

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Finding housing for the Syrian refugee newcomers in Canadian cities: challenges, initiatives and policy implications

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The background of the entire page is a vibrant blue. It features a complex overlay of white and light blue graphics, including a network of lines and nodes, a map of a region, and various data visualizations such as pie charts and bar graphs. The text 'INRS' is prominently displayed in large, white, sans-serif font, with 'UNIVERSITÉ DE RECHERCHE' underneath it in a smaller, white, sans-serif font. The overall aesthetic is modern and academic.

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Executive Summary

FINDING HOUSING FOR THE SYRIAN REFUGEE NEWCOMERS IN CANADIAN CITIES: CHALLENGES, INITIATIVES AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS. SYNTHESIS REPORT

Context

Moving into their first permanent home is a major milestone for newcomers to Canada. Decent, suitable and affordable housing is not just a question of shelter. It is an anchor point for a new start in a new country and new city. It needs to be accessible to the services and resources they need to help them settle. Where it is located, and in what type of neighbourhood, may affect their social connections as well as their overall sense of inclusion. Moreover, for newcomers who arrive as refugees fleeing from contexts of profound and traumatic dislocation, obtaining decent and stable housing is a key to resettling with dignity.

Canada's resettlement policy for refugees acknowledges that they need intensive assistance finding their first housing, because of the unplanned nature of their migration, their lack of economic resources on arrival, and because many have special needs. For government assisted refugees (GARs), in each destination city, the newcomer serving community organization holding the government contract for delivery of the Resettlement Assistance Program must find and offer them suitable permanent housing as soon as possible. For privately sponsored refugees (PSRs), the sponsoring organization or group is responsible for finding appropriate housing.

The operation to resettle Syrian refugees was on a scale not seen for 35 years. In many cities, the arrival timetable was concentrated over a few weeks in midwinter 2016, requiring a major ramp-up of all aspects of refugee welcoming capacity by different levels of government and by local communities. This was also the first large resettlement operation since the 2002 *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* (IRPA), in which Canada committed to welcoming, within the refugee category, a larger share of people with "high needs" than previously. Due to their large and complex family configurations and/or major health issues or disabilities, and/or low mother-tongue literacy rates, they are likely to face significant barriers to achieving economic self-sufficiency in the short- to medium-term. Many of the Syrian newcomers, especially in the GAR stream, were

deemed to have high needs. Another key difference from earlier major resettlement operations is that in many cities, affordable rental housing has become much scarcer. The federal government, however, maintains a policy of calibrating refugees' resettlement allowances to provincial social assistance rates that are too low to cover market rents without compromising other basic needs. For the Syrian operation, it solicited charitable contributions from the corporate sector to help local organizations meet GARs' urgent housing needs.

Questions and methods

The Syrian operation is an important opportunity to examine how the organizations and groups responsible for finding housing for resettled refugees went about this challenging task. Despite a rich and diverse research literature about newcomer housing experiences including those of refugee newcomers, no previous studies have addressed this crucial question.

For this study, the researchers focused primarily on the process of finding the first permanent housing for GARs. They selected 13 large, mid-size and smaller cities including a variety of local rental housing market conditions: Victoria, Vancouver, Calgary, Winnipeg, Windsor, Hamilton, Toronto, Peterborough, Ottawa, Gatineau, Montréal, St. John, and Halifax (61% of Syrian GARs and 87% of Syrian PSRs arriving in Canada from November 2015 to September 2016 were destined to these metropolitan areas). In each city, they conducted in-depth interviews with senior supervisory or management personnel of the organization holding the Resettlement Assistance Program contract. What challenges did the RAP-providers face? What kinds of help could they mobilize within the local community? What strategies and tactics did they deploy to settle these newcomers into suitable housing and to ensure the stability of those arrangements? Interviewees addressed their experiences: from the planning stages, through the arrivals and temporary accommodation arrangements, to finding permanent housing, and, finally, to the situation at the end of year 1, when the RAP allowance comes to an end. For the PSRs, the very modest budget and short timeframe for this research precluded an equally in-depth and robust approach, since this would have required a very large number of interviews to obtain a representative sample of sponsors. Instead, the report briefly points to key insights gleaned from interviewees whose organization was a sponsorship agreement holder as well as a RAP-provider, as

well as from two key informant interviews in Montréal (one of the top two destinations for PSRs). The researchers also drew on documentary sources to assist with local context and add different viewpoints: they built an exhaustive data base of media coverage of housing-related aspects of the Syrian operation; analyzed witness about the Syrian operation; and compiled relevant local housing market data.

Findings

The RAP providers interviewed underscored that advance planning, involving an unprecedented degree of cooperation between different levels of government and local organizations in their city or region, over the weeks before the first arrivals of the intensified Syrian refugee operation, had crucial positive impacts on their capacity to manage the process of finding housing once the newcomers began to arrive. While local networks to coordinate newcomer welcome and settlement already existed in a number of cities, these planning meetings helped all parties share their respective expertise and work out appropriate task division. Including a housing table or task force in the advance planning network and encouraging private landlords' associations and social housing providers to participate proved especially useful. Most RAP providers had longstanding working relationships with major property owners, but these tables promoted buy-in by new private landlords and encouraged social housing providers to explore how they could contribute to the resettlement effort. As well, new or expanded housing portals or banks run by provincial, municipal or community organizations helped coordinate the outpouring and flow of information about ad hoc offers of accommodation.

Despite these concerted efforts at advance planning for an orderly and timely process of moving refugee newcomers into permanent housing, the RAP providers found themselves facing major unforeseen contingencies and having to adapt and intensify their housing search strategies once the refugees began to arrive. Insufficient advance information from the federal government as to the timeframe of refugee newcomer arrivals and as to their family profiles hampered their work during the early weeks of the resettlement operation. Family sizes were even larger than expected, and 60% of GARs were minor children. These were the main factors causing lengthy stays in hotel or other temporary accommodation, especially in the tighter housing markets and where housing suitable for large families was in short supply. Complex health needs also posed major

housing challenges. As well, various administrative log-jams, related to the steep ramp-up of the resettlement operation, led to delays and even lost rental opportunities.

Nevertheless, whether it took less than two weeks or more than two months, RAP providers succeeded, with the support of housing providers, community based networks and citizen mobilization, in matching up all the newcomers with suitable housing. Moreover, RAP interviewees reported that this housing—while generally quite basic—was almost always in good condition. This is an impressive achievement considering that much of Canada's low-end-of-market rental stock is beset with quality problems due to lack of maintenance and investment. Working with trusted landlords, plus in some cases having access to municipally-inventoried and quality-controlled units, seemed to be key to achieving this outcome.

After locating suitable housing, RAP providers had to ensure it would be affordable. The nub of the challenge is the size of the gap between the notional amount allocated to housing in IRCC's calculation of RAP income support and the actual cost of renting. Even with Child Benefit boosting their income support, a GAR family with two children will spend 40-50% of their income on rent, depending on the city. The Syrian operation highlights how the Child Benefit has become a de facto housing allowance for low-income Canadian families with children. While it can make housing much more affordable for larger families, it helps small families only marginally. Low-income couples without children and single people do not have access to any equivalent benefit. Interviewees signaled that market rental of a self-contained unit is totally untenable for a single person on a RAP allowance. Moreover, clients often need to use the transportation allowance component of RAP income support to help pay their rent.

RAP providers deployed two main strategies for housing affordability. In balanced local housing markets or for rental complexes with higher vacancy rates, they managed to negotiate rent discounts over the year (commonly 15-20%) and/or free rent for shorter-term cases of extreme need (e.g. during the waiting period for Child Benefit). In tighter housing markets, they used the Welcome Fund allocation from Community Foundations of Canada (which administered this Fund, created from corporate donations, to assist the Syrian refugees) for various permutations of rent supplementation, according to needs and local conditions. In a number of cities, the Welcome Fund played a major role in helping to make the first housing affordable, but it created ethical dilemmas for RAP

providers, in that these donor funds were earmarked for Syrian GARs only, whereas they also had refugee clients from elsewhere, albeit far less numerous than the Syrians in 2015-2016, who needed rent subsidies.

In some provinces and cities, RAP providers could access taxpayer-funded sources of rent assistance: rent supplement programs for approved private rental units; rent-geared-to-income public housing; and housing in mixed-income non-profits and housing cooperatives. Involving these housing providers at the advance planning stage was key to unlocking access to such longer-term stable solutions to affordable housing relatively early in the resettlement process of some needy Syrian refugees. In many cities however, these were not options for the first permanent housing due to intractably long waiting lists and/or eligibility criteria that exclude people domiciled less than 6 to 12 months in the province or city.

Making GARs' first permanent housing sustainable and planning for contingencies were also important issues for housing search and support workers. First, keeping friends together mattered for social support and mental health. Second, housing needed to be accessible, by public transportation, to essential services and cultural or religious institutions. Third, RAP providers often needed to assist their clients (who had received no advance briefing about rental housing in Canada) in coming to terms with the limited range of options for families on a tight budget, so that they would not try to take on housing they liked better but that cost more. Fourth, some newcomers needed ongoing accompaniment to become familiar with the legal obligations and cultural codes associated with renting and living in medium-to-high density developments. Fifth, local organizations reserved contingency funds in case of housing emergencies such as the need for a new rent deposit if a client had to break a lease and move to a new place. Finally, RAP providers tried to reduce the impacts of the transition to provincial social assistance ("month 13") on housing affordability, for those cases where it would lead to a substantial drop in income support (the impacts varied by province and family configuration). Some managed to plan for this in advance when negotiating initial rent levels or by negotiating an exception to the usual requirement to use up the Welcome Fund allocation in year 1.

Cutting across this study's findings is the crucial role that volunteer efforts played in supporting successful housing outcomes. For RAP interviewees, this development

was very praiseworthy and promising in terms of local community support to integration of the Syrians and future refugees. Nevertheless, local newcomer support networks and RAP-providers were often unprepared for the huge and unprecedented upsurge in volunteer involvement generated by the Syrian crisis and the federal resettlement program. A key challenge was how to integrate amorphous volunteer energies into established structures (especially in the larger cities), and work out complementary roles for professionals and volunteers. Finding the staff time and material resources to manage the volume of diverse offers of help and goods was also problematic. This study uncovered promising practices in response to both of these challenges, such as newcomer support teams integrating professionals and trained volunteers, and municipal or private funding to manage donations of time, expertise, or goods.

With respect to private sponsorships, the researchers' preliminary conclusion, based on limited information, is that the main challenges sponsors face finding housing are similar to those for the GARs. However, the Syrian operation has highlighted that sponsor groups vary in their knowhow about the rental housing system and in their ability to access assistance in these matters. Sponsor groups also vary in their financial capacity to achieve suitable and sustainable housing outcomes, especially in the more expensive rental markets.

Issues for policy and further research

The policy issues lessons stemming from this research address local, provincial and federal government stakeholders in newcomer settlement and housing policy.

At the local scale, the leaders of newcomer support networks and partnerships should ensure that housing tables and task forces become permanent components of the settlement infrastructure and that they include both private and social housing providers. They should maintain the housing portals and protocols developed for managing volunteer offers, or at least retain the knowhow for reactivating them when needed.

During large-scale resettlement operations, Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada should ensure that RAP providers and sponsor organizations receive timely information about arrivals and refugee profiles. Strengthening the housing component of pre-arrival orientation, in partnership with CMHC, is also a priority. Most

critically, this study's in-depth account of the challenges organizations faced in finding housing for the Syrians helps to show that the gap between RAP income support and housing costs in Canadian cities has become untenable. Ad hoc measures such as counting on private philanthropy for rent reductions here and there or creating stopgap rent supplements proved invaluable in this operation, but they raise problems of ethics and do not constitute a sustainable approach to ensuring affordable and decent housing for refugee newcomers, which Canada must do to fulfill its UNHCR commitments. Moreover, the research highlights an unintended consequence of the Canada Child Benefit program: low-income families with several children are relying on it to afford market rents, but this de facto housing allowance provides little help to small families and none at all to childless households.

This research highlights the need for housing policy changes that would benefit not only high needs newcomers, but also other low-income Canadians. Although RAP providers' good relations with landlords helped their clients get decent housing in year 1, this is not a cause for complacency. Since these groups depend primarily on the older low-end rental stock, which suffers from under-maintenance, it is important to reinstate defunct federal funding for rehabilitation programs. The needs of large and multigenerational families must also be planned for in new or retrofitted affordable rental housing. Expanding access to non-profit affordable housing and rent-geared-to-income social housing would provide a sustainable solution to housing stability for refugees and others relying on income support or precarious employment. Provinces should abolish length of residency requirements for applying for rent supplement or low-income social housing.

Finally, the researchers identify several topics needing further research. These including robust studies of how sponsor groups deal with their housing-related responsibilities, and detailed tracking, over time and space, of the housing progress of people welcomed to Canada in all refugee streams and in cities with differing housing market conditions.

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For more on this study

The research report is available for free download at

<http://espace.inrs.ca/6458/>

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