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INTRODUCTION

The issue of housing has emerged as one of the most pressing challenges in Canada today, intersecting powerfully with questions of migration, settlement, and cohesion. At a time when global displacement is reaching unprecedented levels, Canada remains a destination of choice for those seeking safety, opportunity, and a sense of belonging. Yet, as this edition of *Canadian Diversity* makes clear, the promise of protection and integration cannot be realized without addressing the housing situation often encountered by newcomers as well as established communities.

The contributions in this volume reveal the many layers of the problem. They examine refugee resettlement and the disparities that shape access to shelter, the lived experiences of asylum seekers navigating precarious housing markets, and the systemic barriers that affect both migrant and Indigenous communities across the country. The perspectives presented here draw from research, policy, health, and community practice, highlighting the vital role played by local organizations and service providers in filling critical gaps.

Housing is not only about buildings or markets. It is a cornerstone of dignity, security, and well-being. Without stable homes, integration efforts stall, health outcomes decline, and social divisions deepen. At the same time, the ideas and initiatives presented in these pages remind us that solutions are within reach when we approach housing as a shared responsibility and a collective right.

RETHINKING REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT IN CANADA: ADDRESSING DISPARITIES AND UPHOLDING INTERNATIONAL OBLIGATIONS

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RACHEL SHAN is a Specialist in Housing Research at CMHC. With a background in economics, her work primarily focuses on the housing needs of vulnerable populations, such as racialized communities, newcomers and refugees, and seniors. She leads the GBA Plus initiative aimed at embedding the practice in research and beyond at CMHC.

This research investigates the transitions of new Canadians within the housing system through key-informant interviews with housing providers who support access to hotel shelters in Southern Ontario. We explore the dynamics of housing transitions, focusing on flows into and out of hotel shelters. Our findings highlight the challenges and pathways encountered by newcomers accessing and exiting shelters, providing insights into the broader housing system in Canada. This research was part of a larger series of projects that aimed to inform policy on the housing system and identify opportunities for improving housing transitions and stability for vulnerable populations.

INTRODUCTION: THE CANADIAN REFUGEE SYSTEM

Canada's refugee system offers protection to people who are forced to leave their home due to serious human rights abuses. It can be broken into two main components. First, the Refugee and Humanitarian Resettlement Program (RHRP) was created to resettle people outside of Canada who need protection. This group includes government-sponsored refugees, privately sponsored refugees, or a mix of both under the Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) Program. Second, the in-Canada asylum program assists people making claims for refugee status from within the borders of Canada and these individuals or families are referred to as refugee claimants.

Upon entry to Canada, government-assisted refugees are placed in Resettlement Assistance Programs (RAP) run by service provider organizations (SPOs) and funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). By contrast, temporary accommodations for refugee claimants are not directly arranged by the federal government and are considered to be the responsibility of the provinces and municipalities.¹ Thus admission category affects the housing journey of refugee populations in Canada.

This article examines the use of transitional hotels for refugees arriving in Canada and the systemic barriers and obstacles encountered in the resettlement process. CMHC-funded research examines the use of transitional hotels in a case study of housing transitions in Southern Ontario. The authors also draw on internally conducted research on systemic barriers in the housing system.

HISTORICAL AND STATISTICAL CONTEXT

While hotels and motels have long been a part of the emergency shelter system, the use of hotels as temporary accommodations for refugees and refugee claimants is a more recent phenomenon, corresponding with an increase in the number of arrivals into Canada. Since 2017, the federal government has provided approximately \$700 million to provinces and municipalities to address housing pressures related to the

increase of refugee claimants. In 2023, the IRCC announced \$212 million for the Interim Housing Assistance Program (IHAP) and in January 2024 the federal government committed a further \$362 million. As of February 26, 2024, the IRCC was providing funding for approximately 4,050 hotel rooms across six provinces.^{2,3} The Refugee Protection Division (RPD) of the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada reported that it had 57,812 refugee claims referred to it in 2023,⁴ while 144,035 asylum claimants were processed by the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) and IRCC.⁵

TRANSITIONS IN AND OUT OF SHELTER HOTELS

There are two distinct policy pathways for transitions in and out of shelter hotels, based on the distinction between government-assisted refugees and refugee claimants. Under the first path, government-assisted refugees, privately sponsored refugees, and those under the Blended Visa Office-Referred program have a clear pathway to housing stability and settlement support. Under the second path, refugee claimants have no clear passage, and are increasingly entering the shelter system, settling in encampments, or living on the streets.⁶

Government-assisted refugees are identified for resettlement by the UNHCR and sponsored by the Government of Canada. Upon arrival, government-assisted refugees are welcomed at the Port of Entry by service providers who provide help with processing paperwork for permanent residency. They receive resettlement support for up to one year as well as temporary accommodation in RAP centers or IRCC-funded hotels until permanent housing can be secured.

Refugee claimants arrive in Canada on their own and file a claim for refugee status at a Port of Entry or inland office. The Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) or IRCC officials will decide whether an individual is eligible to be referred for a hearing following the filing of this claim. Refugee claimants have little access to resettlement services until their claim is decided, but they are eligible for the Interim Federal Health Program (IFHP). They can also apply for work or study permits as they await the decision of their claim which takes an

1 Government of Canada. "More Federal Housing Support for Asylum Claimants." Last modified July 18, 2023. www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2023/07/more-federal-housing-support-for-asylum-claimants.html

2 www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/transparency/committees/cimm-feb-28-2024/interim-housing-assistance-program.html

3 For more information on citizenship and immigration in Québec, see www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/transparency/committees/cimm-mar-20-2024/quebec-key-facts.html.

4 Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB). "Refugee Protection Claims (New System) Statistics." Last modified 2023. www.irb-cisr.gc.ca/en/statistics/protection/Pages/RPDStat.aspx

5 Government of Canada. "Asylum Claimants by Year – 2023." Last modified August 2, 2024. www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/asylum-claims/asylum-claims-2023.html

6 For statistics on refugee claimants and homelessness, see <https://housing-infrastructure.canada.ca/homelessness-sans-abri/reports-rapports/data-newcomers-donnees-nouveaux-arrivants-eng.html>.

average of 24 months.⁷ Because they are ineligible to receive support through IRCC-funded resettlement assistance programs, refugee claimants often seek out municipal services or community-based organizations for help, which they must locate on their own. The lack of a clearly defined path can lead to housing insecurity or being unhoused.

Transitions out of shelter hotels also differ according to refugee status. Service providers are contracted by the IRCC to find government-assisted refugees stable housing. This can involve arranging viewings of potential units and assisting with other logistics. For refugee claimants, assistance in finding stable housing depends on the service organization and if they have capacity or funding to help. For example, one service provider research participant mentioned,

“You have only so many staff and these are staff who weren’t experienced with working with asylum-seeking refugees. I think [the organization] learned as they went along. What we heard was [refugees] would only see their counselor if they were lucky... So you’re not going to get the services that you would get, say, if you’re staying at [our settlement organization], where you have a case-assigned counselor you meet with weekly and who knows to work with you on your case management plan.... You know all these things have to take place within a certain period of time, or you’re going to fall through the cracks and miss deadlines.”
– Participant 4

SYSTEMIC BARRIERS

Refugees and refugee claimants face systemic barriers that are similar despite the fact they have different entry categories. These include limited or delayed entry into the workforce impacting income opportunities; limited or delayed access to wrap-around supports; and discrimination, which significantly impact their resettlement experience and access to stable housing. As discussed above, access to government-funded temporary accommodations is not guaranteed and depends on many factors, including the categories under which refugees and claimants fall, availability and type of units, family size, and shelter system capacity. Transitions

out of temporary accommodations can also be challenging, marked by limited supplies of supportive and affordable housing, and coordination gaps between service organizations and different levels of government. These experiences are complicated in the rental market by low or no income upon arrival, and no Canadian credit history. Refugee claimants’ barriers are compounded by the precarious nature of their claim status, as potential employers, landlords, and financial institutions may express reluctance in accepting these households if their claims are rejected. As a result, refugees and refugee claimants are unable to exercise autonomy and choice in the housing system.

LOCAL PRESSURES

Without a clear path to housing and settlement supports, refugee claimants cannot access federally funded settlement programs and accommodations until their claim is decided, so they must rely on municipal services and community organizations for assistance. As shelter systems across Toronto and much of southern Ontario are operating at or above capacity, increases of refugee claimants without additional funding, resources, and infrastructure have stretched existing support systems beyond capacity. For example, while 500 spaces for refugee claimants are reserved in Toronto’s shelter system, the demand outpaces the supply of these beds. Furthermore, 200 to 300 people a day who call Toronto’s central intake system are not matched with a bed due to lack of capacity.⁸

Despite support services that provide a pathway to stable housing for government-assisted refugees, both refugee pathways face challenges in finding affordable housing after leaving temporary accommodations. Canada’s supply of supportive, social, transitional, and non-market housing is very limited.⁹ Service providers report their clients are staying longer in temporary accommodations due to the lack of affordable housing. Furthermore, financial support provided by the government for housing does not reflect market realities.

Finally, government-assisted refugees and refugee claimants can face additional obstacles in securing housing in the private rental market. There is considerable research on the

7 Government of Canada. “Claim Refugee Status from Inside Canada: Work and Study Permits.” Last modified March 25, 2024. www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/asylum/claim-protection-inside-canada/work-study.html

8 See www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2024/bu/bgrd/backgroundfile-242122.pdf, p. 7. “Toronto’s shelter system is full. Current demand for shelter space is so high that every night the City is unable to provide shelter to hundreds of people requesting a space.”

9 Canada’s social housing stock is approximately 3.5% of total housing stock, compared to the OECD average of 7%. See www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/oecd-affordable-housing-database.html, section PH4.2 for more information.

effect of market competition on newcomers including refugees.^{10,11,12,13,14,15,16,17} Within this context, overt, subtle, and covert forms of race-based discrimination appeared frequently.¹⁸ Because some service provider organizations rely on a pool of willing landlords who will work with them to rent to refugees, the reluctance they observed to rent to certain groups of refugees placed additional obstacles in resettlement.¹⁹ Sometimes this reluctance was overt, while other times it was in the form of additional requirements such as requesting more than one month of rent upfront or requiring a credit score and reference check. One service provider assisting refugees provided the following example about landlord reactions,

“...Oh I rented to a family from [country] once, don’t send me anybody from [country] because it went bad,’ or something. So, you know just like really terrible things that they are telling us, and they have one bad experience and they’ll write everybody off.”
– Service provider, rental markets

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

These research findings have several implications for both immigration and housing policy.

- Representatives of immigration service provider organizations consistently identified the importance of affordable and supportive housing and increased benefits and subsidies. These measures can help transition government-assisted refugees out of shelter hotels and into permanent housing.
- Even though the policy supports currently overlap, refugee claimants experiencing homelessness often face distinct challenges that require specific programs and supports that are often not available within the general shelter system. Policymakers could thus consider infrastructure which targets the specific needs of refugee claimants. One such possibility would be to create reception centers at major Ports of Entry, which would allow a single access point for refugee claimants and reduce the chance that they end up in emergency shelter systems.
- Representatives of service provider organizations indicated that increasing flexible funding and coordination between orders of government could help prevent stalled transitions out of temporary hotel accommodations and emergency shelters.

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 - 18 For statistics related to the country of origin of Canada’s refugee claimants, see www.irb-cisr.gc.ca/en/statistics/protection/Pages/RPD-Stat2023.aspx. In 2023, the top three countries were Mexico, Haiti, and India. See also <https://open.canada.ca/data/en/dataset/4a1b260a-7ac4-4985-80a0-603bfe4aec11>.
 - 19 For additional context, see CMHC (2024), “Systemic Barriers Framework.” https://assets.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/sf/project/archive/research_6/systemic-barriers-framework---final-pub-version.pdf

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LOGEMENT POUR PERSONNES MIGRANTES PRÉCAIRES ET DEMANDEUSES D'ASILE : UNE NOUVELLE SYNERGIE DU SECTEUR COMMUNAUTAIRE DE MONTRÉAL

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Alors que la crise du logement est souvent attribuée aux personnes migrantes, cet article montre que la précarité résidentielle vécue par les personnes demandeuses d'asile et migrantes précaires s'inscrit dans des dynamiques structurelles préalables à l'augmentation de l'immigration au Canada et au Québec ces dernières années. À Montréal, le secteur communautaire joue un rôle central pour combler les lacunes des politiques publiques et de nouvelles initiatives d'hébergement illustrent une synergie croissante entre organismes. Malgré ces efforts, l'offre demeure insuffisante. Une meilleure documentation et une action concertée entre État, milieu communautaire et recherche sont impératives pour répondre aux besoins des personnes migrantes précaires.

L'association entre immigration précaire et crise du logement fait débat au Québec. En 2024, des organisations de la société civile québécoise ont exprimé des préoccupations concernant la perception selon laquelle la crise du logement au Québec serait principalement attribuable aux personnes migrantes

et demandeuses d'asile.¹ Cette vision est relayée par certains médias québécois et par des figures politiques telles que le premier ministre du Québec, François Legault, qui a déclaré que « 100 % du problème de logement » de la province découlerait de l'incapacité du marché locatif à satisfaire la demande

¹ Consulter la déclaration du 21 février 2024 de la Table de concertation des organismes au service des personnes réfugiées et immigrantes (TCRI), Réponse aux propos du gouvernement du 20 février 2024, <https://tcri.qc.ca/2024/02/reponse-aux-propos-du-gouvernement-du-20-fevrier-2024>, et la lettre ouverte de l'Association québécoise des avocats et avocates en droit de l'immigration (AQAADI), D'anges gardiens à vauriens, *La Presse*, 11 juin 2024. www.lapresse.ca/dialogue/opinions/2024-06-11/travailleurs-etrangers-temporaires-etudiants-internationaux-et-demandeurs-d-asile/d-anges-gardiens-a-vauriens.php

accrue liée à l'augmentation des niveaux d'immigration temporaire et des demandes de statut de réfugié des dernières années.²

Cependant, si cette mise en accusation des personnes migrantes n'explique pas le manque de logement dans les régions du Québec où elles sont moins présentes, elle ne rend pas plus compte des enjeux relatifs aux pénuries de logement dans la région montréalaise. D'abord, la pénurie de logements abordables dans les villes canadiennes ne peut être directement imputée aux personnes migrantes en raison de conditions structurelles préexistantes. La recherche indique que le logement social a été sous-financé pendant des décennies, entraînant une stratification importante de l'accès au logement, particulièrement pour les femmes et les personnes immigrantes. Depuis les années 1980, ce désinvestissement public s'est progressivement accompagné d'une financiarisation croissante du secteur locatif au Canada. Comme le soulignent les travaux de Dan Hiebert, et tel que corroboré par les observations du secteur communautaire montréalais, les personnes réfugiées et migrantes précaires sont souvent les premières à subir les conséquences de cette détérioration de l'accès au logement abordable.

Cependant, si cette mise en accusation des personnes migrantes n'explique pas le manque de logement dans les régions du Québec où elles sont moins présentes, elle ne rend pas plus compte des enjeux relatifs aux pénuries de logement dans la région montréalaise. D'abord, la pénurie de logements abordables dans les villes canadiennes ne peut être directement imputée aux personnes migrantes en raison de conditions structurelles préexistantes. La recherche indique que le logement social a été sous-financé pendant des décennies, entraînant une stratification importante de l'accès au logement, particulièrement pour les femmes et les personnes immigrantes. Depuis les années 1980, ce désinvestissement public s'est progressivement accompagné d'une financiarisation croissante du secteur locatif au Canada. Comme le soulignent les travaux de Dan Hiebert, et tel que corroboré par les observations du secteur communautaire montréalais, les personnes réfugiées et migrantes précaires sont souvent les premières à subir les conséquences de cette détérioration de l'accès au logement abordable.

UNE PROBLÉMATIQUE DE LOGEMENT EN CONSTANTE ÉVOLUTION

Les enjeux relatifs au logement vécus par les personnes demandeuses d'asile témoignent de la précarité de leur situation. L'histoire suivante combine trois histoires de demandeuses d'asile ayant sollicité l'aide de Foyer du Monde³,

un organisme qui offre de l'hébergement temporaire pour familles migrantes à statut précaire :

Cette semaine, Sofia (pseudonyme) et sa fille ont franchi le seuil de Foyer du Monde. Sofia est vénézuélienne et journaliste indépendante. Elle a dû fuir son pays après avoir reçu des menaces de mort et avoir vécu des années de pénurie dans un contexte de crise politique et économique. Avec à peine assez d'argent en poche pour survivre aux premiers jours de la traversée des Amériques à pied, Sofia est passée par la jungle du Darién, l'une des routes migratoires les plus dangereuses au monde. Pendant son trajet de plusieurs mois, elle a failli perdre la vie plusieurs fois, a dû faire le deuil de ce dont sa fille a été témoin, et a perdu des camarades de route qu'elle n'a jamais eu le temps de pleurer. Au plus creux de sa trajectoire, elle a pensé plusieurs fois tout abandonner, comme lorsque, n'ayant plus d'autre option, elle a dû mendier au Costa Rica et puis au Mexique.

Alors que le froid automnal s'installe trois semaines après son arrivée au Canada, Sofia se bute à un autre obstacle : l'absence de logement. N'ayant nulle part où dormir, elle passe deux nuits sur un banc de parc à Montréal avec sa fille. Sans logement, la Direction de la protection de la jeunesse (DPJ) menace de lui retirer sa fille. Foyer du Monde est l'une des rares options d'hébergement pour elle si elle souhaite conserver la garde de son enfant. Sans elle, Sofia ne voit pas pourquoi elle continuerait à se battre. Elle en veut à un système sur lequel elle fondait beaucoup d'espoir.

Cette histoire n'est malheureusement pas unique. Le risque d'itinérance est réel pour les personnes migrantes précaires, alors que les parents migrants mal logés risquent de voir leurs enfants placés en famille d'accueil. Entre 2018 et 2024, les milieux communautaires ont observé une augmentation significative des niveaux d'itinérance parmi les personnes migrantes à statut précaire à Montréal. Des données chiffrées sont difficiles à obtenir. Pour l'instant, le portrait de la situation peut être dressé à partir des estimations du terrain faites par le secteur communautaire. Pendant la pandémie, ces évaluations évoquaient que 10 % des cas d'itinérance concernaient des personnes demandeuses d'asile et migrantes précaires à Montréal. Par conséquent, les ressources en hébergement témoignaient d'une demande forte. Par exemple, un organisme montréalais offrant de l'hébergement temporaire a confié à des employées de Foyer du Monde que, début 2024, la moitié de ses lits étaient occupés par des personnes demandeuses d'asile. Les choses se sont depuis stabilisées, mais les

2 Rima Elkouri, 100 % irresponsable, *La Presse*, 11 juin 2024. www.lapresse.ca/actualites/chroniques/2024-06-11/legault-logements-et-immigration-temporaire/100-irresponsable.php

3 www.foyerdumonde.ca

structures d'accueil pour personnes en situation d'itinérance, déjà très sollicitées, peinent toujours à répondre efficacement aux besoins spécifiques des personnes migrantes.

OBSTACLES STRUCTURELS : LE DÉFI POSÉ PAR L'ENTENTE DE TIERS-PAYS SÛR

Un autre défi majeur limitant l'accès au logement pour les demandeurs et demandeuses d'asile réside dans l'inadéquation entre les exigences de l'Entente de tiers-pays sûr (ETPS) et les conditions d'accueil du Programme régional d'accueil et d'intégration des demandeurs d'asile (PRAIDA) au Québec. Alors que d'autres provinces ne disposent pas d'infrastructures spécifiques, le Québec bénéficie depuis 1956 de ce programme établi à Montréal et qui offre 1200 lits pour les personnes demandeuses d'asile. Cependant, la révision de l'ETPS en 2023 a modifié les conditions d'accueil, imposant aux personnes demandeuses d'asile ayant traversé la frontière terrestre de patienter 14 jours avant de soumettre leur demande, tandis que le PRAIDA exige que les demandes soient déposées dans un délai de 10 à 12 jours pour accéder à ses services.⁴ Cette discordance met en lumière un besoin urgent de réévaluation des critères d'accès aux services du PRAIDA.

En effet, des données récentes révèlent que, malgré l'arrivée continue de demandeurs d'asile à la frontière au printemps 2025, le taux d'occupation des lits du PRAIDA était de seulement 30 %. Une partie de cette faible occupation résulte du fait que les personnes demandeuses d'asile, souvent des personnes ayant de la famille au Canada, sont d'abord logées chez leurs proches. Toutefois, lorsque ces familles ne peuvent plus offrir d'hébergement, ces personnes se retrouvent sans solution de logement. Par ailleurs, le retrait de la protection temporaire aux États-Unis pour 500 000 personnes migrantes en provenance d'Haïti, de Cuba, du Venezuela et du Nicaragua pourrait inciter certaines d'entre elles à se tourner vers le Canada, ce qui exercerait une pression supplémentaire sur les services de première ligne. Ainsi, l'inadéquation entre l'ETPS et les capacités du PRAIDA contribue à accroître la vulnérabilité des demandeurs d'asile, les exposant davantage à l'itinérance.

UNE NOUVELLE OFFRE INSUFFISANTE

L'expertise des organismes de première ligne spécialisés dans le soutien à la population immigrante est devenue indispensable en raison de l'insuffisance des ressources. Considérant souvent l'afflux migratoire comme un phénomène tempo-

raire, les autorités publiques proposent des solutions provisoires et quasi-carcérales, telles que l'hébergement dans une dizaine d'hôtels de la région de Montréal en 2021. Cependant, cet apport temporaire ne couvre pas les besoins complets en matière d'accompagnement et de services. Les personnes demandeuses d'asile ont donc rapidement appris à se tourner vers les organismes communautaires avoisinants qui ont dû pallier ces insuffisances.

Le secteur communautaire montréalais s'engage quotidiennement à fournir un logement et un soutien adaptés aux personnes migrantes, contribuant ainsi à leur intégration dans leur nouvelle ville. Néanmoins, les défis actuels sont de taille et c'est pour cette raison qu'un nouvel écosystème du logement migrant a émergé à Montréal et complète l'hébergement proposé par le PRAIDA. Il comprend Foyer du Monde (35 lits), l'organisme Le Pont (35 lits), ainsi que La Traverse (25 lits) née en 2021 d'une initiative citoyenne de Montréal-Nord. Malgré ces efforts, l'offre reste insuffisante. Par exemple, Foyer du Monde, créé en mai 2017 en réponse à la demande croissante, a accueilli plus d'une centaine de personnes depuis son ouverture. Face à l'augmentation de la demande, l'organisme a dû restreindre les critères d'acceptation aux personnes les plus vulnérables et prolonger les délais d'attente. La liste d'attente qui comptait en 2020 une trentaine de familles a bondit en 2024 à plus de 80 familles. Avec un taux de refus en date de juillet 2025 de 75 % et un taux d'occupation de 97 %, l'organisme a opté pour une solution à long terme. Elle a fait l'acquisition d'une seconde bâtisse pour augmenter sa capacité de lits financée à même des dons privés et provenant de communautés religieuses. D'autres organismes similaires, comme Le Pont, réfléchissent à des projets de sous-location permettant un hébergement de deuxième étape à leurs bénéficiaires.

SYNERGIE ET REGROUPEMENT

Des initiatives récentes ont permis de constater qu'une réaction concertée du milieu communautaire et des partenaires sociaux, ainsi qu'un leadership politique, sont possibles en matière d'accueil et de logement. L'arrivée des Haïtiens et Haïtiennes demandeurs d'asile depuis les États-Unis en 2016–2017 ainsi que l'accueil des Ukrainiens et des Ukrainiennes fuyant l'invasion par la Russie en 2022 le démontrent.

Un autre exemple illustre cette synergie : en 2021, face à la demande croissante de services de la part des personnes migrantes hébergées dans des hôtels, le milieu communautaire montréalais a organisé une concertation par quartiers impliquant le Service de police (SPVM), les écoles et les bibliothèques de quartier, ainsi que les organismes communautaires spécialisés en famille, en services alimentaires et

⁴ Le projet de loi C-2 sur la sécurité frontalière propose de modifier ces délais, mais il n'était pas adopté au moment de la rédaction de ce texte et n'avait donc encore aucun impact sur la situation du logement des personnes migrantes au Canada.

en immigration. Certains arrondissements de la ville de Montréal, comme Ahuntsic, ont même élaboré des plans d'action spécifiques, permettant ainsi à la Table de quartier de donner naissance au Comité d'accueil local des personnes demandant l'asile, le CALDA.

Cependant, les instances de concertation officielle soutenant l'hébergement des personnes migrantes restaient limitées. Foyer du Monde, La Traverse et Le Pont ont donc collaboré pour créer une structure de plaidoyer visant à combler les lacunes dans les services de logement pour les personnes demandeuses d'asile et migrantes précaires. Cette collaboration a conduit à la formation du Regroupement des organismes en hébergement pour personnes migrantes (ROHMI) en 2023.⁵ Le ROHMI coordonne désormais les efforts des organismes impliqués dans l'hébergement des personnes

migrantes dans la région de Montréal et cherche à élaborer un portrait plus précis des besoins spécifiques en matière de logement.

Les besoins sont grands et les ressources limitées. Un premier pas vers une synergie du milieu communautaire à Montréal a été fait, mais les efforts sont encore entravés par le manque de données sur le logement pour les personnes migrantes précaires et demandeuses d'asile. Il est crucial de mieux documenter et quantifier les enjeux de l'itinérance et de l'accès au logement abordable pour ces populations. Les instances gouvernementales et le milieu de la recherche universitaire doivent intensifier leurs efforts pour mieux comprendre et cartographier les défis liés au logement des personnes demandeuses d'asile et migrantes précaires à Montréal, afin de soutenir une réponse publique adaptée à ces défis.

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5 Pour en savoir plus sur le ROHMI, consultez leur site web: www.rohmi.ca.

HOW THE EXPERIENCES OF SYRIAN, YAZIDIS, AND AFGHANS CAN INFORM US ABOUT RESETTLEMENT HOUSING

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This article leverages findings from our previous research on Syrian and Yazidi refugees and current survey data from a longitudinal study on Afghan cohorts to elucidate several housing challenges faced by these vulnerable populations after landing in Canada, both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. We highlight how the persistent issues of household overcrowding and unbalanced rent-to-income ratios, as well as Afghan refugees' expressed dissatisfaction with resettlement housing services, collectively contribute to the financial burden of rent experienced by this vulnerable population. Suggestions for the government and the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) agencies to address refugee housing issues are presented in this article.

INTRODUCTION

Securing reliable housing represents a crucial initial step in achieving successful settlement and integration for resettled refugees in host countries.^{1,2} (Christ 2020; Sherrell 2017). Without appropriate housing, the integration process is slowed and less optimistic. Drawing upon the resettlement experiences of previous Syrian and Yazidi refugees and our current data on Afghan cohorts,^{3,4,5} the present article investigates the housing challenges encountered by these three groups of displaced people who arrived to Canada at different times and under varying conditions. Our goal is to enhance the general public's awareness of refugees' difficulties in accessing affordable and stable housing during the already demanding international migration process. We advocate for alternative and innovative approaches to tackling the systemic problems in Canada's housing market to improve refugees' resettlement experience.

BACKGROUND

The number of people at risk seeking asylum in the global north has grown enormously in recent years due to intra-state/interstate conflict, political persecution, or human rights violations (UNHCR 2021). Research has extensively stressed that providing adequate, affordable housing is paramount in facilitating vulnerable refugees' successful resettlement and integration in receiving countries.^{6,7} In Canada,

notwithstanding the augmented housing assistance for asylum claimants at the federal level,⁸ refugees in the country still encounter obstacles to securing suitable accommodation and meeting the associated costs in terms of rent and utilities.^{9,10} Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Canada had already exhibited the lowest rate of new housing starts among the Group of Seven (G7) countries.¹¹ Contrary to popular belief, the housing crisis is not a new phenomenon; it was already apparent to economists and other economic observers since the early 1990s.¹² Today, politicians and media are quick to link and blame immigration, both temporary and permanent, for these long-standing issues. These are, in turn, promoted by public/political discourse and subscribed to an increased number of Canadians — exacerbating these preexisting social problems and creating additional barriers for newcomers to integrate into the host society.

FINDINGS

ARRIVING DURING A PANDEMIC: CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY AFGHAN REFUGEES

Data collected for our current project involving Afghan refugees reveal that seeking stable housing that simultaneously met their size and space requirements was challenging. When asked to rank the severity of their resettlement challenges, housing ranked #3 and was identified by (13.4%) as problematic regarding their initial resettlement to Canada. Additionally, nearly half (48.6%) of participants claimed receiving more affordable housing options was among their top urgent needs

- 1 Christ, Simone. *The Key to Successful Integration of Refugees in Germany: Language Skills, Housing, Work, Social Participation*. Bonn: Bonn International Center for Conversion (BICC), 2020.
- 2 Sherrell, Kathy. "Access to Housing in Canada." In *Structural Context of Refugee Integration in Canada and Germany*, edited by Annette Korntheuer, Paul Pritchard, and Débora Maehler, 67–72. GESIS–Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences, 2017.
- 3 Wilkinson, Lori, Jihad Othman, Abdul-Bari Abdul-Karim, Chenyu Liu, and Kezia Wong. "The Experiences of Arrival and Resettlement of Afghan Refugees to Canada During the COVID-19 Pandemic-Interim Report." Forthcoming. Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada.
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- 6 Ager, Alastair, and Alison Strang. "Understanding Integration: A Conceptual Framework." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21, no. 2 (2008): 166–91.
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when considering their resettlement in Canada. Correspondingly, securing suitable housing and paying rent was the second most frequently identified issue (58.7%) that Afghan refugee respondents and their families genuinely encountered after arrival in the host country.

HOUSEHOLD CROWDING ISSUES AND A SCARCITY OF EXTENDED GOVERNMENT SPONSORSHIP

Despite all the housing support provided to the refugees in Canada, evidence has shown that low incomes and high rental costs continue to represent a significant challenge.¹³ Issues including finding affordable housing relative to the size of the family unit, proximity to schools, employment and integration services, and other problems have been identified by previous research.^{14,15,16} Affordability is a major concern, especially since most refugees are reliant on payments from the federal government or their private sponsors during their first two to five years in Canada. The shelter-to-income ratio, a method developed by Statistics Canada¹⁷ in order to help determine the “affordability” of accommodation, suggests that families devoting more than 30% of their monthly income towards rent are in a crisis.¹⁸ In the case of recent Afghan refugee arrivals, arriving during a pandemic exacerbated the issue of affordability of accommodation, perpetuating household overcrowding problems because of the low number of affordable units available, poor employment outlook and the looming recession which greeted them upon their arrival to the country.

Our survey of Afghan participants included several open-ended questions in which many participants elaborated on their challenges. Many respondents stated that it was challenging to live with several family members together in a crowded accommodation and simultaneously manage the high living costs (e.g., paying rent and utility bills) once the

limited-term sponsorship from the federal government ended and they transitioned to provincial social assistance. More specifically, one Afghan refugee identified the severe overcrowding situation in their home and the financial strain their family faced: “Our rent is so high, and we are living [with] 14 family members in one house and paying \$6,000 rent if we don’t have IRCC support, so that is very difficult for us.” Another respondent’s statement echoes the earlier quotation concerning household overcrowding and a lack of adequate government sponsorship in housing:

“I had a lot of trouble [finding] a house because my family was eight people, and for this number, there are many problems, and the government gives us very little money.”

The combination of financial difficulties and the urgent need for extended government sponsorship in housing is also prevalent among the respondents with no large family. One Afghan refugee indicated:

“After one year of support from the Government of Canada, a number of families like mine are under stress about how we survive and manage life, especially the rent for residence.”

The conjunction of overcrowding issues and high rates of housing expenses is prevalent not only among recent Afghan arrivals but also among Syrian and Yazidi cohorts who landed in Canada before the COVID-19 pandemic. Our previous research found that of the Syrian refugees in Alberta and Saskatchewan, approximately 15% of the population expressed that their accommodations were too small for their crowded households.¹⁹ Another 10% of Syrian respondents residing in Alberta and Manitoba were concerned about paying the rent as they perceived it as expensive based on their limited incomes without receiving continuous economic support

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- 13 Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). “Evaluation of the Resettlement Programs (GAR, PSR, BVOR and RAP).” Ottawa: IRCC-Evaluation Division, 2016. Accessed July 22, 2024. www.canada.ca/content/dam/ircc/migration/ircc/english/pdf/pub/resettlement.pdf
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from the federal government.²⁰

Resonating with the housing challenges faced by Syrians, Yazidis similarly experience the issue of affordability and suitability of housing in Canada. Wilkinson and Bhattacharyya²¹ elaborate on how the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) income support provided to Government Assisted Refugees (GARs) is insufficient to cover the Yazidi families' housing expenses and other costs for life necessities. They indicate that because of these affordability issues, a considerable number of Yazidi refugees in Canada are confronted with acute overcrowding in their current accommodations, with multiple families or unrelated individuals sharing confined living spaces, which inevitably results in suboptimal living conditions. These conditions last a long time, over five years. As proof, their study uncovers how a widowed refugee mother of six resides in a crowded two-bedroom apartment while another single female in Calgary lives with seven individuals in a three-bedroom unit.²²

LOW SATISFACTION WITH THE HOUSING SETTLEMENT SERVICES

As a project aiming to inform migration and refugee resettlement policy innovations, some of our survey items were designed to comprehensively evaluate the settlement services provided to Afghan refugees since they arrived in Canada. In examining their quality and Afghan refugees' satisfaction, nine settlement services ("Services from the Federal government," "Settlement and immigration services," "Mental health," "Interpretation/translation," "Housing," "Health and medical services," "English language learning," "Employment and/or skills training," and "Education for children.") offered to be respondents were measured on a five-point Likert scale. Our findings reveal that 23.8% of Afghan refugees rated the quality of housing-related settlement programs as poor; it ranked second among the least satisfactory services they received after arriving in Canada. One Afghan refugee expressed their disappointment with the housing resettlement service providers:

"Because I left [name of a Canadian city], I was not given any kind of expenses. I had to come to [name of a Canadian city] at my own expense, and because of this, they said that you came to [name of a Canadian city] as a random reader; they did not even help me find a house...They didn't even give me a place to stay.

I had to live in my brother-in-law's small house to find a house. There were 18 of us living in three rooms."

The findings here starkly contrast with Yazidi refugees' largely positive rapport with the resettlement service providers they interacted with in four studied Canadian cities.²³ Ziersch, Due, and Walsh²⁴ contend that culturally appropriate and satisfied resettlement services and resources are inseparable from mitigating refugee housing issues in Australia. Given the insights into the poorly rated housing resettlement services received and experienced by recent Afghan refugee arrivals in Canada, it is no wonder that accommodation-related challenges are frequently cited by the respondents in our survey.

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated how an unbalanced shelter-to-income ratio and a lack of extended governmental sponsorship compound the household overcrowding issues encountered by Syrian, Yazidi, and Afghan refugees in Canada. We have also articulated that external factors like large household sizes and the impact of COVID-19 exacerbate the Afghan refugees' financial burden of rent, even though the Canadian government has made efforts to provide housing support. Furthermore, the refugees' dissatisfaction with the offered housing settlement services hinders them from securing affordable accommodation in the host country. It is thus imperative to inform policy innovations that mitigate these housing challenges to better assist the refugees already in Canada and the upcoming new arrivals in integrating successfully into the host society.

First, we recommend that the Canadian government extend the duration of federal housing support for refugees upon their arrival in Canada and increase the funding for provincial social assistance programs. This approach can increase the likelihood that more refugees and their families will be able to secure affordable housing beyond the initial resettlement period and simultaneously offer them a smooth transition before landing a decent job with a salary that can sufficiently afford the related expenses. Second, we suggest that building upon the augmented financial assistance, RAP agencies promote culturally sensitive events and individualized housing support services that can not only be utilized to address the specific needs for suitable accommodation of different refugee populations but also facilitate their overall

20 Ibid.

21 Wilkinson, Lori, Pallabi Bhattacharyya, Annette Riziki, and Abdul-Bari Abdul-Karim. "Yazidi Resettlement in Canada-Final Report 2018." Technical Report. Ottawa: Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada, 2019.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Ziersch, Anna, Clemence Due, and Moira Walsh. "Housing in Place: Housing, Neighbourhood and Resettlement for People from Refugee and Asylum Seeker Backgrounds in Australia." *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 24 (2023): 1413–36.

integration process. Finally, we urge public and private institutions to help promote the acquisition of open-mindedness

and acceptance of Otherness to address the misconceptions about newcomers' impact on the Canadian housing market.

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ITINÉRANCE DES PERSONNES EN SITUATION DE PRÉCARITÉ MIGRATOIRE

LA PRÉVENIR ET Y RÉPONDRE PAR POLITIQUES INCLUSIVES ET DES SERVICES ADAPTÉS

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L'augmentation de l'itinérance chez les personnes migrantes à statut précaire à travers le Canada révèle les effets cumulés de politiques migratoires restrictives, de l'exclusion des services sociaux et de la crise du logement. À Montréal, les équipes de Médecins du Monde constatent que ces personnes sont souvent invisibilisées et exclues des services de réponse à l'itinérance. Pour faire face à ces défis, l'organisation appelle à des politiques migratoires inclusives, à l'élargissement des critères d'accès aux services d'hébergement et à une meilleure coordination entre les secteurs.

INTRODUCTION

Depuis 2011, Médecins du Monde gère une clinique médicale et sociale à Montréal, dédiée aux personnes vivant au Québec sans couverture de santé en raison de leur statut d'immigration précaire. Cette initiative est essentielle pour répondre aux besoins de santé des personnes qui ne peuvent accéder aux services publics ni se permettre des soins privés. Les équipes de travail de proximité, comprenant des pairs ayant eux-mêmes traversé des parcours migratoires précaires, vont à la rencontre de ces personnes dans leur environnement, identifient leurs besoins spécifiques, les informent de leurs droits, et les soutiennent dans leurs démarches administratives et juridiques.

Dans le contexte de l'augmentation de la précarité migratoire et de la crise du logement, Médecins du Monde a observé une augmentation de l'itinérance parmi les personnes migrantes en situation de précarité économique et sociale. En 2022–2023, 50 % des personnes ayant fait l'objet d'une évaluation sociale à la clinique vivaient dans des conditions de logement instables, insalubres ou surpeuplées. Ce chiffre a augmenté à 70 % en 2023–2024, illustrant l'aggravation de la situation.

Alors que les personnes migrantes sont instrumentalisées de manière grandissante dans le discours politique comme bouc émissaire de plusieurs crises sociales, cet article vise à illustrer comment ces dernières sont plutôt précarisées par des politiques publiques sous-optimales tout en proposant des pistes d'action pour y remédier.

LES MÉCANISMES DE PRÉCARISATION LIÉS À LA MIGRATION

Depuis le milieu des années 2000, les politiques migratoires canadiennes favorisent une immigration temporaire plutôt que permanente, un choix qui a des conséquences profondes sur la sécurité économique et sociale des migrants. L'immigration temporaire impose des délais d'attente prolongés pour l'obtention de la résidence permanente, et crée une incertitude financière qui empêche les migrants de planifier leur avenir. En outre, le coût élevé des démarches administratives, combiné à l'incapacité de nombreux migrants à travailler légalement, aggrave leur précarité.

Ce fardeau est notamment fortement aggravé par l'accès limité à l'aide juridique. Les migrants en situation précaire, en particulier ceux qui souhaitent déposer des demandes de considération humanitaire, se heurtent à des barrières importantes, notamment un manque d'information sur leurs droits, des délais de traitement prolongés, et une focalisation des ressources juridiques sur les demandes d'asile. Ces obstacles rendent l'accès à la justice difficile pour les migrants les plus vulnérables, qui ont souvent des besoins complexes nécessitant une représentation juridique complète, et non une simple consultation.

Les migrants sans statut permanent sont également exclus de nombreux programmes sociaux essentiels, tels que les aides sociales, l'assurance maladie et le logement social. Ces programmes sont censés constituer un filet de sécurité contre la pauvreté extrême et l'itinérance, mais en l'absence d'accès, de nombreux migrants sont contraints de s'endetter pour subvenir à leurs besoins fondamentaux. Cette exclusion des services de base expose les migrants à des risques accrus de détérioration de leur santé physique et mentale et affecte fortement leur capacité économique à se loger.

La précarité de l'emploi exacerbe également la vulnérabilité des migrants. Beaucoup de migrants sans statut ou avec un permis de travail restreint travaillent dans des conditions d'exploitation. Ils subissent des formes diverses d'abus, y compris la non-rémunération, le harcèlement sexuel, des charges de travail excessives, et des licenciements abusifs. Les permis de travail fermés, qui lient les migrants à un seul employeur, rendent difficile toute contestation des conditions de travail et augmentent le risque d'exploitation. Un récent rapport de l'ONU a décrit ces conditions comme une nouvelle forme d'esclavagisme, soulignant la nécessité d'une réforme urgente.

LES EFFETS DES CRISES SOCIALES SUR LES MIGRANTS

La crise du logement à Montréal a un impact disproportionné sur les personnes en situation de précarité migratoire. L'augmentation des loyers, les exigences de dépôt anticipé et les conditions de logement déplorables forcent de nombreuses

familles migrantes à accepter des situations abusives, souvent par crainte de dénonciation aux autorités de l'immigration. Les migrants sont fréquemment contraints de vivre dans des logements surpeuplés et insalubres, ou de partager des espaces avec plusieurs autres familles, ce qui augmente les risques pour leur santé et leur sécurité.

L'inflation et la hausse du chômage exacerbent encore davantage la situation. De nombreux migrants, déjà précaires, perdent leurs emplois ou voient leurs revenus diminuer, ce qui limite leur capacité à payer un loyer ou à accéder à un logement adéquat. Ces facteurs économiques, combinés aux restrictions imposées par les politiques migratoires, créent une tempête parfaite qui conduit de plus en plus de migrants à l'itinérance.

LES FORMES D'ITINÉRANCE DES PERSONNES EN SITUATION DE PRÉCARITÉ MIGRATOIRE

L'itinérance chez les personnes migrantes se manifeste de diverses manières, souvent de façon cachée et fluide. Contrairement à l'itinérance visible dans les espaces publics, l'itinérance des migrants est souvent dissimulée; elle prend la forme de cohabitation informelle avec des amis ou de la famille, ou de logement temporaire sans bail. Cette forme d'itinérance est familiale, de longue durée et moins visible, ce qui rend difficile pour intervenants de l'identifier et d'y répondre adéquatement.

Cependant, une tendance vers une itinérance plus visible est observée. Un nombre croissant de personnes migrantes se retrouvant dans des centres d'hébergement pour les personnes en situation d'itinérance. Les équipes de Médecins du Monde rapportent aussi que certains secteurs géographiques traditionnellement associés à l'itinérance accueillent de plus en plus de migrants. Elles rapportent également que l'itinérance s'est visibilisé dans des quartiers historiquement habités par les nouveaux arrivants, comme Parc-Extension avec l'émergence de « camps de migrants ».

LES OBSTACLES À L'ACCÈS AUX SERVICES POUR LES PERSONNES MIGRANTES

Le statut migratoire constitue une barrière systématique à l'accès aux services de logement et d'hébergement. Les programmes de logement subventionnés et d'hébergement temporaire sont souvent conditionnés à un statut de résident permanent, rendant ces services inaccessibles aux migrants précaires. De plus, les préjugés et les stéréotypes autour des migrants sans statut — souvent perçus comme « illégaux » — limitent la volonté des services d'aide à leur fournir une assistance, exacerbant ainsi leur vulnérabilité à l'itinérance.

Les ressources d'hébergement existantes sont souvent mal adaptées aux besoins spécifiques des migrants. Il y a un manque de flexibilité dans les documents requis pour l'accès aux services, et une insuffisante compréhension des réalités interculturelles et multilingues. De plus, il y a un manque de centres d'hébergement adaptés pour les familles ou les femmes seules avec enfants, qui représentent une partie significative de la population migrante en situation d'itinérance.

CONCLUSION : LE BESOIN DE SERVICES ADAPTÉS ET DE POLITIQUES INCLUSIVES

La lutte contre l'itinérance des personnes en situation de précarité migratoire nécessite une approche holistique, intégrant des réformes politiques

Pour prévenir l'itinérance parmi les migrants, des politiques migratoires plus inclusives et durables sont nécessaires. Ces politiques devraient garantir des droits fondamentaux et un accès universel aux services sociaux et de santé. Les programmes de régularisation pour les personnes sans statut ou à statut précaire, soutenus par la société civile, constituent une étape cruciale pour réduire la précarité et prévenir l'itinérance.

Pour répondre aux besoins des personnes migrantes sans-abri ou à risque d'itinérance, il est essentiel de développer des services adaptés et d'adopter des politiques inclusives.

Une approche intersectionnelle de l'itinérance est nécessaire, prenant en compte les multiples facettes de la vulnérabilité des migrants, y compris leur statut migratoire, leur situation économique, et leur manque d'accès aux services de base. Les critères d'admissibilité aux ressources d'hébergement doivent être élargis, et les budgets alloués à ces services doivent être augmentés pour répondre à la demande croissante.

Il est crucial de renforcer la collaboration entre les secteurs de l'itinérance et de l'immigration pour échanger des informations, partager des ressources, et coordonner les services. Des formations croisées entre les intervenants des deux secteurs peuvent améliorer la compréhension des besoins spécifiques des migrants et les doter des compétences nécessaires pour fournir un soutien adéquat. De plus, une sensibilisation accrue aux réalités des migrants peut aider à réduire les stéréotypes et à promouvoir une réponse plus humanitaire et inclusive.

Il est également essentiel d'améliorer l'accès aux services adaptés pour les migrants sans-abri ou à risque imminent de l'être. Cela inclut l'élargissement des critères d'admissibilité aux ressources d'hébergement, l'augmentation des budgets alloués à ces services, et la formation des intervenants sur les besoins spécifiques des migrants. Cela inclut la mise en place de forums d'échange, la consolidation des listes de ressources, et la sensibilisation aux réalités spécifiques des migrants, notamment les femmes avec enfants, en situation d'itinérance.

FILLING THE GAPS IN HOUSING FOR REFUGEE CLAIMANTS: THE ROLE OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS ACROSS CANADA

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Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 20 representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working with refugee claimants across Canada, this article analyzes their role in shelter and settlement support. While these organizations have been filling the gaps left by municipal, provincial and federal governments for decades, their capacity to respond to current levels of refugee claimant homelessness is limited by constrained human and financial resources. We conclude by proposing closer collaboration between all levels of government and NGOs to develop a triage and referral system to better serve all refugee claimants, including families, unaccompanied minors, and those with mental health needs.

INTRODUCTION

Increased homelessness of refugee claimants across Canada is a manifestation of structural problems in both housing and asylum policy. While non-governmental organizations

(NGOs) have stepped in to provide shelter and settlement support for decades, the current situation is unsustainable, as demand far exceeds supply. Drawing on a community-based research project with twenty NGOs in BC, Manitoba, Ontario, and Quebec, this article analyzes models of support and

ways to build on promising practices, while ensuring that civil society does not bear primary responsibility for government inaction. In particular, instead of short-term, ineffective responses like renting hotel rooms, all levels of government need a coordinated approach to receive and refer refugee claimants, while creating specialized programs for people with specific needs.

CONTEXT

The right to seek asylum is protected by the UN 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 protocol, as well as the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* in Canada. Because of Canada's geography — bounded on three sides by oceans, and bordering the United States, with whom we have signed the Safe Third Country Agreement to severely limit refugee claims — historically, relatively small numbers of people have sought asylum in Canada. However, in the context of growing global displacement (UNHCR, 2024), there have been significant increases in refugee claimants recently. For example, in 2023, 143,435 people filed refugee claims in Canada (IRCC, 2024b), a 50% increase compared to the record high of 91,670 people in 2022 (IRCC, 2024a).

The right to housing is also protected by international law, and the Canadian *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, which, with certain exceptions, applies to anyone physically present in Canada, regardless of citizenship and immigration status. Housing is a shared responsibility across all levels of government, but no clear division of powers exists because housing was absent from the 1867 *Constitution Act*. The result is a fragmented and complex system (Annor, 2019; Rose, 2019, 2022). The federal government is responsible for the National Housing Strategy, but its role is limited to providing funding to provincial and municipal governments for affordable housing and homelessness programs. Provinces provide funding to housing non-profits, build and operate social housing, and regulate landlord-tenant relationships. They also delegate powers to municipalities, which then decide on the size and location of housing through their planning and zoning decisions. Since the 1980s, there has been an underinvestment in affordable housing in Canada, resulting in chronic housing shortages.

In contrast to resettled refugees arriving through government-assisted or private sponsorship routes who receive housing upon arrival, there is no national strategy to address the housing needs of newly arrived refugee claimants. Complicating the federal-provincial-municipal jurisdictions highlighted above, refugee protection falls within the federal government's responsibility but many of the services are delivered locally, by the refugee claimant's province or city of residence. There is no coordinated plan between various levels of government to welcome refugee claimants, resulting in a patchwork of services across Canada. For example, in Que-

bec, the provincial government runs the Regional Program for the Settlement and Integration of Asylum Seekers (PRAIDA) providing a limited number of beds for 6 weeks and referrals to some settlement supports, while no such program exists in other provinces.

The homelessness experienced by refugee claimants results from housing shortages and lack of access to settlement information and expertise. As a result, tens of thousands of refugee claimants are ending up homeless each year (Swadden, 2023). The federal government has responded with expensive, short-term, and ineffective emergency measures like renting hotel rooms, but these only temporarily house a small number of refugee claimants and lack consistent and adequate integration support. While non-governmental organizations across Canada have filled the gaps in housing and settlement supports for decades, there is little peer-reviewed research that analyzes the effectiveness of current approaches, as well as their capacity to respond to expanding demand.

METHODOLOGY

This article is based on data collected from an interdisciplinary, community-based research project involving Matthew House Ottawa (MHO), the University of Ottawa, and Carleton University to map and analyze non-governmental housing and settlement supports for refugee claimants in Canada. In spring 2023, MHO completed a mapping of organizations across Canada to identify existing initiatives (Matthew House Ottawa, 2024). After receiving ethics approval from the University of Ottawa (S-09-23-9570 — REG-9570) and Carleton (Project #120131), we surveyed all organizations identified in the mapping exercise to provide baseline data on programming, basic demographics of clients served and scope of services (Clark-Kazak and Reesor-McDowell 2024). Subsequently, we conducted twenty semi-structured interviews with representatives of organizations housing refugee claimants to better understand their models of support. Using a rights-based approach, our analysis documents models for welcoming and supporting refugee claimants and identifies policy and programming gaps.

KEY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Our survey and interview data reveal four significant findings:

1. **The central role of NGOs in providing housing to refugee claimants.** Many organizations we surveyed report an increase in the number of refugee claimants they shelter between 2019 and 2023, and most are actively working to increase their capacity to house more refugee claimants. However, their current models are insufficient to scale up to meet the demand. Importantly, the vast majority of

these organizations report receiving funding from private sources (such as donations) or municipalities, and in fewer instances, provinces. Despite holding primary responsibility for refugee claimants in Canada, the federal government appears to play very little active role in strategically and proactively planning for refugee claimants' housing.

2. **The desire to expand is hampered by funding and human resources constraints.** The majority, but not all, of the organizations we interviewed, expressed an interest in expanding their capacity to provide housing and support to more refugee claimants. However, both survey and interview data reveal inadequate funding and human resources as the biggest hurdles in the way of expansion. The two issues appear to be interlinked, as organizations report high levels of staff turnover due to at times unsustainably low salaries they can afford to pay their workers. The difficulty in finding and securing housing units is another major challenge faced by NGOs who wish to expand their capacity. Without the ability to accommodate the increasing number of clients, some organizations report regularly turning prospective residents away: "We have had to turn people away because we do not have the capacity to accept everyone. When we first started, we had to do some marketing to get the word out. But now the ramp is going up quite steeply." (Interview, Toronto, ON, May 1, 2024).
3. **NGOs receive many of their residents from homeless shelters.** The majority of the organizations we surveyed report receiving their residents from emergency shelters. Some organizations have dedicated staff working in or with shelters to identify and locate refugee claimants and divert them away from the shelter system. Emergency homeless shelters are ill-prepared to support refugee claimants with their specific needs, such as referring to refugee lawyers and submitting their claim for refugee status. This suggests that boosting dedicated housing and support programs for refugee claimants will both increase claimants' ability to successfully resettle in Canada, and alleviate the growing pressure on already overburdened shelters.
4. **The efficacy and success of the NGO model of housing and support for refugee claimants.** Despite the significant challenges faced by organizations that house and support refugee claimants, the organizations report supporting claimants with an impressively wide variety of needs, including legal, educational, employment, housing, health, cultural, social, food, and recreation. These supports are at times offered in multiple languages. The

majority of organizations provide food, and some provide clothing, diapers, menstrual and hygiene products to residents. Most organizations continue to provide some form of support to their former residents after they have left their residences with furniture, clothing, or food, or provide occasional legal, social, and mental health support services. Our research indicates the importance of belonging to a network of support, as housing is connected to other settlement services.

Moreover, the organizations we interviewed report a relatively short length of stay for their residents, with the vast majority reporting stays of up to or shorter than 6 months. Our research finds that many former residents continue onto the path of independent living, with very few ever becoming homeless after leaving supported housing programs. This suggests that these organizations have succeeded in diverting homelessness and cultivating the conditions for successful integration.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While NGOs play important roles in housing and supporting refugee claimants in Canada, the current situation is unsustainable. In the context of growing and more complex needs, the federal, provincial, and municipal governments should collaborate to establish a triage and referral system to receive and orient refugee claimants, and then refer them to the most appropriate agency or service. In particular, many NGOs indicated that they did not have the capacity to serve claimants with specific needs, such as unaccompanied minors or people with severe mental health issues. A centralized system, including transitional housing and programming adapted to specific needs, would ensure that the most vulnerable do not fall through the cracks. The federal government could leverage its existing experiences with transitional housing for Government-Assisted Resettled Refugees. Building on successful NGO experiences in some areas, municipal shelters should have designated personnel to identify refugee claimants in the shelter system and refer them to more appropriate housing and settlement support.

Government funding would be better spent in investing in such longer-term, structural solutions, than in the current short-term hotel model. Municipal, provincial, and federal governments should provide core funding with streamlined reporting requirements to existing organizations that have decades of experience in community-based housing and support models. Any new structures should build on this expertise, rather than duplicate efforts.

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CRACKS IN THE FOUNDATION: HOUSING QUALITY AND MENTAL HEALTH AMONG INUIT IN NUNAVUT

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This paper explores the intersection between housing conditions and mental health among Inuit in Nunavut, based on analysis of data from the 2017 Aboriginal Peoples Survey (now called the Indigenous Peoples Survey), specifically the Nunavut Inuit Supplement. Using validated measures such as the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) alongside self-perceived mental health indicators, the study examines how key housing factors—particularly dwellings in need of major repair—are associated with psychological distress among Inuit respondents. Framed within a social determinants of health approach, the analysis reveals that housing quality is a critical determinant of mental well-being in Inuit communities, independent of other socioeconomic factors. The findings underscore the need for targeted policy interventions that prioritize the repair of existing housing stock as a mental health strategy in Nunavut.

INTRODUCTION

Housing is a cornerstone of well-being. For Inuit in Nunavut, where the vast majority of the population is Inuit and over half experience housing inadequacies, the implications of poor shelter are profound. The longstanding housing crisis in Nunavut is not just a deficit of physical infrastructure; it is a public health emergency rooted in historical dislocation and systemic neglect.

This article draws on data analyzed from the Nunavut Inuit Sustainable Housing Index (NISHI), a collaborative initiative led by NTI, the Association for Canadian Studies & Metropolis Institute, which seeks to measure and address the impact of housing on the health, social, economic, and cultural outcomes of Inuit across all 25 Nunavut communities. Among its most significant findings is the strong association between inadequate housing — especially homes requiring major repairs — and poor mental health outcomes.

HOUSING AND MENTAL HEALTH: A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING

Inuit have significantly lower life expectancies, higher rates of infant mortality, and the highest suicide rates of any demographic in the country. These disparities are rooted in social determinants of health — conditions shaped by the unequal distribution of resources, opportunity, and power (World Health Organization 2013). Social determinants of health are “the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age, including the health system. These circumstances are shaped by the distribution of money, power and resources at global, national and local levels, which are themselves influenced by policy choices.”

Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) — the national organization of Inuit in Canada — has outlined eleven social determinants of health critical to Inuit well-being, including income distribution, education, personal safety, and, notably, housing. While overcrowding and general shortages have long been recognized as key housing issues in Nunavut, this current research suggests that the condition of existing housing — particularly the prevalence of homes in need of major repairs — is also a critical factor in determining mental health outcomes for Inuit. ITK has further identified mental wellness as the single most important health issue for Inuit in Canada (Alianait Inuit-specific Mental Wellness Task Group, 2007).

METHODOLOGY AND DATA SOURCES

The findings presented are derived from analyses of the Indigenous Peoples Survey (IPS) for the years 2012 and 2017. The weighted sample included 28,762 Inuit living within Inuit Nunangat, with a focus on respondents residing in Nunavut. The research team examined both subjective and objective indicators of mental health, namely self-perceived mental health status and scores from the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10), a validated 10-item instrument assessing anxiety and depressive symptoms.

Four key housing variables were analyzed:

- 1. Crowding index (persons per room);
- 2. Dwelling in need of major repairs;
- 3. Ownership vs. rental status; and
- 4. Access to subsidized housing.

These housing variables were examined alongside a suite of sociodemographic controls linked to the broader dimensions of the NISHI framework, including economic stability (e.g., income, food insecurity, education), cultural engagement (e.g., Inuit language use, traditional practices), and social capital (e.g., community belonging, close friends, and family support).

KEY FINDINGS

DWELLINGS IN NEED OF MAJOR REPAIRS ARE A STRONG PREDICTOR OF MENTAL DISTRESS

Among all four housing variables analyzed, dwellings in need of major repairs emerged as the most consistent and powerful predictor of psychological distress among Inuit respondents. Approximately one in four respondents (24.8%) whose homes were in need of major repair showed signs of psychological distress while 18.1% of those whose homes needed only minor repairs or regular maintenance were experiencing distress (see Table 1).

After controlling for confounding factors such as food insecurity, education level, employment status, and other socio-demographics (see Table 2), living in a home that requires major repair significantly increased the likelihood of experiencing mental distress as measured by the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale ($b=1.15, t=11.58, p<.001$). To a lesser extent, overcrowding was associated with higher psychological distress ($b=.22, t=4.11, p<.001$) among Inuit respondents while homeowners ($b=-.36, t=-3.11, p<.01$) and subsidized housing recipients ($b=-.46, t=-4.44, p<.001$) were less likely to experience psychological distress.

TABLE 1. DWELLINGS IN NEED OF MAJOR REPAIRS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS AMONG INUIT

| Dependent Variable: Kessler Distress Scale — K10 | Dwelling — Major repairs needed | | |
|---|--|-------------------------------|-------|
| | No, only regular maintenance or minor repairs needed | Yes, major repairs are needed | Total |
| Likely to be doing well (0–9) | 81.9% | 75.2% | 80.4% |
| Low mental distress (10–15) | 11.8% | 14.5% | 12.4% |
| Moderate mental distress (16–21) | 5.0% | 7.0% | 5.4% |
| High or very high mental distress (22+) | 1.4% | 3.4% | 1.8% |

TABLE 2. REGRESSION MODEL FINDINGS FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS AMONG INUIT

| Dependent Variable: Kessler Distress Scale - K10 | | | | | |
|---|-------|------|-------|--------|-------|
| Model 1 | B | S.E. | Beta | t | Sig. |
| Housing Indicators | | | | | |
| Crowding index/Persons per room | 0.40 | 0.05 | 0.06 | 7.47 | <.001 |
| Dwelling - Major repairs needed | 1.40 | 0.10 | 0.10 | 13.56 | <.001 |
| Dwelling - Owned/rented | -1.16 | 0.12 | -0.09 | -9.71 | <.001 |
| Dwelling - Subsidized | 0.04 | 0.11 | 0.00 | 0.37 | n.s. |
| (Constant) | 4.50 | 0.14 | | 31.91 | <.001 |
| Model 2 | B | S.E. | Beta | t | Sig. |
| Housing Indicators | | | | | |
| Crowding index/Persons per room | 0.22 | 0.05 | 0.03 | 4.11 | <.001 |
| Dwelling - Major repairs needed | 1.15 | 0.10 | 0.09 | 11.58 | <.001 |
| Dwelling - Owned/rented | -0.36 | 0.12 | -0.03 | -3.11 | <.01 |
| Dwelling - Subsidized | -0.46 | 0.10 | -0.04 | -4.44 | <.001 |
| Sociodemographics | | | | | |
| Age group of respondent | -0.33 | 0.04 | -0.08 | -9.18 | <.001 |
| Sex of respondent (Female) | 0.74 | 0.09 | 0.06 | 8.67 | <.001 |
| Marital status (Married) | -1.17 | 0.10 | -0.09 | -11.46 | <.001 |
| Moved in the last 12 months | 0.59 | 0.12 | 0.04 | 5.09 | <.001 |
| Language - Speak Aboriginal language | 0.28 | 0.18 | 0.01 | 1.56 | n.s. |
| Traditional activities done during past year | -0.52 | 0.14 | -0.03 | -3.88 | <.001 |
| Socioeconomic Predictors | | | | | |
| Highest level of education attained - Grouped | 0.27 | 0.03 | 0.07 | 9.04 | <.001 |
| Current school attendance status (in school) | -0.61 | 0.20 | -0.02 | -2.98 | <.01 |
| Employment status - Full-time | -0.30 | 0.10 | -0.03 | -2.96 | <.01 |
| Total personal income - groups (2011) | -0.13 | 0.03 | -0.05 | -5.14 | <.001 |
| Level of food security in household (food insecurity) | 1.79 | 0.06 | 0.25 | 31.39 | <.001 |
| (Constant) | 3.95 | 0.36 | | 10.85 | <.001 |

These findings align with lived experiences documented in community consultations and political advocacy: deteriorating housing conditions — mold, unsafe structures, and broken plumbing — are daily stressors that erode mental well-being. This form of structural neglect is compounded by harsh climates and remoteness, further exacerbating physical and emotional vulnerability.

FOOD INSECURITY AND MENTAL HEALTH: AN INTERCONNECTED CRISIS

Food insecurity is one of the most persistent and distressing challenges facing Inuit communities in Nunavut. It not only undermines physical health and nutrition but is also closely linked to adverse mental health outcomes. Food insecurity is shaped by a complex set of structural and environmental fac-

tors, including low income, inadequate housing (e.g., lack of proper food storage or cooking facilities), and limited access to culturally appropriate foods (i.e., “country food”).

According to Statistics Canada (2022), 62.6% of households in Nunavut were food insecure, the highest rate in the country. Earlier data from Arriagada (2017) reported that more than half (52%) of Inuit aged 25 and older living in Inuit Nunangat experienced food insecurity. Analysis of the 2017 Indigenous Peoples Survey (Nunavut Inuit Supplement) shows that food insecurity is the single strongest predictor of psychological distress among Inuit in Nunavut — exceeding other socioeconomic factors such as income, education, or employment status. This reinforces the importance of considering food insecurity as a central driver of mental well-being.

Numerous studies support the relationship between food insecurity and mental distress in Indigenous contexts. Kral et al. (2011) and Richmond et al. (2012) found that chronic food scarcity leads to heightened stress, anxiety, and a sense of powerlessness — particularly among caregivers and parents unable to meet their families’ basic needs. More recent national data have reinforced this connection.

SUBSIDIZED HOUSING AND HOMEOWNERSHIP AS PROTECTIVE FACTORS FOR MENTAL HEALTH

Stable and affordable housing is closely linked to improved mental health outcomes among Inuit in Nunavut. Analysis of the 2017 Indigenous Peoples Survey (Nunavut Inuit Supplement) reveals that Inuit living in subsidized housing reported lower levels of psychological distress than those in non-subsidized housing, even after controlling for key socioeconomic factors such as food insecurity, income, and education. Subsidized housing appears to offer a form of security and stability that can help mitigate the chronic stressors many Inuit face, including economic hardship and housing precarity.

Homeownership may also confer mental health benefits. While the proportion of Inuit homeowners remains relatively low in Nunavut, preliminary findings suggest that those who own their homes — often with support from housing programs or cooperative models — tend to report better self-perceived mental health and slightly lower psychological distress. This may reflect the increased autonomy, stability, and control that ownership provides, particularly in a context where rental housing can be overcrowded, poorly maintained, or subject to displacement.

Both subsidized housing and homeownership contribute to housing security, which in turn supports mental wellness. These findings reinforce the importance of expanding affordable housing options along the entire housing continuum, including public housing, co-operative models, and pathways

to ownership. An accessible and culturally appropriate housing stock is essential not only to meet basic shelter needs, but to support the long-term mental health and well-being of Inuit communities.

SELF-PERCEPTION OF MENTAL HEALTH OFTEN MASKS DEEPER DISTRESS

One of the most striking findings was the discrepancy between self-perceived mental health and results from the Kessler scale. A notable proportion of individuals who reported having “good” or even “excellent” mental health still showed signs of significant psychological distress. This discrepancy underscores the need for culturally sensitive and clinically valid tools to accurately assess mental wellness in Inuit contexts — tools that take into account the historical trauma and resilience narratives prevalent in Inuit culture. Recent research from the Association for Canadian Studies (2023) suggests that self-perceived mental health measures often reflect only surface-level assessments, whereas diagnostic tools that include multiple indicators provide a more comprehensive understanding of an individual’s mental well-being.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND ACTION

These findings highlight the need for a new approach to Nunavut’s ongoing housing crisis — one that prioritizes Inuit well-being alongside infrastructure development. While constructing new housing units is critical to addressing overcrowding and long waitlists, equal emphasis must be placed on repairing the existing housing stock. Homes with structural issues, poor insulation, and inadequate heating not only fall short of providing safe shelter — they directly harm the health and well-being of Inuit well-being.

Policy recommendations include:

- Prioritizing funding for urgent home repairs in existing housing units as a preventative measure to support and protect mental health.
- Integrating housing assessments into mental health screening processes.
- Expanding access to subsidized housing, especially for those facing the greatest housing and health challenges.
- Supporting Inuit-led housing initiatives that reflect cultural values and traditional Inuit knowledge (*Qaujimajatuqangit*).
- Enhancing mental health support services to include trauma-informed care and land-based healing approaches.

CONCLUSION

The relationship between housing conditions and mental health among Inuit is deeply interconnected. Inadequate housing — especially when in serious disrepair — can significantly erode mental well-being, which can also affect one's sense of belonging to the community, and overall life satisfaction. These findings underscore the importance of recognizing housing as a key determinant of health and prioritizing

policies and actions that address housing quality as part of broader efforts to support Inuit wellness.

The Nunavut Inuit Sustainable Housing Index offers a promising path forward — one rooted in data, Inuit self-governance, and a multidimensional approach to community well-being. As we continue to track outcomes across housing, economic, social, and cultural domains, we must remember: mental wellness begins at home.

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