

IMPROVING HOUSING FOR FORMER REFUGEES: LESSONS FOR AND FROM A PANDEMIC?

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Project: Improving Housing for Former Refugees

- Funded by SSHRC/Manitoba Research Alliance
- 2015 – Recruit 21 Government Assisted Refugees and Privately Sponsored Refugees
- Interview max 5 times over 3+ years to determine housing trajectories over time in relationship to settlement situation

Housing in the web of (re)settlement

- Former refugees' housing situations, including the pursuit of housing, can lead to positive or negative effects on other key aspects of resettlement:
 - Employment
 - Education
 - Training
 - Child care
 - Financial well-being
- Key aspects of resettlement can have positive or negative effects on an individual's or family's housing situation.

Housing in the web of (re)settlement

- Housing and resettlement are 'mutually reinforcing' and 'co-constitutive'
- Housing is an oasis of stability or epicenter of problems during resettlement
- Everyone in the refugee serving sector knows this, right?
 - But how do we document and substantiate it?

The Big Context

- Former refugees overwhelmingly rely on the private rental market
- Private rental market in Canadian cities increasingly expensive and constricted over time
- Many (but not all) former refugees are low income, and therefore experience same challenges as other low income individuals, however....
- Housing former refugees a matter of:
 - Structural conditions of local, provincial, national housing markets (public and private)
 - A matter of *resettlement*

Big Concepts?

- **Deluge of resettlement:** concurrent needs
 - large, and often overwhelming, number of fundamental needs that must be tended to immediately upon resettlement for former refugees.
 - A laundry list, including doing the laundry!
 - Securing housing
 - Attaining employment and/or income supports
 - Enrolment in language or other training/schooling
 - Care function for family members including those overseas, including seeking family reunification
 - Learning and habituating to a new city, culture, and society, and so on.

Big Concepts?

- **Resettlement Conundrum:** the puzzle confronted
 - In resettlement contexts, amid a scarcity of resources, pursuing one core need (housing, employment, language training, child care, and so on) leads to compromises vis-à-vis other core needs and/or settlement objectives
 - The fundamental need to locate, secure, and pay for a home, whatever that home's quality, led many of our interviewees to make difficult decisions which then compromised their long term settlement situation

Big Concepts?

- **Impossible tradeoffs:** the choices and the impact
 - The difficult decisions that former refugees make when they are put in the position of having to choose which fundamental need to pursue, and which to go without, and the consequences thereafter.
- The deluge of resettlement, resettlement conundrum, and impossible tradeoffs are all captured in our forthcoming report

By way of illustration: Ibrahim*, originally from Darfur area, Sudan

- 'I go to school and come back and go to agency and work 3 or 4 hours. I collect weekly 20 hours or 15 hours weekly, just only when I buy [pay] the rent, it's OK, I can do something. Just only for rent and food, you can't save something. Only if I got a job, I could save something. But agency is not like a stable job, it is a temporary job.'
- 'When I start Rent Assist, I applied for EIA. EIA said you have to stop Rent Assist because you are now going to receive from EIA. They know I have school at morning and they don't finish my application. They stop. When I go for next month, they send me Sorry we can't help you. I call and make an appointment and he says No we can't help you because you have school in the morning at high school. Why did they stop the Rent Assist? It was going OK for me. He said if you want to apply again you can apply. I never got EIA. Just Rent Assist, they pay me a little bit. It is not a lot but it was helpful. Now that stopped too. No Rent Assist and no EIA.'

Preliminary Findings

- All former refugees
 - Many are confined initially, perhaps longer, to poorest neighbourhoods with highest core housing need
 - High demonstration of core housing need (rent more than 30 percent of income; inadequate [in need of major repairs; we might add dilapidated, insecure ...]; unsuitable)
 - Amidst the **deluge of resettlement** (all of the concurrent needs), a high prevalence of **the resettlement conundrum** (which must I prioritize and choose?), leading to **impossible tradeoffs** (the decision and its effects):
 - Immediate, longer-term effects compounding and reciprocal

Preliminary Findings

- Social housing can help (if you can get it)
- Socially-supported housing and interventions (e.g. rental subsidies and supplements to offset commodification) can help (if you can get it)
- Navigating both exceptionally challenging for former refugees in new contexts

Preliminary Findings

- GARs:
 - Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) shelter allowance inadequate:
 - Average Winnipeg rental prices, including those found in its poorest neighbourhoods, exceed the basic RAP shelter allowance.
 - Month 13 and beyond -- further income instability, affordability problems, poor housing traps

Preliminary Findings

- PSRs
 - Many into private rental markets before 12 months (i.e. not living with sponsor for mandated 12 months)
 - Sponsorship is a lottery, with variable effects on housing and resettlement situations
 - We hope, but cannot assume, that private sponsorship produces stable and positive housing outcomes

Lessons for a Pandemic

- The long arc of resettlement continues amidst a pandemic
- Private rental markets expensive, constricted relative to need
- The 'dark side of resilience' – the assumption that former refugees' capacity for adaptability and survival diminishes need for broad social support
- Services matter, now more than ever

Lessons from a Pandemic

- The deluge of resettlement is now greater; the pandemic will exacerbate precarity, inequality, and uncertainty
- COVID-19 has deeply racialized, gendered, and class-based impacts
- Moratoriums on evictions matter
- Remote and virtual service provision matter, but...
 - Should this become the new normal?
- Rental rates dropping across Canada?
 - Perhaps...?
 - Unevenly distributed (i.e. Vancouver v, Winnipeg) uncertain duration
 - Measure rental rate relative to income
- Cohabitation

Please stay in touch!

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