

Big housing challenges for refugees in Montréal

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What you need to know

In Canada's three biggest cities, finding housing is a huge challenge for newcomers. While refugees and asylum seekers face the greatest hurdles, housing affordability problems affect a large proportion of immigrants in general and these problems can go on for many years after arrival.

Why did we conduct this study?

Housing is an essential and immediate need for newcomers to Canada. Housing is also a crucial pillar and symbol of integration into a new society. The study conducted in Montréal is part of a larger research project documenting and comparing the housing situation of refugees and immigrants in Canada's three main immigrant gateway cities, Montréal, Toronto et Vancouver.

What the researchers studied

The researchers focussed in on two vulnerable groups: refugees selected by the Canadian government, which loaned them money to come to Canada ("sponsored refugees"), and "asylum seekers" who fled their country and made a refugee claim on arrival in Canada. First, the researchers met with workers in immigrant settlement community organizations so as to obtain their viewpoints about the housing problems of their clients. Then, 201 clients of these settlement agencies (57 asylum seekers, 47 sponsored refugees and 97 immigrants in other categories, who had lived in Canada for between 3 months and 10 years) responded to a questionnaire survey about their housing experiences in Montréal. Finally, 6 focus groups were conducted with 37 sponsored refugees and asylum seekers.

What the researchers found

"Either we pay the rent and we go hungry, or we live in a chicken coop but we eat. That's the way it is!" ('Lara', refugee claimant, Montréal)

Challenges finding decent affordable housing

Housing is one of the most important difficulties that newcomers face. The vast majority of respondents in this study are paying more than 30% of their income on rent and nearly one in 10 is spending over 75% of their income on rent. This is mainly due to their difficulties in getting into the labour market and by the inadequacy of social assistance payments compared to rent levels.

A disturbingly large number of the newcomers in this study have experienced episodes of "hidden homelessness". This term refers to situations such as "couch-surfing", living in substandard conditions, or living in overcrowded housing.

Many respondents, especially refugees and asylum seekers, have lived in insanitary housing conditions (mould, infestations, inadequate ventilation...). As well, in most parts of Greater Montréal, rents have risen drastically and there is a shortage of affordable rental housing with 3 or more bedrooms. As a result, landlords have upped the financial requirements demanded of prospective tenants, and newcomers are especially vulnerable due to their modest resources and lack of contacts who could co-sign a lease. Another result is large families living in overcrowded conditions.

Finally, two out of five respondents reported having had housing problems linked to discrimination (on grounds of income source, ethnic origin, religion, immigration status, family or personal characteristics).

Vulnerability of refugees and asylum seekers

Because of their precarious immigration status, refugee claimants are often forced to put up with poor housing conditions for several years, and are afraid to stand up for their rights when dealing with landlords. Sponsored refugees are especially likely to have large families, which creates additional barriers in their search for affordable and suitable housing.

Coping and survival strategies

In the absence of other means of overcoming these kinds of housing difficulties, many study participants were inclined to put up with uncomfortable, inadequate and even unhealthy conditions for a period of time. They see this as a tactic until they can find something better, when a household member gets a job or when the first year of their lease is up and the landlord gives them a good reference letter. Recourse to friends and acquaintances can help them find more suitable housing, but many don't have such networks on account of the circumstances of their migration to Canada. The support of immigrant settlement organization workers can be crucial in gaining access to their first decent housing, and it is not uncommon for people to return to these same organizations for help with subsequent housing.

How can this research be used?

These findings reinforce the urgency of doing more to help newcomers find decent jobs corresponding to their skills and experience, because this would help them afford market rents for decent housing.

The research also includes recommendations for all levels of government, and for organizations that help people with housing. It is important to make sure that newcomers are better informed about all aspects of the housing system. It is also very important to accompany the most

vulnerable newcomers for a longer period of time so that they can “learn the ropes” and find decent and stable housing. It is crucial to work against all forms of discrimination, including the kinds of discrimination that worsen the housing situation of refugee claimants and refugees with large families. Finally, the research recommends broader measures: the affordable housing supply needs to be increased and more investment is needed to rehabilitate the older rental housing stock in the inner suburbs, which is deteriorating. As well as helping newcomers, such measures would benefit low- and modest-income households in general.

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Read the full report (in French only):
http://www.im.metropolis.net/research-policy/research_content/wp_fr.html, scroll down to the heading « Domaine 6 » where you can also download an English version of the tables and charts, and an 8-page summary in English, French or Spanish.

The study and the researchers

Project title: “*Precarious Housing and Hidden Homelessness among Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Immigrants in Montréal, Toronto and Vancouver*”. The Montréal study was done in 2010-2011 in partnership with 6 settlement organizations: **CARI St-Laurent, CACI, CSAI, La Maisonnée, La MIRS and Le Projet Refuge – Maison Haidar**. *Thank you!*

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Key words: Immigrants, Refugees, Asylum seekers, Housing, Homelessness, Hidden homelessness, Canadian housing markets.