RETHINKING REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT IN CANADA: ADDRESSING DISPARITIES AND UPHOLDING INTERNATIONAL OBLIGATIONS

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This research investigates the transitions of new Canadians within the housing system through key-informant interviews with housing providers who support access to hotel shelters in Southern Ontario. We explore the dynamics of housing transitions, focusing on flows into and out of hotel shelters. Our findings highlight the challenges and pathways encountered by newcomers accessing and exiting shelters, providing insights into the broader housing system in Canada. This research was part of a larger series of projects that aimed to inform policy on the housing system and identify opportunities for improving housing transitions and stability for vulnerable populations.

INTRODUCTION: THE CANADIAN REFUGEE SYSTEM

Canada's refugee system offers protection to people who are forced to leave their home due to serious human rights abuses. It can be broken into two main components. First, the Refugee and Humanitarian Resettlement Program (RHRP) was created to resettle people outside of Canada who need protection. This group includes government-sponsored refugees, privately sponsored refugees, or a mix of both under the Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) Program. Second, the in-Canada asylum program assists people making claims for refugee status from within the borders of Canada and these individuals or families are referred to as refugee claimants.

Upon entry to Canada, government-assisted refugees are placed in Resettlement Assistance Programs (RAP) run by service provider organizations (SPOs) and funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). By contrast, temporary accommodations for refugee claimants are not directly arranged by the federal government and are considered to be the responsibility of the provinces and municipalities.[1] Thus admission category affects the housing journey of refugee populations in Canada.

This article examines the use of transitional hotels for refugees arriving in Canada and the systemic barriers and obstacles encountered in the resettlement process. CMHC-funded research examines the use of transitional hotels in a case study of housing transitions in Southern Ontario. The authors also draw on internally conducted research on systemic barriers in the housing system.

HISTORICAL AND STATISTICAL CONTEXT

While hotels and motels have long been a part of the emergency shelter system, the use of hotels as temporary accommodations for refugees and refugee claimants is a more recent phenomenon, corresponding with an increase in the number of arrivals into Canada. Since 2017, the federal government has provided approximately $700 million to provinces and municipalities to address housing pressures related to the increase of refugee claimants. In 2023, the IRCC announced $212 million for the Interim Housing Assistance Program (IHAP) and in January 2024 the federal government committed a further $362 million. As of February 26, 2024, the IRCC was providing funding for approximately 4,050 hotel rooms across six provinces.[2,3] The Refugee Protection Division (RPD) of the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada reported that it had 57,812 refugee claims referred to it in 2023,[4] while 144,035 asylum claimants were processed by the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) and IRCC.[5]

TRANSITIONS IN AND OUT OF SHELTER HOTELS

There are two distinct policy pathways for transitions in and out of shelter hotels, based on the distinction between government-assisted refugees and refugee claimants. Under the first path, government-assisted refugees, privately sponsored refugees, and those under the Blended Visa Office-Referred program have a clear pathway to housing stability and settlement support. Under the second path, refugee claimants have no clear passage, and are increasingly entering the shelter system, settling in encampments, or living on the streets.[6]

Government-assisted refugees are identified for resettlement by the UNHCR and sponsored by the Government of Canada. Upon arrival, government-assisted refugees are welcomed at the Port of Entry by service providers who provide help with processing paperwork for permanent residency. They receive resettlement support for up to one year as well as temporary accommodation in RAP centers or IRCC-funded hotels until permanent housing can be secured.

Refugee claimants arrive in Canada on their own and file a claim for refugee status at a Port of Entry or inland office. The Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) or IRCC officials will decide whether an individual is eligible to be referred for a hearing following the filing of this claim. Refugee claimants have little access to resettlement services until their claim is decided, but they are eligible for the Interim Federal Health Program (IFHP). They can also apply for work or study permits as they await the decision of their claim which takes an

1 Government of Canada. "More Federal Housing Support for Asylum Claimants." Last modified July 18, 2023. www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2023/07/more-federal-housing-support-for-asylum-claimants.html

2 www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/transparency/committees/cimm-feb-28-2024/interim-housing-assistance-program.html

3 For more information on citizenship and immigration in Québec, see www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/transparency/committees/cimm-mar-20-2024/quebec-key-facts.html.

4 Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB). "Refugee Protection Claims (New System) Statistics." Last modified 2023. www.irb-cisr.gc.ca/en/statistics/protection/Pages/RPDStat.aspx

5 Government of Canada. "Asylum Claimants by Year – 2023." Last modified August 2, 2024. www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/asylum-claims/asylum-claims-2023.html

6 For statistics on refugee claimants and homelessness, see https://housing-infrastructure.canada.ca/homelessness-sans-abri/reports-rapports/data-newcomers-donnees-nouveaux-arrivants-eng.html.

average of 24 months.[7] Because they are ineligible to receive support through IRCC-funded resettlement assistance programs, refugee claimants often seek out municipal services or community-based organizations for help, which they must locate on their own. The lack of a clearly defined path can lead to housing insecurity or being unhoused.

Transitions out of shelter hotels also differ according to refugee status. Service providers are contracted by the IRCC to find government-assisted refugees stable housing. This can involve arranging viewings of potential units and assisting with other logistics. For refugee claimants, assistance in finding stable housing depends on the service organization and if they have capacity or funding to help. For example, one service provider research participant mentioned,

> "You have only so many staff and these are staff who weren't experienced with working with asylum-seeking refugees. I think [the organization] learned as they went along. What we heard was [refugees] would only see their counselor if they were lucky... So you're not going to get the services that you would get, say, if you're staying at [our settlement organization], where you have a case-assigned counselor you meet with weekly and who knows to work with you on your case management plan…. You know all these things have to take place within a certain period of time, or you're going to fall through the cracks and miss deadlines." – Participant 4

SYSTEMIC BARRIERS

Refugees and refugee claimants face systemic barriers that are similar despite the fact they have different entry categories. These include limited or delayed entry into the workforce impacting income opportunities; limited or delayed access to wrap-around supports; and discrimination, which significantly impact their resettlement experience and access to stable housing. As discussed above, access to government-funded temporary accommodations is not guaranteed and depends on many factors, including the categories under which refugees and claimants fall, availability and type of units, family size, and shelter system capacity. Transitions out of temporary accommodations can also be challenging, marked by limited supplies of supportive and affordable housing, and coordination gaps between service organizations and different levels of government. These experiences are complicated in the rental market by low or no income upon arrival, and no Canadian credit history. Refugee claimants' barriers are compounded by the precarious nature of their claim status, as potential employers, landlords, and financial institutions may express reluctance in accepting these households if their claims are rejected. As a result, refugees and refugee claimants are unable to exercise autonomy and choice in the housing system.

LOCAL PRESSURES

Without a clear path to housing and settlement supports, refugee claimants cannot access federally funded settlement programs and accommodations until their claim is decided, so they must rely on municipal services and community organizations for assistance. As shelter systems across Toronto and much of southern Ontario are operating at or above capacity, increases of refugee claimants without additional funding, resources, and infrastructure have stretched existing support systems beyond capacity. For example, while 500 spaces for refugee claimants are reserved in Toronto's shelter system, the demand outpaces the supply of these beds. Furthermore, 200 to 300 people a day who call Toronto's central intake system are not matched with a bed due to lack of capacity.[8]

Despite support services that provide a pathway to stable housing for government-assisted refugees, both refugee pathways face challenges in finding affordable housing after leaving temporary accommodations. Canada's supply of supportive, social, transitional, and non-market housing is very limited.[9] Service providers report their clients are staying longer in temporary accommodations due to the lack of affordable housing. Furthermore, financial support provided by the government for housing does not reflect market realities.

Finally, government-assisted refugees and refugee claimants can face additional obstacles in securing housing in the private rental market. There is considerable research on the

7 Government of Canada. "Claim Refugee Status from Inside Canada: Work and Study Permits." Last modified March 25, 2024. www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/asylum/claim-protection-inside-canada/work-study.html

8 See www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2024/bu/bgrd/backgroundfile-242122.pdf, p. 7. "Toronto's shelter system is full. Current demand for shelter space is so high that every night the City is unable to provide shelter to hundreds of people requesting a space."

9 Canada's social housing stock is approximately 3.5% of total housing stock, compared to the OECD average of 7%. See www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/oecd-affordable-housing-database.html, section PH4.2 for more information.

effect of market competition on newcomers including refugees.[10,11,12,13,14,15,16,17] Within this context, overt, subtle, and covert forms of race-based discrimination appeared frequently.[18] Because some service provider organizations rely on a pool of willing landlords who will work with them to rent to refugees, the reluctance they observed to rent to certain groups of refugees placed additional obstacles in resettlement.[19] Sometimes this reluctance was overt, while other times it was in the form of additional requirements such as requesting more than one month of rent upfront or requiring a credit score and reference check. One service provider assisting refugees provided the following example about landlord reactions,

> "...Oh I rented to a family from [country] once, don't send me anybody from [country] because it went bad,' or something. So, you know just like really terrible things that they are telling us, and they have one bad experience and they'll write everybody off." – Service provider, rental markets

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

These research findings have several implications for both immigration and housing policy.

- Representatives of immigration service provider organizations consistently identified the importance of affordable and supportive housing and increased benefits and subsidies. These measures can help transition government-assisted refugees out of shelter hotels and into permanent housing.
- Even though the policy supports currently overlap, refugee claimants experiencing homelessness often face distinct challenges that require specific programs and supports that are often not available within the general shelter system. Policymakers could thus consider infrastructure which targets the specific needs of refugee claimants. One such possibility would be to create reception centers at major Ports of Entry, which would allow a single access point for refugee claimants and reduce the chance that they end up in emergency shelter systems.
- Representatives of service provider organizations indicated that increasing flexible funding and coordination between orders of government could help prevent stalled transitions out of temporary hotel accommodations and emergency shelters.

10 Miraftab, Faranak. "Sheltering Refugees: The Housing Experience of Refugees in Metropolitan Vancouver, Canada." *Canadian Journal of Urban Research* (2000): 42–63.

11 Murdie, Robert A. "The Housing Careers of Polish and Somali Newcomers in Toronto's Rental Market." *Housing Studies*, 17, no. 3 (2002): 423–443.

12 Murdie, Robert A. "Pathways to Housing: The Experiences of Sponsored Refugees and Refugee Claimants in Accessing Permanent Housing in Toronto." *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 9 (2008): 81–101.

13 Polillo, Alexia, and John Sylvestre. "An Exploratory Study of the Pathways into Homelessness Among Foreign-Born and Canadian-Born Families: A Timeline Mapping Approach." *Journal of Social Distress and Homelessness*, 30, no. 1 (2021): 6–19.

14 Simone, Dylan, and K. Bruce Newbold. "Housing Trajectories Across the Urban Hierarchy: Analysis of the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada, 2001–2005." *Housing Studies*, 29, no. 8 (2014): 1096–1116.

15 Teixeira, Carlos, Lucia Lo, and Marie Truelove. "Immigrant Entrepreneurship, Institutional Discrimination, and Implications for Public Policy: A Case Study in Toronto." *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy*, 25, no. 2 (2007): 176–193.

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17 Teixeira, Carlos. "Living on the 'Edge of the Suburbs' of Vancouver: A Case Study of the Housing Experiences and Coping Strategies of Recent Immigrants in Surrey and Richmond." *The Canadian Geographer*, 58, no. 2 (2014): 168–187.

18 For statistics related to the country of origin of Canada's refugee claimants, see www.irb-cisr.gc.ca/en/statistics/protection/Pages/RPD-Stat2023.aspx. In 2023, the top three countries were Mexico, Haiti, and India. See also https://open.canada.ca/data/en/dataset/4a1b260a-7ac4-4985-80a0-603bfe4aec11.

19 For additional context, see CMHC (2024), "Systemic Barriers Framework". https://assets.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/sf/project/archive/research_6/systemic-barriers-framework---final-pub-version.pdf

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