

Finding Home

Policy Options for Addressing
Homelessness in Canada

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 E-book

Chapter 5.2

Taking Care of Their Own? Or Falling Between the Cracks? Absolute and Relative Homelessness Among Immigrants, Refugees, and Refugee Claimants in Vancouver

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In July 2002, the Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD) released its report on *Homelessness in Greater Vancouver*. The findings were alarming: the population at risk of (economic) homelessness in Greater Vancouver increased dramatically between 1991 and 1996. This increase may be attributed, in part, to worsening conditions for both renters and owners. The period between 1991 and 1996 was characterized by increasing property values and rental rates, low vacancy rates, and a decline in (real) household incomes.

The report also revealed that immigrant populations are disproportionately affected by changes in the housing market. For newcomers, the challenges faced by Canadian-born population in accessing affordable housing are compounded by both economic and social barriers. In light of the declining fortunes of immigrant households over the last decade, these barriers are insurmountable for some.

Daniel Hiebert, Silvia D'Addario, and Kathy Sherrell. Taking Care of Their Own? Or Falling Between the Cracks? Absolute and Relative Homelessness Among Immigrants, Refugees, and Refugee Claimants in Vancouver. In: Hulchanski, J. David; Campsie, Philippa; Chau, Shirley; Hwang, Stephen; Paradis, Emily (eds.) *Finding Home: Policy Options for Addressing Homelessness in Canada* (e-book), Chapter 5.2. Toronto: Cities Centre, University of Toronto. www.homelesshub.ca/FindingHome

We undertook this study to examine the extent and profile of absolute and relative homelessness among immigrants, refugees, and refugee claimants in the GVRD. There is little systematic knowledge on this topic, partly because marginalized populations are poorly recorded in key data sources. Basic social surveys, such as the census, do not necessarily include all groups. Members of some groups, including Aboriginal people, may refuse to acknowledge the census. Others, including those without shelter, can easily fall below the notice of census enumerators.

In conducting this study, we sought to:

1. generate basic knowledge, and if possible a realistic estimate, of the number of immigrants, refugees, and refugee claimants experiencing relative or absolute homelessness in the Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD);
2. understand the degree to which these communities provide in-group assistance to homeless individuals and families;
3. understand the ways that service organizations (NGOs) provide assistance to homeless individuals and families.

We defined homelessness broadly as a spectrum of conditions that ranges across the following categories:

- Housing stress: households spending more than 30 percent of their income on shelter.
- Critical housing stress: households spending more than 50 percent of their income on shelter.
- Relative homelessness: individuals or households who are in temporary accommodations, such as “sofa surfing” or “camping out” with family members or friends.
- Absolute homelessness: individuals or households who are in shelters or, worse, living without shelter.

Method

In light of the complexities in defining and enumerating homelessness, we adopted an evidence-based, multiple-points-of-contact study design, combining both qualitative and quantitative methods. The project was composed of three sub-studies, each of which highlights a particular aspect of homelessness.

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The first sub-study focused on the immigrant and refugee populations using emergency shelters and transition houses. This sub-study involved 12 semi-structured interviews with key informants from emergency shelters and second-stage transition houses in the GVRD; and the compilation and analysis of data collected by shelter personnel over seven 24-hour periods between October and December 2004. In total, we received 261 completed shelter data collection forms.

The second sub-study explored the housing situation of refugee claimants who have recently received a positive decision enabling them to stay in Canada. Thirty-six individual interviews were conducted with successful refugee claimants (SRCs) in the GVRD. The interviews were semi-structured and explored the housing situation of claimants both before learning of the positive decision, and in the first six months since learning of it. In addition, four interviews were conducted with settlement workers. In this summary chapter, we focus particularly on the results of our interviews, since they include the voices of refugees, and provide startling insight into their experiences since arriving in Canada.

The third sub-study examined the profile and extent of relative homelessness among immigrants, refugees, and refugee claimants. We hoped to generate a basic estimate of the “sofa surfing” or “camping out” population among recent immigrants, as well as to identify in-group systems of support through questions about the provision or receipt of housing assistance. This sub-study is mainly focused on the Immigrant and Refugee Housing Survey (IRHS), conducted October 4-8, 2004. In total, we received 554 completed surveys.

The shelter study: Where immigrants are a small minority

The shelter survey conducted as part of this project reveals a sample population that is overwhelmingly English-speaking (91 percent) and Canadian-born (82 percent). Although immigrants and refugees form 38 percent of the population in Greater Vancouver, they account for only 18 percent of our respondents, and probably an even lower proportion of the total shelter population.

It was suggested that when facing a lack of secure housing, members of established ethnocultural groups stay with family or other acquaintances, instead of relying on emergency shelters. For those lacking

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secure accommodations, these networks may be tapped to provide temporary accommodations. While established ethno-cultural communities may have the ability to “take care of their own,” other groups who lack extensive social networks, including recently arrived individuals and refugee claimants, may fall through the cracks.

We also learned that almost one-quarter of the individuals staying in shelters reported some form of employment, either full-time, part-time or casual.

While some respondents in our shelter survey describe their last long-term housing as unstable (e.g., living in single-room occupancy hotels, staying with friends or family, or renting a friend’s couch), others reported having owned their last form of long-term housing. Key informants spoke of a cycle of homelessness in which people move between insecure housing and “rooflessness” on a regular basis. Low social assistance and shelter allowance rates, combined with institutional rules that limit shelter stays to no more than 30 days, produce a cycle in which whatever housing that is obtained is temporary. In the rush to obtain housing, and with limited means, clients settle in unsafe housing located in marginal and inexpensive areas of the city, perpetuating a cycle of social marginality and homelessness. Often, key informants report, these clients return to the shelter system within six months to a year.

The most frequently cited causes of homelessness were financial (e.g., job loss, eviction); substance abuse (e.g., drugs, alcohol); mental health issues; family breakdown; and physical or emotional abuse. When we combined all the immigrant categories (refugee, immigrant, permanent resident, and citizen), the three most frequently cited responses for homelessness are physical or emotional abuse, family issues, and mental health issues; while for non-immigrants, the three most frequently cited are financial crisis, substance abuse, and mental health issues.

In sum, we learned from the shelter survey that few immigrants and refugees appear to use the shelter system. We also found that despite being homeless, many respondents reported having some form of employment. Finally, shelter personnel expressed concern about the structural barriers that affect all clients, including limited shelter and transportation allowances, as well as the time limits on stays (in light of current waiting lists).

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Interview findings: Unique obstacles and social isolation

Income, rent, and making ends meet

Until they obtain employment, successful refugee claimants depend on basic welfare provisions. All but three respondents in this study were dependant on welfare alone during the initial stages of settlement. Rental rates in Vancouver have been increasing, while the basic welfare allowance has not, leading to a critical affordability problem. Unless people share accommodations, refugee claimants and their families can rarely, if ever, afford larger units. During the initial settlement stages, 32 out of 36 refugee claimants found themselves spending between 50 and 74 percent of their income on housing in the initial settlement phase, and 4 respondents spent more than 75 percent.

We heard many stories about particularly difficult circumstances. For example, Ali arrived in Canada by himself in 2003 from Afghanistan. At the airport, Ali's appendix burst and he was rushed to the hospital and underwent emergency surgery. Without any knowledge of the medical system or social support, Ali was charged medical fees and was required to take antibiotics after his surgery which cost him well over \$200 a month. After one month of staying in Canada, Ali received his first welfare check totalling \$500. He found housing with a friend and they each paid \$350 a month in rent. Ali's medical expenses exceeded the \$150 that he had left over after paying his share of rent. In addition, Ali spoke of shrapnel wounds that he had endured during the war. He said that for months he required medical attention that he just could not afford. With no money left over, Ali said that he went hungry and thirsty for months. He stated that he had fainted several times owing to starvation and dehydration.

Finding work

Gaining entrance into Vancouver's labour market has been a trying and emotionally difficult experience for many interviewees. While some decided to wait and upgrade their language and education, those who sought work were stymied. The greatest barrier and point of frustration

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for those who had searched for work has been employers' expectation of Canadian work experience.

For example, Paulo, a 51-year-old man from Mexico, had been a very successful businessman in his country and had worked in film production and within the media for over 25 years. In addition, he had taught related subject matter at a university. Despite his training, skills, and excellent English, Paulo was unable to attain work after his arrival here in 2000. He said that he was discriminated against because he did not have Canadian experience in his professional field. However, when Paulo attempted to look for low-skilled work in the local cafés, he reported that he was then discriminated against for being too old and overqualified. Paulo spent years volunteering in a variety of places in order to attain Canadian experience. "But now I can't be a volunteer anymore, I need money. ... I don't have time to be a volunteer. I need a job, a real job. So the housing could be a problem for me and my future." Paulo was desperate and felt he had nowhere to turn. Without employment income, his housing situation is very unstable.

While many have had to deal with a labour market that does not recognize foreign experience or skills, some have accepted downward occupational mobility in order to attain employment. Of the 16 claimants who possess a postsecondary degree, and who had attempted to attain employment, none were able to utilize their education, either in a practical application or in order to obtain a skilled job.

Language barriers

Lack of fluency in English also proved to be a significant barrier inhibiting access to adequate housing for refugee claimants. Only 5 of the 36 participants had arrived in Canada with fluent skills in English.

Ten claimants spoke about the issue of discrimination spontaneously. Of particular concern were issues of social insurance tagging, welfare discrimination, and a widespread reluctance of many landlords to rent to households with children.

All the respondents reported that there was little, if any, support offered upon entry to Canada and in the subsequent days after arrival. Claimants said they experienced feelings of confusion and fear upon arrival and in all cases, they were left on their own. A young woman from

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Albania noted, “[The Immigration officers] make it clear to you that this is what their responsibilities are and where they end and so you are on your own from that point on.”

Five respondents arrived at the airport in Vancouver with French-language skills. These claimants were surprised that, upon arrival in a bilingual, French-English speaking country, there was no one who could communicate with them. The participants said that there was no one at the airport who spoke French, and that this made the refugee claim process much more difficult. A 25-year old male from Togo told us, “When I came here I could hardly speak any English... [the language] was difficult. The worker started to ask me a bunch of question and I can’t speak English. I tried to speak, I asked if they speak French, and they didn’t know. I got so angry.”

Arrival

Participants were also asked, “Where did you stay the first night you arrived in Canada?” For several claimants, the first night – and in some cases the first several nights – were spent at the airport. Some were detained for lack of documentation, while others spent the first night at the airport because they had no other place to go to and were unable to find proper accommodations that first night. For example, one respondent from Nigeria arrived in Vancouver in 2003. She was eight months pregnant and accompanied by two children, aged one and four. She recalled her experience with the immigration officers. “They said that I had to go... I said, ‘Where do you want me to go?’ [The officer] said, ‘Anywhere.’ ... [I said] ‘I don’t know anywhere...you have to tell me.’ I [asked] if I can sleep on the floor. She said yes. So I slept on the floor... I am pregnant.”

Another woman from Congo had a similar experience. On her first night in Vancouver, eight months pregnant, she said, “I had to sleep on the chair, because I don’t know where I am.”

When discussing her first few days in Canada, one woman from Albania expressed her frustration over the lack of support during such a trying time. “There are too many processes going on at the same time: you have find a house, you have report to immigration, you have to find a lawyer, you have to do your welfare papers, you have to go do immi-

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gration exam ... and then you have to go apply for the work permit and then you have to go apply for social insurance number and then you have to go and apply for a job, and then your hearing comes and ... it's too many things to do at the same time ... And you only have 20 days to do everything and what if you don't have your lawyer at that time? And what if the lawyer asks for too much money and you don't have the time to collect all of that money?"

The initial settlement period was trying for all of the participants. A single mother from Sri Lanka expressed the gender differences and cultural considerations that are sometimes overlooked. She stated, "Guys, they can go around and get the information, but ladies, in our country, we are taught that it is scary and especially because we don't know the language and we cannot trust anybody, so we cannot find the information right away."

One settlement worker reflected on the capabilities of settlement agencies to provide initial information on housing to claimants. He stated, "Unfortunately, the situation for a lot of settlement workers is that we don't have that many resources to offer in terms of housing. We can't say to our clients, 'By the way, there is this specific way where you go to get all of the information and they will help and give you assistance and inform you about housing and where to go.' There is no such thing. [Housing] is an area that the settlement sector has not put that much attention to, and it's the key thing from the beginning."

Social networks

Only one participant had arrived to Canada with a family member who was already established here in Vancouver. All 35 claimants arrived without any pre-existing social networks. Settling in a new country without any social support can make the housing situation for newcomers even more difficult. One settlement counsellor stated, "If they are very honest and tell them that they are a refugee claimant, then most probably the landlord won't rent a place to them first. They don't know much about refugee claimants. In their mind it's always someone very desperate, no job, maybe experienced violence in their home country or their personality is unknown and also they don't have networks here, so

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if anything happens they have no other sources to help these tenants. Stigmatization is very serious.”

Although the claimants did not have anyone to assist them in the first few days after arrival, some claimants did manage to tap into “ethnic resources.” One settlement counsellor noted, “[Claimants] will turn to people that seem familiar to them. Familiarity. If they speak their language then they will approach them ... people who look like their group ... they are looking for a face or words that will lead them to a place.”

A 29-year old female from Sri Lanka recounted that she felt the safest approaching someone from her own ethnic group. “On bus I met some Sri Lankan Sinhalese lady, my language. She said, ‘Do you know about Inland Refugee Society, they help refugees. Go and talk to them...’ Then I go and I try to find them, but it was difficult. We don’t know any information, especially BC housing, we don’t know anything.”

A 32-year old man from Cameroon was able to find housing by networking with other refugees and African migrants. “I met this friend from Liberia. Then I spoke to him that I was looking for accommodations. In fact I was with one African guy that just came at the same time. So we were both looking for accommodation. So we happen to meet this guy who is from Liberia, then that’s when he invited me to meet [a settlement worker] at church with the possibility of how I can get accommodation.”

Another settlement worker credited the settlement of claimants to their creative survival methods. He said, “They have been so creative, they develop these kinds of networks amongst themselves ... they start talking about living in such a place and they know the landlord now ... so it helps, but it also brings its own problems because people end up being in places that aren’t necessarily the best.”

While discussing his observations in dealing with refugee claimants, another settlement worker asserted, “The more supported a refugee claimant is, not only with housing, but with relationships ... they have the support they need to pull it off and they settle in more quickly, generally find jobs more quickly. Refugee claimants are totally disconnected.”

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Living conditions

Inadequate and substandard living conditions constitute a major component of relative homelessness. Although all of the claimants reported having a space in which to live, their dwellings were often of low quality. One interviewee spent many of his nights sleeping on the floor or on old mattresses that had been discarded on the street. In the second place that he stayed, he recounted, "Until that time we didn't have blankets, we were sleeping on the floor ... we didn't have anything until four or five months we were sleeping on the floor. We had no pillows, no mattress ... nothing. We didn't even have cups, we were drinking water out of our hands."

A prominent housing outcome for many refugee claimants was overcrowding. A number of problems led to "doubling up" strategies in order to access rental units in Vancouver. Vacancy rates for larger accommodations are higher, but so are prices. Therefore, newcomers are forced to seek out smaller and more affordable accommodations. This quotation is representative of many: "It was just a one bedroom and it was very hard for us; my son needs a bedroom and also me and my husband need one bedroom ... for our culture it is very important for our child. My son got the bedroom and me and my husband sleep in the living room. It was really, really, really hard time."

A male claimant from Sri Lanka has lived in six units since his arrival, and he is currently searching for his seventh. He commented on the crowded conditions of a one-bedroom suite that he lived in for six months. "The whole house was filled with beds, like two beds in the room and one bed on the outside." In addition to crowding, claimants also mentioned substandard conditions, describing much of these places as dirty, smelly, and requiring upgrades.

Owing to financial constraints, claimants are settling in areas that have low rental rates or are compromised in quality. Alongside low-income and cheap housing complexes are also crime, drug abuse and prostitution.

This issue can be seen in the experience of a family from Nigeria. Nia was eight months pregnant and had two small children with her. Her husband Joseph was not able to reunite with them until several

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months later. Nia and the children spent their first month in an emergency shelter. She said that, "The [emergency shelter] was very dirty and there was a lot of smoke, marijuana ... the smoke come inside, it was mouldy and the kids were getting a lot of problems." Nia was very concerned about the health and safety of her children while living at the shelter. Once Joseph arrived in Canada, the family was able to move into BC housing in the Downtown Eastside. The move out of the emergency shelter and into more stable housing did not increase feelings of safety for this family. Both parents are still quite concerned for the wellbeing of their children. Joseph said, "We are so much worried about our own children. When we take them out, there are the drunks and drug addicted... it is not a good place." In response to concern for their children's safety, the couple applied for a transfer. They reported being told that a transfer is only possible after having lived in the housing complex for more than one year.

A 43-year-old female claimant from Russia commented, "Safety is always jeopardized, especially for the refugee claimant. Canadian, well-educated intelligent women tried to use me as a free housecleaner, babysitter ... they don't care; [she says] I kick you from the country. And guys are always looking for how to use women. And no one cares."

A place in Chinatown

The refugee claimants who have come from China told us an important and unique story. While many claimants discuss one or a combination of the above factors (crowding, substandard conditions, and safety), the claimants from China speak of a housing situation that includes all of these factors in an alarming combination. Six of the seven claimants from China found their first accommodations in Chinatown, and all six still reside in this area of the Downtown Eastside.

As newcomers to the country, they arrived alone, without any financial resources or English skills. Without any knowledge of the housing market, all six found themselves wandering the streets. Several Chinese claimants relied on the advice of strangers, which led them to seek accommodations in Chinatown. The respondents said that once they arrived in Chinatown, they were all able to find somewhere to sleep; all

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five claimants found themselves in similar rundown accommodations that are geared towards newcomers from China.

The interpreter/settlement worker acknowledged one specific hotel as the same place that nearly all of her refugee clients from China find themselves. According to these six participants, the conditions here were nothing short of horrendous. A male claimant aged 49 from China gave these details, "Things there are in a mess ... there were cockroaches everywhere. But the rent was cheap. There were a lot of seniors living there; they are dirty and have a lot of personal belongings, so things are in a mess. A lot of cockroaches. Dirty, stinky."

The description of crowding varied slightly between respondents, but the image remained the same. Four of the claimants noted how this site for Chinese refugees allots one washroom and a small kitchen area for 20 to 30 people. Electricity and heating work sporadically at best. Each participant detailed the same list of unhealthy and unsanitary conditions, which include dirty, smelly, infested rooms.

In the Downtown Eastside, safety is also a major factor. A female claimant from China, age 65, became very emotional during the interview as she discussed her first reaction to living in Chinatown. "First, it's very noisy. Second there is drug trading inside the hotel and some people using drugs and there is different mixture of people living there like refugee claimants, very low-income people, or long-term residents and there is a gambling room for people to go gambling."

This woman stated how unsafe she felt in an environment where there was rampant drug use and dealing as well as illegal gambling. She still resides in Chinatown five years after her arrival. All six of the claimants who have lived or are still living in Chinatown felt compelled to reside in this precarious environment primarily because they cannot see any other option. Without the ability to speak English, and without information or how to learn English, these claimants felt that there was no other way to communicate with others or even perform basic tasks such as shopping for groceries, unless they were in a culturally homogenous environment. Chinatown provided a familiar environment during a very daunting and unstable period. Financial constraints are also a key factor in the clustering of claimants in Chinatown. The participants all quoted the same rental rate of \$325 per month and all were restricted to the wel-

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fare allowance of \$510 per month. Spending more than 50 percent of their income on housing, these five were all in critical housing need.

One settlement counsellor who works with Chinese claimants was asked about the settlement patterns of her clients. She discussed Chinatown as a likely starting point for claimants who are new to Vancouver. She stated, "These refugee claimants don't have many resources to look for other places, and... the landlords don't like to rent a place to refugee claimants, so they are stuck in a hotel in Chinatown and the living condition is very bad. I heard from my clients that there are mice, and people break in and steal their stuff and also the facilities, shared kitchen and shared bathroom and very it's noisy and also people are gambling ... so the whole environment is not very healthy."

The vulnerability associated with refugee status, as well as the barriers faced by all immigrants, results in a high degree of homelessness in one form or another. The situation is more extreme for claimants, who face deeper levels of deprivation than the average immigrant; most claimants depend on welfare rates that are far below the poverty line.

In sum, we learned that refugee claimants face unique obstacles that are symptomatic of their immigration class. By virtue of their means of entry, claimants have a greater disadvantage in the housing and labour markets. Furthermore, there is a discrepancy between what refugee claimants are receiving in basic aid, and the average cost of renting an apartment in Vancouver. In addition, the vacancy rates for smaller, more affordable accommodations are particularly low. Inadequate and sub-standard living conditions, overcrowding and safety concerns represent three major components of relative homeless among SRCs.

Finally, claimants tend to be socially isolated. The minimal levels of financial, documented human, and social capital of individuals in this group is associated with extreme vulnerability to homelessness. The situation is quite different for those immigrants and refugees who have access to social networks and support systems.

Survey findings: Giving and receiving assistance

The IRHS was intended to be a representative sample of all clients who sought the services of immigrant and refugee-serving agencies on either a phone-in or an in-person basis during the week of October 4-8, 2004.

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Sixty-four percent of our respondents were female. Although respondents came from 61 countries, 52 percent of the respondents were born in 4 countries: China (19.1 percent), India (13.2 percent), South Korea (10.5 percent), and Iran (9.2 percent).

Many of the respondents who have arrived within one year are located outside the traditional immigrant receiving areas (the east side of the City of Vancouver).

Thirty percent of respondents reported their status as being Canadian citizens, 60 percent are Permanent Residents (they arrived as either Economic Immigrants or through the Family Class), 5 percent are Government Assisted Refugees (GARs) and 5 percent are refugee claimants. Those who arrived as immigrants were more likely to be geographically dispersed than those who arrived as refugees/claimants.

Although 90 percent of survey respondents report having some form of housing, 7.5 percent were living in what could be considered temporary or unstable living conditions (e.g., staying with friends or family, living in single-room-occupancy hotels, or emergency shelters) over the three-month period directly preceding the survey.

Twenty-eight percent of respondents in the IRHS are receiving some form of help with housing, while 15 percent of the respondents who are not receiving help indicate that they have provided assistance to someone other than their parents or children. Almost one-quarter of those receiving help were staying with friends and family. Almost half (44 percent) of those who are receiving help have been in Vancouver four years or longer.

We learned from the survey that the socio-economic profile of respondents who are providing assistance does not differ significantly from those who are receiving assistance. Respondents in both groups reported high numbers of people who officially landed in Canada within the last three years, as well as living in households with no one employed. Moreover, those who are providing help often do so despite living in precarious situations. Over 61 percent of those providing assistance, for example, are in core housing need, while 25.6 percent are in critical housing stress.

We also learned that there is a disconnect between the length of time people expect they will need assistance, and the length of time peo-

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ple have provided assistance. Despite the perceived need for help over long periods, those who have provided assistance report having done so for relatively short periods of time. Finally, there is a lack of similarity between type of help received and type of help provided. Those providing assistance generally help their guests obtain housing, while those receiving assistance say that they receive help paying the rent. This point reveals the fact that our sample included few immigrants who are relatively well off.

Overall conclusions: Hidden homelessness and social capital

The phrase that has come to represent our understanding of the situation is “hidden homelessness.” This is another concept around which all three sub-components of the study converge. The SRCs in our sample tell a fairly consistent story of their first encounter with Canadian society as confusing and full of anxiety. Their initial housing experience was typically in the cheapest accommodations available, in poor residential environments. They coped by sharing rents and crowding. Nearly all continue to be dependent on social assistance and nearly all are in situations of housing stress. But they are not “on the streets,” in large part because of their coping strategies and – in number of cases – help extended from social organizations or other members of their ethnocultural community.

The existence of bottom-up self-help was even more apparent in the survey of clients of settlement agencies. In this part of the project we found a significant sharing of resources that mainly occurs within familial networks and ethno-cultural or religious communities. About 15 percent of those using settlement services are receiving some form of housing assistance, which ranges from help locating housing, through financial help, to the provision of housing (often temporary, but occasionally long-term). Nearly all of this activity occurs “below the radar” of the Canadian welfare state. Those who are helped, in essence, are able to avoid the services of homeless shelters. Significantly, even those who are living in precarious circumstances extend whatever help they can to others in their close networks.

The findings of this project also highlight the fact that the housing situation of newcomers to Greater Vancouver is heavily influenced by

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the social capital of existing ethno-cultural communities. As a result, the extent of relative and absolute homelessness among immigrants, refugees, and refugee claimants is less than would be expected, given the income levels of these groups.

This is not to say that the delineated groups are well housed. Indeed, many individuals and families are living in crowded, substandard conditions. However, the social networks operating among immigrant, refugee, and refugee claimant communities appear to mitigate the worst forms of homelessness, and the groups of people we studied are actually underrepresented in the population using homeless shelters.

Our findings lead to several conclusions. First, our study suggests that current levels of social/shelter assistance are exceedingly low, especially in light of the lack of affordable housing. When clients settle in unsafe housing, in inexpensive and marginal areas of the city, they tend to enter a cycle of homelessness, needing help from others.

Second, help is available. The positive side of the story is the extent to which mutual aid is provided. This is a clear example of what is variously labelled “ethnic resources” or “social capital” in the academic and policy literatures.

But systems of reciprocity do not include everyone – which is our third basic finding. Refugee claimants, given the combination of their uncertain legal status, lack of language facility, and lack of familiarity with Canadian society, are the most likely of all newcomers to “fall between the cracks” of both ethnocultural communities and the welfare and housing provisions of the state.

Fourth, we re-emphasize the phrase “hidden homelessness.” Immigrants, refugees, and refugee claimants appear to be particularly susceptible to relative homelessness, so their difficulties in the housing market are essentially invisible.

Fifth, as we increasingly come to understand the fact that homelessness is a spectrum of conditions, rather than a single absolute state, it is logical that there also needs to be a spectrum of policy responses to homelessness.

Daniel Hiebert, Silvia D’Addario, and Kathy Sherrell.
5.2 Taking Care of Their Own? Or Falling Between the Cracks?
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Based on "The Profile of Absolute and Relative Homelessness Among Immigrants, Refugees, and Refugee Claimants in the GVRD: Final Report," prepared for the National Secretariat on Homelessness. The principal investigator on the project was Sherman Chan.

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