THE PANEL STUDY ON HOMELESSNESS

Secondary Data Analysis of Responses of Study Participants Whose Country of Origin is not Canada

ABSTRACT

This article proposes excerpts of a report prepared for National Secretariat on Homelessness, The Panel Study on Homelessness: Secondary Data analysis of responses of Study Participants Whose Country of Origin is not Canada. This study examines the characteristics of Ottawa homeless individuals as observed, at the time the research was conducted. The authors conclude by highlighting the urgency of creating affordable and safe permanent housing, as part of the revitalization of the social housing sector.

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Main Findings

> I do not speak English. I cannot afford to rent a market rent unit. I do not have a job, and I cannot find a job because I do not speak English. (Translated).
> – Adult Female in Family, Age 30-39

> I don't like my life because I am alone in Canada. My whole family lives in Rwanda. It's very hard to find a job because I can't speak English. It's very expensive to rent an apartment. Social assistance is nothing. I need more money. (Translated).
> – Youth Female, Age 20

> The reason that I am here is that I couldn't find an affordable place to rent. Also, I am new to this country and that makes things more difficult. I did try to find an affordable private place, but I couldn't find one.
> – Adult Male in Family, Age 30-39

> Before I had my first child in September 2002, I was having a very difficult time finding an affordable house. I was sharing 3 bedrooms with a family of three, and it was not easy to live in that apartment. There were not enough rooms for everybody.
> – Adult Female in Family, aged 30-39

> It is scary not having anybody to help you out. Strange city, strange country. They should allow people to work under special circumstances.
> – Adult Male, Age 30-39

> In Sept 2001, I went to visit my family and husband in Djibouti. After visiting, my husband told me to stay with him in Djibouti. First, I was reluctant, but decided to live with him. After three months he became abusive and I left and came back to Canada.
> – Adult Female in Family, Age 20-29

> It's hard to get back on your feet in a city where you don't know anyone and you're broke – bad situation. Shelters are helpful – certain rules and policies are unfair but [I] can understand because some people abuse the services.
> – Youth Male, Age 20-29[1]

This final section includes a summary of the main findings, conclusions, future directions for research and recommendations.

Summary of Main Findings

Characteristics of the Population
Education, Language Employment
Family Difficulties
Physical and Mental Health Status
Health and Social Service Utilization
Most Pressing Needs

Characteristics of the Population

Generally, the foreign-born population was less diverse than Canadian-born respondents. Seventy-nine percent of all foreign-born respondents were women, including 83% of refugees and 74% of immigrants. In both groups, the majority were female heads of families with children. Indeed, fully 53% of the Panel Study's 'adults in families' subgroup was not born in Canada. Of that group, 87% were women. The foreign-born respondents were also much more likely to be working age adults than was the rest of the sample. However, there were two noteworthy exceptions – about one quarter of the immigrants was less than 20 years of age, and the refugee sample included proportionally more respondents over 50 years of age than any other group.

Refugees constituted just over half of the foreign-born respondents and of this group, over half were women with children. While most of the foreign-born mothers had three or less children living with them, 39% of refugees had four or more children. This greater preponderance of adults in families helps to explain why more foreign-born respondents were married, separated, divorced or widowed than was the case for the rest of the Panel Study respondents. These differences also help to explain why the Phase I report noted that the characteristics of adults in families often diverged from those of the other subgroups (Aubry et al., 2003). Foreign-born respondents were more likely to be homeless because of financial reasons than was true for those born in Canada. While many of them had been homeless only once or twice for a short period of time, others reported experiencing multiple episodes of homelessness.

> It certainly appears that a large number of foreign-born homeless individuals in Ottawa are women and especially women refugees with children. These distributions certainly are out of line with the overall profile of newcomers by sex and by citizenship – in 1996, 52% of Ottawa newcomers were women and 23% were refugees (CIC 2000, p. x).

Diversity did manifest itself in country of origin, date of arrival, and citizenship status. Foreign-born respondents identified about 40 countries of origin, with African countries being particularly prominent for those who came to Canada as refugees. Roughly equal numbers had arrived in Canada throughout the 1990s and into the 21st century; however, fully one-third of immigrants (but no refugees) arrived earlier than 1990. More than one third of the respondents were Canadian citizens, including 60% of immigrants and 25% of refugees. Forty percent of refugees still had the status of refugee claimant.

Education, Language and Employment.

The foreign-born respondents had more education than those born in Canada, with substantial proportions having completed some sort of post-secondary program. Refugees were somewhat more likely to have a low level of education and/or to have interrupted their studies; however, they also were more likely than any other group to be in school at the time of the Phase 1 interviews. Most immigrants and refugees reported written and spoken proficiency in English. Among some refugees, proficiency in French but not English was reported and finally, a minority of foreign-born respondents lacked proficiency in either official language.

The majority of newcomers were not working for pay, although they were somewhat more likely to be working than their matched Canadian-born counterparts. Among the matched samples, about one-third of foreign-born and Canadian-born respondents reported that they were looking for work; this was slightly less true for refugees than were immigrants.

Family Difficulties

More foreign-born respondents explained their homelessness as having been caused by family conflict than was the case for Canadian-born respondents. Fleeing abuse also was a significant factor for some households.

Physical and Mental Health Status

As noted above, based on an analysis of the SF-36 scale, the physical and mental health status of newcomers appears to be substantially more favourable than it is for Canadian-born respondents. Other health status results are consistent with these findings: for example, the only chronic conditions reported equally for both groups are high blood pressure and migraine headaches, likely caused by the stress of being homeless.

Health and Social Service Utilization

Overall, newcomers were less likely than were Canadian-born respondents to use health and outreach social services, or to indicate that they had unmet health needs. Although their higher physical and mental health status may be part of the reason for this difference, given the integration challenges they face, newcomers' relatively low use of certain social services certainly requires further investigation.

Most Pressing Needs

Foreign-born respondents appear to be quite distinct from the other individuals who were interviewed for the Panel Study. Their reasons for being homeless appear to be more readily attributable to a series of external barriers, such as insufficient affordable housing, or restrictions on their ability to compete for employment, or inadequate child care supports, than is the case for many of the respondents who were born in Canada. This latter group, on the whole, appears more vulnerable in terms of health status, educational attainment and problems with substance abuse.

Conclusions and Future Research Directions

It is well to begin this section of the report by recalling that the main goal of the Panel Study on Homelessness was to explore the characteristics of diverse individuals who were homelessness in Ottawa at the time of the study. In order to

achieve this goal, the Panel Study's sampling strategy was designed to recruit a representative sample from *within* each of five subgroups of homeless individuals (adult men, adult women, youth males, youth females and adults in families). Consequently, different criteria were used for each subgroup, based on extant population data and advice from key informants. Citizenship was used as a stratification criterion in only two of the five subgroups – single women and adults in families. The reason this criterion was not used with the three other subgroups (i.e., single men, male youth, female youth) is that information on citizenship was not available from the shelters serving these populations. It is important to acknowledge that this approach likely influenced the preponderance of female foreign-born respondents among these two groups, while also recognizing that extant data and key informants certainly gave credence to this strategy. An important question for future research is to determine the breakdown of foreign-born individuals across all of the subgroups of the homeless population. Data produced by the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System being used in many shelters now, including those in Ottawa, may help answer this question.

> Regardless, it certainly appears to be the case that a large number of foreign-born homeless individuals in Ottawa are women and especially women refugees with children. These distributions certainly are out of line with the overall profile of newcomers by sex and by citizenship – in 1996, 52% of Ottawa newcomers were women and 23% were refugees (CIC 2000, x).

Given their distinctiveness, three issues stand out in considering the policy and program implications of our findings. The first has to do with supports for refugee settlement. As noted in a Refugee Homelessness Prevention seminar in 2001, "refugee claimants are at most serious risk of homelessness" (Murdie, 2001). Clearly, in Ottawa, there is a cluster of homeless refugee women with children who confront a complex set of challenges, having to do with the speed at which they are able to settle their refugee claims, their disadvantaged education and language profiles, and their responsibilities for large numbers of children. An urgent need exists to address their specific settlement issues in a holistic and comprehensive manner. Israelite et al.'s Toronto-based observations about undocumented Somali women refugees are likely relevant in Ottawa too:

> Difficulties with English and problems with inter-cultural communication disadvantaged the women in their dealings with government officials, teachers and landlords. Problems such as unemployment and constant worries about the well-being of their families were other significant factors. More than half the women were functioning as single parents and responsibilities for family finances and decision-making rested on their shoulders for perhaps the first time in their lives. One women said many Somali women felt worthless primarily because they could not adequately provide for their families. Yet poor English proficiency, the restrictions on postsecondary education and limited employment opportunities [lack of documentation resulted in severe restrictions on education and employment for up to five years] made it hard for the women to get jobs and integrate into the economic sphere (1999, 19-20).

Nonetheless, questions of settlement also need to address other newcomer groups, especially given the significant proportion of homeless immigrants who arrived in Canada before 1990, and the much greater concentration of women among homeless newcomers than among their housed peers.

A second issue is financial. Given that so many newcomers are homeless primarily because they are unable to afford the rent, it is clear that a combination of first, enhancing the availability of secure, suitable, affordable housing, and second, reducing the barriers to securing decent employment, would go a considerable way in reducing the risk of homelessness. With regard to housing, more attention also needs to be paid to design criteria that meet the needs of extended and multi-generation families. Many newcomers find such living arrangements more attractive and familiar than the typical Canadian nuclear family living arrangement. Unfortunately, very few opportunities exist to find units suitable for multiple family living in the affordable rental housing market. Further research is required to assess the extent to which family conflict caused by a mismatch between living arrangements and house design leads to homelessness on the part of newcomer households.

The third issue that needs attention has to do with the accessibility and suitability of available health and social services for newcomers. The much more favorable physical and mental health status of newcomers suggests that their needs are quite different than those of the Canadian-born respondents. However, it is likely that most services to those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness are developed based upon the needs of the more numerous Canadian-born homeless populations. While the much lower health service utilization rates among newcomers may be a reflection of their higher health status, it may also have something to do with the way in which these services are promoted or offered.

At one level, newcomers' higher physical and mental health status is unsurprising, given the stringent criteria that Canada specifies before accepting newcomers as landed residents. However, similar results for refugees suggest that something else is also in play, highlighting an area for further investigation. Given the significant challenges associated with re-locating to a new country, we can speculate that the ability for individuals and families to make their way to Canada is a reflection of the presence of significant personal resources. As well, it is quite possible that some newcomers to Canada view homelessness in a different light than Canadian-born individuals and families, given the circumstances, risks, and living conditions they may have faced in their home countries. In light of their different backgrounds, they also may find themselves more optimistic about the future than Canadian-born individuals and families. The significance of "resilience" in the newcomer population, relative to the Canadian-born respondents, will be a

significant point of departure in examining the Phase 2 results, relating to the extent to which various subgroups have been successful in achieving housing stability, two years after the initial interviews. Other questions that further research should address include the following: to what extent do economic factors alone explain immigrant and refugee homelessness in comparison to the Canadian-born subgroups? How significant is the experience of lone parenthood for newcomers relative to Canadian-born women with children? Does visible minority status have a particular adverse impact on newcomers? Finally, it is important to recognize the somewhat distinct but definitely overlapping roles of municipal, provincial and federal government departments in developing policies and programs that are relevant to the needs of homeless newcomers and those at risk of homelessness.

Recommendations

Very briefly, we highlight policy and program implications in four domains. First, there is a pressing need for involvement by all levels of government because: a) the causes of homelessness are complex, involving numerous pathways, b) some homeless people are very mobile and move from place to place with very little consideration of provincial and municipal boundaries, and c) there are governmental programs and policies in all jurisdictions that might, inadvertently, contribute to some persons' homelessness but might also be an effective conduit for redress. For example, it is clear that the role of the federal government is pre-eminent with regard to immigration policy. Yet, despite its national scope, it is also apparent that the impacts of immigration policy occur very unevenly across the country, with a tremendous concentration occurring especially in Canada's major metropolitan areas (Bourne, 2003). Explicit recognition of this unevenness needs to be incorporated into settlement initiatives that are negotiated with provincial and municipal partners.

Second, there is a need to develop policies and programs that target problems in a manner that is focused, yet also recognizes that various specific problems each overlap with one another and, through complex interactions, raise the risk of homelessness. For example, family conflict, family violence, poverty and the stress caused by inadequate housing, have often been associated with one another (Lenon, 2002). While the resources to enhance the availability of affordable housing (through income and infrastructure related activities) are clearly the joint responsibility of federal and provincial governments, their *effects* are often left to municipalities and non-profit organizations to address.

A third issue is the pressing need to develop safe, affordable permanent housing through a revitalized social housing sector. In their recent report on housing and social policy, Carter and Polevychok (2004) asserted that:

> First and foremost, it can be argued that there is not enough social housing. The portfolio is too small to be effective in accommodating the many people who are inadequately housed and too small to be an effective support for other social policy initiatives. [...] [P]roportionally Canada has one of the smallest social housing portfolios among the developed countries. […] [T]he size of the portfolio provides no "horizontal equity" for the many people facing housing problems. Those able to access social housing units (generally after a long wait) are in a much more advantageous position than those who have to find housing on the private market (2004, 35).

Finally, the support of federal and provincial governments to enhance the range of health and social services that address the unique needs of newcomers is urgently required. It has been a considerable challenge for mainstream services that are themselves caught between declining provincial and municipal budgets and growing case loads, to also address the changing needs of their clientele. Further attention on the part of senior governments in this arena is certainly required.

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Note

1 Selected responses from question asked at the beginning of the Phase 1 interview: "Before beginning to ask you questions, we thought that you should have the opportunity to first tell your ideas about the problem of homelessness and what might help people who are homeless. Is there one specific thing about your homeless situation that you would like to tell us? Don't worry if you can't think of something right now. I will be asking this question again at the end of the interview" (Panel Study on Homelessness, Phase 1 Questionnaire, October 2, 2002).