A BMRC RESEARCH DIGEST
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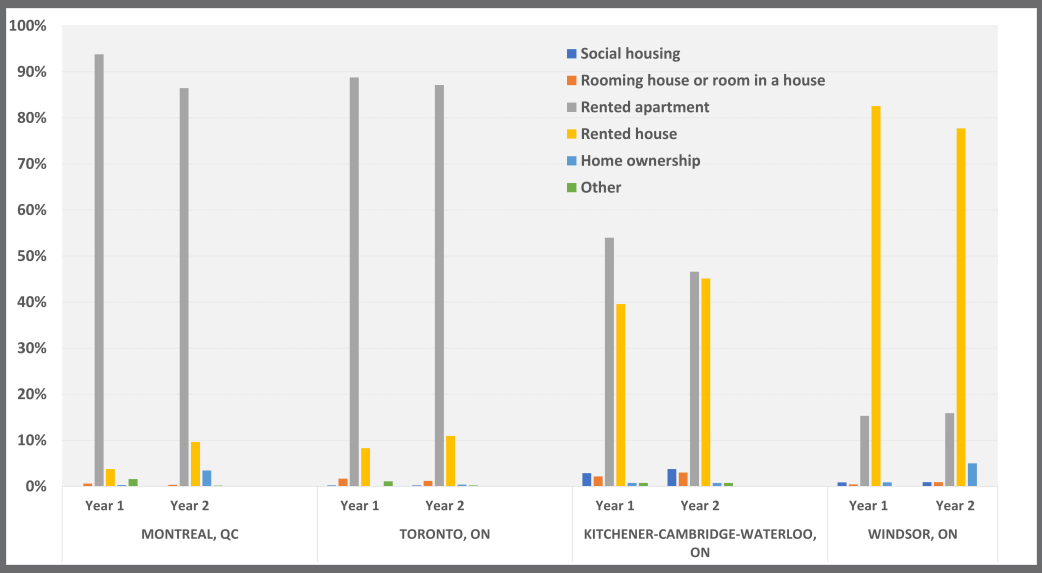
Resettled Syrian Refugees' Housing Transitions:

The Early Years in Canada



Transitions in housing type during the first two years of Syrian refugees' settlement

What you need to know

We know that finding affordable and suitable housing is one of the keys to a successful settlement experience, while improving one's housing over time is a marker of social integration. The Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada, 2001-2005, showed that resettled refugees' housing situations improved over the first four years after arrival, but more slowly than those of other newcomers. Given Canada's current housing crisis, it is important to document recent housing experiences of refugees.

What is this research about?

The Syria Long-Term Health project (Syria.lth) longitudinal survey of the 2015-2016 Syrian refugee cohort focuses on their health and its socioeconomic determinants. It includes several housing-related indicators that allow us to update knowledge about the housing progress of refugee newcomers over time in different Canadian cities. The study allows us to know more about how Syrian refugees found their housing, if they received any help to do so, the condition of their housing, and why they might have decided to move.

How was the research carried out?

The Syrian Refugee Integration Long-Term Health outcomes project (Syria.lth) is a multi-province (QC, ON, BC), multi-site (Montreal, Toronto, Kitchener-Waterloo, Windsor, Vancouver, and Okanagan) longitudinal study exploring the health, well-being, and social integration pathways for Government-Assisted Refugees (GARs) and Privately-Sponsored Refugees (PSRs). Annual surveys (2017-2020, 5th wave in 2024) were conducted in Arabic with resettled adult Syrian refugees who arrived between Jan 2015 and April 2017. Community recruitment led to 1,921 people participating in the study, 14% of Syrians resettled in these cities, with remarkably high retention rates across the different waves.

What have we learned from the research?

The findings on the help received with finding housing in Year 1 reflect the preeminent roles of community organizations administering the Resettlement Assistance Program, and of family and other sponsors. In Year 2, over a quarter of respondents in Kitchener-Cambridge-Waterloo, Windsor and Montreal reported moving within their city in the past year, while only 11% in Toronto's tighter rental market reported the same. For these moves, they mostly found housing autonomously or with the help of friends, though family remained an important source in Montreal, reflecting the much greater share of family sponsorships in that city. In Year 2, for those who moved within the same city in the past year, the predominant reason was to improve their housing situation. Between Years 1 and 4, moves to a different city were very infrequent.

Rental apartment living was the predominant housing type, except in Windsor where families were more likely to find entire houses to rent - a more suitable option for the large families that predominated in the Syrian refugee cohort and in Windsor in particular. By Year 2, there are indicators of housing progress: a modest shift toward renting a house in Kitchener-Cambridge-Waterloo, Toronto, and Montreal, and even the emergence of home ownership in Windsor and Montreal. Less than 1% gained access to social housing in Years 1 and 2, except in Kitchener-Waterloo where 4% were in social housing in Year 2.

Except in Windsor and Montreal, a majority of respondents paid $1,300 or more in monthly housing costs in year 1. The size of this majority grew in year 2. Factors at play could be rent increases, the end of temporary rent subsidies offered to some of the Syrian newcomers, and improved economic circumstances enabling transition to better but more expensive housing.

How can you use this research?

Housing-related findings from the Syria.lth study complement previous qualitative research and add to the knowledge base about refugee newcomers' housing progress in the early years. Other longitudinal data sources do not include housing variables. Despite the housing challenges frequently encountered, due to large family sizes and low incomes, the survey findings reported here point to improvements as early as Year 2 (as documented in previous literature). We are now analyzing the housing data in its own right, across all 5 waves, including the trajectories leading to home ownership or remaining in the rental market by Year 7. The analysis will take into account entry category and other dimensions.

Who is leading this research?

This Research Digest was prepared by Damaris Rose (INRS), Oula Hajjar (Coordinator of the Quebec site, McGill) and Jill Hanley. Michaela Hynie (YorkU) was the PI of Syria.lth and Jill Hanley (McGill & SHERPA University Institute) was lead for the Quebec site. Please refer to the website for further information on the team: https://syrialth.apps01.yorku.ca/.

Learn more

Hanley, J., Al Mhamied, A., Cleveland, J. et al. (2018). The social networks, social support and social capital of Syrian refugees privately sponsored to settle in Montreal. Canadian Ethnic Studies, 50(2), 123-148.