

Finding housing for the Syrian refugee newcomers in Canadian cities: challenges, tactics, initiatives and lessons learned

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Pathways to Prosperity (P2P) 2017 National Conference
Toronto (16-17 November 2017)



Context (1)

- *“Once people are in permanent accommodation they begin to rebuild their lives” ... “That first apartment is that first place that they are safe”* (Resettlement Assistance Program provider interviews 2017)
 - Practicalities of daily life
 - Making connections, sense of inclusion
- Previous research on refugee housing experiences
 - Refugees face greater barriers than economic immigrants, but affordability improves after 3-4 years (Hiebert et al. 2006; Hiebert 2009)
 - Government, volunteer supports to refugee settlement are beneficial to housing outcomes (Murdie 2008)
 - But GARs’ housing vulnerabilities have been increasing since Canada strengthened humanitarian component of refugee selection (2002 IRPA) → higher % with “high-needs” (IRCC 2011; Sherrell & ISSofBC 2009; Rose & Charette 2011, 2014)

Context (2)

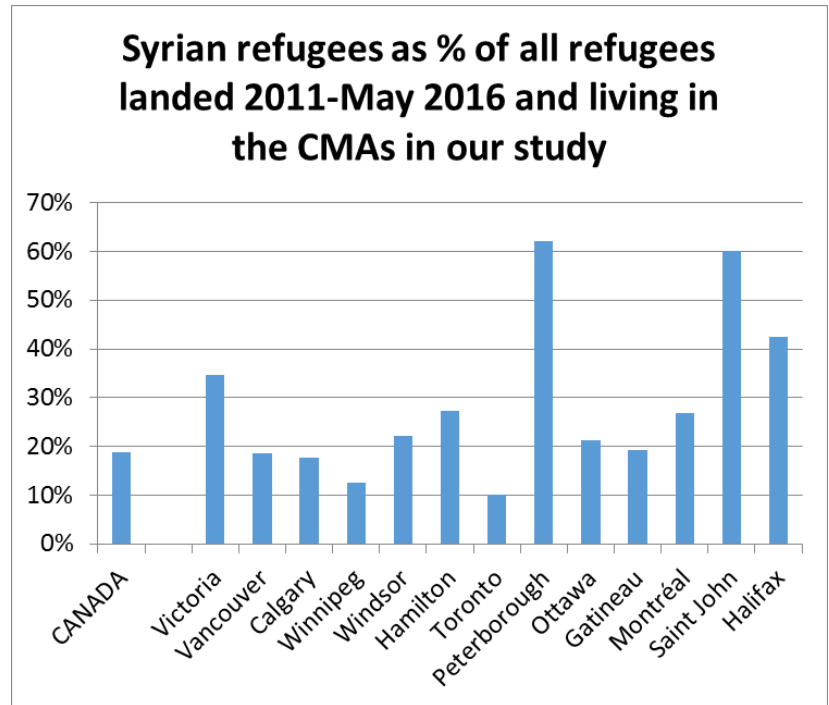
- Syrian operation = first major resettlement of refugees since the 2002 IRPA, and on a scale not seen for 35 years
- Housing market changes since last large-scale refugee arrivals (1999)
 - Spiralling rents in high-growth urban regions
 - Little new investment in social/affordable housing
- Income support for refugees is tied to social assistance rates (RAP allowance; guidelines for private sponsors)
- 92% of former GARs begin year 2 with social assistance as main income source; 48% after 5 years (Edlund 2017)

Research foci and questions

- Syrian operation = important opportunity to examine how the organizations and groups responsible for finding housing for resettled refugees went about this challenging task
- Main focus: Syrian government assisted refugees
 - Secondary goal: identify issues for research re housing of PSRs
- How did the **process of finding the first permanent housing** for the Syrian refugees unfold in **different cities** across Canada?
- Challenges, strategies, resources, successful practices for **suitable, affordable** and **sustainable** housing outcomes
- Policy issues arising from findings

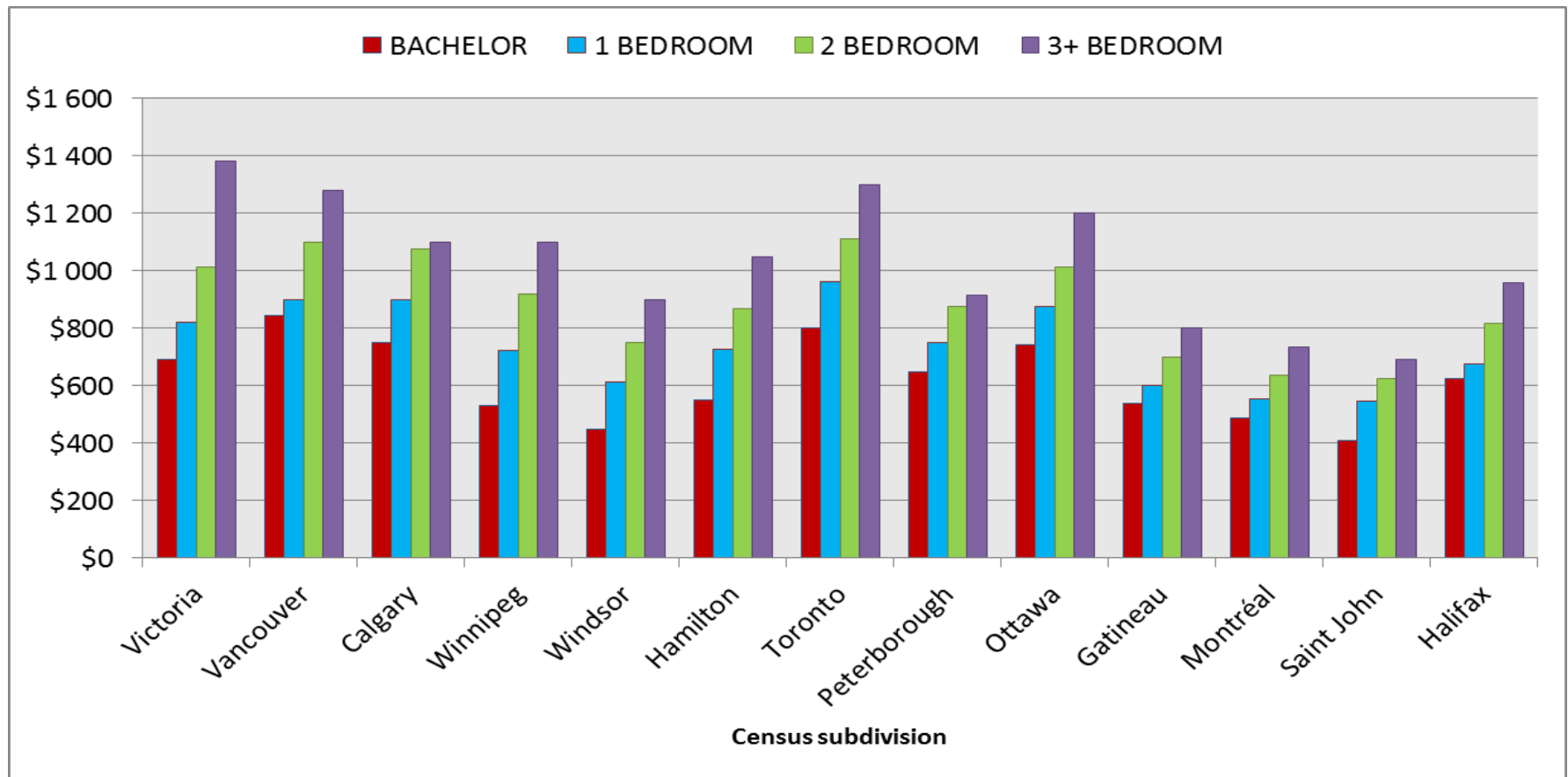
Cities included in this study

- 13 CMAs in 7 provinces
- Different sized cities
- Varying rental market conditions
- Long-established and new Resettlement Assistance Program contract holders
- Welcomed 100+ Syrian GARs as of Sept. 2016

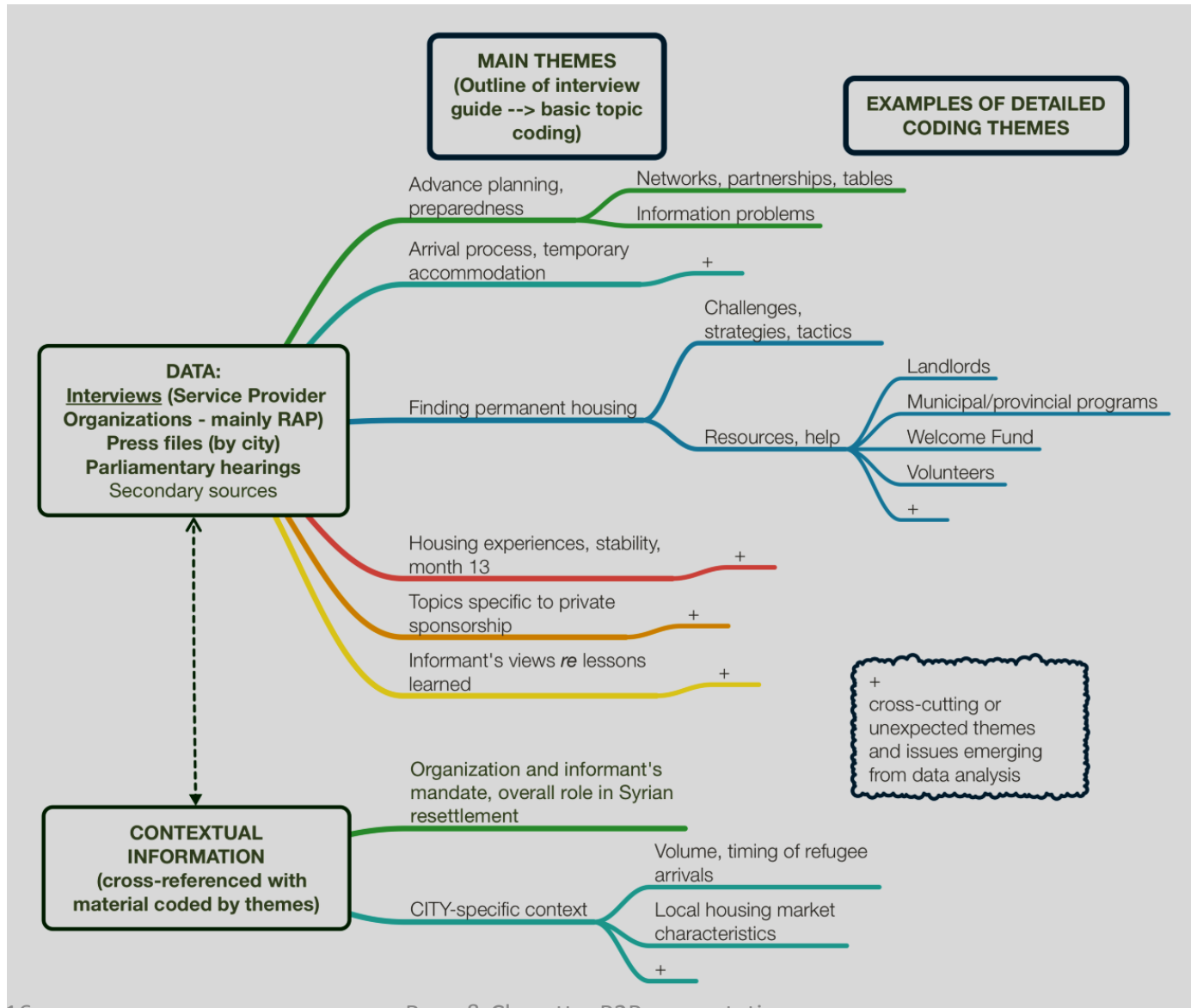


Source: Statistics Canada, Census of 2016, data tables, cat. no. 98-400-X2016202

Average rent levels in the lowest quartile, private row houses and apartments, for the cities selected for this study, October 2016



Themes, data sources, analysis process



Advance planning – strengths & challenges

- “Unprecedented” cooperation between different local organizations and different levels of government
 - ✓ Reinforcing existing networks, → long-term capacity building
 - Clarifying respective roles, task divisions, balance between emergency response model and “normal” resettlement work
- ✓ Including a housing table and encouraging private and social housing provider buy-in had major positive impacts later on
 - ✓ Outreach to housing providers not previously involved in refugee resettlement efforts
- ✓ Creating/expanding housing inventories and portals
 - But coordination hampered by insufficient advance information about family types

Limits to local “housing readiness”

“When we first learned the Syrians were coming, we were saying, “OK, what did we learn from Kosovo?” And we talked, we dragged out our old reports and recommendations and thought we were prepared (...).

Over the last few years. (...) we have seen the population has changed to more higher needs clients and we were expecting to see the same. But we were not prepared or we were not realizing what it means to work with a family of nine, where (...) everybody except for two is under the age of fourteen or ten, you know? (...). We had a long list of apartments. We had pages and pages of empty apartments, but the majority of the housing we have is one and two bedroom apartments (...). And we didn't see that trend before people were starting to arrive” (RAP-SPO, Halifax).

Size of resettled Syrian refugee family units, Canada, Nov. 2015-July 2016

	GOVERNMENT-ASSISTED REFUGEE		PRIVATELY SPONSORED REFUGEE		BLENDED SPONSORSHIP REFUGEE		TOTAL, RESETTLED FAMILY UNITS	
FAMILY SIZE	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
1	408	12.3%	2295	49.0%	127	19.1%	2830	32.7%
2 to 3	360	10.9%	1166	24.9%	82	12.3%	1608	18.6%
4 to 5	1235	37.3%	1113	23.8%	276	41.4%	2624	30.3%
6 to 8	1182	35.7%	109	2.3%	159	23.9%	1450	16.7%
9 to 10	114	3.4%	2	0.0%	14	2.1%	130	1.5%
11 +	14	0.4%	0	0.0%	8	1.2%	22	0.3%
Total	3313	100%	4685	100%	666	100%	8664	100%

Source: IRCC Open Data

Finding housing: suitability & adequacy

- Size
 - Persuading landlords to take large families
 - Dwelling adaptations
- Quality
 - ✓ A (surprisingly?) successful outcome
 - Basic but decent low-end-of-market
 - ✓ Positive impact of working with trusted landlords and/or lists of units vetted by city/province

Housing affordability—the nub of the challenge

- Rent levels far exceed the housing allocation in RAP
 - Long-standing issue well known to federal government
- Child Benefit (CB) has become *de facto* housing allowance, especially for large families
- Even with CB, 2-child family pays 40-50% of income on rent in most cities
- Childless households only get RAP: *“A single person with a lot of issues, torture and everything, vulnerable person, who cannot share an apartment with anybody—how we can find them an apartment for \$300?”* (RAP-SPO, Halifax, group discussion)



Making the first housing affordable

- Primarily, reliance on short-term private-sector contributions

“This major landlord gave us the whole complex, he reduced the rent by 20%, to make it work with the [Welcome Fund] allowances (...). If we did not have that rent supplement, it would be really unfortunate, because then people would have to pay their food money to supplement their rent” (RAP-SPO interview, Calgary)

- Ethical dilemmas of housing assistance earmarked for a single national origin...



- Less often, access to publicly-subsidized housing

“We had quite a few families go into social housing, and absolutely, we're less concerned about their situation, and had we been able to get more in social housing, I think it would be a better, much more stable situation for people to go in” (RAP-SPO, Victoria (group discussion)).

Fostering housing stability and sustainability

- Location: proximity to friends

“If you put them out in an isolated area, they are isolated (...) And the tendencies towards depression, or towards other mental health challenges are exacerbated because of their isolation” (RAP-SPO, Peterborough)

“Even if you place them in town, if they are the only [new refugee family] that's renting the unit, they don't feel that comfortable or safe (...)” (RAP-SPO, Ottawa)

- Location: accessibility to services, institutions
 - ✓ volunteer teams helping people discover neighbourhood, use transit

Fostering housing stability and sustainability

- Challenge of helping RAP clients come to terms with local housing market realities
 - impact of gaps in pre-arrival briefing?
- “Living well” in rental housing – needs of some newcomers for ongoing accompaniment *re* legal obligations and cultural codes of high-density living
- Contingency funds for housing emergencies (from Welcome Fund)
- Planning to minimize housing impacts of drops in income support in “month 13”

A cross-cutting theme: potential and challenges of volunteer contributions

- Volunteers played important role in housing aspects of resettlement
 - Facilitating daily life in temporary accommodation
 - Housing search – logistical support to RAP teams
 - Volunteer support groups: more personalized accompaniment than RAP, help with neighbourhood connections
- Challenges arising from upsurge of volunteering
 - Extra work and costs for RAP-SPOs at busiest time: training, coordination, managing donations...
 - Need for protocols to work out roles, avoid “boundary crossing”
- ✓ Learning experience - evolving models for collaboration between RAP-SPOs and grassroots community initiatives

Finding housing for privately sponsored refugees – preliminary observations

- Private sponsors and RAP workers faced similar challenges *re* housing affordability
 - but private sponsors more vulnerable to landlord exploitation
- Syrian operation highlights variations in sponsor groups' capacities and access to support
 - Knowhow about rental housing system (many new, inexperienced, sponsor groups)
 - Financial capacity to pay for suitable housing in the tighter markets
 - Strength of connection to Sponsorship Agreement Holder organization, and SAH capacity to help with housing search
 - ✓ Sharing of housing support resources between GAR and PSR streams when SAH is also RAP-provider
 - Access to training (e.g. no RSTP in Québec)

Policy implications – local scale of welcome

- Housing tables and task forces should become permanent and integral components of settlement infrastructure
 - and include both private landlord associations and social housing providers
- Infrastructure maintenance and memory-building
 - Maintain housing portals and protocols for managing volunteer offers
 - Or at least retain the knowhow for reactivating them when needed!

Policy implications – federal government

- Timely information to cities and RAP-SPOs about arrivals and family profiles
- Strengthen housing component in pre-arrival orientation
- Canada's humanitarian commitments imply need for **durable** income and housing supports, yet success in finding affordable first housing for Syrian refugees depended on resourceful local mobilizations of a **patchwork of ad hoc, short term** measures
- Gap between RAP allocation and housing costs is untenable
 - Role for private charity and philanthropy in emergency response, but not sustainable solution to structural problem
 - Unintended consequences of Child Benefit as housing allowance?

Policy implications – housing policy

- Affordable housing for large and multigenerational families
- Reinvestment in rehabilitation of older low-end rental stock
 - Successful first housing quality outcomes are no cause for complacency
- Expanding non-profit and rent-geared-to-income social and affordable housing as sustainable solution for those relying on income support or precarious employment
- Eliminate provincial and municipal residency requirements for access to subsidized housing

Thank you!

- Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (Targeted Research: Syrian Refugee Arrival, Resettlement and Integration), grant no. 890-2016-4027
- 17 interviewees in 15 newcomer serving organizations
- Sara Lyons, Community Foundations of Canada
- Project team collaborators: Valerie Preston (York U.) & Kathy Sherrell (ISS of BC)
- Student transcribers: Robert Jennings: Christine Préfontaine-Meunier

The usual disclaimers apply

Report and executive summary: <http://espace.inrs.ca/6458>

Research Digest:

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