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CREATING A HOME IN CANADA: REFUGEE HOUSING CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL POLICY SOLUTIONS

By Damaris Rose

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November 2019

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Executive Summary

Canada undertook an extraordinary humanitarian operation in 2015, committing to resettle 25,000 Syrian refugees in the space of just four months. While Canada has long had a strong commitment to refugee resettlement, this program was unprecedented in scale, reaching numbers not seen since the Indochinese emergency resettlement operation in 1979–80. Although Canada has a well-developed settlement and integration service sector and longstanding experience with resettlement, the pace and scale of the Syrian arrivals and their larger-than-expected families strained the system.

Locating and securing suitable housing was among the most critical, and difficult, tasks service providers and sponsors faced. Housing for refugee newcomers must not only be clean, safe, and affordable, but also located near critical services such as job training and language courses, as well as suitable job opportunities and, in some cases, specialized health services. Syrian refugees and their case managers and sponsors faced several challenges finding suitable housing that met these needs:

- **Lack of affordable housing.** Syrian newcomers entered a housing market that was already very tight, particularly at the lower-cost end of the market. Social housing is available only to those with the most extreme needs, and most refugee newcomers must find housing on the private market using a monthly allowance provided by the Canadian government or private sponsor groups. Long before the Syrian operation, evaluations of Canada's Resettlement Assistance Program had demonstrated that the level of housing benefits provided to government-assisted refugees was not keeping pace with rental costs and was insufficient to meet their housing needs.
- **Limited housing for large families.** Among Syrian families resettled by the Canadian government between November 2015 and July 2016, 40 percent had six or more members. However, rental housing that can accommodate families with four or more children is generally scarce in Canada. As a result, much of the existing housing stock that service providers relied on was not suitable for these newcomers.
- **Mismatch between where housing and services are available.** Integration and settlement services for refugees and immigrants have tended to be delivered primarily in larger cities in Canada. These cities offer public transportation, specialized health care, and often, diaspora communities from refugees' origin countries who can provide additional support to newcomers. More affordable and larger housing units are often available in smaller cities, outer suburbs, and rural communities, but the limited availability of services in these locations has meant that refugees and settlement workers have often been unable to take advantage of otherwise suitable housing options.

Despite the constraints settlement workers and sponsors faced, all Syrian refugees resettled as part of the 2015–16 program were able to move into permanent housing within a few months of arrival in Canada, and most were able to move in much sooner. The speed and effectiveness of this response on the part of settlement workers helping government-assisted refugees was the result of several factors. First, they were able to build on and expand strong, pre-existing relationships with landlords and other local stakeholders. By engaging in an unprecedented level of planning and coordination with these stakeholders early on in the resettlement operation, settlement workers were able to expand the stock of available housing to meet new needs through additional contacts with new landlords, nonprofit housing associations, and social housing providers.

Settlement workers also tapped into voluntary and private support that was extremely forthcoming during the Syrian operation. A Welcome Fund for Syrian Refugees, established by Community Foundations of Canada at the request of the federal government to manage and direct corporate donations, provided a



temporary rental supplement to high-needs Syrian refugees, which helped some to overcome the initial housing affordability gap. In some cities, municipalities and local nonprofits set up housing portals that allowed private individuals and landlords to offer suitable and affordable housing to newcomers. Elsewhere, settlement workers enlisted volunteers with a strong knowledge of local neighborhoods to mentor refugees, alongside professional case workers, in finding permanent housing.

Finally, voluntary support and action at the federal level allowed refugees to be resettled to an expanded range of locations. Housing offers made by private individuals through local housing portals allowed settlement workers to place refugees in neighborhoods that otherwise might not have been accessible. To ease housing pressures in larger cities, the federal government also began offering settlement services in seven new cities across Canada, many of them smaller cities that offered promising employment opportunities for low- and semi-skilled workers but that had not previously been considered for resettlement because they lacked settlement services.

Diversifying and expanding affordable rental housing would benefit not only newcomers but also existing low- and modest-income residents.

Canada's experiences with the Syrian resettlement operation offer several lessons that could help its policymakers and those in other countries strengthen the housing situation of refugee newcomers in the future. First, multi-stakeholder coordination at the local level, particularly with private landlords, is critical to ensuring that housing is available when needed. Within Canada, multi-stakeholder initiatives that were begun during the Syrian operation should be made a permanent part of the settlement infrastructure. Second, broader investments in the rental housing stock, and particularly affordable housing and units for larger families, are needed. Diversifying and expanding affordable rental housing would benefit not only newcomers but also existing low- and modest-income residents, including those with nontraditional household configurations. Finally, resettlement policymakers should ensure that the generosity of resettlement commitments is matched with a generous investment in meeting the needs of newcomers post-arrival. In Canada, the benefits provided to resettled refugees are not sufficient to meet their housing needs. And while voluntary support and private donations provided a short-term fix during the Syrian operation, they are not a sustainable solution. Efforts in Canada and other resettlement countries to develop more long-term strategies, including building up housing stock that is both affordable and adaptable to changing newcomer needs, are important parts of supporting refugees' long-term integration.

I. Introduction

Canada has long had a strong commitment to refugee resettlement as part of its legal immigration program.¹ Over the past decade or so, refugees admitted to Canada as new permanent residents have generally comprised between about 9 percent and 13 percent of total immigrant admissions to the country. The Canadian government expanded its commitment to resettlement in 2015 and 2016, when it

1 For a summary of refugee numbers and sources in historical perspective, see Ümit Kiziltan and Tracey Donaldson, "We Used to Watch a Cartoon Series Called *Adnan Wa Lina*" (presentation at Pathways to Prosperity Annual Conference, Toronto, November 16–17, 2017), http://p2pcanada.ca/wp-content/blogs.dir/1/files/2017/11/Session-5_Umit-Kiziltan--Tracey-Donaldson-ENGLISH.pdf.



agreed to take in 25,000 Syrian refugees through a special resettlement initiative that ran from November 4, 2015 until March 1, 2016. A second phase brought in an additional 10,000 Syrian refugees by December 31, 2016.² As a result, the refugee share of all new permanent residents rose to 20 percent in 2016, and in absolute numbers, it was the highest level of refugee admissions since the Indochinese “Boat People” arrivals of 1979–80. While this is still quite a small minority of newcomers arriving in Canada, the circumstances of refugees’ journeys to and arrival in a new country put them at a greater disadvantage in terms of the economic resources and social connections with which they begin their new lives compared to immigrant newcomers admitted to Canada in the economic or family reunification categories.³

The Canadian government’s Operation Syrian Refugees—initiated in Fall 2015 following the election of a new government led by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau that had promised to break with the tepid response of the previous administration to the Syrian crisis⁴—was the first major resettlement operation since the 1999 airlift of refugees from Kosovo. It entailed a very rapid ramp-up of all steps of the resettlement process, from overseas selection to initial reception in Canada to settlement in refugees’ city of destination. In particular, in the four months of Phase 1 of the operation during Winter 2015–16, the government mobilized a set of emergency protocols to airlift almost 26,000 Syrians to Canada.⁵ These newcomers arrived with permanent resident visas, principally through either Canada’s Government-Assisted Refugees (GAR) program or as Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSR).⁶

One of the major challenges faced by the organizations and groups responsible for assisting Syrian refugee newcomers—and the focus of this report—was the need to find suitable and affordable housing.⁷ The Syrian resettlement operation took place at a time when many of the cities across Canada where refugees were being resettled, including mid-sized as well as major cities, were grappling with a severe and worsening shortage of rental housing affordable for low- and modest-income households. This shortage had its roots in a decade or more of intense rental market inflation (due to economic and demographic growth), and many cities had seen very little new private rental construction for the lower end of the market and an almost complete standstill in social housing starts since austerity measures were introduced in the mid-1990s.⁸ Low-income newcomers have been severely affected by this situation, leading to very high rent-to-income ratios, as well as greater incidence of crowding and substandard

- 2 By the end of September 2018, Syrian admissions had reached almost 60,000 as the government completed processing a large backlog of applications for private sponsorships of Syrian refugees. See Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), “Syrian Refugees Horizontal Initiative,” in *2017 Departmental Results Report* (Ottawa: IRCC, 2017), www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/publications-manuals/departmental-performance-reports/2017/syrian-refugees-initiative.html; IRCC, “#WelcomeRefugees: Key Figures,” updated February 27, 2017, www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/welcome-syrian-refugees/key-figures.html.
- 3 Percentages in this paragraph were calculated using data from IRCC, “Canada – Permanent Residents by Category, 2006–15,” accessed October 11, 2019, www.cic.gc.ca/opendata-donneesouvertes/data/IRCC_FFPR_02_E.xls; IRCC, “Canada - Admissions of Permanent Residents by Province/Territory and Census Metropolitan Area of Intended Destination (2018 Ranking), January 2015 - August 2019,” accessed October 11, 2019, www.cic.gc.ca/opendata-donneesouvertes/data/IRCC_M_PRAdmiss_0003_E.xls; Anne-Marie Bélanger-McMurdo, “Causes and Consequences of Canada’s Resettlement of Syrian Refugees,” *Forced Migration Review* 52 (May 2016): 82–84, www.fmreview.org/sites/fmr/files/FMRdownloads/en/solutions/belangermcmurdo.pdf.
- 4 Bélanger-McMurdo, “Causes and Consequences of Canada’s Resettlement of Syrian Refugees”; Elke Winter, Anke Patzelte, and Mélanie Beaugard, “L’imaginaire national, l’asile et les réfugiés syriens en Allemagne et au Canada : une analyse discursive,” *Canadian Ethnic Studies / Études ethniques au Canada* 50, no. 2 (2018).
- 5 IRCC, *Rapid Impact Evaluation of the Syrian Refugee Initiative* (Ottawa: IRCC, 2016), http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2017/ircc/Ci4-160-2016-eng.pdf.
- 6 For concise summaries of these categories of resettled refugees, see Government of Canada, *Canada. Country Chapters - UNHCR Resettlement Handbook* (Geneva: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2018), www.unhcr.org/3c5e55594.pdf; Jennifer Hyndman, *Research Summary on Resettled Refugee Integration in Canada* (Geneva: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2011), www.unhcr.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/RPT-2011-02-resettled-refugee-e.pdf.
- 7 This report draws on a 2017 study led by the author and funded under a special joint research initiative of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the IRCC. See Damaris Rose and Alexandra Charette, *Finding Housing for the Syrian Refugee Newcomers in Canadian Cities: Challenges, Initiatives and Policy Implications* (Montreal: Institut national de la recherche scientifique, Centre Urbanisation Culture Société, 2017), <http://espace.inrs.ca/6458>.
- 8 Ron Kneebone and Margarita Wilkins, “The Very Poor and the Affordability of Housing,” *SPP Research Papers* 9, no. 27 (2016).



housing conditions in aging properties. Immigrants and refugees are particularly vulnerable to the effects of these constraints, as they cannot always take advantage the housing assistance resources offered by community organizations due to a lack of information and/or language barriers.⁹

Many Syrians who arrived as part of the 2015–16 operation faced additional challenges compared to other newcomers. This was the first major operation since the 2002 *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* (IRPA), under which Canada strengthened the component of its refugee resettlement program that assists the most vulnerable. This increased the proportion of GARs with “high needs” stemming from protracted experiences of displacement and associated trauma, major physical and mental health issues and disabilities, and low levels of formal education and mother-tongue literacy. Such high needs were even more prevalent among Syrian GARs than other post-IRPA refugee cohorts.¹⁰ Consequently, it is now taking longer for GARs to establish themselves in the labor market, meaning many have a longer period of dependency on government transfer payments.¹¹ Moreover, Syrian GARs’ family sizes were much larger than those of the Syrian PSRs—a notable difference, given that Canada’s private rental housing stock has a very limited supply of units for large families, especially in the major cities.¹²

This report examines the challenges this combination of circumstances created for the placement of Syrian GARs into permanent housing, how organizations responded to these challenges, and the policy implications arising from these housing constraints. Due to an unfortunate lack of research and data on the housing situation of privately sponsored Syrian refugees, the report will make much more limited reference to this group.

II. The Canadian Refugee Settlement System

The primary channel of entry to Canada for Syrian refugees has been the resettlement of refugees recognized by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and others in similar circumstances.¹³ This channel includes refugees referred by UNHCR or certain other organizations to one of Canada’s overseas visa offices as well as refugees nominated by private sponsors. Canada sets targets for the number of refugees it intends to resettle annually, and they are offered resettlement in Canada through one of three streams:

- **Government-Assisted Refugees (GAR).** These refugees are nominated by overseas visa offices, and the federal government takes financial responsibility for supporting them for 12 months through the Resettlement Assistance Program, as well as providing four to six weeks of intensive orientation and assistance with refugees’ initial needs post-resettlement.
- **Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSR).** These refugees are identified for resettlement by sponsor groups—nonprofits, faith-based (including interfaith) groups, community

9 Carlos Teixeira, “New Immigrant Settlement in a Mid-Sized City: A Case Study of Housing Barriers and Coping Strategies in Kelowna, British Columbia,” *The Canadian Geographer / Le Géographe canadien* 53, no. 3 (2009).

10 Dawn Edlund, “Settlement of Syrian Refugees: One Year Later” (presentation by Associate Assistant Deputy Minister, IRCC, at the 19th National Metropolis Conference, Montreal, March 16-18, 2017); Government of Canada, *Canada. Country Chapters*; IRCC, *Rapid Impact Evaluation of the Syrian Refugee Initiative*.

11 In the case of these Syrian refugees, employment was the main source of income for about 10 percent one year after arrival, compared to about 50 percent of privately sponsored refugees, who arrived with higher educational levels, greater knowledge of English or French, and smaller families. See Edlund, “Settlement of Syrian Refugees”; IRCC, *Rapid Impact Evaluation of the Syrian Refugee Initiative*.

12 IRCC, *Rapid Impact Evaluation of the Syrian Refugee Initiative*.

13 Canada also grants humanitarian protection through another channel: Protected Person status for asylum seekers who file a claim from within Canada and whose claim is validated by the Immigration and Refugee Board. Only a handful of the Syrian refugees have received protection in Canada through this channel since 2015.

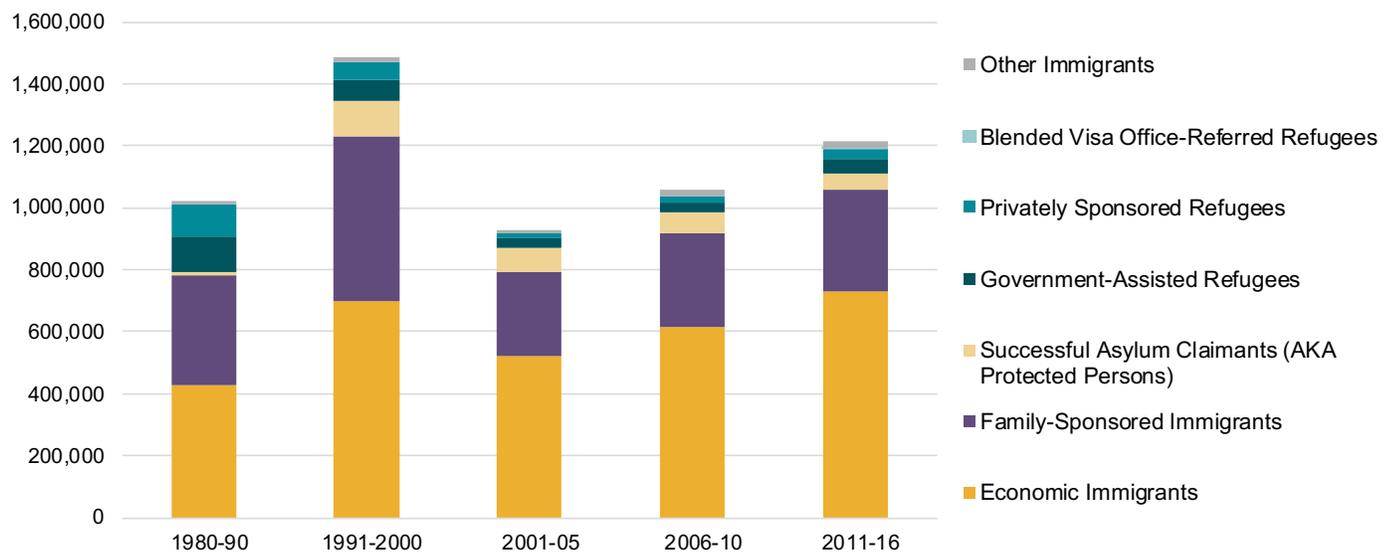


organizations, and small groups of individuals—though the government must approve their application for settlement. Sponsors then take on financial responsibility for supporting approved refugees for 12 months, as well as providing orientation and assistance with the practical and cultural dimensions of settlement.

- **Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) Refugees.** The blended stream is a hybrid between the GAR and PSR streams: private sponsors support the settlement of a refugee referred by an overseas visa office, rather than one they nominate. The financial responsibility for supporting the refugee for 12 months is shared by the sponsor group and the federal government.¹⁴

All three streams for resettling refugees to Canada are small compared to the much larger economic and family admissions channels. Figure 1 shows the immigrant population resident in Canada at the time of the May 2016 census, broken down by the category under which immigrants obtained permanent resident status and their period of immigration.

Figure 1. Immigrants Living in Canada in 2016, by Period of Arrival and Entry Category



Note: This figure does not include immigrants who arrived prior to 2016 but were deceased or no longer living in Canada at the time of the 2016 Census. These data are thus not comparable to annual admissions data compiled by Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada.

Source: Statistics Canada, “2016 Census: Admission Category and Applicant Type (46), Period of Immigration (7), Age (12) and Sex (3) for the Immigrant Population Who Landed between 1980 and 2016, in Private Households of Canada, Provinces and Territories” (dataset, catalog no. 98-400-X2016201, Ottawa, 2017), <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/catalogue/98-400-X2016201>.

The guiding principles of Canada’s refugee resettlement policy date back to the late 1950s, when humanitarianism and a “welcoming” attitude by the general public began to emerge as key Canadian identity markers. The 1979–80 Indochinese “Boat People” operation was an iconic moment, marked by a groundswell of support from civil-society groups across the country that took part in the resettlement effort. Due to these high levels of civil-society financial and logistical support, the federal government was able to admit far more refugees than it alone was willing or able to pay for; the private sponsorship

¹⁴ Government of Canada, *Canada. Country Chapters*.



program emerged out of this effort.¹⁵ Today, the PSR and BVOR streams exemplify the Canadian principle of resettlement as a shared responsibility between civil society and the state; however, as this report will discuss, the Syrian operation became a catalyst for the extension of this idea to the GAR stream through an upsurge of informal and voluntary support for the work of the settlement organizations assisting the GARs.

Another crucial characteristic of Canadian refugee resettlement policy is that resettled refugees arrive with a permanent resident visa, rather than temporary status as in many other countries.¹⁶ In fact, because Canada is a settler society whose economic and demographic growth has always depended on immigration, its refugee settlement and integration policies have been linked from the outset to these aspects of nation building as well as to humanitarian considerations. As permanent residents, refugee newcomers have full coverage under Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms. This includes geographic mobility rights, so that refugee newcomers, like new permanent residents in most other immigration categories, may live and move wherever they choose within Canada, even though they are initially settled in certain places upon arrival.¹⁷

A. The Geographic Dimension of Refugee Settlement

Canada's settlement policy seeks to direct newly resettled refugees to urban communities (large, mid-sized, or small) that are well placed to receive them. Considerations include the availability of newcomer settlement services and specialized services (e.g., health), local housing markets, and the presence of an economic and social environment conducive to their integration (employment opportunities, official language training, welcoming atmosphere). This geographic dimension of resettlement has been a policy concern at least since the Indochinese operation of 1979–80, which led to the creation of a national "matching center" that considers the characteristics of refugees selected for resettlement and matches them with suitable cities.¹⁸

In the past, many smaller cities and towns have had difficulty retaining refugee newcomers, leading to "secondary migration" as refugees move elsewhere after their initial year of intensive settlement support. Barriers to retention in the initial settlement location include limited employment, educational, and training opportunities, as well as the fact that newcomers often prefer to live in places where there is an established compatriot community with familiar cultural and religious institutions from which to seek support. The wish to be close to other family members is another important factor that may cause refugees to relocate shortly after initial settlement. The matching process thus includes all of these considerations, with the aim of making suitable placements that last past the initial support period.¹⁹

15 Harald Bauder, "Dialectics of Humanitarian Immigration and National Identity in Canadian Public Discourse," *Refuge* 25, no. 1 (2008): 84–93; Audrey Macklin et al., "A Preliminary Investigation into Private Refugee Sponsors," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 50, no. 2 (2018): 35–57; Michael J. Molloy, Peter Duschinsky, Kurt F. Jensen, and Robert J. Shalka, *Running on Empty: Canada and the Indochinese Refugees, 1975-1980* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017).

16 Successful asylum seekers are also granted permanent residence as soon as the usual health and security procedures are completed.

17 Armand de Mestral and Jan Winter, "Mobility Rights in the European Union and Canada," *McGill Law Journal* 46, no. 4 (2001): 979–1010, <https://lawjournal.mcgill.ca/issue/volume-46-issue-4-2001/>.

18 Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC), "CIC's Matching Centre: Destining Resettled Refugees," *Inside RAP*, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 6, http://atwork.settlement.org/downloads/atwork/RAP_Newsletter_Issue_3.pdf.

19 CIC, "CIC's Matching Centre"; Employment and Immigration Canada, *Indochinese Refugees: The Canadian Response, 1979 and 1980* (Ottawa: Employment and Immigration Canada, 1982), http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2015/cic/MP23-60-1982-1-eng.pdf; Robert Vineberg, *Responding to Immigrants' Settlement Needs: The Canadian Experience*, Springer Briefs in Population Studies (Heidelberg: Springer Verlag, 2012); Laura Simich, Morton Beiser, and Farah N. Mawani, "Paved with Good Intentions: Canada's Refugee Destining Policy and Paths of Secondary Migration," *Canadian Public Policy* 28, no. 4 (2002): 597–607; René Houle, "Secondary Migration of New Immigrants to Canada," *Our Diverse Cities* 3 (2007); Harvey Krahn, Tracey M. Derwing, and Baha Abu-Laban, "The Retention of Newcomers in Second- and Third- Tier Canadian Cities," *International Migration Review* 39, no. 4 (2005).



Prior to the Indochinese operation, settlement services for newcomers, including refugees, were delivered in only the five largest immigrant-receiving cities. As the number and diversity of newcomers grew in the 1970s, and secondary movement within Canada rose, it became clear that the existing settlement infrastructure was insufficient for the task; the federal employment counselling centers that delivered these services did not necessarily have sufficient expertise in helping newcomers overcome settlement challenges. To fill the gap, the number of local community organizations and voluntary agencies equipped to assist newcomers expanded rapidly in large, mid-size, and even some small urban centers. Hundreds of these organizations eventually received federal government funding to deliver the Immigrant Settlement and Adjustment Program, set up in 1976.²⁰ Refugee-specific settlement services were formalized in 1998 with the beginning of the present-day Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP), delivered by a subset of the community-based newcomer organizations under contract from the federal government.²¹ Since RAP was formalized, newly arrived GARs have been settled to cities that have a RAP-provider organization.

*Refugee-specific settlement services were formalized
in 1998 with the beginning of the present-day
Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP).*

Until 2016—that is, before the Syrian operation—there were only 23 designated RAP providers in the nine provinces excluding Quebec, plus 13 providers of Quebec’s RAP-equivalent program.²² While no available documentation specifies how cities were chosen to become locations for RAP providers, one factor was the expertise in assisting refugees that local community organizations and health centers had already built up in cities with a history of refugee settlement.²³ It is also probable that some locations were selected at the request of provinces for whom immigrant newcomers, including refugees, have long been seen as potential contributors to economic and demographic growth; this is the case for many peripheral regions seeking to reverse decline and outmigration, and for some small but growing communities facing labor shortages.²⁴

The cities chosen for RAP were mostly large and mid-sized cities, though some providers based in large cities (e.g., Vancouver and Calgary) also deliver the program via cooperation agreements with newcomer-serving organizations in smaller cities in the same province, which allows for some decentralization of GAR settlement. And during the Syrian operation, Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC)—the federal agency that oversees the RAP—awarded contracts to organizations in several smaller cities.

20 Institute of Urban Studies, *The Pre-Evaluation Assessment of the Settlement Component of the Immigration Program* (Winnipeg: Institute of Urban Studies, 1983).

21 Power Analysis Inc., *Evaluation of the Resettlement Assistance Program* (Komoka, Canada: Power Analysis Inc., 2002), http://atwork.settlement.org/downloads/Resettlement_Assistance_Program_Evaluation.pdf; IRCC, *Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) Service Provider Handbook, 2019* (Ottawa: IRCC, 2019), http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2019/ircc/Ci34-5-2019-eng.pdf.

22 The province of Quebec, which controls many aspects of immigration to its territory, has a long-standing program of sending most of its government-assisted refugees to smaller centers (so as to foster rapid acquisition of the French language and promote immersion in Quebec culture, as well as due to economic and demographic growth considerations). This policy was continued for the Syrian operation, even though the largest city, Montreal, was geared up for a major resettlement effort, which included an elaborate protocol to assist the refugee newcomers in finding good-quality affordable housing. This explains the low numbers of GARs settled in Montreal, as shown in Table 1.

23 Power Analysis Inc., *Evaluation of the Resettlement Assistance Program*.

24 For examples of “regionalization” strategies in different provinces, see Bill Reimer, ed., *Our Diverse Cities*, vol. 3 (Ottawa: Metropolis, 2007), http://canada.metropolis.net/pdfs/ODC_Summer07_3_en.pdf. In its 2015 call for proposals to offer the Resettlement Assistance Program, the ministry indicated a willingness to consider proposals from places that were not traditional GAR-receiving centers, but where there was high demand for labor. See CIC, *Funding Guidelines: National Call for Proposals. Settlement, Resettlement Assistance and Inter-Action (Multiculturalism) Programs* (Ottawa: CIC, 2015), http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2015/cic/Ci1-18-2015-eng.pdf.



Since GARs are only placed by the federal (or Quebec) government in cities where they can receive the intense resettlement support provided under RAP, they are distributed over a smaller number of cities (about 50) than are PSRs or BVORs, who normally settle in the same city as their sponsor group. In fact, Syrian refugees were sponsored by hundreds of different groups across the country, many of them from small communities, reinvigorating the community-driven resettlement tradition first established in the Indochinese operation. Nevertheless, about 70 percent of Syrian PSRs who arrived in 2015–16 settled in Toronto and Montreal, home to the main concentrations of Syrian diaspora communities in Canada.²⁵ In these metropolitan areas, the Syrian crisis generated a huge upsurge in sponsorship by organizations and individuals with cultural or familial connections to Syrian refugees.²⁶

The 25 Canadian cities that welcomed the most Syrian refugees between the start of the Syrian operation in November 2015 and September 2018 vary in a number of ways. As seen in Table 1, they are spread across provinces and include both large and some smaller areas. Among these are some cities with relatively small immigrant populations (e.g., St. John’s, NL; Saint John, NB; and Moncton, NB) as well as major immigrant “gateway” cities such as Toronto and Vancouver, and many that fall in between. Taken together, these top 25 cities, representing 64 percent of Canada’s population as of 2016, took in 90 percent of the Syrian refugees resettled to Canada during this period (94 percent of PSRs and 92 percent of GARs, but only 61 percent of BVORs). The remaining GARs were settled in a few smaller cities (under a “hub-and-spoke” model of RAP delivery used mainly in British Columbia), whereas the remaining PSRs and BVORs were spread out in small numbers over hundreds of localities, reflecting the widespread involvement of small sponsor groups across Canada that included hundreds of groups of citizens who (on their own or in association with a faith group) sponsored a single family or individual.²⁷

These top 25 cities, representing 64 percent of Canada’s population as of 2016, took in 90 percent of the Syrian refugees resettled to Canada during this period.

- 25 The 70 percent figure was calculated using data from IRCC, “Canada – Admissions of Syrian Refugees by Province/Territory and Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) of Intended Destination and Immigration Category, November 4th, 2015 – September 30th, 2018,” accessed July 1, 2019, www.cic.gc.ca/opendata-donneesouvertes/data/IRCC_M_Sradmiss_0007_E.xls.
- 26 CIC, *Population Profile: Syrian Refugees* (Ottawa: CIC, 2015), <https://cpa.ca/docs/File/Cultural/EN%20Syrian%20Population%20Profile.pdf>; Centre d’appui aux communautés immigrantes (CACI), *Rapport d’activités 2015-2016* (Montreal: CACI, 2016), <http://caci-bc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Rapport-annuel-CACI-2015-2016.pdf>; testimony of Shahan Mirakian, Government Relations Coordinator, Armenian Community Centre, before the House of Commons, Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, 42nd Parliament, 1st sess., June 2, 2016, www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42-1/CIMM/meeting-17/evidence.
- 27 Shannon Tito and Sharolyn Cochand, “The Story of a Small Canadian Congregation Sponsoring a Refugee Family,” *Forced Migration Review* 54 (2017): 60-61, www.fmreview.org/sites/fmr/files/FMRdownloads/en/resettlement/tito-cochand.pdf; Macklin et al., “A Preliminary Investigation into Private Refugee Sponsors.”



Table 1. Top 25 Canadian Cities by Syrian Refugees Received, November 2015–September 2018

Census Metropolitan Area or Agglomeration	Province	Population, 2016	Immigrant Share of Population (%)	Syrian Refugee Intake (Nov. 2015–Sept. 2018)			City's Share of Canadian Total (%)	
				Government-Assisted Refugees	Privately Sponsored Refugees	Blended Visa Office-Referred Refugees		All Categories
Canada Total		35,151,728	21.9	27,725	27,170	4,985	59,875	100.0
Toronto	Ontario	5,928,040	46.1	3,530	7,485	1,005	12,020	20.1
Montreal	Quebec	4,098,927	23.4	895	10,275	15	11,185	18.7
Vancouver	British Columbia	2,463,431	40.8	2,570	780	180	3,530	5.9
Ottawa – Gatineau (Ontario part)	Ontario	991,726	22.6	1,845	1,125	340	3,305	5.5
Calgary	Alberta	1,392,609	29.4	1,240	1,375	140	2,755	4.6
Edmonton	Alberta	1,321,426	23.8	1,540	960	215	2,720	4.5
London	Ontario	494,069	19.5	1,515	690	100	2,300	3.8
Kitchener – Cambridge – Waterloo	Ontario	523,894	23.0	1,500	450	210	2,160	3.6
Hamilton	Ontario	747,545	24.1	1,620	330	125	2,075	3.5
Winnipeg	Manitoba	778,489	23.9	1,390	295	120	1,805	3.0
Windsor	Ontario	329,144	22.9	1,275	295	20	1,590	2.7
Halifax	Nova Scotia	403,390	9.4	1,050	250	100	1,395	2.3
Saskatoon	Saskatchewan	295,095	15.6	610	90	80	780	1.3
Regina	Saskatchewan	236,481	15.9	635	45	25	705	1.2
Moncton	New Brunswick	144,810	5.6	585	25	40	650	1.1
Saint John	New Brunswick	126,202	5.4	535	35	60	630	1.1
Fredericton	New Brunswick	101,760	8.2	560	10	45	615	1.0
Victoria	British Columbia	367,770	18.3	370	150	75	600	1.0
Quebec	Quebec	800,296	5.7	415	120	0	535	0.9
Ottawa – Gatineau (Quebec part)	Quebec	332,057	11.0	345	180	5	530	0.9
St. John's	Newfoundland & Labrador	205,955	4.0	345	85	85	515	0.9
Sherbrooke	Quebec	212,105	7.1	280	140	0	420	0.7
Lethbridge	Alberta	117,394	13.5	325	55	0	380	0.6
Charlottetown	Prince Edward Island	69,325	9.3	190	130	35	355	0.6
Peterborough	Ontario	121,721	8.5	260	70	20	350	0.6

Note: The IRCC data suppress values between 0 and 5 and round all others to the nearest multiple of 5 for confidentiality reasons.

Sources: Statistics Canada, "2016 Census: Population and Dwelling Count" (dataset, catalog no. 98-402-X2016001, Ottawa, 2017), <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/catalogue/98-402-X2016001>; Statistics Canada, "2016 Census: Admission Category and Applicant Type (7), Period of Immigration (7), Place of Birth (272), Age (12) and Sex (3) for the Immigrant Population Who Landed between 1980 and 2016, in Private Households of Canada, Provinces and Territories, Census Metropolitan Areas and Census Agglomerations" (dataset, catalog no. 98-400-X2016202, Ottawa, 2017), <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/catalogue/98-400-X2016202>; IRCC, "Canada – Admissions of Syrian Refugees by Province/Territory and Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) of Intended Destination and Immigration Category, November 4th, 2015 – September 30th, 2018," accessed July 1, 2019, www.cic.gc.ca/opendata-donneesouvertes/data/IRCC_M_Sradmiss_0007_E.xls.



B. Settlement Assistance

Compared to other immigrants in Canada, newly resettled refugees face heightened challenges to social, cultural, and economic integration. They are less likely than other immigrants to have close family in the country able to provide financial, practical, and social support during their first months after settlement.²⁸ The unplanned nature of their migration and the circumstances of their departure also mean that they arrive in Canada with very few financial resources. Refugees thus have major needs for orientation and guidance, referrals to services, and financial assistance until they can become self-supporting through employment, as well as help with finding and settling into their first house.

Canadian policy is that both GARs and PSRs receive a basic level of income support for the first 12 months of settlement, unless they become self-supporting before then. In the case of GARs, this takes the form of a monthly RAP allowance paid by the Canadian government. It is calibrated—with minor variations—to provincial social assistance (welfare) rates, which are based on the concept of “aid of last resort” for people with no other means of support and are not designed to maintain a household over an extended period.²⁹ Private sponsors must commit to providing a similar level of financial support for the refugees they sponsor, and must demonstrate to the federal (or Quebec) government that they have access to sufficient resources to fulfill this commitment.

Beginning as soon as they arrive in their destination city and over a period of the next four to six weeks, all GARs receive a bundle of practical and “life skills” orientation services. These include practical help with essentials, such as temporary accommodation and accessing the school and health-care systems, as well as guidance on navigating the administrative procedures of settling in a new country and living independently. They also receive a needs assessment and referrals to services to support their settlement in the ensuing years, including ongoing intensive support of high-needs cases. GARs are also referred to the different components of the government’s Settlement Program to which all new permanent residents have access (including language training, preparation for the labor market, and cultural programs to foster connections to the broader community).³⁰

The newcomer-serving community organizations that hold the RAP contract in each city are funded by the federal government for these activities. Organizations and groups that act as sponsors are supposed to provide analogous supports to PSRs. Small sponsor groups are linked up with larger organizations with experience and knowhow that can offer training and support for the sponsors’ settlement, referral, and social integration work, and the Sponsorship Agreement Holder³¹ is mandated to provide support and oversight.

- 28 Robert Murdie and Jennifer Logan, *Precarious Housing & Hidden Homelessness among Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Immigrants: Bibliography and Review of Canadian Literature from 2005 to 2010* (Toronto: CERIS – The Ontario Metropolis Centre, 2011), <https://forcedmigrationguide.pbworks.com/w/page/47242718/Precarious%20Housing%20and%20Hidden%20Homelessness>; Robert Murdie, Valerie Preston, Sutama Ghosh, and Magali Chevalier, *Immigrants and Housing: A Review of Canadian Literature from 1990 to 2005* (Ottawa: Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2006), ftp://ftp.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/chic-cddh/Research_Reports-Rapports_de_recherche/eng_unilingual/CHIC-Immigrants.pdf; Damaris Rose and Alexandra Charette, “Housing Experiences of Users of Settlement Services for Newcomers in Montréal: Does Immigration Status Matter?” in *Immigrant Integration: Research Implications for Public Policy*, ed. Kenise Kilbride (Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press, 2014); Grant Schellenberg and Hélène Maheux, “Immigrants’ Perspectives on Their First Four Years in Canada: Highlights from Three Waves of the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada,” in *Canadian Social Trends, Special Edition 2007* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2007), <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/11-008-x/2007000/pdf/9627-eng.pdf?st=z0kYPiQ>.
- 29 CIC, *Evaluation of Government Assisted Refugees (GAR) and Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP)* (Ottawa: CIC, 2011), www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/reports-statistics/evaluations/government-assisted-refugees-resettlement-assistance-program.html; Power Analysis Inc., *Evaluation of the Resettlement Assistance Program*.
- 30 Jessica Praznik and John Shields, *An Anatomy of Settlement Services in Canada: A Guide*. (Toronto: Ryerson University, 2018), http://bmrc-irmu.info.yorku.ca/files/2018/07/An-Anatomy-of-Settlement-Services-in-Canada_BMRCIRMU.pdf; John Shields, Julie Drolet, and Karla Valenzuela, “Immigrant Settlement and Integration Services and the Role of Nonprofit Providers: A Cross-National Perspective on Trends, Issues and Evidence” (working paper 2016/1, Ryerson University, Toronto, February 2016), www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/rcis/documents/RCIS%20WP%202016_01%20Shields%20et%20al%20final.pdf; CIC, *Funding Guidelines: National Call for Proposals*; IRCC, *Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) Service Provider Handbook*.
- 31 A Sponsorship Agreement Holder is an incorporated organization that has signed a legal agreement with the federal government to contribute to the resettlement of PSRs by facilitating the sponsorship process. They can initiate sponsorships or assist smaller sponsoring groups with many aspects of sponsorship.



C. *Housing Placement and Assistance*

Finding suitable and affordable housing for GARs is a major contractual obligation for the newcomer service providers that deliver the Resettlement Assistance Program.³² Their housing-related responsibilities comprise arranging temporary accommodation (in hotels and/or temporary reception centers that exist in some cities), providing refugees with intensive assistance in searching for permanent housing, and then helping them move into that housing.³³

Liaising with housing providers is a key part of this process. Over the years, RAP providers have developed expertise in the housing-search process and cultivated relationships of trust with local landlords so that they have access to an inventory that is both relatively affordable and of acceptable quality. Many such organizations have long-established practices of maintaining lists of suitable rental vacancies open to refugees and other newcomers. As a result of these relationships, landlords often agree to make special accommodations for newly resettled refugee tenants, such as waiving credit checks and the requirement that prospective tenants provide Canadian references; they may also ask a smaller deposit.³⁴ RAP providers also counsel refugees about their housing options, work to ensure that the first RAP payment is available to cover the deposit needed to sign a lease, and arrange delivery of the furniture (paid for by IRCC).

Over the years, RAP providers have developed expertise in the housing-search process and cultivated relationships of trust with local landlords.

For privately sponsored refugees, their sponsors are responsible for arranging and paying for temporary accommodation on arrival and then finding (or helping refugees find) suitable and affordable permanent housing. Sponsors are responsible for ensuring that the refugees are well housed throughout their first year in Canada and for the cost of that accommodation. An early evaluation of the Syrian operation found that in the majority of cases surveyed, sponsors were paying rent directly to the landlord.³⁵ Small private sponsor groups are unlikely, however, to have pre-established relationships with trusted landlords, and this makes them more vulnerable to excessive demands by landlords (e.g., requiring many months' deposit). Sponsors also generally lack the experience of RAP housing workers in terms of being able to assess the physical and sanitary condition of a housing unit (e.g., no mold or cockroaches).

32 For asylum seekers, by comparison, the federal government does not fund housing-search and counselling services, and provinces and cities may or may not help to fill this gap. Consequently, asylum seekers rely heavily on the social networks of friends and acquaintances, but since the latter tend to be in equally precarious situations, this networking only marginally helps their housing outcomes. See Silvia D'Addario, Dan Hiebert, and Kathy Sherrell, "Restricted Access: The Role of Social Capital in Mitigating Absolute Homelessness among Immigrants and Refugees in the Greater Vancouver Regional District," *Refuge* 24, no. 1 (2007), <https://refuge.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/refuge/article/view/21372/20042>.

33 CIC, *Funding Guidelines: National Call for Proposals*.

34 Landlords make these accommodations because they understand that refugees will have a regular monthly income from the government. See CIC, "Promising Practices: Search for Permanent Accommodation," *Inside RAP*, no. 7 (Fall 2011): 3–4, http://wiki.settlementatwork.org/uploads/archive/20120105193018!RAP_Newsletter_Fall_2011_FINAL_Eng.pdf; Power Analysis Inc., *Evaluation of the Resettlement Assistance Program*.

35 IRCC, *Rapid Impact Evaluation of the Syrian Refugee Initiative*.



Box 1. Housing: A Key Component of Refugee Integration

Moving into their first permanent home is a major milestone for newcomers to Canada. Beyond shelter, suitable and affordable housing is an anchor point for a new start in a new country and city. It is both a marker that integration is successfully underway, and a means to make progress in other dimensions of settlement, adaptation, and integration. Housing thus needs not only to be affordable but also in a location that is accessible to services and resources, including official language training, labor market training, and suitable job opportunities, as well as the specialized health services some refugee newcomers need. This means that the most preferred and suitable settlement locations are large or mid-size cities with a critical mass of newcomer services and a diversified employment base. In the Canadian context, however, some smaller cities also have long traditions of welcoming immigrants, including refugees, and may have labor shortages that refugee newcomers can fill.

Housing also needs to be located in a neighborhood that feels secure and can help newcomers make social connections. Conversely, having to live in unsanitary conditions, experiencing housing discrimination, or living in a neighborhood that feels unsafe can have negative repercussions on physical and mental health, which in turn can affect refugees' ability to obtain and keep a job.

Sources: Alastair Ager and Alison Strang, "Understanding Integration: A Conceptual Framework," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21, no. 2 (2008), <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fen016>; Kathleen M. Sherrell and Immigrant Services Society of British Columbia, *At Home in Surrey? The Housing Experiences of Refugees in Surrey, BC* (Surrey, Canada: City of Surrey, 2009), http://issbc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/20_-_At_Home_in_Surrey_June_20092009.pdf; Harvey Krahn, Tracey M. Derwing, and Baha Abu-Laban, "The Retention of Newcomers in Second- and Third-Tier Canadian Cities," *International Migration Review* 39, no. 4 (2005); Thomas S. Carter, Chesya Polevychok, and John Osborne, "The Role of Housing and Neighbourhood in the Resettlement Process: A Study of Refugee Households in Winnipeg," *Canadian Geographer / Le Géographe canadien* 53, no. 3 (2009); City of Edmonton, Community and Public Services Committee, Citizen Services, *Update on Refugees from Syria - (M. Walters) - CR_4919 - Report* (Edmonton: City of Edmonton, 2017); Anna Ziersch, Moira Walsh, Clemence Due, and Emily Duivesteyn, "Exploring the Relationship between Housing and Health for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in South Australia: A Qualitative Study," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 14, no. 1036 (2017); Gloria Wenyeye, "Newcomers' Perceptions of How Housing Discrimination Affected Their Health and Sense of Wellbeing" (PhD dissertation, Faculty of Graduate Studies, York University, Toronto, 2014), <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/2869/c94052570ca498f8960b81723d7cd454ef01.pdf>.

III. Housing Challenges for Syrian Refugee Newcomers in Canada

In Canada's housing system, one of the most market-dominated in the world, deeply subsidized social housing is available only to a portion of those in the most extreme need.³⁶ Waiting lists are open to refugees who meet criteria based on income or special needs, such as major health issues or disabilities,

³⁶ David Hulchanski, "What Factors Shape Canadian Housing Policy? The Intergovernmental Role in Canada's Housing System," in *Canada, State of the Federation 2004: Municipal - Federal - Provincial Relations*, eds. Robert Young and Christian Leuprecht (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006); Kathleen Scanlon and Christine Whitehead, *International Trends in Housing Tenure and Mortgage Finance* (London: Council of Mortgage Lenders, 2004), www.urbancenter.utoronto.ca/pdfs/elibrary/CML_Inter-Trends-Housing-Te.pdf.



as they are to any other permanent resident or Canadian citizen. Being able to afford decent housing is thus highly dependent on obtaining adequately paid and stable employment.³⁷

A large body of research has documented the challenges newcomers in Canada frequently face in finding decent housing—economic immigrants as well as refugees and asylum seekers. This can be due to unfamiliarity with the housing system, language barriers, difficulty meeting landlords’ requirements for references and security deposits, and, sometimes, racism. These difficulties are compounded for those with low incomes and precarious employment.³⁸

Some challenges have become even more pronounced in recent years as the Canadian government has increased its resettlement efforts. This section considers major contributing factors, including the cost, size, and location of available housing, as well as the pace and scale of the Syrian arrivals.

A. *Affordability*

Finding suitable and affordable housing for GAR newcomers has perennially been a challenging part of RAP service providers’ work because of the very low monthly income provided by the RAP allowance, and these difficulties have worsened as affordable rental housing has become scarcer in recent years. The amount included in the RAP allowance for housing costs is too low to cover rent for adequate housing without cutting deeply into the household budget for other essentials. In 2006, an additional housing allowance of \$100 was added to the RAP allowance in response to the providers’ concerns about the impact of rising rents, but this has not been enough to bridge the gap. Statutory periodic evaluations of the Resettlement Assistance Program have repeatedly stressed that the housing allowance is insufficient.³⁹ And during the initial stages of the Syrian resettlement operation, the national association representing RAP providers flagged the gap between rent prices and refugee income support as a key challenge, and suggested that it would need to be addressed urgently in order for the operation to succeed.⁴⁰ But rather than making changes to the RAP allowance, the government called on the private sector to help make housing affordable for Syrian GARs (as will be discussed in more depth in Section IV).

The amount included in the RAP allowance for housing costs is too low to cover rent for adequate housing without cutting deeply into the household budget for other essentials.

Low-income families with minor children also have access to a federal-provincial Child Benefit. After a waiting period of three months, newcomers to Canada become eligible for this, too. For Syrian refugee families, low-end-of market rents became somewhat more manageable after receiving the Child Benefit.⁴¹ However, a family with two children would still have to spend 40 percent to 50 percent of their income

37 Paul Flatau et al., *The Housing and Homelessness Journeys of Refugees in Australia* (Melbourne: Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, 2015); Jenny Francis and Daniel Hiebert, “Shaky Foundations: Refugees in Vancouver’s Housing Market,” *The Canadian Geographer/Le Géographe canadien* 58, no. 1 (2014).

38 Murdie, Preston, Ghosh, and Chevalier, *Immigrants and Housing*; Bruce Newbold et al., *Exploring the Links: Housing and Homelessness amongst Newcomers to Hamilton* (Hamilton: Hamilton Immigration Partnership Council, 2011); Rose and Charette, “Housing Experiences of Users of Settlement Services.”

39 IRCC, *Evaluation of the Resettlement Programs (GAR, PSR, BVOR and RAP)* (Ottawa: IRCC, Evaluation Division, 2016); Power Analysis Inc., *Evaluation of the Resettlement Assistance Program*.

40 Canadian Immigrant Settlement Sector Alliance (CISSA), “Letter to The Honourable John McCallum Regarding Resettling 25,000 Syrian Government Assisted Refugees (GARs)” (news release, CISSA, December 2015), www.cissa-acsei.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/12-22-2015_CISSAACSEILetterRAP.pdf.

41 Rose and Charette, *Finding Housing for the Syrian Refugee Newcomers in Canadian Cities*.



on rent in many mid-size cities as well as in the most expensive big cities, Toronto and Vancouver. Many resettled Syrian families were larger than this, adding additional cost.

Childless couples and single refugees without employment income were in a far more precarious situation. A single person living solely on income support for refugees would have to share an apartment or rent a room, neither of which are ideal options for someone in a precarious mental health situation, unless accompanied by supportive services provided by a sponsor or community organization.⁴²

B. Lack of Housing for Large Families

The challenges of finding suitable rental housing for families with four or more children in the Canadian housing market have been acknowledged by Canada's federal housing agency for several years, as has the fact that the shortage of such housing disproportionately affects immigrant families, which tend to be larger than those of the Canadian born.⁴³ Prior to the Syrian operation, the larger family sizes and greater needs of recent refugee cohorts for intensive guidance and support (including accompaniment to appointments) when looking for housing had already increased the demands on housing-search and support workers.⁴⁴

However, the demographic profile of the Syrian GAR newcomers posed even greater housing challenges than anticipated. In contrast to the single individuals and small families that predominated among privately sponsored Syrian refugees, almost 40 percent of GAR families resettled from November 2015 to July 2016 had six or more members; more than 10 percent were families of eight or more; and about 60 percent of GARs were under age 18.⁴⁵ This meant that much of the RAP providers' existing housing inventory and many of the new housing offers that poured in from supportive individuals and landlords were too small and thus unsuitable for the new arrivals.⁴⁶

The mismatch between available housing and family sizes was a major factor in delaying the transition from temporary to permanent housing. This was exacerbated by the fact that service providers in destination cities were not able to anticipate this need for larger rental units in the advance planning process due to a lack of timely information about GAR family profiles, which were supposed to be relayed from the overseas processing centers before the resettlement operation began but in many cases were not.⁴⁷

C. Rapid Pace and Scale of Arrivals

In Canadian cities where the ramp-up of the Syrian operation moved especially quickly, there was a sudden spike in housing demand. This contributed to significant bottlenecks in transitioning GARs from temporary to permanent housing, as RAP providers waited for government funds to hire more housing-search workers in order to expand their inventories of suitable rental housing units. Some providers also experienced delays in receiving the first checks (one-time payment for start-up costs as well as the

42 Rose and Charette, *Finding Housing for the Syrian Refugee Newcomers in Canadian Cities*.

43 Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, "How to Find and Rent a Home if You Have a Large Family" (brochure, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, Ottawa, 2016).

44 CIC, *Evaluation of Government Assisted Refugees (GAR)*; Sherrell and Immigrant Services Society of British Columbia, *At Home in Surrey?*

45 IRCC, *Rapid Impact Evaluation of the Syrian Refugee Initiative*; Rose and Charette, *Finding Housing for the Syrian Refugee Newcomers in Canadian Cities*.

46 Rose and Charette, *Finding Housing for the Syrian Refugee Newcomers in Canadian Cities*.

47 IRCC, *Rapid Impact Evaluation of the Syrian Refugee Initiative*; Rose and Charette, *Finding Housing for the Syrian Refugee Newcomers in Canadian Cities*.



first month's income support) so that leases could be signed, or in receiving furniture so that refugee newcomers could move into their new homes. A month into the operation, settlement organizations in a few cities—those that had experienced the most rapid ramp-up and that had some of the most expensive housing markets—asked for a short pause in new refugee arrivals to their cities in order to work on the housing backlog.⁴⁸

The absence of the standard pre-departure training for refugees in the 2015–16 cohort meant that the Syrian newcomers had received less information prior to resettlement about what life in Canada would hold.⁴⁹ Many were unprepared for the extremely high rents and limited housing choices they would face, and this exacerbated the challenges RAP housing-search workers encountered when working with them.⁵⁰

D. Suitability of Geographic Locations: The Balance between Housing Availability and Access to Services

At the city level, housing-search workers helping GARs to find their first homes in Canada are constrained in terms of the choice of neighborhoods by the limited availability of suitable housing that is also affordable. A key criterion for suitability is the accessibility of housing to settlement services, health care, and everyday services by public transportation. Housing workers assisting Syrian newcomers also sought to respect their wishes to live in proximity to friends: spatial and social isolation of refugee newcomers from peers who have had similar experiences and share a common culture is thought to contribute to mental distress and impede integration, and in Syrian culture reinforcing social connections between family and friends by doing activities together is very important.⁵¹ Thus, RAP workers judged that it was preferable to prolong GARs' stay in temporary accommodation until housing that met all of these criteria could be found—sometimes a difficult task.⁵²

Spatial and social isolation of refugee newcomers ... is thought to contribute to mental distress and impede integration.

Sponsors for PSRs also faced the twin constraints of affordability and suitability, albeit in a different way. The prevalence of sponsorship by Syrian diaspora organizations and extended family members, as well as their concentration in large cities (see Table 1), reduced the likelihood of social and cultural isolation and lack of access to services. Their sponsors often lived in inner-suburban, middle-class neighborhoods with quite high concentrations of established Syrian, Syrian-Armenian, and other Arabic-speaking residents, as well as institutions and businesses that served these communities (although these neighborhoods, as is typically for Canadian cities, are ethnically very diverse). Sponsors often found housing for the refugees they sponsored in those same neighborhoods, which helped support their initial settlement and integration. These housing solutions were not always sustainable, however. Because rents were quite

48 Maureen Brosnahan, "Refugee Housing Challenges 'Not Insurmountable,' Say Those Working to House Syrians," CBC News, March 2, 2016, www.cbc.ca/news/canada/refugee-housing-challenges-1.3412335.

49 The International Organization for Migration (IOM) usually provides pre-departure orientation for refugees about to be resettled to Canada, but this was not done during the Syrian operation due to its compressed time frame.

50 COSTI Immigrant Services, *Making Canada Home: The Syrian Refugee Resettlement Initiative Two Years after Arrival* (Toronto: COSTI Immigrant Services, 2018), www.costi.org/downloads/syriannewcomer_2018.pdf; IRCC, *Rapid Impact Evaluation of the Syrian Refugee Initiative*; Rose and Charette, *Finding Housing for the Syrian Refugee Newcomers in Canadian Cities*.

51 Alberta Association of Immigrant Serving Agencies (AAISA), *Alberta Syrian Refugee Resettlement Experience Study* (Calgary: University of Calgary and Habitus Consulting Collective Inc., 2017).

52 Rose and Charette, *Finding Housing for the Syrian Refugee Newcomers in Canadian Cities*.



high in these neighborhoods, some refugees found them unaffordable once the sponsorship agreement ended.⁵³ Moreover, not all Syrian newcomers wanted to live close to diaspora communities.⁵⁴

Although social isolation was a less prevalent issue for Syrian PSRs, those who were sponsored, and thus settled, in outer suburbs or rural areas did often face geographic isolation. While housing affordability, size, and quality may pose fewer challenges in a small community or distant suburb, passing a driver's test in English or French and buying a car are generally prerequisites for accessing employment and services in such places.⁵⁵ On the other hand, the Syrian PSRs have experienced lower health-related needs than GARs,⁵⁶ which makes resettlement in smaller localities without specialized health resources a more feasible option. However, travel to language classes and employment training can be problematic and can lead some to move to larger communities at the end of the sponsorship period.

At the regional level, refugees' constitutionally protected freedom of movement can have unforeseen consequences if they move in the early months after settlement. During the Syrian refugee operation, there were reported instances of GARs moving from Toronto to mid-size cities (such as Hamilton or Windsor, Ontario) or to smaller cities as a coping strategy to reduce housing costs in the first few months after arrival.⁵⁷ In such cases, the refugee's RAP file is transferred to the appropriate RAP provider in the new location. But if the numbers of refugees relocating at the same time are substantial, this can increase demand for settlement services, such as language training, beyond what the government planned and allocated resources for, which can lead to growing waiting lists for services in these cities.

IV. Policy and Public Responses in Canada

Even in Canada's most challenging housing markets, all of the Syrian GAR newcomers resettled during the 2015–16 operation were moved into permanent housing within a few months, and in many other cases, much sooner. This was the result of both the extensive coordination conducted by RAP providers with key stakeholders prior to refugees' arrival, as well as the unusually high level of additional support offered by volunteers, private landlords and homeowners, foundations, and private companies. Placing Syrian refugees into suitable housing as quickly as possible genuinely became an all-of-Canada endeavor.

A. Extensive Pre-Arrival Planning and Stakeholder Coordination

Housing was a major component of city-level advance planning for the arrival of the first 25,000 Syrian refugee newcomers. Planning networks included newcomer-serving organizations and municipal and

53 Catherine Solyom, "Sponsors Face the Challenges of Settling Syrian Refugees," *Montreal Gazette*, February 25, 2016, <https://montrealgazette.com/news/sponsors-face-the-challenges-of-settling-syrian-refugees>; Marie-Jeanne Blain et al., "Private Sponsorship of Syrian Refugees: Sponsors and Refugees Perspectives in Quebec," in *A National Project: Canada's Syrian Refugee Resettlement Experience*, eds. Luisa Veronis, Leah Hamilton, and Margaret Walton-Roberts (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, forthcoming); Doug Schmidt, "Syrian Wave: Refugees Share Stories of Building New Lives in Windsor," *Windsor Star*, May 13, 2018, <https://windsorstar.com/news/local-news/syrian-stories-refugees-building-new-lives-in-windsor>.

54 AAISA, *Alberta Syrian Refugee Resettlement Experience Study*.

55 Steven Farber et al., "Transportation Barriers to Syrian Newcomer Participation and Settlement in Durham Region," *Journal of Transport Geography* 68 (2018): 181-192.

56 By definition, GARs and BVORs are higher-needs cases referred by UNHCR, while PSRs are nominated by sponsor groups and do not have to meet UNHCR criteria as long as they are in "refugee-like situations." See Government of Canada, *Canada Country Chapters*. See also IRCC, *Syrian Outcomes Report* (Ottawa: IRCC, 2019), <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/ircc/documents/pdf/english/corporate/reports-statistics/evaluations/syria-outcomes-report-may-2019.pdf>.

57 Samantha Craggs, "Wesley Reaching out to Syrian Refugees Who Moved from Toronto to Hamilton," CBC News – Hamilton, March 16, 2016, www.cbc.ca/news/canada/hamilton/headlines/wesley-reaching-out-to-syrian-refugees-who-moved-from-toronto-to-hamilton-1.3494475.



provincial representatives (sometimes under the auspices of an existing local planning partnership, such as Canada's Local Immigration Partnership model).⁵⁸ Several interview-based studies have underscored that the determination to meet the challenges of the Syrian operation generated an unprecedented degree of intergovernmental, intersectoral, and multi-scalar cooperation, beginning at the advance planning stage, and that this was crucial to the capacity of service organizations to find housing and react to contingencies once the newcomers began to arrive.⁵⁹ These partnerships were particularly effective where major private landlords, as well as social housing providers, were invited to participate. As previously mentioned, RAP providers have established practices of cultivating contacts with sympathetic local landlords and maintaining lists of suitable rental vacancies. Nevertheless, the speed and scale of the Syrian resettlement operation and the prevalence of large families required them to expand their inventories (sometimes even connecting adjoining smaller apartments) and to work out favorable rental arrangements.

RAP staff attribute their success in securing housing primarily to their partnerships with private landlords and, in a few cases, with nonprofit housing providers.

The extraordinary buy-in by private landlords willing to assist in making suitable housing available and affordable to the Syrian newcomers played a major role in bridging the housing affordability gap for GARs in the early months of settlement. And in fact, RAP staff attribute their success in securing housing primarily to their partnerships with private landlords and, in a few cases, with nonprofit housing providers.⁶⁰ RAP providers not only leveraged their existing contacts, they also reached out to new stakeholders ahead of the first arrivals to increase their housing inventory.⁶¹ There was a limit to what could be done pre-arrival, however. RAP providers could not, for example, reserve private units before the refugees arrived, due to uncertainty about the timing of refugees' arrival and their first RAP allowance payments.

In some cities, pre-arrival planning allowed RAP providers to secure social housing for some of their neediest clients, though this was rare overall due to the length of most social housing wait lists.⁶² RAP staff engaged in intense outreach to provincial and municipal social housing representatives, which increased their awareness and understanding of refugees' housing needs.

58 Blair T. Cullen and Margaret Walton-Roberts, "The Role of Local Immigration Partnerships in Syrian Refugee Resettlement in Waterloo Region, Ontario," *The Canadian Geographer / Le Géographe canadien* 63, no. 3 (Fall 2019): 374–90; Huyen Dam and Sarah V. Wayland, "Syrian Refugee Resettlement: A Case Study of Local Response in Hamilton, Ontario," *The Canadian Geographer / Le Géographe canadien* 63, no. 3 (Fall 2019): 360–73; Luisa Veronis, "Building Intersectoral Partnerships as Place-Based Strategy for Immigrant and Refugee (Re)settlement: The Ottawa Local Immigration Partnership," *The Canadian Geographer / Le Géographe canadien* 63, no. 3 (Fall 2019): 391–404.

59 Rose and Charette, *Finding Housing for the Syrian Refugee Newcomers in Canadian Cities*; Ottawa Syrian Refugee Research Initiative, *The Arrival and Settlement of Syrian Refugees in Ottawa: System Response, Lessons Learned, and Future Directions* (Ottawa: Ottawa Local Immigration Partnership, 2017), <http://olip-plio.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Syria-Report-1.pdf>; Access Alliance Multicultural Health & Community Services, *Refugee Health and Resettlement: Lessons Learned from the Syrian Response* (Toronto: Access Alliance Multicultural Health & Community Services, 2017), https://accessalliance.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/SyrianResettlement_ResearchHighlightsReport_2017-4.pdf.

60 Rose and Charette, *Finding Housing for the Syrian Refugee Newcomers in Canadian Cities*; Cheryl Mahaffy, *Lessons from the Influx: How Edmonton Welcomed Refugees from Syria... and What We Are Learning as They Strive to Put Down Roots* (Edmonton: Edmonton Chamber of Voluntary Organizations, 2018), <https://ecvo.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Lessons-from-the-Influx-Final-Report-june-2-Web.pdf>.

61 Rose and Charette, *Finding Housing for the Syrian Refugee Newcomers in Canadian Cities*.

62 This included some large cities (such as Vancouver) and some small ones (Saint John, NB). See Rose and Charette, *Finding Housing for the Syrian Refugee Newcomers in Canadian Cities*.



B. Voluntary and Private Support

The broader upsurge of volunteer offers and private-sector goodwill and support for the Syrian refugee resettlement effort was unprecedented, according to RAP providers and other newcomer-serving organizations.⁶³ Much of this was expressed in terms of offers of assistance to make the first permanent housing affordable, suitable, and welcoming. There were numerous instances of private landlords and property management corporations, for example, offering temporary rent reductions to refugee newcomers—PSRs as well as GARs—in response to calls for support made by newcomer-serving organizations and municipalities.⁶⁴

In several cities, municipalities and nonprofit organizations, with the aid of donated technical expertise, set up online housing portals to help refugees and sponsor groups in their housing search. These platforms helped coordinate the numerous offers of housing from small landlords and private individuals not previously involved in housing refugee newcomers. In the early days of the operation, when the general public had limited information about refugee profiles and needs, many of the offers were unsuitable: units were either too small for large families, or only available for short-term rental. With improved matching, the portals generated significant new sources of housing, and sometimes provided refugees with opportunities to live in neighborhoods that have not traditionally been places of newcomer settlement.⁶⁵

Support also came from businesses. Some offered financial assistance to individual homeowners who wanted to support refugee resettlement. A credit union in Vancouver, for example, offered an interest-free seven-year loan of up to \$50,000 to their members to renovate suites in their homes for a newly arrived refugee, either privately sponsored or government assisted. While the program was developed as a response to the Syrian crisis, it was available to all refugees and remains active, which has helped to expand the availability of affordable rentals for refugees in middle-income suburban neighborhoods.⁶⁶ Various private-sector organizations also provided matching funds for local community foundations, newcomer-serving organizations, and volunteer groups fundraising for the Syrian resettlement effort. Often, such funds were used to help supply household furnishings and “welcome packages” of household supplies.

The federal government drew on the philanthropic spirit of large corporations that had shown an interest in assisting with the Syrian resettlement effort to address the housing affordability gap.⁶⁷ To do so, the Minister for Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship initiated negotiations to rapidly set up a Welcome Fund for Syrian Refugees, which was funded with large corporate donations and managed and disbursed by Community Foundations of Canada (a nationwide network of foundations) on a city-

63 Access Alliance Multicultural Health & Community Services, *Refugee Health and Resettlement*; Rose and Charette, *Finding Housing for the Syrian Refugee Newcomers in Canadian Cities*.

64 Andrea Huncair, “Boardwalk Promises Reduced Rents for Syrian Refugees,” CBC News - Edmonton, November 18, 2015, www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/boardwalk-promises-reduced-rents-for-syrian-refugees-1.3323698; Nicholas Keung, “So Many Lending a Hand to Help House Syrian Refugees,” *Toronto Star*, February 7, 2016, www.thestar.com/news/immigration/2016/02/07/so-many-lending-a-hand-to-help-house-syrian-refugees.html; Marieke Walsh, “Halifax Developers Donate Apartments to Syrian Refugees,” *Global News*, January 4, 2016, <https://globalnews.ca/news/2432741/halifax-developers-donate-apartments-to-syrian-refugees/>; Affan Chowdhry, “Sponsors Seeking Homes for Syrian Refugees Instead Find Closed Doors,” *Globe and Mail*, January 8, 2019, www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/sponsors-seeking-homes-for-syrian-refugees-instead-find-closed-doors/article28094994/; Jeff Bell, “Victoria’s ‘Fantastic’ Act of Generosity Aids Soon-to-Arrive Refugees,” *Victoria Times-Colonist*, February 27, 2016, www.timescolonist.com/news/local/victoria-s-fantastic-act-of-generosity-aids-soon-to-arrive-refugees-1.2186068.

65 Amanda Choo and Nicole Watson, “Finding Housing: Leveraging New Technologies in Refugee Resettlement,” in *19th National Metropolis Conference* (Montreal: City of Toronto and Wood Green Community Services, 2017).

66 Brian Morton, “Vancity to Offer Interest-Free Loans for Upgrades to House Syrian Refugees,” *Vancouver Sun*, February 12, 2015, www.vancouversun.com/Vancity+offer+interest+free+loans+upgrades+house+Syrian+refugees/11559796/story.html.

67 The minister responsible for the Syrian operation at the time, John McCallum, had close contacts and credibility with some of the lynchpins of Canadian corporate enterprise on account of previous work at one of the country’s major financial institutions.



by-city basis.⁶⁸ In many cities, the RAP organization made use of these funds to create temporary rent supplements for the Syrian refugees in the highest need (among them, large families waiting for their Child Benefit, single people, and people with disabilities who needed special housing adaptations).

While the Welcome Fund and other new initiatives for Syrian refugees proved to be very helpful for meeting the affordability gap in the short term, they also created ethical dilemmas and issues of fairness since refugees from other countries were often not eligible for such assistance. The Welcome Fund, for example, allowed the government to bridge the housing affordability gap for Syrian refugees without raising the housing component of income support for GARs higher than provincial social assistance rates—a move the Minister for Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship feared would undermine public support for the Syrian resettlement operation.⁶⁹ But the result was that, while Syrian GARs received critical financial support to reduce their rents to a more affordable level, other refugees continued to face a serious affordability gap. Moreover, although the Canadian government classified the Syrian GARs as urgent and high-needs cases under Canada's UNHCR commitments, resettlement staff found it difficult if not impossible to explain and justify offering different levels of housing assistance within their client base.⁷⁰

While Syrian GARs received critical financial support to reduce their rents to a more affordable level, other refugees continued to face a serious affordability gap.

In addition, the Welcome Fund subsidies were only available to GARs, although sponsor groups supporting PSRs were not always in a robust financial position themselves.⁷¹ This meant that some sponsors were not able to bridge the affordability gap with their own resources, having only planned to support the PSRs at the prescribed level of financial aid, which turned out to be insufficient. Moreover,

- 68 Brosnahan, "Refugee Housing Challenges 'Not Insurmountable'"; Community Foundations of Canada, "Toronto Receives \$750,000 from Welcome Fund for Syrian Refugees," CISION, May 24, 2016, www.newswire.ca/news-releases/toronto-receives-750000-from-welcome-fund-for-syrian-refugees-580653391.html; Teviah Moro, "Wesley Receives \$250K to Subsidize Housing for Syrian Refugees in Hamilton," *Hamilton Spectator*, April 11, 2016, www.thespec.com/news-story/6470179-wesley-receives-250k-to-subsidize-housing-for-syrian-refugees-in-hamilton/; Jacquie Miller, "Syrian Refugees in Ottawa to Receive Rent Subsidies," *Ottawa Sun*, May 5, 2016, <https://ottawasun.com/2016/05/05/syrian-refugees-in-ottawa-to-receive-rent-subsidies/wcm/0a20d970-3031-4a31-80a4-6fee21b58330>; Sara Lyons, "Rolling out the Welcome Fund for Syrian Refugees in Canadian Communities," Community Foundations of Canada, June 20, 2016, www.communityfoundations.ca/rolling-out-the-welcome-fund-for-syrian-refugees-in-canadian-communities/.
- 69 Susana Mas, "John McCallum Cautions against Putting Syrian Refugees 'ahead of the Queue,'" CBC News - Politics, January 13, 2016, www.cbc.ca/news/politics/john-mccallum-cautions-against-putting-syrian-refugees-ahead-of-the-queue-1.3402085; Speech by John McCallum, Minister of Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship, "Forum on Welcoming Syrian Refugees to Canada," Rideau Hall, Ottawa, December 1, 2015, www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/video/forum-welcoming-syrian-refugees-canada.html; Kathleen Harris, "1st Flight of Syrian Refugees to Arrive by Military Aircraft Thursday," CBC News - Politics, December 09, 2015, www.cbc.ca/news/politics/mccallum-update-syrian-refugee-flights-1.3356906.
- 70 Rose and Charette, *Finding Housing for the Syrian Refugee Newcomers in Canadian Cities*; Ottawa Syrian Refugee Research Initiative, *The Arrival and Settlement of Syrian Refugees in Ottawa*; Access Alliance Multicultural Health & Community Services, *Refugee Health and Resettlement*.
- 71 Agincourt Community Services Association (ACSA), *Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, Federal Government's Initiative to Resettle Syrian Refugees to Canada* (Ottawa: Parliament of Canada, House of Commons, 2016), www.ourcommons.ca/Committees/en/PACP/StudyActivity?studyActivityId=9794260; Sandeep Kumar Agrawal, "Canadian Refugee Sponsorship Programs: Experience of Syrian Refugees in Alberta, Canada," *Journal of International Migration and Integration* (online 2018): 1-22; Anne-Louise Despatie, "Des parrains de réfugiés syriens débordés dans la région de Montréal," Radio-Canada - Grand Montréal, February 16, 2016, <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/767586/refugies-syriens-parrainage-problemes-organismes-montreal-laval>.



many were new to the sponsorship process and inexperienced in navigating private rental markets, and sometimes had difficulty finding sympathetic landlords.⁷²

The upsurge of voluntary initiatives also posed unanticipated challenges for RAP providers. One challenge was managing the sheer volume and diversity of the offers of help, which required human resources not funded under the program. Another was how to integrate volunteers into established structures and protocols—particularly important when working with vulnerable populations, such as refugees—without crossing boundaries between volunteer work and professional responsibilities. At the same time, RAP providers have voiced a strong belief that the upsurge of volunteer support was the greatest strength of the Syrian resettlement initiative. In some cities, for example, the housing-search teams within RAP providers drew on volunteers’ neighborhood-specific knowledge in mentoring refugee newcomers on their housing choices, a promising practice that matches volunteers’ unique expertise with professional oversight.⁷³

While voluntary and private initiatives were thus critical in temporarily filling the gap between housing need and supply, on their own they are not a sustainable long-term solution to the housing problem. Large corporations’ philanthropic interests and priorities, and the resources they are willing to commit to them, may change or fluctuate over time. Moreover, the reach of these initiatives may not extend to helping refugee groups whose stories are less widely covered by the media or are viewed as less compelling by donors, leading to a tiered system where some groups receive more support than others.

C. Fostering Connections at the Neighborhood Level

Over and beyond their RAP-funded settlement work, RAP providers and other newcomer-serving organizations also made use of programs funded by IRCC under the Settlement Program (see Section II.B.) during the Syrian operation. These include the Community Connections program and various provincially or municipally funded programs that aim to foster newcomer integration, including by helping refugees build familiarity with their neighborhood and the wider city and understand aspects of Canadian culture and lifestyle. Volunteer contributions are encouraged under such programs and were very forthcoming for the Syrian refugee operation.

In some cases, cities also added to the modest public transportation subsidy included in refugees’ RAP benefits, so that all family members could afford to access services and become more familiar with their new city. In a few cities (such as Calgary, AB and Saint John, NB), several dozen Syrian newcomer families were placed into the same rental complex on account of local circumstances that meant these housing units, which were affordable and of suitable size, could not be passed over, even though housing-search workers would ideally have preferred slightly smaller groupings of refugees spread over a greater number of neighborhoods so as to facilitate contact with a range of host-community

72 Chowdhry, “Sponsors Seeking Homes for Syrian Refugees”; Samantha Craggs, “Some Hamilton Landlords Won’t Rent to Syrian Refugees, Volunteers Say,” CBC News - Hamilton, December 1, 2015, www.cbc.ca/news/canada/hamilton/headlines/some-hamilton-landlords-won-t-rent-to-syrian-refugees-volunteers-say-1.3345508; Despatie, “Des parrains de réfugiés syriens débordés dans la région de Montréal.” Conversely, the goodwill of sponsors could sometimes have unintended consequences, if the group settled the refugee family into a house with rent that would be beyond the family’s capacity to pay on their own once the sponsorship agreement ran out.

73 Rose and Charette, *Finding Housing for the Syrian Refugee Newcomers in Canadian Cities*.



organizations.⁷⁴ In such instances, newcomer support organizations worked intensively to ensure the development of links between refugees and the wider local community.⁷⁵

D. Expanding Destinations

During the Syrian operation, the federal government added seven new cities to the RAP program, most of them small cities, in order to ease housing pressures in the largest destinations, Toronto and Vancouver. This was done only after careful assessment of the local settlement infrastructure's capacity to provide services for refugees. Consideration was also given to employment opportunities for low- and semi-skilled workers, which in some cases included agricultural/food-processing operations.⁷⁶ In these new smaller centers, finding suitable housing, notably for large families, was often, although not always, less of a challenge.

V. Conclusions and Recommendations

In a number of cities, the challenges of the Syrian operation stretched the resources of RAP providers' housing placement staff—already strained by the combination of rising rents and changing GAR profiles⁷⁷—to their limits.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, even in the most challenging housing markets, all Syrian newcomers were settled into permanent housing within a few months, and even sooner in many cases. The outpouring of practical assistance and financial support from different segments of local civil society, volunteers, and housing providers, as well as greater networking and collaboration between newcomer-serving organizations and landlords and housing providers were all crucial ingredients in this success. These challenges were also catalysts for strengthening interorganizational and intersectoral information sharing and collaboration, as exemplified by municipalities co-organizing housing portals. And they have led to new thinking about how to most effectively mobilize volunteer support.

Follow-up surveys with Syrian GARs two years into their settlement in Toronto and Vancouver (the most expensive housing markets and the cities that received the most GARs) underscore the long-term positive impacts of settlement workers' efforts to find suitable first permanent housing: a large majority of respondents were still living in that first housing, primarily because they are satisfied with the unit and the neighborhood, including its accessibility to services. Yet affordability problems remain a frequent concern, since employment was not yet the main source of income for the majority

74 Taylor Lambert, "Little Syria: How 30 Refugee Families Came to Find Forest Lawn as Their New Home," *Calgary Herald*, November 29, 2016, <http://calgaryherald.com/life/swerve/little-syria-how-30-refugee-families-came-to-find-forest-lawn-as-their-new-home>; Colleen Underwood, "Design and Makeup of 'Little Syria' Ideal for Resettlement, Says Calgary-Based Researcher," *CBC News - Calgary*, July 6, 2018, www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/calgary-little-syria-community-1.4736017.

75 In one well-documented case in the small city of St. John, New Brunswick, activities to assist in learning English were delivered on-site and residents were encouraged to join neighborhood improvement committees. The outcome was better social integration of the housing complex into the neighborhood than before the Syrians arrived, as well as social economy employment for Syrian women. See Kate Wallace, "They Call It Syria Town," *The Deep Magazine*, 2017, <https://thedeepmag.ca/syriatown>; Rose and Charette, *Finding Housing for the Syrian Refugee Newcomers in Canadian Cities*.

76 CIC, *Funding Guidelines: National Call for Proposals*; Adel Haleem, "Syrian Refugees: Leamington to Welcome 125 Newcomers over Next Year," *CBC News - Windsor*, March 4, 2016, www.cbc.ca/news/canada/windsor/syrian-refugees-leamington-to-welcome-125-newcomers-over-next-year-1.3475324.

77 CIC, *Evaluation of Government Assisted Refugees (GAR)*; Sherrell and Immigrant Services Society of British Columbia, *At Home in Surrey?*

78 Rose and Charette, *Finding Housing for the Syrian Refugee Newcomers in Canadian Cities*; Ottawa Syrian Refugee Research Initiative, *The Arrival and Settlement of Syrian Refugees in Ottawa*.



of households, whose adult members were often still enrolled in professional or vocational retraining courses, language classes, and/or working part-time.⁷⁹

While the Syrian resettlement operation can be viewed as a success, it offers several lessons for how housing can be improved for future refugee cohorts in Canada and other resettlement countries. The following are recommendations for how to put the lessons of Canada's Syrian operation into practice.

A. Invest in Sustaining Multisector Cooperation

The multisector and intergovernmental housing task forces that were set up across Canada during the Syrian operation should be made a permanent part of local settlement infrastructure. Permanent housing task forces that include private landlords and social housing providers would help to ensure that the unprecedented level of cooperation developed during the Syrian operation in city after city is sustainable and can be reactivated in an intensified form as needed for future major resettlement operations. Better cooperation would also improve the housing assistance provided to refugee newcomers during "normal" times. Likewise, the infrastructure and the knowhow built up through the creation of housing portals to collate pledges of donated housing not only hold great, ongoing practical value but can also serve as an important symbol of public-private collaboration at the local community level.

B. Support Private Sponsors

While research and evaluations have been conducted on how government-assisted refugees are connected with housing after arrival in Canada, less is known about the housing-search process for privately sponsored refugees. For example, research is still needed into what help private sponsors sought and received from experienced newcomer-settlement organizations, and into the quality of the housing help sponsors provided to PSRs. This could shed light on whether outcomes vary depending on the type of sponsor. For example, large faith-based or other community organizations that have sponsorship experience are much more likely to have developed relationships with housing providers than small groups of individual citizens. Sponsors' income likely also plays a role in the assistance they are able to provide: a group of middle-class individuals may well have the resources to expend far more than government guidelines so as to cover the rent of suitable housing. By contrast, some who sponsor extended family or a distant relative may lack the expertise or connections to find high-quality housing and/or have limited means to do so. The prior experience of sponsors and the extent to which new sponsors receive mentoring likely also come into play.⁸⁰

A small percentage of sponsorship agreements break down due to sponsors insufficiently understanding or being unable to meet their support commitments due to unforeseen financial circumstances. This no doubt happened in a few instances in the sponsorship of Syrian refugees.⁸¹ In spite of the limited data as to the housing outcomes of PSRs, it is clear that sponsors need to receive systematic and sustained assistance in navigating local private housing markets.

79 COSTI Immigrant Services, *Making Canada Home*; Immigrant Services Society of British Columbia, *Syrian Refugee Operation to BC: Taking Stock Two Years After Arrival* (Vancouver: Immigrant Services Society of British Columbia, 2018), <https://issbc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/ISSofBC-Report-Operation-Syrian-Refugees-to-BC-Taking-Stock-Two-Years-After-Arrival.pdf>.

80 Agrawal, "Canadian Refugee Sponsorship Programs."

81 Testimony of Emily Woods, Sponsorship Program Officer, Action Réfugiés Montréal, before the Canadian House of Commons, Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, 42nd Parliament, 1st Session, May 31, 2016, www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42-1/CIMM/meeting-16/evidence; Agrawal, "Canadian Refugee Sponsorship Programs."



C. Improve Information Transmission

The timely sharing of information about the family and health profiles of arriving refugees is crucial for local actors working to develop effective processes for matching refugee newcomers with suitable permanent housing, so as to minimize the length of their stay in hotels or other temporary accommodations. Especially in the early weeks of the intense ramp-up of the Syrian resettlement operation, the limited communication between overseas processing offices, the Operations Branch of IRCC in Ottawa, and RAP providers in each city made this type of advance planning difficult.

The Canadian experience with the Syrian operation also underscores the importance of providing refugees preparing for settlement in a new country with clear and accurate basic information about that country's housing system. Doing so is a critical tool for helping refugees develop realistic expectations about their future housing (that it will be basic) and aspirations (that it is normal and very possible to move to better housing later on in the settlement process). Normally, Canada contracts with IOM to ensure that refugees receive this pre-arrival training, and the government's own evaluation of the Syrian operation (when this training did not take place due to time constraints) concluded that this step should not be skipped in future large-scale resettlement operations.⁸²

D. Increase and Diversify the Affordable Rental Housing Stock

The housing aspect of the Syrian resettlement operation exposed a shortcoming in the rental housing supply in many of the cities where refugees were resettled: very limited options for large and multigenerational families. Apartments or townhouses with several bedrooms are scarce in neighborhoods that are accessible to services in large cities. Developers need to be incentivized to provide more of this type of stock, but improving the housing supply for large and complex families has not thus far been addressed in the roll-out of Canada's National Housing Strategy, launched in 2017. There are a few examples of nonprofit housing organizations obtaining funds to create small-scale housing developments designed for large families and offered to newcomers, integrating these developments into existing neighborhoods and social environments.⁸³

The lack of diversity in the rental stock, with limited options for a range of household and family configurations, as well as the broader chronic shortages of affordable rental housing, limits the resilience of cities when they are called on to contribute to major humanitarian resettlement operations. Addressing these housing supply issues would contribute to building this resiliency, while also improving housing options for other low-income Canadians and those who live in multigenerational households.⁸⁴

Additionally, because small cities and towns are more likely to have houses of an appropriate size and cost for newcomers, there may be merit to considering how to take advantage of this housing stock more systematically. This may include finding innovative ways to overcome the service barriers that often prevent resettlement in these locations.

82 This evaluation was informed by consultations with resettlement workers. See IRCC, *Rapid Impact Evaluation of the Syrian Refugee Initiative*.

83 Sharon Crowther, "Church Land Redeveloped as Net-Zero Homes for Refugee Families," *Globe and Mail*, December 12, 2017, www.theglobeandmail.com/real-estate/calgary-and-edmonton/church-land-redeveloped-as-net-zero-homes-for-refugeefamilies/article37196392/.

84 Ren Thomas, "Viewing Immigrants' Neighbourhood and Housing Choices through the Lens of Community Resilience," *Sapiens* 6, no. 1 (2013), <https://journals.openedition.org/sapiens/1516>.



E. Resolve the Gap between Income Support and Housing Costs

Perhaps above all, the challenges of finding permanent housing for refugee newcomers in the midst of a more generalized scarcity of affordable rental housing underscore that resettlement decisions should not be approached separately from the policies that determine what happens to refugees after they arrive. Rather, making an international commitment to resettling refugees with dignity needs to include measures that enable newcomers to find affordable housing—regardless of household size and whether they can rapidly become self-supporting through employment.

For the Syrian operation, the Canadian government worked out a stopgap solution for the most critical situations by counting on private-sector goodwill toward Syrian refugees. But such ethno-specific, targeted measures create ethical dilemmas as different groups of refugees receive different levels of assistance, and they may not be sustainable in the long run. There is a clear need for “mainstreamed” solutions that will assist low-income households in general. These include an increase in the supply of social housing and increases in the social assistance benefit levels to which refugee support allowances are calibrated. Since it rarely takes less than a year for refugee newcomers to reach a level of employment income high enough to pay for acceptable market housing without cutting into their budget for other essentials, it seems paradoxical to set their support allowance at the level of “aid of last resort.” Increases in minimum wage levels would also benefit the many refugee newcomers who enter the labor market in low-level service-sector positions, sometimes because these jobs correspond to their skill sets, but very often because their professional credentials are not recognized or their official language skills are not yet sufficient.

Ethno-specific, targeted measures create ethical dilemmas as different groups of refugees receive different levels of assistance, and they may not be sustainable in the long run.



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About the Author



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Dr. Rose was actively involved for more than 15 years in the Montreal center and national network of the Metropolis Project on immigration and integration in cities, where she led and contributed to studies on immigrant and refugee housing issues, in collaboration with government and community partners. She is on the executive committee of the Building Migrant Resilience in Cities research partnership, a project of the Social Science and Humanities Research Council, and is co-researcher in a study of the settlement experiences of asylum seekers in Quebec who crossed the border irregularly in 2017–18. She has also authored a chapter (with Alexandra Charette) in the book *A National Project: Canada's Syrian Refugee Resettlement Experience*, edited by Leah Hamilton, Luisa Veronis, and Margaret Walton-Roberts and to be published in 2020 by McGill-Queen's University Press.

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