## RESEARCH SUMMARY January 2012

### Metro Vancouver newcomers face major housing challenges and risk of homelessness

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#### What you need to know

Nearly all newcomers to Canada's three largest cities struggle to find adequate and affordable housing. Although refugees report the most severe housing difficulties, other immigrants are also 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?

Housing is the first and most immediate need for newcomers when they arrive in Canada and therefore provides the foundation for other aspects of settlement and integration such as working or studying. Thus, without adequate housing as the cornerstone, the entire structure of settlement is put at risk. This study is part of a larger research project called *Precarious Housing and Hidden Homelessness among Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Immigrants in Montréal, Toronto and Vancouver*, which 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 in other countries that are selected by the Canadian government and lent money ("sponsored") to come to Canada, and "refugee claimants" who arrive on their own and request refugee protection once inside Canada (sometimes referred to as "asylum seekers"). Researchers first held focus groups with settlement and housing workers to get their views on the main housing issues that newcomers face. Then, 185 newcomers that had been using settlement services completed a survey about their housing experiences in Metro Vancouver. All had been living in Canada from three months to ten years. Finally, researchers held focus groups with sponsored refugees and refugee claimants to understand their personal experiences.

# 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* 50% of their income on housing. In an even more difficult situation, around 15% of newcomers spend 75% or more of their income to keep a roof over their heads. Newcomers, especially refugees, struggle in the housing market because of very low incomes. Especially in a tough economy, immigrants often find it difficult to get a decent job (or any job at all). This is an important factor contributing to lower incomes and the struggle to afford a place to live. The majority of those surveyed have the skills, qualifications, and contacts that should help them in job-searching, but are still finding it difficult.

Fifty percent of newcomers surveyed have experienced homelessness or "hidden homelessness." Hidden homelessness means staying with friends or in other places not obvious to the public (also known as "sofa surfing"), due to not having a permanent residence. Overcrowding is a problem for over half of those surveyed. Poorly maintained and unhealthy housing are also common problems. Mould, poor ventilation, bedbugs, and pest problems were additional issues raised in the focus groups. Worse, many refugees have been homeless in a more absolute sense. Many of those

interviewed have stayed in a shelter, including entire families. Recent economic problems have only made finding housing more difficult, especially for newcomers. Affordability concerns are exacerbated by the lack of affordable housing and restricted access to subsidized housing (public housing, such as BC Housing), especially for large families and single people. Finally, 40% of newcomers participating in our survey have experienced discrimination in the housing market, including discrimination based on their source of income, skin colour, or immigration status.

## Sponsored refugees and refugee claimants most vulnerable

The report finds that immigration category and housing outcome are closely linked as newcomers who enter Canada through humanitarian streams are more likely to lack the resources needed to find and maintain adequate and affordable housing. Because of their temporary status, refugee claimants find it harder than others to get a stable job and a place to live. Many are forced to depend on social assistance that is not sufficient to pay for decent housing in Metro Vancouver. Sponsored refugees, who tend to have larger families and may have spent many years in a refugee camp, are no better off. More than half live in unaffordable, overcrowded, poorly maintained, and unhealthy housing.

#### Coping strategies

In addition to resorting to food banks to deal with household budget shortfalls, newcomers turn to friends and family for help with housing difficulties. Non-refugee immigrants rely more on family, while refugees, who tend to have smaller social networks, go to friends for help. However, refugees pointed out that information shared by relatives and friends is not always reliable and they may not have the time or the money to help. Settlement services funded by the provincial or federal government are able to offer little or no help with housing issues. Unfortunately, many newcomers simply have to "make do" with inadequate and unaffordable housing.

#### How can this research be used?

The findings point to 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. A strong nation depends on solid foundations and housing is therefore a key part of nation building.

For more information, please contact jenois@telus.net.

**Read the Vancouver report**: http://mbc.metropolis.net/assets/uploads/files/wp/2011/WP11-18.pdf

# **About the researchers**

This research was carried out in partnership with **Immigrant Services Society of British Columbia** (ISS*of*BC), **Settlement Orientation Services** (SOS), **MOSAIC**, and **New Hope Community Services**.

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#### **Keywords**

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