of those receiving the Canada Child Benefit, the precise amount of which is based on the age of each child and family income (CRA 2017). There is also ample evidence that settlement provider organizations and sponsorship groups had to raise additional funds to cover the shortfall in financial assistance for the newly arrived Syrian refugees during their first year in Canada due to a shortage of rent-geared-to-income housing among the refugees.

HOUSING SATISFACTION OF SYRIAN REFUGEES IN THE PRAIRIES

Findings from our tri-provincial study of 631 newly arrived Syrian refugees conducted in March 2017, reveal that 70% were satisfied with the accommodation they were placed in upon arrival (Wilkinson et al., 2017). There were no differences in satisfaction between families without children and those with children. When we examined whether or not the number of children under age 18 influenced satisfaction, we found a pattern, as reflected in Table 3. Families having four or more children were far more dissatisfied with their present housing situation than families with fewer children.

TABLE 3: REFUGEES NOT SATISFIED WITH CURRENT HOUSING BY SIZE OF FAMILY, 2017



Source: Wilkinson et. al., 2017

When we asked the families to tell us why they were not satisfied with their current housing situation, the number one issue was size—many apartments were just too small for their families. The second issue was fear that they would be unable to afford their current house or apartment after funding from their sponsorship agreements or their government support ended. Other housing issues that were unique to families with children included concern about the distance their house was from their children's school as many were afraid of sending their children alone on a school bus. Another problem with being placed far away from schools is the lack of playground and outdoor play spaces—which tend to be located close to school grounds. Those families living in downtown areas, where apartments tend to be more affordable, are more likely not to live close to schools and playgrounds. Having outdoor playspaces nearby is important for families living in apartment buildings who often complained that their apartments were too small for the children to play in. Some families received noise complaints from their neighbours and/or landlords when their children played indoors.

Another unique difficulty some families with children faced is living in housing with indoor stairs. For most North Americans, housing with stairs is acceptable as part of the architectural landscape of city living. For many newcomers, however, housing with stairs is a new phenomenon. Many families with small children commented on their fear of indoor stairs because they worried that they might fall and hurt themselves. We suspect many have never heard of baby gates as a safety measure.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

There are many policy and practical issues about adequate, suitable and affordable housing that can be gleaned from the responses to our survey.

Given that the number one concern of the families is housing affordability, attention to the shelter-to-income-ratio for refugee families is an important consideration for future housing policies. There simply is not enough household income to cover the costs of adequate shelter and provide the other needs necessary for the family's survival in their first years in Canada. Because of this gap, settlement organizations require additional emergency funding to assist with the extra housing costs and that refugee families tend to have more children than the average Canadian household. This suggests that it is imperative for governments to reconsider the amount of funding they provide for shelter costs during the initial settlement years.

The difficulties that sponsors and settlement organizations experienced in finding large and affordable apartment units to house larger refugee families are indication that the housing stock is too small in size for many refugee families from certain parts of the world in which larger families is the norm. Incentives for developers to design apartments to include four or

more bedrooms are necessary to assist with adequate, and hopefully affordable, housing of future refugee families.

In regard to the location and other concerns about housing units, urban planners need to be encouraged to provide more play structures closer to downtown apartment units. Not only would these benefit refugee families, but they would greatly benefit other families living in the same area. Creating apartment units that could accommodate families with several children may also give them places to play inside their homes. Special design features, such as sound proof flooring and walls would make these units more family-friendly spaces in which children could play.

Providing baby gates and instructions about their use would make newcomer families feel more comfortable in housing with staircases. Again, these measures would benefit not only refugee families but also other families by making housing units more appropriate for all.

Finally, in the case of suitable housing, the issue of bedrooms-to-family-members ratio is a problem for many refugee families. To reiterate, CMHC'sstandards for 'suitable housing' require that different-sexed children ought not share a room after the age of five. Thus, for example, to meet the CMHC's standards a single mother with three teenaged boys and girl older than would require a four-bedroom apartment (one room for her, one for two boys, one for a single boy and one for the girl). We know that this is not possible in many situations either due to an insufficient number of larger units and the higher costs of any such units that may be available. Consequently, many large Syrian refugee families, as well as other large families of refugees and other categories of immigrants, are probably living in housing that is not in compliance with those standards. Part of the reason for this is that a "typical" apartment rental unit in Canada consists of 1-3 bedrooms. Larger apartment units are difficult to locate and more expensive. Reports from across Canada reveal that some larger Syrian refugee families had to be accommodated in two or even three separate apartment units given the short period of time settlement service organizations and private sponsors had to locate housing for them prior to their arrival.

The foregoing overview of the survey results suggests that policy advocates, policy makers, and planners must all do more to ensure that adequate, suitable and affordable housing is available for refugees and particularly those with large families.

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