

Toronto newcomers face major housing challenges and risk of homelessness

Valerie Preston, Robert Murdie, Silvia D'Addario, Prince Sibanda, Ann Marie Murnaghan, with Jennifer Logan & Mi Hae Ahn

What you need to know

Nearly all newcomers to Canada struggle to find affordable housing in the country's largest city. Although asylum seekers and refugees report the most severe housing difficulties, 75% of other immigrants are struggling with unaffordable housing and similar problems. This includes many who have been living in Canada for up to 10 years.

What is this research about?

When people come to Canada, finding a place to live is a first step to successful settlement. This study is part of a larger research project that compares the housing situation and needs of immigrants and refugees in Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver, the three Canadian cities where most newcomers settle.

What did the researchers do?

Researchers focused on two vulnerable groups; refugees that are chosen in other countries and are supported to come to Canada, and asylum seekers who arrive on their own and file a refugee claim after getting into Canada. They first held focus groups with settlement and housing workers to get their views on the main housing issues that newcomers face. Then, 188 newcomers that had been using settlement agency services completed a survey. The group was made up of 24 sponsored refugees selected outside Canada, 63 asylum seekers, and 97 others that included mostly skilled workers and family-sponsored immigrants. All had been living in Canada for at least three months but no longer than ten years. Four focus groups looked



Bunk beds at a city shelter. Almost half of the refugees and asylum seekers interviewed had been homeless and spent time at a shelter.

at the personal experiences of 23 refugees and asylum seekers.

What did the researchers find?

Housing difficulties

Being able to afford housing is the main issue for newcomers. Most from the survey spend *at least* 30% of their income on housing. In an even more difficult situation, 17-33% of each newcomer group spends 75% or more of their income to keep a roof over their head.

Newcomers struggle in the housing market because of very low incomes. Most respondents have annual household incomes of no more than \$20,000, compared to the Toronto city average of \$69,000. Immigrants often find it difficult to get a decent job (or even a job at all). This is an important factor contributing to lower incomes and the struggle to afford a place to live. More than half of those surveyed have the skills, qualifications, money, and contacts that should help them in job-searching, but are still finding it difficult. Although their housing costs are slightly less than others in the metropolitan area, they spend a high proportion of their incomes on housing.

Many newcomers have experienced "hidden homelessness", living without a permanent residence, staying with friends and staying in places not obvious to the public. Overcrowding is a problem for almost half of those surveyed. Poorly maintained and unhealthy housing are also

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common problems. Mould, bad ventilation, bedbugs, and pest problems were issues brought up in the focus groups.

Many refugees and asylum seekers have been homeless. Almost half of those interviewed have stayed in a shelter. Recent economic problems have only made finding housing more difficult, especially for newcomers. This is mainly a reflection of the changing housing market in Toronto, where the construction of rental units and social housing largely ended in the mid-1990s.

Asylum seekers and refugees more vulnerable

Because of their temporary status, asylum seekers find it harder than others to get a stable job and a place to live. Many depend on social assistance that is not enough to pay for decent housing in Toronto.

With bigger families than many asylum seekers, sponsored refugees are not much better off. More than half live in unaffordable, overcrowded, poorly maintained, and unhealthy housing. However, their housing situation seems a bit more secure since sponsored refugees have made fewer moves on average than asylum seekers.

More than 20% of newcomers in the study have experienced discrimination in the housing market. Sponsored refugees are more likely to report this than asylum seekers or non-refugee immigrants. However, some of those interviewed said that in neighbourhoods where minorities are the majority, landlords rarely discriminate on the basis of ethnic, racial, or religious background.

Coping strategies

Newcomers turn to friends and family first for help with housing difficulties. Non-refugee immigrants rely more on family, while sponsored refugees and asylum seekers go to friends for help. Refugees and asylum seekers pointed out that information shared by relatives and friends is not always reliable.

The City of Toronto funds housing programs and projects in immigrant-serving agencies for all newcomers. Settlement services funded by the federal government mostly serve immigrants who are legal permanent residents and offer little help with housing issues.

How can you use this research?

The findings point out the need to help newcomers find well-paid jobs in line with their qualifications and experience. An adequate income allows them to secure affordable and decent housing. The research also includes recommendations for all levels of government and housing service providers to increase affordable housing, improve the quality of the rental units, provide appropriate housing services, and overall, improve the housing system.

The research report is available at:

http://j.mp/precarioushousing_pdf

For more information, contact vpreston@yorku.ca

About the research and its researchers

Research project title: *Precarious Housing and Hidden Homelessness among Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Immigrants in Montréal, Toronto and Vancouver*

This research was carried out in partnership with the **Immigrant and Refugee Housing Committee** at the City of Toronto and some of its partner agencies including **COSTI Immigrant Services, Flemingdon Neighbourhood Services, Midaynta, Housing Help Association of Ontario, and Scarborough Housing Help Centre.**

Valerie Preston is a Professor in the Department of Geography at York University and the York director for CERIS – The Ontario Metropolis Centre.

Robert Murdie is a Professor Emeritus in the Department of Geography at York University.

Silvia D'Addario is a doctoral student in the Department of Geography at York University.

Prince Sibanda is the Coordinator at Don Valley Local Immigration Partnership.

Ann Marie Murnaghan is an instructor in the Department of Environment and Geography at the University of Manitoba.

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