

Executive Summary

The political instability in Somalia has caused a mass exodus of Somali refugees in to neighbouring African countries and smaller numbers to countries such as Canada. Since 1988, the Immigration and Refugee Board reports that over 16, 596 Somali refugee claimants have entered Canada. As Somali refugee claimants settle in Canadian urban centres and become housing consumers, their need to secure temporary and permanent housing is urgent. Access to affordable and stable housing is an essential component of resettlement because stable housing may alleviate social inequality. Without an address it becomes difficult to apply for employment, language training and social assistance. Limited financial resources confines the majority of Somalis to the lower end of the rental housing market. Focusing on the housing resettlement of 28 Somali refugee claimants in Ottawa-Carleton rental housing market, this research examines the rental market conditions in Ottawa-Carleton, their behaviour used to secure housing and their housing outcome.

Research Method

Existing literature on low income housing consumers, housing search and immigrant and housing issues defined the theoretical framework of this research. Key informant interviews established the current housing situation in Ottawa-Carleton and identified the main housing issues apparent among both Somali refugees and lower income groups in Ottawa-Carleton. Together, a review of the literature and the key informants interviews guided the focus of the interview schedule used with the Somali participants. In-depth interviews with 28 Somali refugees identified the main issues of housing resettlement among Somali refugee claimants in Ottawa-Carleton. The sampling technique involved a non-probability sample which utilized a member of the Somali

community who assisted with participant selection. In order to minimize intrusion and maximize trust, a member of the Somali community acted as a liaison and assisted with language interpretation at each interview.

Research Findings

Interviews with the Somali participants demonstrated that while on the one hand the housing experience of Somali refugees have some similarities to low income housing consumers, on the other hand, they face an additional set of factors. Language, race, ethnicity, refugee status, inexperience with the Canadian housing market and the need to integrate in Canadian society pose an additional set of constraints on the housing resettlement of refugees. The following outlines the significant findings of this research.

1. Ottawa-Carleton Rental Market

Since the arrival of Somalis in the late 1980's, the rental market vacancy rates have remained below three percent, making it difficult for new households to enter. Market rents in the Downtown and Sandy Hill are significantly higher than for housing in the outlying areas of Nepean, Gloucester and Kanata. This helps to explain the settlement of Somalis in the suburban areas of Ottawa-Carleton. As renters of housing, Somalis are expected to comply to market practises such as the signing of a tenancy agreement, the provision of security deposits, co-signers, personal information and references. For some Somali renters, the compliance to these practises proves to be difficult. For example, having never rented housing in Canada, it is difficult for Somalis to provide references and co-signers. Arriving as a refugee may mean that the individual does not have the necessary personal information required by landlords.

2. Temporary and Permanent Housing

Arriving in Ottawa-Carleton, the majority of Somalis double-up with family or friends on a temporary basis. Approximately, 62.5 percent lived in extremely overcrowded temporary housing; occupancy ratios varied from three to seven people per bedroom. Large households with more than five people are particularly vulnerable to overcrowding in temporary housing which exacerbates an already precarious lifestyle.

Prior to 1991, refugee claimants were not eligible for subsidized housing and were therefore limited to renting in the private rental market. After 1991, the Ministry of Housing changed the qualifications so that refugee claimants could also apply. There are approximately 21100 subsidized units provided by various subsidized housing providers in Ottawa-Carleton. Similar to other applicants, Somalis are put on a waiting list and may have to wait several years before being accepted.

3. The Search for Housing

Arriving in Ottawa-Carleton, the majority of Somali refugees stayed with family or friends while looking for permanent housing. It was evident that larger households spend shorter periods doubling-up with family or friends. On the other hand, smaller households are able to spend longer periods of time doubling-up with family and friends before forming independent households and looking for their own place to live. Households with five or more people spent an average of 17.3 days with family and friends. On the other hand, households with less than four people spent an average of 37.8 days doubling-up with other Somalis.

As Somali refugees arrive in Ottawa-Carleton, they are pushed to find a place to live in the rental housing market. Coping with trauma, fear and a transitional lifestyle, refugees arrive in Canada in a state of uncertainty and therefore are desperate to settle. Lack of experience with the Canadian housing market combined with a desperation for security and stability, Somali refugees settle for any place that is shelter. Proximity to

shopping, school and transportation does not shape the decision making process during the search for first permanent housing. Rather the concern to be safe and settled is more pressing. As Somali refugees gain experience in the rental housing market, their ability to access housing improves and their housing needs change.

4. Factors Affecting the Search for Housing

Similar to other groups who search for housing, several factors affect the ability of Somali refugees to secure housing in the Ottawa-Carleton housing market. The main factors include housing affordability, limited financial resources, language, limited knowledge of the housing market and discrimination. The lack of affordable housing options, limited financial resources and discrimination limit the number of housing choices available to Somali households. Consequently, as low income housing consumers, many Somali households are forced to rent run-down housing in the lower end of the housing market. While language, transportation and limited knowledge of the housing market pose some challenges, they can usually be overcome by the assistance of others through the informal social network.

5. Coping Mechanisms with the Market

The most significant research finding documents the informal social network established in the Somali community to assist others with meeting housing needs. Somalis have informally organized a network used to assist fellow Somalis with language translation, the provision of temporary accommodation, assistance with the search for housing and with the negotiation with the landlord. In addition, prominent members of the Somali community, who are financially secure, are willing to assist others by co-signing rental agreements. The establishment of this system of mutual support provides assistance to those in need, allowing the Somali community to empower themselves and take control of their own housing needs.

Other coping strategies include borrowing money from family and friends to provide rent deposits; pooling financial resources together to overcome the minimum income requirements; and doubling up to afford adequate housing. Large households are particularly affected by the limited number of four and five bedroom housing units, forcing them to rent smaller units or pay more than they can reasonably afford. They cope by reporting a smaller household size, yet risk possible eviction for lying.

6. *Housing Outcome*

As low income housing consumers, many Somalis rent run-down housing which often takes up more of their income than they can afford. While the majority of Somali refugees did not encounter landlords who charge 'key money', many are squeezed to pay for repairs, sometimes resulting from previous tenants. High housing costs are a major concern among Somali refugees. Given that 61 percent of participants spend over forty percent of their income on shelter, many Somalis find it difficult to afford other necessities such as food and clothing. Doubling-up to afford shelter leads to overcrowded housing among many Somalis. Of the 77.8 percent of the participants who lived with more than one person per bedroom, 23.8 percent of participants lived in housing with more than two people per bedroom.

Issues of Planning and Recommendations

As refugees continue to become consumers of housing in Canadian urban centres, it is important for planners to understand the changing needs of the Canadian population so that these diverse needs are reflected through the provision of urban services. Derived from this research, several recommendations can be incorporated into the process of planning.

- Formalizing the community development and self-help approach within the Somali community will insure that assistance is provided to those in need.

Support could involve the establishment of a community co-signer project so that access to cosigners is increased, therefore also increasing available housing options.

- Recognizing that the housing needs of immigrant households vary by size and the demand for four and five bedroom units is high, planners can work toward increasing the number of four and five bedroom units available in the rental market. These units could be converted into smaller units should the demand shift in the future.
- Given that integration is a two-way process involving the acceptance of immigrants by mainstream Canadians, it is important to increase cultural awareness and understanding. Education could be targeted at landlords so that they better understand tenants.
- Increase avenues of communication and the provision of information about housing to refugee groups.
- Housing is one of several important aspects of the resettlement process. Therefore, research initiatives which examine other aspects of the settlement process are important in creating a holistic picture of the entire process.

As Canadian cities continue to become more and more culturally and socially diverse, planners must reflect the changing needs of the urban populations through plans and policies. In both the rental and ownership market, the demand for housing from immigrant groups is significant. This research can yield insight into the housing resettlement of other refugee groups because other refugee groups, who are poor, have limited resources and experience in Canada, lack English language skills and are from a racial or ethnic minority group may encounter similar barriers in the rental housing market. This research adds to the existing body of literature on the settlement experience

of newcomers in Canadian cities and therefore can be used by planners so that the needs of immigrants are reflected through the planning process.