

NO: R115 COUNCIL DATE: June 29, 2009

REGULAR COUNCIL

TO: Mayor & Council **DATE: June 29, 2009**

FROM: General Manager, Planning and Development **FILE: 4815-01**

**SUBJECT: Summary of a Study Related to Refugee Housing in Surrey –
"At Home In Surrey? The Housing Experiences of Refugees in Surrey BC"**

RECOMMENDATION

The Planning and Development Department recommends that Council receive this report as information.

INTENT

The purpose of this report is to inform Council about the recommendations provided in the report entitled "*At Home in Surrey? The Housing Experiences of Refugees in Surrey, B.C.*", which is attached as Appendix I to this report.

BACKGROUND

The federal government's introduction of the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* in 2002, shifted its priority from the "ability to establish" to the "need for protection" in relation to refugees. This has resulted in significant changes to the profile of Government Assisted Refugees (GARs) arriving in Canada. Since 2003, Canada has received more "high needs" GARs, including those with low literacy, significant physical and mental health issues, larger household sizes and increased numbers of single headed households. Obtaining adequate and affordable housing represents an important first step in the settlement process for these vulnerable households.

From 2004 to 2008, approximately 1,000 newly arrived GARs, representing 295 family units, settled in Surrey. Half of these refugees are children and youth under the age of 19 years. Surrey's GAR population represents one a quarter of all GARs that have arrived in BC in this four year period.

A project was undertaken to assist the City in better understanding and supporting the settlement and integration of these newcomers. Specifically, two research questions framed the study:

1. What are the current housing needs of refugees in Surrey?
2. How are refugees being supported by settlement services and housing services/programs?

Process

In September 2008, the City of Surrey received a \$25,208 grant from BC Housing to undertake a study of the housing experiences of refugees in Surrey. The City partnered with Immigrant Services Society of BC to conduct the study, which included:

- a brief review of existing literature and other data sources;
- key informant interviews (4);
- interviews (24) and focus groups (4) with Karen and Sudanese GARs in Surrey representing 44 different households;
- a final report; and
- a one-page summary of findings translated into appropriate languages for distribution to refugee participants and participating agencies.

A project Advisory Committee was established that included representatives of the City, the School District, community agencies, the provincial government and UBC. The Advisory Committee first met in November 2008 to provide input into the research questions and process and, in March 2009, to review and give feedback on the draft final report.

At its meeting on April 23, 2009, the Social Planning Advisory Committee received a presentation from the researchers. The Committee provided feedback on the draft report and made the following recommendations to Council, which were approved by Council on May 4, 2009:

(RES.R09-775) *That:*

- (a) Council receive a presentation on the "At Home in Surrey? The Housing Experiences of Refugees in Surrey, BC" report at a Council in Committee meeting;*
- (b) Council forward a copy of the report to key stakeholders including other Metro Vancouver Mayors, Minister of Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Minister of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development, Minister of Housing and Social Development, and BC Housing; and*
- (c) Staff prepare a corporate report to Council responding to the recommendations provided within the "At Home in Surrey? The Housing Experiences of Refugees in Surrey, BC" report.*

Research Results

The results of this study indicate that the majority of GARs in Surrey live in housing that is both unaffordable and overcrowded. Most live in private rental apartment units and rely on Income Assistance, so market rental rates are generally unaffordable in comparison to the household income of a typical refugee household. Language issues and lack of knowledge mean that GARs have problems communicating with landlords and/or seeking alternative housing, including subsidized social housing. Language difficulties also create barriers for GARs in securing employment that would enable them to afford better housing. Highlights of the research include:

Income

- Most households rely on provincial Income Assistance. Only about one-third of respondents were employed; and
- Over half of respondents reported difficulties in repaying their government transportation loans. Upon arrival in Canada, GARs are asked to sign a loan document. This loan covers costs associated with transportation, pre-entry medical costs and a service fee. The repayment of these loans must commence on the first anniversary of the GARs settlement in Canada and interest begins accruing after three years.

Housing Affordability

- 23 out of 24 respondents rent in the private market;
- 15 out of 22 spend over 51% of household income on housing; and
- 7 out of 22 spend over 75% of their household income on housing.

Crowding

- The majority of respondents live in overcrowded conditions;
- 3 out of 24 are households of 4+ in a 1-bedroom apartment;
- 8 out of 24 are households of 6+ in a 2-bedroom apartment; and
- 4 out of 24 are households of 7 in a 3-bedroom.

Housing Condition

- The physical condition of housing is better than may be expected although there are problems with pests (mice, cockroaches and bedbugs) and a need for minor repairs. Refugee households have problems in having repairs completed due to language barriers.

Settlement and Housing Services

- The majority of refugees were able to access assistance with locating housing;
- Barriers to finding housing include: low incomes and high rents, large household size, and lack of knowledge; and
- Three key needs identified included the need for:
 - increased access to English language and employment skill training (pre-arrival and post-arrival);
 - Surrey-based housing settlement counsellors who can provide on-going assistance; and
 - arranging housing for GARs prior to their arrival in Canada.

Report Recommendations

The final report emanating from the study, titled "*At Home in Surrey? The Housing Experiences of Refugees in Surrey, B.C.*", includes 28 recommendations related to addressing the housing challenges experienced by GARs settling in Surrey (see pages 43-47 of Appendix I). The recommendations identify for each specific issue the level of government and/or Ministry that has responsibility and divides the recommendations into those, which may be implemented in the shorter-term and those that are likely to require a longer term for implementation. The following is a summary of the recommendations:

Citizenship and Immigration Canada

Short-term

1. Provide correct information, in first language, about linkages between the repayment of government transportation loans and the ability to obtain Canadian citizenship and/or travel documents;
2. Re-examine the initial (furniture) move-in package for GARs; and
3. Increase the number of housing search workers to provide targeted housing-related support during their first year in Canada.

Long-term

4. Cease seeking repayment of transportation and pre-entry medical costs for GARs coming to Canada;
5. Establish a national shelter rate for the Resettlement Assistance Program and provide a monthly transportation supplement;
6. Expand English and employment training (pre-arrival or in first year after arrival); and
7. Provide more accurate pre-departure information to refugees about employment and housing as well as the need to learn English.

Ministry of Housing and Social Development

Short-term

1. Arrange periodic first language information sessions for GARs to explain about housing assistance programs and assist in filling out applications;
2. Translate documents into refugee first languages (e.g. Po, Arabic, Nuer); and
3. Make the assignment to refugees of available BC Housing units a more transparent process.

Long-term

4. Build more social housing, including larger units, to alleviate waitlists;
5. Explore alternative housing delivery models (e.g. modular housing models);
6. Eliminate for refugees the one-year residency requirement for the BC-Rental Assistance Program;
7. Convert some of the existing social housing stock into larger units (e.g., by combining two 2 bedroom units); and
8. Raise the income support rates for low income, underemployed BC residents and include transportation allowances for low-income families.

Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development (Immigrant Integration Branch - IIB)

Short-term

1. Explore targeted funding for housing search settlement specialists in key cities in BC to assist refugees in locating suitable housing;
2. Fund a discussion paper exploring the feasibility of a 'Family-Host Housing Program' (FHHP) for refugees.

Long-term

3. Establish a program focused on housing and housing support similar to the Ministry's Step Ahead Program;

4. Provide funding to offset transportation costs (e.g., bus tickets) for newcomers accessing English Language Services for Adults (ELSA) classes; and
5. Provide funding for pre-employment skill-based training programs for GARs.

City of Surrey

Short-term

1. Increase education on refugee issues for municipally-funded services (e.g., libraries, fire department, police, etc.);
2. Encourage greater community understanding of the experiences of refugees and recognize refugees more directly on a regular basis;
3. Promote the Community Bridging/Host program (e.g. ISSofBC Host Program for Refugees, DIVERSEcity Host Program) to encourage volunteering to support newcomers;
4. Provide newcomers with a 'Welcome to Surrey' letter in their first language and post such a letter on the City of Surrey website; and
5. Disseminate this report to key stakeholders including other Metro Vancouver Mayors, Minister of Citizenship and Immigration Canada, BC Housing, and the Ministers of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development and Housing and Social Development.

Long-term

6. Create and distribute a Newcomers Guide to Surrey brochure;
7. Create a multilingual "Welcome to Surrey" rotating sign on the City's website; and
8. Lobby the Government of Canada to replace Government Transportation Loans for refugees with grants.

DISCUSSION

The report, "*At Home in Surrey? The Housing Experiences of Refugees in Surrey, B.C.*", contains 28 recommendations for addressing the housing challenges facing GARs in Surrey. Twenty of these recommendations relate to federal and provincial government policies and programs, and eight are actions that the City of Surrey could take to be more welcoming and supportive of GARs. Action is already underway on two of these recommendations, as follows:

- *Recommendation #5*: On May 4, 2009, Council approved the distribution of copies of the subject report to the appropriate Ministries and other stakeholders (RES. R09-775). This represents an important first step in the City's efforts to advocate on behalf of Surrey's GAR population; and
- *Recommendation #8*: The Social Planning Advisory Committee has requested that the Government Transportation Loan issue be included on the agenda of their next meeting. The Committee will advise Council of their recommendation in relation to addressing this issue.

The other six recommendations that are within the jurisdiction and authority of the City of Surrey will be considered by the Social Planning Advisory Committee and the Multicultural Advisory Committee and recommendations regarding actions that can be taken by the City will be forwarded to Council over time.

CONCLUSION

The City of Surrey continues to be a primary destination for GARs arriving in BC. These newcomers face significant challenges in overcoming past traumas and settling into a new life in Canada. With the support of a provincial grant, the City undertook a study of the housing experiences of refugees in Surrey to develop a better understanding of and to document their housing situation.

The report, "*At Home in Surrey? The Housing Experiences of Refugees in Surrey, B.C.*", which documents the results of the study, indicates that the majority of GARs live in housing that is unaffordable and overcrowded. The report's recommendations identify actions that the federal and provincial governments can take to better respond to the settlement needs of these vulnerable households. It also provides recommendations in relation to actions that the City can take to assist in ensuring a welcoming environment in Surrey for GARs.

It is recommended that Council receive this report as information.

Original signed by

Jean Lamontagne
General Manager
Planning and Development

AM/kms/saw

Attachment:

Appendix I - *At Home in Surrey? The Housing Experiences of Refugees in Surrey, B.C.*

**At Home In Surrey? The Housing Experiences of Refugees in Surrey, B.C.
Final Report**

(attached as a separate document)



At Home in Surrey
(Sherrell and ISSofBC)

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AT HOME IN SURREY?

THE HOUSING EXPERIENCES OF REFUGEES IN SURREY, B.C.

FINAL REPORT

Prepared by:

Kathy Sherrell

and

Immigrant Services Society of BC

Prepared for the

City of Surrey



APRIL 2009



Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	1
List of Tables and Figures.....	3
Acronyms.....	4
Executive Summary: At Home in Surrey?.....	5
Context and Research Questions:.....	5
Methodology.....	5
Key Findings.....	5
Recommendations.....	7
Research Questions and Context.....	9
GARs to Surrey (RAP Statistics).....	11
Methodology.....	14
Research Findings.....	16
Profile of Respondents.....	16
Assistance: Housing.....	17
Assistance: Other.....	17
Income Security: Employment and Source of Income.....	19
Income Security: Government Transportation Loans.....	21
Housing: Current Conditions.....	25
Housing: Crowding.....	27
Housing: Affordability.....	30
Housing: Moving over time.....	32
Housing: General difficulties identified in finding housing.....	33
Housing: Future moves?.....	35
Services and Programs: What would have helped?.....	36
Services and Programs: The need for information on BC Housing.....	39
Conclusions.....	41
Recommendations:.....	43
Citizenship and Immigration Canada.....	43
BC Housing [Ministry of Housing and Social Development (MHSD)].....	44
Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development (Immigrant Integration Branch - IIB).....	45
City of Surrey.....	46
Works Cited.....	48
Appendix A: Review of Existing Literature.....	50
Appendix B: Summary Data of 2004-2008 GARs by Source Country.....	55
Appendix C: Financial Assistance – RAP and MHSD.....	56

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Members of the Project Advisory Committee, led by Aileen Murphy, have provided invaluable guidance and feedback throughout the project. To each, our heartfelt thanks.

This study has been prepared for the City of Surrey through funding provided by BC Housing, Ministry of Housing and Social Development (MHSD).

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March 2009

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Dan Bottrill	City of Surrey
Judy McLeod	City of Surrey
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The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the official policy of the City of Surrey.

About the author:

Kathy Sherrell is a doctoral candidate in Geography at the University of British Columbia. Kathy has worked extensively with refugee groups in BC through both research and advocacy.

Immigrant Services Society of BC (ISS_{of}BC) is the oldest immigrant serving agency in BC. ISS_{of}BC pioneered what is now commonly referred to as “settlement services” in BC. ISS_{of}BC’s mandate is to help immigrants build a future in Canada. This is done through the provision of a wide range of programs and services that assist new immigrants and refugees through their adaptation, settlement and integration phase. Of particular relevancy to this study, all government assisted refugees destined to BC are case managed through ISS_{of}BC.

List of Tables and Figures

Tables

Table 1: Top % Countries of Origin by Year of Arrival for GARs to Surrey	13
Table 2: Age breakdown of GARs to Surrey (2004-2008).....	13
Table 3: Profile of Respondents (Individual Interviews).....	16
Table 4: Source of Income (Individual Interviews).....	19
Table 5: Housing Type (Individual Interviews).....	23
Table 6: Crowding in Units (Individual Interviews).....	27
Table 7: Average rents by size of unit	30
Table 8: Proportion of Household income devoted to housing	30
Table 9: General difficulties in finding housing	33

Figures

Figure 1: RAP Statistics for Surrey (Individual Clients)	11
Figure 2: RAP Statistics for Surrey (Family Units).....	11
Figure 3: Private Apartment Rental Rates (City of Surrey).....	30
Figure 4: Private Apartment Vacancy Rates (%).....	34

Acronyms

BC Rental Assistance Program	BC-RAP
Canada Child Tax Benefits	CCTB
Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation	CMHC
Census Metropolitan Area	CMA
Citizenship and Immigration Canada	CIC
Dissemination Area	DA
Employment Insurance	EI
English Language Services for Adults	ELSA
Frequently Asked Questions	FAQ
Government- Assisted Refugee	GAR
Greater Vancouver Regional District (now Metro Vancouver)	GVRD
Immigrant Integration Branch	IIB
Immigrant Services Society of British Columbia	ISS _{of} BC
Immigration and Refugee Protection Act	IRPA
Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada	LSIC
Metropolis BC	MBC
Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development	ALMD
Ministry of Housing and Social Development	MHSD
National Affordability Standards	NAS
National Occupancy Standards	NOS
Privately Sponsored Refugee	PSR
Refugee Claimant	RC
Resettlement Assistance Program	RAP
University of British Columbia	UBC

Executive Summary: At Home in Surrey?

Context and Research Questions:

The emergence of the City of Surrey as the primary destination for Government-Assisted Refugees (GARs) in Metro Vancouver has coincided with an overall shift in the profile of GARs arriving in BC, and Canada more broadly. GARs admitted to Canada following the 2002 implementation of the Immigrant and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA) are more likely than previous cohorts to include more 'high needs' refugees, including those with low literacy levels in their original languages, significant physical and mental health issues, as well as increased numbers of single parent headed households and larger than Canadian-average households. Further, newly-arrived GARs include an increased number of children and youth who were born and raised in refugee camps with limited exposure to formal education. As a result significant numbers of GARs are less likely to obtain employment and self-sufficiency, and more likely to rely on assistance.

This research seeks to better understand the housing experiences of refugees in the City of Surrey, BC. Two questions frame this research:

- What are the current housing needs of refugees? (e.g., What is the profile of immigrants and refugees living in Surrey? Is their current housing adequate and affordable)
- How are refugees being supported by settlement services and housing services/programs (e.g. What services are available? Are there any barriers to accessing services/ programs?).

Methodology

Following a brief review of existing literature and appropriate data sources, primary research was undertaken. Four key informant interviews were conducted with frontline and managerial workers at immigrant and refugee serving agencies, church organizations, and community representatives working with refugees in Surrey.

Twenty four (24) individual interviews and 4 focus groups, representing a total of 44 households, were undertaken with Karen and Sudanese refugees in Surrey (12 interviews and 2 focus groups with each group). In total 11 Sudanese and 11 Karen respondents participated in the focus groups. Whenever possible, attempts were made to ensure respondents chosen for focus groups and individual interviews were not from the same households.

Key Findings¹

High unemployment and increasing layoffs are prevalent among participants in both interviews and focus groups. At the time of the interview only 8 of 24 respondents were employed; three more reported having been laid off in the previous month. Employment and provincial social assistance are the two main sources of household income. Over half of respondents are

¹ Numbers and percentages provided in findings refer to individual interviews as detailed information was not collected in focus groups.

dependent on some type of government transfer (e.g. social assistance, disability, resettlement assistance program benefits).

The overwhelming majority of respondents (23/34) live in rental accommodations in the private market. While the Karen are concentrated within two complexes in the Cedar Hills area, the Sudanese are more dispersed around the Guilford Town Centre and Whalley Town Centre areas. Both groups exhibit low mobility, with 11 Karen and 6 Sudanese respondents and their families still living in their initial accommodations.

Affordability challenges are widespread, with 15 of the 22 respondents providing affordability information spending upwards of 51% of monthly household income on housing. Alarming, 7 of 22 respondents allocate over 75% of monthly household income on housing, placing them at extreme risk of absolute homelessness. Anecdotal evidence in both interviews and focus groups indicates “sofa surfing” is on the rise.

Difficulties in reconciling low incomes, whether from employment in low-paying, part-time jobs or dependence on insufficient RAP or MHSD benefits, with high rents is aggravated for many by the need to begin repaying Federal Government travel loans (incurred travelling to Canada) one year after arrival.

While the housing is in better physical condition than may be expected by previous research, almost all households are experiencing significant overcrowding (e.g. households of 4 and 5 in a one bedroom unit, or 6-8 in a two bedroom unit). Crowding may be higher even within suites, as families attempt to separate male and female youths and adults.

Barriers to finding housing include the need to reconcile low incomes and high rents, size of households, and a lack of knowledge (e.g. about how to find housing). In particular, respondents in focus groups and interviews identified a need for information about BC Housing programs, as well as the City of Surrey itself.

The ability to access assistance has been widespread among participants. In addition to ISS_{of}BC, existing ethnocultural and church organizations in Surrey have provided help with housing, employment, interpreters and the provision of household goods.

When asked to reflect on their experiences since coming to Canada and identify what would have helped, respondents identified three key needs:

- Improved access to both English language classes *and* job training classes, either pre-arrival or within the first year in Canada.
- Access to a Surrey-based housing search specialist who can provide ongoing support and locally-relevant information; and,
- Having good quality and affordable housing in safe neighbourhoods arranged prior to arrival.

The goals of this research are two-fold: to assess the current housing situations of refugees, and to explore existing supports and barriers to housing that exist in Surrey, BC. The portrait that emerges is complicated. It is one of poverty, overcrowding and barriers to housing and employment. And yet, it is one of hope in the face of these difficulties. Given the current global economic situation and downturns in the local economy, however, the future is uncertain.

The tenuous financial situations in which many respondents find themselves are currently being threatened by downturns in the economy. The tendency for respondents to be employed in construction, hospitality and service jobs places the few who are employed at risk of future layoffs or reduced hours. For those on the edge, the results could too easily become absolute homelessness.

Recommendations

Citizenship and Immigration Canada

Short-term

- (1) Provide correct information, in first language, about linkages between repayment of **government transportation loans** and ability to obtain Canadian citizenship and/or travel documents.
- (2) **Re-examine initial (furniture) move-in package for GARs.**
- (3) **Increase the number of housing search workers** to provide targeted housing related support during their first year in Canada.

Long-term

- (4) Eliminate **government transportation loans for refugees.**
- (5) **Establish a national shelter rate for the Resettlement Assistance Program.**
- (6) Expand **English and employment training** (pre-arrival or in first year after arrival).
- (7) Provide more **accurate pre-departure information** (e.g. about employment, housing).

Ministry of Housing and Social Development (MHSD)

Short-term

- (1) **Arrange periodic first language information sessions** for GARs to explain about housing assistance programs, and assist in filling out applications.
- (2) **Translate documents into appropriate languages** (e.g. Po, Arabic, Nuer).
- (3) **Make the assignment of available BC Housing units a more transparent process.**

Long-term

- (4) **Build more social housing**, including larger units, to alleviate waitlists.
- (5) Explore **alternative housing delivery models** (e.g. modular housing models).
- (6) **Eliminate the one-year residency requirement for the BC-Rental Assistance Program.**

- (7) **Convert some of the existing social housing stock into larger spaces** (e.g. by combining two 2 bedroom units).
- (8) **Raise the income support rates** for low income, underemployed BC residents. Include **transportation allowances** for low income families.

Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development (Immigrant Integration Branch - IIB)

Short-term

- (1) **Explore targeted funding for housing search settlement specialists in key cities in BC.**
- (2) Fund a **discussion paper exploring the feasibility of a ‘Family-Host Housing Program’ (FHHP).**

Long-term

- (3) Establish a program focused upon **housing and housing support** (e.g. similar to the Ministry’s Step Ahead Program).
- (4) Provide **funding to alleviate transportation costs** (e.g. bus tickets) for newcomers accessing English Language Services for Adults (ELSA) classes.
- (5) Provide **funding for pre-employment skill-based training programs** for low skilled GARs

City of Surrey

Short-term

- (1) **Increased education** on refugee issues for municipally funded services.
- (2) **Encourage greater community understanding** of the experiences of refugees.
- (3) **Promote the Community Bridging/Host program** (e.g. ISSofBC Host Program for Refugees, DIVERSEcity Host Program) to encourage volunteering to support newcomers.
- (4) Provide newcomers with a **‘Welcome to Surrey’ letter** that can be translated and given to refugee newcomers, as well as posted on the City of Surrey website.
- (5) **Disseminate this report to key stakeholders** including other Metro Vancouver Mayors, Minister of Citizenship and Immigration Canada, BC Housing, and the Ministers of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development and Housing and Social Development.

Long-term

- (6) Create and distribute a **Newcomers Guide to Surrey** brochure.
- (7) Create a multilingual “Welcome to Surrey” rotating sign on the City’s website.
- (8) Encourage Surrey’s Mayor and Council to **lobby** the Government of Canada **to eliminate Government Transportation Loans for refugees.**

Research Questions and Context

Housing affordability challenges have become pronounced over the last decade (Bunting et al. 2004; Moore and Skaburskis 2004; Murdie 2004). The concurrent rise in the number of immigrants experiencing economic disadvantage, marked by lower incomes and higher poverty levels (e.g. Picot 2004; Picot and Hou 2003) necessitates newcomers reconcile below-average incomes with above-average housing prices. Results from the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada (2005), for example, reveal that four years after arrival, refugees are the least likely of all immigrant groups to have obtained employment.

The 2002 implementation of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA) precipitated significant changes to the profile of Government Assisted Refugees (GARs) arriving in Canada owing to the shifting priority from ‘ability to establish’ to ‘need for protection’. Beginning in 2003, when the first post-IRPA GARs landed in Canada, the profile of GARs includes more ‘high needs’ refugees, including those with low literacy levels in their original languages, and significant physical and mental health issues, as well as increased numbers of single headed households, larger than Canadian-average households, and an increase number of children and youth who were born and raised in refugee camps with limited exposure to formal education. As a result significant numbers of GARs were less likely to obtain adequate employment and self-sufficiency; as such, many are more likely to rely on assistance.

Rising housing prices throughout Metro Vancouver have made Surrey an attractive destination. Twenty percent (20%) of GARs destined to BC between January 2003 and December 2006 settled in Surrey; in 2007, one in four GARs destined to Vancouver settled in Surrey (ISS_{of}BC 2007; Friesen 2008). The proclivity of newly arrived refugees to settle near co-ethnics, an important source of assistance and support (cf. D’Addario et al. 2008), has resulted in more concentrated settlement patterns among groups.² Over 35% of GARs settling in Surrey from 2003 to 2006 arrived from Myanmar and Sudan (ISS_{of}BC 2007).³ Traumatic experiences in their countries of origin, and protracted refugee situations compound the difficulties faced by newly-arrived Sudanese and Karen GARs (ISS_{of}BC 2007).

Obtaining adequate (and affordable) housing represents an important first step in the settlement process, yet without sufficient incomes, refugees and other newcomers may be forced into crowded and/or substandard living conditions. While homelessness is often equated with ‘rooflessness’ by both academics and policymakers alike, this research will begin with an understanding of homelessness as a continuum that includes both relative and absolute forms of

² Wayland (2007) argues that while challenges arising from the spatial concentration of newcomers into particular buildings or neighbourhoods have been identified (e.g. language barriers, tensions, and connectedness to wider community), this area remains under-researched.

³ The Karen refugees arrived from camps on the Thailand-Myanmar border. While official sources use Myanmar, Karen respondents were more likely to refer to the country as Burma. The report reflects these differences.

homelessness.⁴ In so doing, homelessness becomes tied to notions of residential insecurity as well as the most extreme form, the absence of housing.

Research on the housing outcomes of immigrants and refugees in Metro Vancouver has increased dramatically over the last five years.⁵ Both large scale analyses, such as the LSIC analyzed by Mendez and Hiebert (2008), and smaller scale, qualitative analyses, such as those by Sherrell (2008), Cubie (2006), McLean et al. (2006) and Francis (forthcoming) identify significant challenges among refugees in Metro Vancouver. Findings converge on three main themes:

- Refugees primarily continue to live in rental housing within the private market and display the lowest homeownership rates of all newcomers;
- Refugees are experiencing considerable affordability challenges owing to low employment participation, continued reliance on government transfers (e.g. RAP, MHSD), and/or employment in minimum wage, part-time jobs; and
- Low incomes, high rents and, for some, large household sizes have contributed to significant overcrowding problems among refugee households.

This research seeks to better understand the housing experiences of refugees in Surrey, BC. Two research questions frame this research:

- What are the current housing needs of refugees? (e.g., what is the profile of immigrants and refugees living in Surrey? What type of housing do they live in? Is their current housing adequate and affordable)
- How are refugees being supported by settlement services and housing services/programs (e.g. what services are available? Are there any barriers to accessing services/programs?).

⁴ Thus, the continuum of homelessness ranges from those in insecure, inadequate and/or unaffordable housing – whether rented or owned – to those without any shelter. Included within this group, then, are individuals who are doubling up or ‘sofa surfing’, as well as those in temporary housing and emergency shelters. With respect to affordability, however, it must be recognized that some households may choose to spend high proportions of their monthly income on housing (e.g. to live in particular areas or homes); this project examines those for whom high housing costs are not a choice.

⁵ See Appendix A for a review of existing literature.

Classes of Entry for Permanent Immigrants and Refugees to Canada

Economic immigrants
(e.g. skilled workers and professionals, business class) are admitted under the points system.

Family reunification:
Canadian citizens and permanent residents may sponsor family members (e.g. spouse, common-law partner, dependent child).

Refugees (Humanitarian)
Government assisted and Privately sponsored refugees are selected – and have their claims assessed – overseas. They arrive in Canada with the right to permanent residence (see page 14 for information on the GAR settlement process in BC).

Refugee Claimants have claimed asylum in Canada – either at a port of entry or at a CIC office – and are awaiting a decision on their claim. Upon arrival they must negotiate a complex legal process.

GARs to Surrey (RAP Statistics)

In 2008, 269 of the 814 GARs destined to British Columbia settled in Surrey.⁶ The proportion of

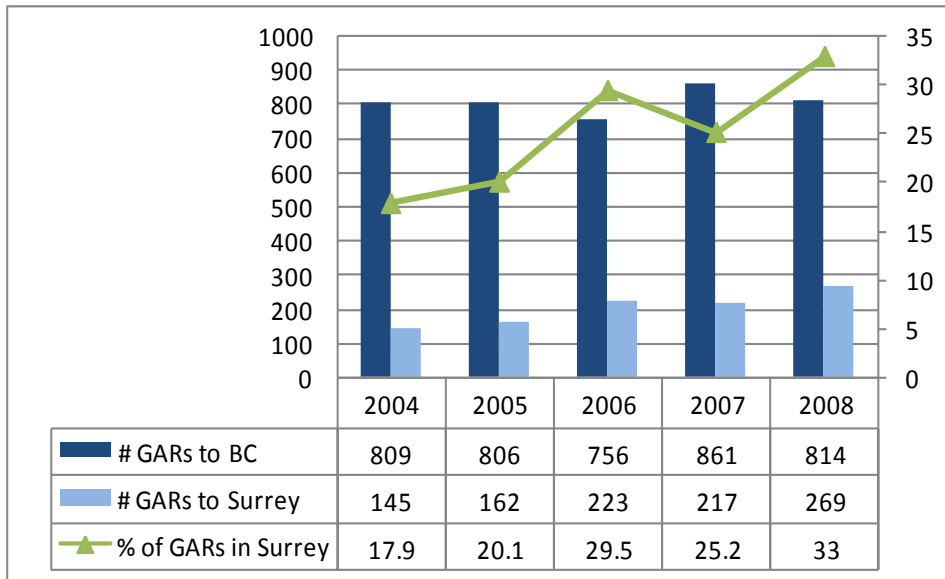


Figure 1: RAP Statistics for Surrey (Individual Clients)

GARs settling in Surrey has increased dramatically from 17.9% in 2004 to 33% in 2008.

Between 2004 and 2008, over 40 newly-arrived GAR households settle in Surrey each year. In 2006 and 2007, this number increased significantly to 80 and 78 respectively. On average, with

the exception of 2005, almost one in four GARs households destined to Metro Vancouver settles in Surrey. The proclivity for larger household sizes over the past three years is evident from comparison of the proportion of RAP clients settling in Surrey when compared by individual versus

household numbers. In each of the years from 2006-2008 the proportion of individual RAP clients settling in Surrey is higher than that of households settling in

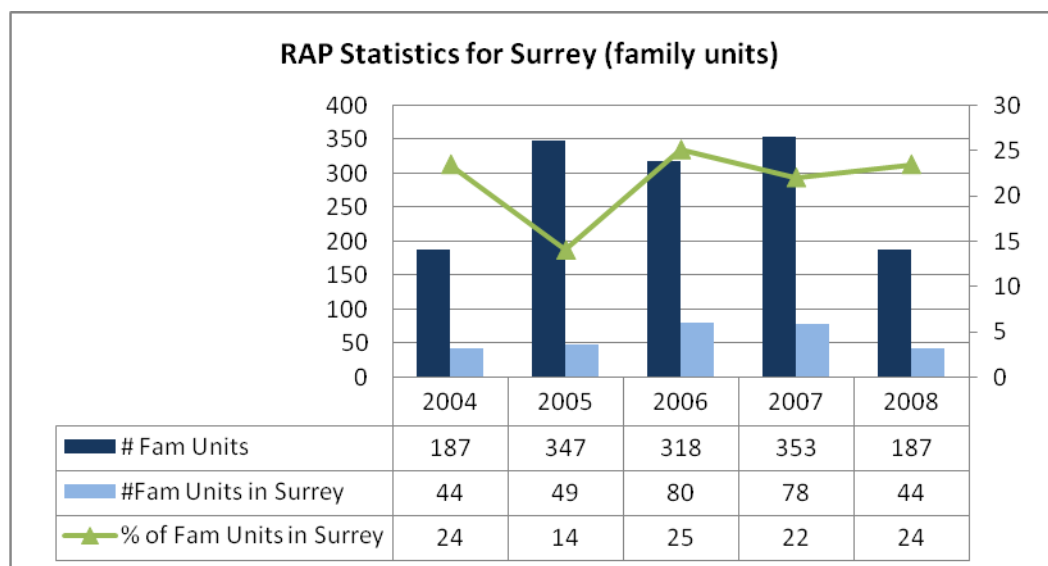


Figure 2: RAP Statistics for Surrey (Family Units)

⁶ Information on GAR arrivals is drawn from Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) Statistics collected by ISSofBC.

Surrey. The gender balance of RAP clients overall remains relatively equal. Between January 1 and December 31, 2008 over one in five RAP clients living in Surrey reported being a single parent; throughout the five year period since 2004 the proportion of RAP clients living in Surrey who are single parents has gone from a high of 25% in 2005 to a low of 13% in 2007.

With respect to country of origin, 27% of RAP clients settling in Surrey between 2004 and 2008 reported Myanmar (Burma) as their country of origin.⁷ Following Myanmar, Somalia (11.5%), Sudan (8.9%), and Afghanistan (8.9%) are the top five countries of origin for RAP clients settling in Surrey during this period. In 2006 and 2007 almost half of RAP clients in Surrey arrived from Myanmar, reflecting a decision to settle GARs from Myanmar in larger community groups. Between 2004 and 2008 African countries accounted over 40% of the countries of origin for RAP clients in Surrey. The concentration of African refugees in Surrey necessitates consideration of their housing experiences.

GAR Settlement Process

Arrival and Temporary Accommodations:

GARs are met at the airport by a settlement counsellor and taken to temporary accommodations at Welcome House, which is run by ISS of BC. A housing search coordinator assists in finding permanent housing.

Orientation:

Thirty hours of orientation, in first language, are provided through the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP), including help in filling out forms (e.g. social insurance numbers), and opening bank accounts.

RAP Funding:

GARs receive one year of financial assistance, approximately equal to provincial social assistance benefits, as well as medical and emergency dental coverage. Those who do not obtain employment during the first year may transition to provincial social assistance benefits.

Settlement Services:

GARs are eligible to access provincially funded settlement services (e.g. English language classes).

⁷ See Appendix B for summary data of 2004-2008 GARs by source country.

Top % Countries of Origin by Year of Arrival for GARs to Surrey				
2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Indonesia (15%)	Sudan (32%)	Myanmar (49%)	Myanmar (49%)	Myanmar (20.4%)
Afghanistan (14%)	Somalia (21%)	Colombia (16%)	Afghanistan (14%)	Iraq (18.6%)
Iraq (12%)	Liberia (17%)	Afghanistan (9%)	Somalia (13%)	Somalia (10.8%)
Somalia (12%)	Colombia (7%)	Liberia (6%)	Burundi (9%)	Ethiopia (10.8%)
Colombia (10%)	Afghanistan (7%)	Sudan (6%)	Colombia (3%)	DRC (8.9%)

Table 1: Top % Countries of Origin by Year of Arrival for GARs to Surrey

Half of RAP clients settling in Surrey between 2004 and 2008 are 18 years of age or younger; almost 1 in 5 are between the ages of 13 and 18. Given anecdotal evidence that GARs are heavily concentrated within two to three areas of Surrey, the impacts on schools may be profound. Further, those children arriving from protracted refugee situations may not have attended school. As such, placing children and youth in classes according to age, as opposed to ability, may increase the stresses of integration.

	2004		2005		2006		2007		2008		2004-2008	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Under 5	18	12.4	27	16.7	36	16.1	22	10.1	26	9.7	129	13
6 to 12	18	12.4	34	21	41	18.4	40	18.4	58	21.6	191	19
13 to 18	31	21.4	33	20.4	30	13.5	44	20.3	44	16.4	182	18
19 to 64	77	53.1	67	41.4	113	50.7	109	50.2	127	47.2	493	49
65 & older	1	0.7	1	0.6	3	1.3	2	0.9	5	1.9	12	1
Total:	<i>145</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>162</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>223</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>217</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>269</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>1016</i>	<i>100</i>

Table 2: Age breakdown of GARs to Surrey (2004-2008)

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to document the needs of a particular population (ie recently arrived refugees) so that the City of Surrey could better understand the issues facing the group and take appropriate actions. The need to complete the project within a specific budget (that included \$ for honoraria and translators), as well as within an 8 month period necessitated we limit the sample size. As such, the study is not intended to be statistically significant but rather to provide an in-depth case study.

This project investigates the housing experiences of refugees in Surrey, examining their current housing needs, as well as their access to settlement and housing services/programs. Following a brief review of existing literature and appropriate data sources, primary research was undertaken. The second stage of the research involved key informant interviews, as well as focus groups and individual interviews with Sudanese and Karen refugees in Surrey. All interviews and focus groups were conducted between December 2008 and February 2009.

- Key Informant Interviews

Four key informant interviews were undertaken with frontline and managerial workers at immigrant and refugee-serving agencies, church organizations, and community representatives working with refugees in Surrey. Although attempts were made to contact other organizations through email and phone messages it was not possible to make further arrangements. These semi-structured interviews were approximately one hour in length and were conducted at a time and place that was convenient to the participant. Interviews were audio-recorded to aid in data analysis.

- Individual Interviews and Focus Groups with refugees in Surrey.

Twenty-four (24) individual interviews and 4 focus groups were undertaken with Karen and Sudanese refugees in Surrey (12 interviews and 2 focus groups with each group). The target population for this project included all Sudanese and Karen refugees in Surrey. Potential participants were initially identified and contacted by settlement counsellors at ISSofBC. Once their willingness to participate was ascertained their contact information was forwarded to Kathy. Interpreters were then asked to contact participants to arrange a mutually convenient time and location for the interviews.

Karen and Sudanese settlement counsellors were asked to review the ISSofBC database and identify 24 individuals from each of the two groups who had arrived prior to 2008. A decision was made to include as many households as possible within the 48 respondents in order to provide a broader understanding of the challenges facing newcomers in Surrey. While ISSofBC makes every effort to track clients beyond the first year, challenges arose in locating those who

had moved and either failed to provide ISSofBC with a forwarding address or moved to another city and/or province.

In total, individuals from 44 of Surrey's 295 GAR households (2004-2008 arrivals) were involved which represents about 15% of all households. While it is a small sample – the results are consistent with other research findings.

Twenty-four semi structured interviews ranging from 45 minutes to one hour each were conducted with Karen and Sudanese GARs in Surrey. Information and consent forms were translated to S'Gaw and Arabic, and interpreters were provided to enable interviewees to respond in the language with which they are the most comfortable. Each participant received a \$65 honorarium to offset costs associated with participation in the project (e.g. childminding). Topics covered in the interviews included demographic information, current and past housing experiences in Canada, and settlement or housing services and programs received in Canada. Whenever possible interviews were audio-recorded. Detailed notes were compiled for each interview. Six respondents (1 Karen and 5 Sudanese) refused permission to record the interviews; more detailed notes were taken in these cases.

Four focus groups were conducted with refugees in Surrey (2 with each group). In total, eleven Sudanese and 11 Karen respondents participated in the focus groups. Whenever possible, attempts were made to ensure respondents chosen for focus groups and individual interviews were not from the same households.⁸

To facilitate access and provide a neutral space in which to meet, all focus groups were held at the Whalley Branch of the Surrey Public Library. As with the individual interviews, interpreters were provided and forms were translated into appropriate languages. Each participant received a \$65 honorarium and 2 one-zone bus tickets to offset costs associated with participation in the project.

The focus groups were two hours in length. Although the Karen focus groups were audio-recorded, neither Sudanese group provided permission for recording, so more detailed notes were taken in the Sudanese focus groups. Topics covered in the focus groups included current housing situations, problems facing refugee newcomers in Surrey, and discussion of what is needed to improve the situation.

⁸ In total, 44 households participated in the study (22 in the individual interviews, 22 in the focus groups).

Research Findings

Profile of Respondents

Individual interviews were conducted with twelve Karen and twelve Sudanese GARs living in Surrey. While all twelve Karen respondents were born in Burma (Myanmar) and listed Thailand as the country of last permanent residence (CLPR), those born in the Sudan were equally likely to have arrived via Egypt as they were Ethiopia.⁹

Attempts were made to interview Sudanese and Karen individuals who arrived in Canada as government-assisted refugees between 2002 and 2007. One individual who arrived in 2008 was interviewed. At the time of the interview, the respondent was in the process of transitioning from Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) to Ministry of Social Development and Housing (MHSD) benefits.

Karen respondents were almost equally divided between males and females, and had an average age of 42.9. While the majority of respondents were between the ages of 20 and 49, 2

	Karen	Sudanese	All Respondents
Gender:			
<i>Female</i>	5	4	9
<i>Male</i>	7	8	15
Age:			
20-29	1	6	7
30-39	3	3	6
40-49	6	1	7
50-59	-	2	2
60+	2	-	2
Average Age	42.9	34.1	38.5
Level of Education			
<i>No formal</i>	1	3	4
<i>Primary</i>	3	2	5
<i>High School</i>	8	4	12
<i>College/Post-secondary</i>	-	3	3
Year of Arrival			
2003	-	4	4
2004	-	1	1
2005	-	7	7
2006	5	-	5
2007	6	-	6
2008	1	-	1

Table 3: Profile of Respondents (Individual Interviews)

respondents reporting no formal education and 3 respondents having attended college or post-secondary education.

Three respondents, all from Sudan, report having previously lived in a Canadian city other than Surrey. Two lived in another province, one in Burnaby.

⁹ Individual data was not collected on respondents in focus groups, as such all numbers and percentages used in the report pertain to participants in the individual interviews.

respondents were over 60 years of age. Two-thirds of Karen respondents have attended high school, with many reporting having completed Grade 10. The majority of respondents arrived in 2006 and 2007.

By contrast, Sudanese respondents were more likely to report being male, 20-39 years of age and having arrived between 2003 and 2007. Educational attainment among Sudanese respondents was much more varied with 2

Assistance: Housing

All but one respondent reported receiving assistance in finding housing, a finding supported by focus group respondents. While help was most frequently obtained from ISS of BC Welcome House staff, family, friends, church organizations, and community members of similar ethno-cultural backgrounds were also important sources of information and assistance. For Sudanese respondents help was frequently obtained from members of the existing Sudanese community who, upon hearing of new Sudanese arrivals at ISS_{of}BC's Welcome House facility, go to see if they are related and offer assistance. Seven of the twelve (7 of 12) Sudanese respondents reported having received assistance in this manner. For many respondents, permanent housing was obtained through a combination of formal and informal networks.

One Sudanese respondent reported having received no assistance in finding housing. Rather he was given a map and shown how to get a bus ticket and find his way to Surrey. Once he arrived in Surrey, the respondent asked a passenger at Guildford Station how to get to Bentley Place and walked there. While this finding supports earlier research showing that English-speaking (African) GARs are often given a map and left to find housing on their own (*cf.* Francis forthcoming) follow-up questioning revealed that staff at ISS_{of}BC's Welcome House facility had in fact arranged housing for him. The lack of accompaniment to Surrey to finalize the process (e.g. signing the lease, paying the damage deposit), however, had left the respondent feeling as though he had received no help. Although the respondent spoke English, the lack of familiarity with Canada, Surrey, and the housing search process was overwhelming. This particular example raises important questions about assistance in finding housing for newcomers. While identifying and arranging housing is one aspect of housing assistance, the lack of accompaniment may cause great stress for some respondents.

Assistance: Other

The majority of respondents reported having been able to access assistance from ISS_{of}BC's Welcome House staff, church groups, family, friends and members of their ethno-cultural community. Help received has been varied and includes the provision of general information (e.g. housing, services, etc; 11 Karen and 5 Sudanese); transportation (8 Karen and 7 Sudanese); assistance with interpretation and translating documents (11 Karen and 1 Sudanese); and assistance and/or accompaniment to medical appointments and hospital visits (5 Karen and 4 Sudanese). Two respondents (1 Karen, 1 Sudanese) reported having been put in contact with volunteers in Surrey who have provided assistance over the course of their first 2 years post-arrival (e.g. clothing, accompaniment, household goods). In both cases respondents spoke of the ongoing assistance as being integral to settlement.

Karens were more likely to have reported receiving assistance from family or ISSofBC's Welcome House staff, while Sudanese were more likely to have reporting receiving assistance from family or finding housing on their own.¹⁰ Five respondents reported having found their own housing, either by perusing newspapers or walking around. The significance of assistance, and in some cases advocacy, in finding housing was underscored by one member of the advisory committee who spoke of a family of 11 who experienced great difficulties in obtaining housing. Though unable to access BC Housing owing to the size of their household, a settlement counsellor advocating on their behalf was successful in having BC Housing agree to pay half towards the rent of a single house for the family.

¹⁰ In part, differences in assistance received by Sudanese and Karen respondents may result from changes made in the provision of settlement services. Beginning in 2006, increased federal funding has dramatically transformed the level and type of services provided to immigrants and refugees in BC. ELSA waitlists have been reduced or eliminated altogether, and new pilot projects have been introduced (e.g. pre-literacy). While the Karen may have benefitted from access to enhanced services, the Sudanese arrived before these changes were implemented.

Income Security: Employment and Source of Income

Fifteen of the twenty-four (15 of 24) respondents reported having worked at some time since coming to Canada. Although they have arrived more recently than the Sudanese respondents, the Karen were almost as likely to report having worked since their arrival in Canada (7 Karen, 8 Sudanese). While it is not possible to determine reasons for the more rapid employment of Karen respondents, they may have benefited from increased funding to programs such as the Employment Outreach Workers at ISSofBC. Previous research has indicated that Employment Outreach counsellors have worked extensively with Karen GARs to facilitate employment for groups of refugees (e.g. where one English-speaking Karen may help to communicate and/or supervise other non-English speaking workers).

The transition from Federal RAP benefits to provincial social assistance benefits through the Ministry of Social Development and Housing (MHSD) at the end of the first year was identified as being traumatic. Though they are expected to obtain work as quickly as possible while receiving MHSD benefits, lack of English language abilities and job training makes it a difficult task to accomplish. Consequently, many spoke of having had to be referred to employment and or English classes once they transitioned to the more structured case management associated with MHSD. For some, it was their first exposure to ESLA training, having elected not to pursue English language classes during their first year post-arrival.¹¹

Limited English language proficiency, lack of Canadian experience, and unfamiliarity with Canadian job market are all major barriers to employment for respondents, a finding that confirms previous research (cf. Sherrell 2008, Cubie 2006; McLean et al. 2006). Many respondents believe that if their English skills improve they will be able to obtain better employment, and have enough money to pay for food or rent. Further, those who obtain employment assert that those without English language skills get the blame when things go wrong, regardless of whether or not they are involved.

At present, however, the employment situation is bleak: 3 Karen and 5 Sudanese interview respondents were employed at the time of this research. Three Karens reported having been laid

	Karen	Sudanese	All respondents
RAP	1	-	1
MHSD	5	4	9
Employment	4	5	9
Disability (MHSD)	-	3	3
No income	2	-	2

Table 4: Source of Income (Individual Interviews)

off in early December and were hoping to return to their previous employment at a later date. Respondents in focus groups echoed the difficult financial situation facing refugees in Surrey, reporting lay-offs and

¹¹ While GARs are eligible to access ELSA classes upon arrival in Canada some respondents reported not having understood the importance of learning English. In part, this may arise from cultural differences in the way information is conveyed. Rather than being seen as a necessity, learning English was viewed by some as being optional.

increased difficulties in paying for housing and other necessities. Of those working, 2 Karen and 3 Sudanese report having full-time employment, while 1 Karen and 2 Sudanese work part-time. Both Sudanese respondents who are working part-time report having two jobs and working part-time and/or on-call hours at both. The reliance on part-time and/or on-call employment makes it difficult for families to budget for housing and other costs. If the family members do not get enough hours the overall income declines, making it difficult to pay rent and make loan payments.

Employment and MHSD benefits (i.e. welfare) are the two main sources of household income among all respondents.¹² When Disability benefits (temporary and long-term) are included, however, MHSD becomes the primary source of income among all respondents. Although the spouses of five respondents (4 Karen and 1 Sudanese) are employed, all but one of the households has both the spouse and the respondent working. Two households reported having no income at the time of the interview. In both instances the individuals (and one of their spouses) had been laid off in the past month. Respondents in both focus groups and individual interviews voiced concerns about declining economic situations, as many are being laid off. While some have been given return to work dates, others remain uncertain about the status of their future employment. Existing units are becoming even more unaffordable as incomes dwindle, and some expressed they may have to seek smaller, lower rent units.

¹² See Appendix C for MHSD and RAP rate tables (2007).

Income Security: Government Transportation Loans

Upon arrival in Canada, GARs are asked to sign a government transportation loan document. This loan covers costs associated with transportation, medical costs and a service fee. GARs are expected to begin repaying within 12 months of landing in Canada; interest begins accruing after 3 years. Failure to repay loans precludes a GAR from sponsoring family members.

Nine of the twelve (9 of 12) Karen and 5 of the 12 Sudanese respondents are still repaying their Government transportation loans. Of those who are not repaying their loans, 2 Karens have been excused from repaying and 3 Sudanese respondents have already repaid their loans in full.¹³ Half of all respondents reported difficulties in repaying the loans.

Of note is the overwhelming concern of Karen and Sudanese respondents with the need to repay the loans as quickly as possible, regardless of the effect on the families' economic situation. Four of the Karens, for example, reported voluntarily increasing their monthly payments in order to pay off the loan faster. One respondent reported having already paid \$3800 of the families' \$7000 debt since their arrival in late 2006.

For many, the desire to repay loans as quickly as possible arises from a fear that they will not qualify for Canadian citizenship and/or travel documents if they are in default of their loans. As one participant noted, "It is a way of surviving. If you do not repay [your loans] it may affect your status, so you have to starve and pay".

While some have begun repayments early, and increased their monthly payments above and beyond the amount requested by the government, others have had to stop making payments when employment ends. Although concerned about the debts accruing interest, three Sudanese respondents were forced to stop paying their loans when employment ceased because

Case Study: When Na Zol and his family arrived in Canada, they arrived with a government transportation loan of \$5700. Neither he nor his wife has worked since their arrival in Canada. The respondent and his family pay \$800 per month for rent, an amount which accounts for over 75% of their monthly household income. Yet, in an attempt to repay their loan before the three year time limit and avoid incurring interest, the family tries to pay \$250 per month, well above the amount requested by the government. The decision to do so, however, leaves little money for food or other household expenses. Reflecting on the difficulties in paying the rent, loans and buying food, the respondent noted that "at least here the situation here is better than in the refugee camp."

¹³ One respondent is unsure if she will have to repay the loan at a later date.

MHSD benefits are insufficient to cover household expenses and loan repayments. “Even if it is a problem for me, they expect me to pay”. One respondent who has repaid the loan in full noted that “it was the most difficult loan I have ever experienced ... the government wants refugees to begin paying [the loan] back after one year, even though the money we make is very minimal”. They “bring people here to give a better life, but it is opposite. People put them in debt”. Concern with repaying loans as quickly as possible, and frequently within limited household budgets, places great stress on newly-arrived households, pushing some household members into depression.

Housing: Type and Tenure

The majority of respondents live in apartments within the private rental market. Only one of the twenty-four (1 of 24) respondents has purchased a home. The decision to do so, however, has

	Karen	Sudanese	All respondents
Apartment	11	8	19
Suite (Upper/Lower)	1	2	3
Townhouse	-	1	1
House	-	1	1

meant the family allocates over 75% of monthly household income to housing. The move to apartment buildings has been a difficult transition,

Table 5: Housing Type (Individual Interviews)

particularly for those with children. Although the kids want to play or walk around, respondents in both interviews and focus groups report having received warnings from neighbours and building managers. Threats they will be asked to move and live elsewhere if they cannot keep their children from disturbing other tenants cause great stress for newcomers.



Unlike Karen respondents, the majority of whom (11 of 12) are concentrated in two multi-unit, low-rise apartment complexes across the street from one another, the Sudanese were more dispersed around Whalley and Guilford. A small grouping of Sudanese respondents is noticeable in a multi-building complex East of King George Highway (4 of 12). While the benefits of this geographic concentration (e.g. assistance with childcare, interpreting, information) were alluded to by many respondents, not everyone was positive about

the situation. One man, for example, expressed concerns about the lack of opportunities for his children to make friends with English-speaking Canadians given the concentration of both Karens and other newcomers in the complex. The respondent believes moving to another area would help his children learn English better and (hopefully) integrate faster. The potential drawbacks of concentration were alluded to by key informants, who worry about long-time impacts on integration. Yet the benefits of concentration are significant, particularly in the initial settlement period.

While proximity to schools, banks, stores



and other co-ethnics was a primary concern among Karen respondents (8), Sudanese respondents were more diverse in their responses.¹⁴ Living near co-ethnics (2), security and safety (2), and living in Surrey were cited by Sudanese. Two others responded by saying they did not want to stay there at all.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that while only one grouping of Sudanese respondents is evident, many of the respondents live in complexes with a number of other Sudanese households. Further, consideration of the location of initial housing, however, reveals that the majority of Sudanese respondents lived in a much more concentrated fashion upon arrival, and have dispersed over time. While some report having moved as a result of needing more room as their families expanded, others have moved in search of safer neighbourhoods. Reflecting on their initial housing, one respondent noted that although the building was identified by ISSofBC's Welcome House staff, it was not in a good neighbourhood, especially for newcomers. Frequent police visits, overcrowding, and problems with other tenants were among the concerns cited by respondents when speaking of the initial neighbourhood and complex. The area is described as a place where landed immigrants live until they find out it is not safe, and then they move to a better area.

¹⁴ One Karen and five Sudanese respondents did not provide responses to this question.

Housing: Current Conditions

Although minor problems exist (e.g. mice, cockroaches, bedbugs, and the need for minor repairs), the physical condition of the units is better than may be expected given the findings of previous research (e.g. Hiebert et al. 2005). Karen GARs were more likely than Sudanese GARs to report having problems with landlords. While problems frequently related to the time it takes for landlords to take care of problems, respondents in both focus groups and individual interviews reported having had to involve



Stains on the carpet show an area that is always wet.



Black mould covers the wall in part of the living room.

ISS_{of}BC staff at Welcome House and/or local community and church organizations in order to have even minor repairs completed.¹⁵ Although it frequently takes weeks for one landlord to fix problems, regardless of severity, one Karen respondent reported that the manager will fix things right away if s/he brings an interpreter or someone with “power”. Some variation is apparent even within complexes, though. Two Karen, for example, reported that calls to the manager go unanswered in spite of continued problems with condensation on the sliding doors and outer walls. The carpet in each of the units is wet 3-5 feet from the wall.¹⁶ In one unit, black mould grows up the walls and a white mould covers the carpet. After showing me the condition of this apartment, one Karen man showed me his notebook documenting repeated attempts over the previous months to have the manager repair the problem.



Fungus and mould cover the carpet in one unit.

Prior to leaving ISS_{of}BC’s Welcome House facility GARs receive first language orientation about their rights and

¹⁵ If ALMD is considering investing in housing, it would be beneficial to fund multi-lingual housing search specialists who could aid in advocating for immigrants and refugees.

¹⁶ Water ingress is a problem in buildings throughout Metro Vancouver, and is not isolated to low rent buildings. While recognition of the problem exists, repairing the issue is extremely costly. Building managers and owners may be unwilling – or unable – to allocate sufficient funding to address the issue.

responsibilities as tenants, and are provided a copy of their Tenancy Agreement. In spite of this, respondents in both interviews and focus groups spoke of difficulties arising from their lack of understanding of who is responsible for what. One respondent spent the first month and a half living in a unit in which the electricity in the unit did not work properly and the sinks backed up constantly causing the floor to be wet. It was only after a neighbour informed them it was not her responsibility to fix it, and directed her to contact the manager, that the problem was taken care of. Unfamiliarity with rights and responsibilities potentially places newcomers at risk of abuse by landlords and building managers who do not fix the issues that arise. Other respondents reported problems in getting damage deposits back when they move out of units, without understanding what building managers can, and cannot, charge them for. In addition to having their damage deposit withheld, one person reported having been charged an additional \$1000 when they vacated their unit.

For others, high rents and a sense of helplessness to change the situation are the most significant concerns. Overall, respondents reported being satisfied with the safety in their buildings, though the same is not necessarily true for the wider neighbourhood. Consequently, due to fear, many spoke of staying inside their units and not engaging with neighbours and other people in the neighbourhood.

Lack of English language proficiency is a significant barrier for refugees, with respect to both employment and housing. Difficulties in communicating with landlords and neighbours owing to language barriers are a problem for many participants, particularly for those with small children. Families with children experience difficulties owing to the need to keep children quiet when living in apartments, particularly those above the first floor.

Housing: Crowding

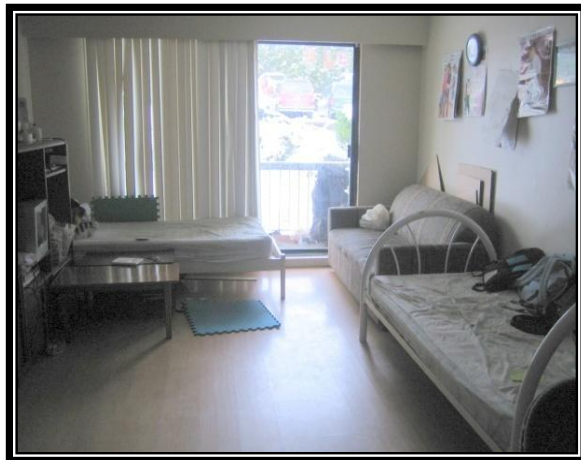
Although the physical condition of the units is good overall, widespread overcrowding is evident among Karen and Sudanese respondents in both interviews and focus groups. The majority of respondents report living in units that are not large enough to meet the needs of their families.

While some households spoke of children and/or teenaged children sharing rooms, others have adults sharing rooms with their children and/or teenagers. Attempts to ensure teens and/or (young) adults of the opposite sex do not share a bedroom mean crowding may be even more significant within the units. In one household, for example, four daughters share one room, while the son sleeps in the other bedroom. The parent(s) sleep in the living room.

Further, key informants noted that household numbers can literally swell overnight as friends or family members arrive from other provinces. While a single household may be able to cope with the arrival of a small family of arrivals, larger groups are frequently split between different households until housing can be arranged.

Interviews	Karen	Sudanese	All respondents
1 Bedroom			
4 people	1	-	1
5 people	2	-	2
2 Bedroom			
2 people	-	2	2
4 people	1	1	2
5 people	-	1	1
6 people	4	-	4
7 people	2	1	3
8 people	1	-	1
3 Bedroom			
5 people	1	1	2
6 people	-	2	2
7 people	-	4	4

Table 6: Crowding in Units (Individual Interviews)



Two beds and a couch are located in the living room of this unit.



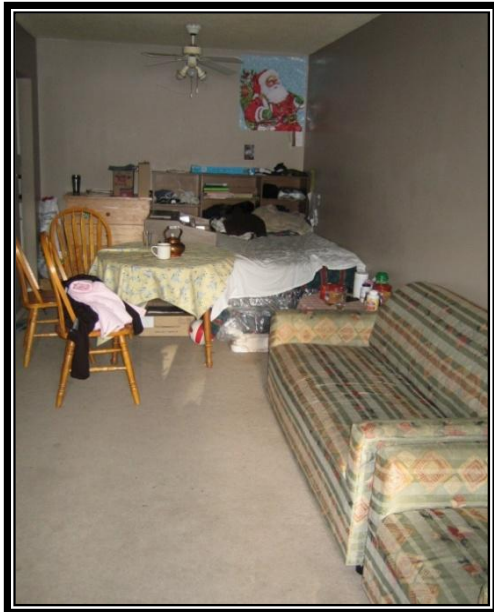
Mattresses are piled high on the bed to be laid out in the living room for sleeping.



Three mattresses lie side to side in the bedroom.

mattress covers that help prevent against bedbugs was warned they would be ineffective if the mattresses were left on the floor. The key informant went on to suggest that bunk beds should be a necessity for those with children, in order to raise mattresses off the floor and prevent the spread of bedbugs and other insects. Further, bunk beds would ensure a more efficient use of space in small units.

It is important to note that while two of the



A bed in the dining room sits alongside the table. Couches line the walls in the living room with space for mattresses in the evening.

In Karen households, for example, couches line the walls in almost all the units leaving floor space open for mattresses to be laid out in the evenings. Eight of the twelve units occupied by Karen households, for example, have one or more beds in the living room and/or dining room area. In the bedrooms mattresses are piled high during the day, ready to be laid out in the evenings. Further, it is difficult for those with mattresses on the floor to deal with bedbugs. One key informant, whose organization secured an \$800 donation to purchase



Bunk beds and mattresses are placed beside one another in the bedroom.

respondents reported having just two individuals living in two-bedroom units, both were instances in which family

breakdown had led the male spouse to move out and find housing with a roommate. Both viewed the situation as temporary, and hoped to return to living with their families in the coming months.

Discussing the extent of overcrowding in their home, one respondent relayed a comment from one of their children: “In the camps we had no food, but lots of room to play. In Canada, we have lots of food, but no room to play.”

The quality of furniture and household goods received upon arrival was a concern identified by both newcomers and key informants alike.¹⁷ It was not uncommon to hear of mattresses and dressers needing to be replaced in the first year, and of pots and pans that were in poor condition. Complaints about the quality of goods received by GARs in the past prompted ISSofBC to sign a contract with a new supply company last year. Consequently, concerns about quality of goods received, as well as of delays in delivery, may have been alleviated in the time following the arrival of this study's participants.

¹⁷ ISS of BC contracts with a company to provide newly arrived GARs with two move-in packages: one for household goods (e.g. linens, towels) and one for furniture (e.g. beds, couches, table). Arrangements are made with the company to deliver these goods – all of which are new – to GARs on move-in day.

Housing: Affordability

Average rents for the respondents in the interviews was \$852, with individual rents ranging from \$674 to \$965.¹⁸ Although the rents are affordable by Metro Vancouver standards, they continue

	Average	Range
1 Bedroom	\$691	\$674 - \$725
2 Bedroom	\$851	\$600 - \$900
3 Bedroom	\$915	\$850 - \$965

Table 7: Average rents by size of unit

to represent affordability challenges for households interviewed. In Canada, housing is considered affordable if a household allocates no more than 30% of their income on housing. Households spending upwards of 31% of household income on housing are considered to be experiencing housing stress, while those spending upwards of 51% are considered to be in critical housing stress.

Affordability challenges are prevalent among respondents in both focus groups and interviews. One of twenty-four (1 of 24) respondents interviewed in this study report living in a household meeting

	Karen	Sudanese	All Respondents
>30%	1	-	1
31-50%	3	3 ¹⁹	6
51-75%	4	4	8
75%	3	4	7
n/a	1	1	2

Table 8: Proportion of Household income devoted to housing

National Affordability Standards (NAS). Alarming, 15 of 22 respondents providing affordability information were experiencing critical housing stress at the time of the interview; 7 households currently allocate over 75% of household income on housing, a situation which places them at extreme risk of absolute homelessness.

With the exception of bachelor suites, average rents in Surrey continue to increase in all other

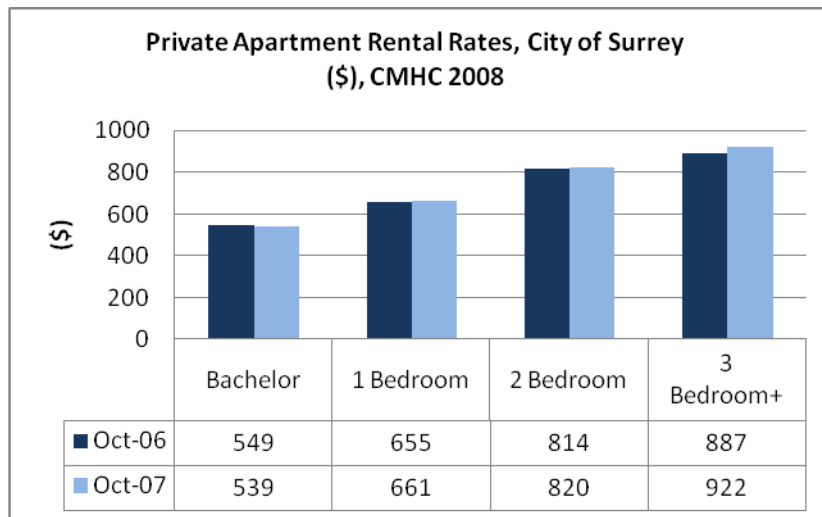


Figure 3: Private Apartment Rental Rates (\$), City of Surrey (CMHC 2008)

units. Vacancy rates and average rents are lowest among older units -- e.g. in October 2007 a 2 bedroom apartment constructed after 1990 rented for \$932 compared to \$789 for those constructed pre-1960.

At the time of the research a single adult would receive \$610 on RAP or MHSD benefits, while a family of four (with no adult children) would receive \$1315 on RAP

¹⁸ The monthly housing costs for the one owner have been excluded from analysis of average rents.

¹⁹ Two of the Sudanese households who reported paying 31-50% were slightly below 50%; as such almost half of household income in these families is allocated to housing.

and \$1101 on MHSD. Given the reliance on minimum wage (and frequently part-time) jobs, and low assistance rates affordability challenges are widespread.²⁰

Respondents in both focus groups and interviews reported having to rely on Canada Child Tax Benefits (CCTB) to make ends meet. One respondent, for example, noted that “it is good to have kids because we can use [CCTB] to pay for food.” Although the incomes of multiple family members may be combined to pay the rent, households are dependent upon CCTB to pay for food and other necessities. Households reported that even though they try to spend as little as possible, there is not enough good food to serve the kids.

One family of three reported having a single person rooming with them in their two bedroom suite. In the past they have had up to three single people rooming with them at a time because it is too difficult for individuals to obtain housing within limited incomes. The crowding for this family is off-set by the increased affordability for all involved. Another reported having an extended family member frequently sleep on their couch. All respondents had housing at the time of the interviews and focus groups. Key informants and respondents spoke of an increase in couch surfing among their respective communities. While frequently a temporary thing, lasting a few weeks or a month at most, anecdotal evidence indicates others have been homeless for periods of up to a year or more.

Consideration of household size and affordability reveals that many of the households experiencing the most severe affordability challenges are also experiencing significant crowding (e.g. family of 6 and 7 in 2 bedroom apartments). All three households renting one bedroom units, for example, continue to allocate 51-75% of monthly household income on rent in spite of having four or more people living in the units. Reflecting on the challenges of reconciling low incomes and the need for large units, one respondent noted that the family of seven continues to live in the 2 bedroom unit they are currently occupying because if they move the rent will increase to \$900 or more, an amount that is out of reach financially.

Twelve (12) respondents reported that although they would like to move to a bigger unit to alleviate crowding the rents would be too high for their current income. For some, larger households or the presence of working age children allows the family to combine multiple incomes to pay household expenses; even so, the affordability challenges remain. In spite of having “no money left at the end of the month”, however, one respondent still considers herself “lucky because [she has a] big family [who can] put our hands together,” easing the financial difficulties somewhat. Further, lay-offs are compounding affordability challenges for many respondents.

²⁰ See Appendix C for RAP and MHSD benefit charts. One key informant, however, questioned the way in which RAP is calculated, noting those households with multiple adults receive more assistance than does a similar household comprised of mostly children. While beyond the scope of this project, it merits further consideration.

Thirteen (13) respondents reporting having had their rent increased one or more times since they moved in.²¹ Rental increases ranged at the low end from \$40 over four years to \$180 over four years for another household. For the most part, however, rental increases appear to be \$10-\$20 per year after the second year. While increases identified by respondents appear in line with the maximum allowable rent increase guidelines (e.g., 3.7% in 2008), one key informant asserted many are being subjected to increases well in excess of these amounts.

Housing: Moving over time

Residential mobility among respondents is extremely low, with 11 of the 12 Karen and 6 of the 12 Sudanese continuing to live in their initial housing.²² Questions about reasons for staying in the current housing included both positive and negative considerations. While some respondents focused upon the benefits of living near friends and family, or near to banks, schools, stores and hospitals, others cited low incomes, lack of knowledge about how to find housing and language barriers as reasons for not moving. One participant noted that although he does not like the area he is living in he feels trapped: “because of income, I cannot move from there”.

While respondents were asked about their longest housing, the small number of respondents having moved more than once precludes further analysis. Consideration of longest time at one address (excluding those whose longest residence was outside of BC), limits the analysis to 4 households, one of whom was living in BC Housing and one that owns their unit.

²¹ Three respondents were unsure if their rent had increased or declined to provide an answer.

²² Of those who have moved at least once since their arrival, 2 have lived in 2 places; 2 have lived in 3 places; 2 have lived in 4 places; and 1 has lived in 5 places.

Housing: General difficulties identified in finding housing

Respondents were asked to identify problems or difficulties they had encountered in finding housing. While presented separately, the challenges are frequently interrelated. Further, given the lack of experience among many in finding housing for themselves – 11 Karen and 6 Sudanese continue to live in their first permanent accommodations – responses were often posed in relation to problems and/or difficulties preventing them from seeking alternative housing, as opposed to problems encountered during the search for housing.

Karen	Sudanese	All respondents
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of knowledge about how to find housing • Language • Low incomes and high rents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Size of household • Low incomes and high rents • ‘No children policies’ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low incomes and high rents • Size of household • Lack of knowledge about how to find housing

Table 9: General difficulties in finding housing

Difficulties of reconciling low incomes and high rents was the most frequently cited response among all respondents, particularly among those with larger than Canadian average size households (e.g. 6 to 8 people). Employment in minimum-wage jobs, part-time or casual employment, and reliance on low MHSB benefits aggravates the challenges of obtaining adequate and affordable housing for respondents. Consequently, many spoke of the need to obtain high paid and more stable employment. While one respondent spoke of the need to “find a good job and get a good income so [the family] can move to a better area,” another tied housing affordability challenges with the size of household.

“Larger units are hard to afford. Low incomes mean people are looking for cheap housing, but landlords don't accept them because of the size of family. It took [us] a while to find a place with more people and less rooms”.

While both Sudanese and Karen respondents have larger than Canadian average households, Sudanese respondents were more likely to report size of household as a problem in finding housing. In part, this may relate to having had more experience in trying to find housing for themselves and their families. Lack of information is a key challenge for Karen respondents. While some identified lack of knowledge as a major barrier in finding housing, others spoke of their need for more general information on Surrey. One respondent, for example, questioned “if I move, will the schools be close? Good? Where do I find information about the city? About schools? About less expensive areas?” The need for information relating to housing (e.g. how to find housing, where to look, tenants rights and responsibilities) is accompanied then by a need for easy access to information about Surrey itself (e.g. areas of Surrey, locations and information about schools, availability of transportation). For Karen families, limited English language ability compounds difficulties in accessing knowledge about how to find housing, both with respect to searching for information and communicating with potential landlords.

For Sudanese households, difficulties in finding affordable housing that is of sufficient size to meet the needs of their family are aggravated by the reluctance of landlords to rent smaller, more affordable housing to large households. Citing National Occupancy Standards (NOS), which limit the number and age of children who can share bedrooms, landlords refuse to rent small apartments to large families (e.g. 4+ people in a 2 bedroom apartment).

“It is very difficult to find a place to rent because not many places are available, especially for big families and those lacking employment. Some landlords are willing to rent place until they find out how large the family is, and then they say no”.

A number of respondents encountered landlords and building managers with ‘no children’ policies that either limit households with families to renting on the ground floor (in order to avoid bothering other tenants), or restrict them outright, a situation more prevalent among private landlords.

Other problems identified by respondents included low vacancy rates in Surrey regardless of unit size, transportation constraints, and landlords not being required to tell applicants why they have not been given the unit. CMHC Rental data confirms that vacancy rates remain tight across the City of Surrey and continue to decline, with the largest declines in the 1 and 3+ Bedroom units.

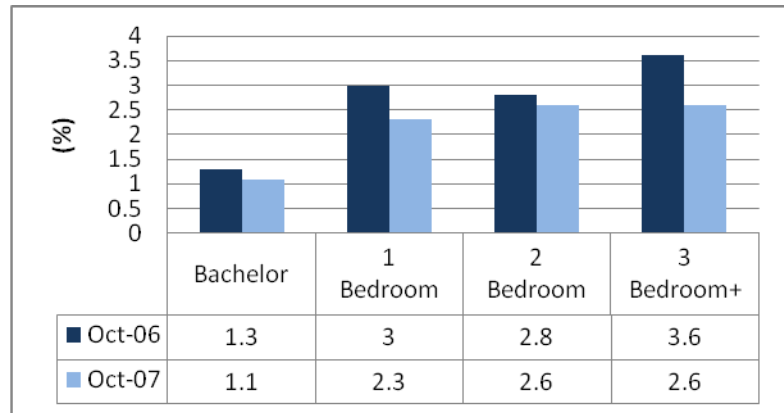


Figure 4: Private Apartment Vacancy Rates (%)

“If you want a good place, it is too expensive. If it is cheap, it is far from transportation, which is okay if you have a car but otherwise is very difficult”.

The need to be located in close proximity to transportation, schools, shops and banks featured prominently in respondents’ reasons for staying in their current locations. Those reliant on public transportation or walking, for example, spoke of the unit being gone by the time they arrived to enquire about renting it.

Sudanese respondents in both focus groups and interviews voiced their frustrations at being told the unit has been rented out regardless of whether or not the sign advertising the vacancy was still posted. In part, respondents expressed frustration that landlords and building managers have no responsibility to tell tenants why they are being rejected as it prevents people from addressing any problems that may exist. Rather, potential tenants are just told their application is not accepted.

When asked to identify the most difficult thing about finding housing language and size of family were the most frequently cited responses among Karen and Sudanese respondents, respectively; while the difficulties of reconciling low incomes and high rents was the most significant barrier for all respondents.

Housing: Future moves?

When asked if they thought they would be moving in the next year, many respondents remain unsure. While some said they would move if they obtained BC Housing, others were concerned about costs associated with moving. “I cannot do anything about moving to a new place because it costs money to move and the rent is higher. So we will just stay here.” While the prospect of moving was a positive achievement for some respondents (e.g. movement into bigger units and/or BC Housing), for others it was associated with concerns of job loss and reduced income.

Services and Programs: What would have helped?

Respondents were asked to reflect on their experiences since coming to Canada, and consider what information or services (if any) would have made settlement easier.²³ When appropriate, respondents were asked to consider whether it would be beneficial to receive any of these services and/or information pre-arrival. Responses were diverse, but centred around three key themes.

1. *Provision of increased access to English language and employment training (pre- and post-arrival)*

Improved access to English language classes and employment information and training (both pre- and post-arrival) was identified as a key need by Sudanese and Karen GARs in both focus groups and interviews. One respondent spoke of having “wasted 3 years in Egypt even though [he] knew [he] was coming to Canada for the last two years.” As such, he believes the government should invest in more programs (English, employment, extended orientation) during the year before they come to Canada to facilitate better settlement outcomes. While some English language classes are available in the camps, respondents noted they are frequently geared towards meeting the needs of children and youth, and focus on written English. Respondents asserted there is a need to ensure access to English language classes for all people regardless of age.

“More English classes for adults would be good (conversation, writing and reading) would help so [we] can communicate with others better, find information, and get a job”.

Improved English language skills would enable refugees to better understand orientation information provided at ISS_{of}BC’s Welcome House facility.

Once in Canada GARs are eligible to access free English language classes. Many respondents spoke of having been encouraged to take English language classes. An understanding that learning English is optional, as opposed to a necessity, means not all GARs take advantage of the free ELSA classes that are offered. Rather, many focus on other, seemingly more pressing issues related to settlement. In retrospect, many respondents believe newly arrived refugees should be required to take classes both pre-arrival and during their first year post-arrival. Some worried, for example, that people may sit at home and not want to go to English classes until after the first year when MHSD sends them to English classes in order to get employment.²⁴

²³ Questions relating to what services and/or information would have been beneficial in facilitating settlement were rarely answered by Karen respondents. In spite of repeated attempts to draw out their suggestions, many either did not feel they could answer the question adequately or expressed gratitude for services and information received.

²⁴ More recently, ISS of BC settlement counselors have begun booking ELSA appointments for newly-arrived GARs and accompanying them to the appointment, when needed. Stronger encouragement from settlement

Further, those who obtain employment face difficulties in attending school and improving their language proficiency. One participant, for example, asserted there is a need to find a way to work *and* attend school without having to go steady from morning until nightfall.

In addition, respondents asserted the provision of information about employment, job-finding programs, and/or skills training pre- arrival, would better prepare them to obtain employment in Canada. Key informants called for a return to the provision of skills-based training, such as those offered in the past by Employment Insurance (EI), including training for Care Aides. Better English language proficiency and employment training would make it easier to understand and communicate with others.

While the majority of respondents stressed the need for enhanced employment and English training, others suggested immediate access to jobs that do not require English language ability would facilitate more rapid integration. One respondent, for example, asserted that “people go to welfare because they cannot work because they do not speak English”, continuing on to suggest it would be good if the government could connect newly arrived refugees with construction or warehouse jobs that do not require English language ability.

2. Need for Surrey-based counsellors who are familiar with the local area and can provide specific and ongoing assistance

A number of respondents asserted there is a need to have access to Surrey-based settlement-counsellors and/or volunteers who could provide locally-based information and assistance when needed. Although respondents spoke highly of the assistance provided by ISSofBC’s Welcome House staff, they acknowledge that people in Welcome House are very busy and require more staff to meet the needs of all clients requiring assistance. Information and orientation received overseas is not enough, nor is it effective. Further, while intensive orientation is provided during the first six weeks after arrival, there is a need for an ongoing relationship with a counsellor who can guide newcomers through the choices, particularly during their first year in Canada. Sudanese respondents in particular requested the provision of counsellors located in Surrey who could provide locally-specific information, orientation, accompaniment (when necessary), and help familiarize newcomers with their new surroundings. One respondent, for example, noted there is a need for help with grocery shopping because many bought dog food in the beginning thinking it was food for humans. Refugees in Surrey may benefit, for example, from being put in contact with OPTIONS, (OPTIONS: Services to Communities Society, located in the Newton area of Surrey). In addition to offering programs and services geared to promoting community health and empowering individuals, OPTIONS publishes an online housing registry offering up to date listings of rental units available in Surrey, and publishes the *Surrey Survival Guide: A Guide to Low Cost Goods and Services*.

counselors may underscore the significance of ELSA classes and increase the likelihood of participation among newly-arrived GARs.

The increased proclivity of Sudanese respondents to report needing more assistance (e.g. accompaniment, ongoing orientation) may arise from differences in RAP orientation received. It should be noted that beginning in late 2006 ISS_{of}BC restructured the resettlement assistance program to introduce a one year case management process as well as a 12 hour home-based life skill orientation program in the clients' first language. Unlike the Sudanese, the Karens have received ongoing case management at 3 and 11 months post-arrival. Even so, many Karens report still needing further assistance. It is important to recognize that GARs have access to locally-based counsellors at many local agencies (e.g. DIVERSEcity, OPTIONS), yet for many these agencies appear to be viewed as sources of information as opposed to ongoing support. Rather, respondents asserted a need for locally-based settlement counsellors with whom they could build a similar relationship to that formed with the initial settlement counsellor at Welcome House. Institutional relationships between settlement counsellors at Welcome House and local agencies need to be supported and strengthened. Expanding these networks and building their capacity to assist newcomers may be beneficial in promoting integration.

A second, related type of assistance required is access to locally-based interpreters for medical appointments. Karen and Sudanese respondents alike reported difficulties in accessing interpreters for medical appointments. Individuals are required to find their own interpreter for medical appointments; those who are unable to do so must either miss the appointment or go on their own knowing they are unlikely to understand the medical practitioner. Multiple respondents noted they do not always understand information provided by doctors about their conditions and/or medication, and called for doctors and hospitals to provide interpreters to ensure patients understand necessary information. If possible, it would help if ISS_{of}BC could make volunteer and professional interpreters available to help people who cannot speak English well. Otherwise those individuals do not go outside into the neighbourhood for fear of needing an interpreter.

As our society becomes increasingly paperless, government offices do not always provide all of the documents, instead people are directed to the internet to download forms but this is difficult for those who do not speak English, are computer illiterate and cannot afford computers or have not yet found their way to local libraries where computers are available. Instead there appears to be a need for additional government (provincial, federal, municipal) office staffing resources that are located in Surrey and for key documents to be translated into other languages.

3. Arranging housing for GARs (pre-arrival)

Seven of the twelve Sudanese (7 of 12) respondents asserted there is a need to arrange housing before arrival to ensure a smooth transition from temporary accommodations at ISS_{of}BC's Welcome House facility to permanent accommodations in the community. Respondents believe that if ISS_{of} BC's Welcome House staff knows a person or family is coming they should try to find housing for them in advance that the family can live in for at least the first year. Obtaining good quality, permanent accommodations for at least the first year would give families time to decide for themselves where they would like to live. That way people would come to ISS_{of} BC's

Welcome House facility for 15 days and then move straight to a secure place they can live in until they become more familiar. It would also be easier to keep in contact with newcomers (if they are not constantly moving around). If possible, respondents suggested refugees be given the option to move directly into appropriately-sized BC Housing units. Reflecting on her own experiences in the apartments on Bentley Avenue, for example, one respondent suggested housing should be located in a safe and secure area for at least the first year to ensure newly-arrived refugees do not suffer. As the agency responsible for settling newly arrived refugees, respondents believe ISSofBC should know if the housing is located in a good area or not. Otherwise, if the housing is not in a good area, the newcomers must go out and look for another place on their own.

Further, efforts should be made to ensure housing that is obtained for refugees is located near to schools and public transportation as newly arrived refugees are unlikely to own cars and must rely on public transportation. Costs associated with public transportation are high, particularly for those with larger than Canadian-average households. As such, housing must be located near to schools, shops, and other key locations. Further, respondents suggested it would be beneficial for government to make public transportation more affordable for low-income households through subsidies.

Others believe the best way to identify housing would be in consultation with existing community who would look for housing for the new arrivals. Further, obtaining housing in advance of their arrival would enable refugee children to begin school as quickly as possible after arrival. As is, respondents spoke of having waited a month or longer to find permanent accommodations and register their children in schools. This would provide a stable base for households to begin integration and allow children to start school as quickly as possible after arrival.

Services and Programs: The need for information on BC Housing

What became apparent in the course of the focus groups and interviews, however, was a deep need for information pertaining to BC Housing. Respondents in both interviews and focus groups were quick to request information and clarification about the programs offered by BC Housing, including subsidized housing and the BC Rental Assistance Program (BC-RAP). Questions centred upon eligibility (e.g. is it true a person pays less if they earn less? Am I eligible if I am on welfare?) and process (e.g. how do I apply? What is the process for obtaining housing?). One respondent who had applied to BC Housing over a year ago, reported that she and her family are “waiting here temporarily” until they receive a BC Housing unit. Calls for BC Housing to be provided to newly arrived refugees either upon arrival (as discussed earlier), or in an expedited fashion in order to improve life for newcomers were voiced by nearly all respondents.

Sudanese respondents in both focus groups and interviews alike voiced concerns over a troubling trend among BC Housing applicants. In spite of having submitted completed applications, a number have received phone calls from BC Housing asking them to go look at available units in

complexes throughout Surrey, and in some cases, neighbouring cities. During the meeting with building managers each reported having been asked to fill out additional forms and told the manager would be in contact within a few days. In some cases, respondents report not having even been shown the units in spite of having been called to look at them. Misunderstandings have arisen, however, as potential tenants believe they have been given the units. In some cases, the newcomers have given notice at their current locations, only to receive a phone call a few days later stating the unit has been given to another family. The stress (and associated financial costs) associated with the disappointment of never getting a unit in spite of repeated trips to look at complexes is very difficult for newcomers.

While the majority of respondents spoke of the benefits obtaining BC Housing would have for new families (e.g. more appropriate unit sizes, lower rents), others who have been fortunate enough to obtain BC Housing raised some concerns. Although the rent is affordable, heating and utility costs in the winter can be very expensive. One month, for example, the heating and utility costs exceeded \$400, an amount that was greater than the rent itself. Further, some complained that as incomes increase, so too do rents, something which prevents people from being able to pay off loans and begin saving money. “When people start to get ahead [BC Housing] drags you back”.

Conclusions

The goals of this research are two-fold: to assess the current housing situations of refugees in the City of Surrey, and to explore existing supports and barriers to housing that exist in Surrey, BC. The portrait that emerges is complicated. It is one of poverty, overcrowding and barriers to housing and employment. And yet, it is one of hope in the face of these difficulties. Given the current global economic situation and downturns in the local economy, however, the future is uncertain.

Difficulties in reconciling low incomes, whether from employment in low-paying, part-time jobs or dependence on insufficient RAP or MHSD benefits, with high rents is aggravated for many by the need to begin repaying government loans one year after arrival. Reliance on Canada Child Tax Benefits and/or combining the incomes of multiple family members are frequently cited strategies for meeting basic household costs (e.g. food, utilities).

While the housing is in better physical condition than may be expected by previous research, almost all households are experiencing significant overcrowding. Mattresses laid side by side in the bedrooms, or stacked on top of each other to be spread out in the evenings, and beds in the living and dining room are among the conditions evident in many of the homes. In spite of these conditions, 15 of the 22 households providing affordability information continue to spend upwards of 51% of monthly household income on housing. Alarming, 7 households (or approximately 1 in 3 respondents) spend upwards of 75% of their income on housing, placing them at extreme risk of absolute homelessness. Anecdotal evidence of “sofa surfing” is widespread.

While the need for access to BC Housing units (or other subsidized housing) is prevalent among respondents, the Karen in particular spoke of the need for basic information about BC Housing (e.g. existing programs, how to apply). In spite of significant affordability challenges and overcrowding few Karen respondents have applied for BC Housing.

The need for access to information (e.g. about BC Housing, as well as Surrey itself) is great. While some were able to articulate the need, many were unsure of where to go to find out the information. With respect to the City of Surrey, for example, respondents asked where to go to find out information about schools, other neighbourhoods, and services. In addition to familiarizing themselves about the city, the provision of information about Surrey may work to overcome negative stereotypes about the City that are conveyed in the media and public culture.

Secondly, existing ethno-cultural and church organizations in Surrey have been important sources of assistance (e.g. housing, employment, interpreters, household goods). Assistance (when needed) is obtained from a variety of sources, including ISS of BC Welcome House staff, church groups, family members and members of the larger ethno-cultural community. The Karen, in particular, appear to have benefited from the provision of increased settlement and

employment services (e.g. expanded case management, access to Employment Outreach Worker through ISS_{of}BC). Karen and Sudanese respondents spoke of the need for ISS_{of}BC to work with these communities when settling newly arrived refugees in Surrey.

Respondents identified three key needs:

- Improved access to both English language classes *and* job training classes, either pre-arrival or within the first year in Canada would better prepare newcomers to obtain employment.
- Access to a Surrey-based housing search specialist who can provide ongoing support and locally-relevant information would be beneficial; and
- There is a need to arrange good quality and affordable housing in safe neighbourhoods prior to arrival.

The tenuous financial situations in which many respondents find themselves are currently being threatened by downturns in the economy. The tendency for respondents to be employed in construction, hospitality and service jobs places the few who are employed at risk of future layoffs or reduced hours. For those on the edge, the results could too easily become absolute homelessness.

Recommendations:

Citizenship and Immigration Canada

Short-term

- (1) Misunderstandings about linkages between repayment of **government transportation loans** and ability to obtain Canadian citizenship and/or travel documents require clarification. Concerns that they may be denied citizenship if loans are not repaid creates a great deal of stress for refugees. Provision of correct information, in first language, would be beneficial.
- (2) **Re-examine initial (furniture) move-in package for GARs.** Ensure furniture provided is of good quality and includes tools needed to put it together. Further, given the arrival of large households and the reality of crowded housing conditions, beds provided should include bunk beds when appropriate. In addition to being more space conscious, bunk beds would get mattresses off the floor and may help to deal with bedbug infestations. (It is acknowledged that the furniture package has improved for subsequent GAR arrivals).
- (3) CIC, in partnership with ISS_{of}BC, should explore **increasing the number of housing search workers** currently on staff so that additional targeted housing related support can be provided to newcomer refugee immigrants during their first year in Canada.

Long-term

- (4) The need to repay government transportation loans represents a significant burden to low income refugee families coming to Canada for a better life. The Government of Canada should consider **eliminating the government transportation loans for refugees**. If loans cannot be forgiven in full, CIC could consider either extending the period before the loans incur interest beyond the first three years, or not charge interest at all.
- (5) CIC should explore the **establishment of a national shelter rate for GARs under the Resettlement Assistance Program**, in essence decoupling from provincial income support (shelter) rates. At present, provincial income support (shelter) rates in British Columbia are inadequate to meet local housing costs, a finding supported by earlier CIC research (*cf.* Goss Gilroy 2004). Include monthly transportation supplement for all family members (6-65+ years) at the 3 zone rate to reduce costs associated with accessing settlement, health and other services.

- (6) Expand **English and employment training** either in the refugee camps or during the first year after arrival. Within the camps, for example, respondents asserted a need for the provision of English language classes (regardless of age) that have more emphasis on spoken, as opposed to written, English.
- (7) Provide more **accurate pre-departure information** about employment and housing within the refugee camps so people are more prepared when they arrive in Canada. This may include emphasizing the need to learn English, as well as difficulties that may be experienced (e.g. housing, employment).

Ministry of Housing and Social Development (MHSD)

Short-term

- (1) In partnership with Immigrant Services Society of BC, BC Housing should **arrange periodic first language information sessions** for GARs to explain about housing assistance programs, including both BC Housing and the BC Rental Assistance Programs (BC-RAP) and assist those who are interested in filling out applications. All families are experiencing over crowding and affordability problems.
- (2) **Translate documents into appropriate languages** (e.g. Po, Arabic, Nuer). This may include, but is not limited to, information about the availability of subsidized housing and other programs, applications, and other Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ). Recognition that many of the refugees may be first language illiterate, however, necessitates other approaches be considered. While this may include the production of written documents illustrated with pictures and diagrams as deemed appropriate, it may also require the provision of workshops and other classes after arrival.
- (3) With respect to BC Housing, there is a need to **make the assignment of available units a more transparent process**. If building managers are to continue interviewing potential tenants to choose the ‘most suitable’ family, respondent should be made aware of the process in advance to prevent misunderstandings. Further, those tenants who are not given the unit should be provided with written reasons as to why they were not successful candidates so as to enable them to (where possible) to be more successful on subsequent interviews.

Long-term

- (4) **Build more social housing**, including larger units, to alleviate waitlists as there have been no new social housing units built in Vancouver since 1996.

- (5) Explore **alternative housing delivery models**, such as modular housing models that are less expensive to build and can be situated throughout Surrey.
- (6) At present, the BC Rental Assistance Program (BC-RAP) has a one year residency requirement. Recommend MHSD recognize GARs as a special group and **eliminate the residency requirement**.
- (7) The arrival of households with larger than Canadian average households presents challenges for procuring existing BC Housing units owing to the paucity of 3 and 4 bedroom (or larger) units. As buildings are being renovated BC Housing could consider **converting some of the existing units into larger spaces** (e.g. by combining two 2 bedroom units). The recent provision of funding from the Federal Government to upgrade and repair existing units may be a source of funding for this venture.
- (8) **Raise the income support rates** for low income, underemployed BC residents including GARs who often utilize provincial income support after their first year in Canada. Include higher **transportation allowances** for all members of low income families.

Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development (Immigrant Integration Branch - IIB)

Short-term

- (1) IIB should **explore targeted funding for housing search settlement specialists** – a mobile team that would provide additional support to GARs during their first three years in Canada within Metro Vancouver and other key immigrant receiving cities in BC.
- (2) Fund a **discussion paper exploring the feasibility of a ‘Family-Host Housing Program’ (FHHP)** which would house refugees in the homes of Canadian families. Expanding the existing Community Bridging Program to include housing would facilitate access to housing and ongoing support. Further, distributing newly arrived refugees throughout cities would lessen the pressure on overcrowded schools in low income neighbourhoods.

Long-term

- (3) Establish a program similar to the Provincial Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development, Immigration Division funded Step Ahead program (e.g. with a lead agency and consortium) that focuses upon **housing and housing support**.

Step Ahead is a Settlement Enhancement Program that provides settlement outreach (e.g. refer to appropriate programs/services or provide accompaniment) to multi-barriered GAR households.

- (4) Provide **funding to all family members to alleviate transportation costs** (e.g. bus tickets, monthly bus pass while in school) for low income newcomers accessing English Language Services for Adults (ELSA) classes.
- (5) Allocate funding for **pre-employment skill based training programs** for low skilled GARs. GARs would benefit from skill based training programs that combine ESL, skills training, and work placement.

City of Surrey

Short-term

- (1) **Increased education** on refugee issues for municipally funded services (e.g. libraries, fire departments, and police).
- (2) **Encourage greater community understanding** of the experiences of refugees, for example, by hosting a Canadian Red Cross “A Story to Tell and a Place for the Telling” dialogue. Host an annual special ceremony /reception at City Hall to mark World Refugee Day on June 20.
- (3) **Promote the Community Bridging/Host program** (eg ISSofBC Host Program for Refugees, DIVERSEcity Host Program) which links volunteers (either Canadian-born or those who have been in Canada for a number of years) with new arrivals. The City of Surrey could promote volunteering to support newly arrived immigrants and refugees settling in Surrey by including information about the Host program on the ‘Surrey Page’ of local newspapers (e.g. through a ‘Help make Surrey feel like home’ campaign).
- (4) **Introductory letter to be translated and given to refugees settling in Surrey**, as well as post it on City of Surrey website. The letter could identify services, ECD programs, and may include maps outlining available services, parks, etc. This would also benefit the larger newcomer population, including both foreign- and Canadian-born populations. In so doing, it would build upon the Welcoming and Inclusive Communities and Workplaces Program (WICWP), a provincially funded program supporting initiatives (including knowledge transfer, public education, research and other special activities) that help build a more welcoming and inclusive community for immigrants and refugees.

- (5) **Post this report on the City of Surrey website as well as disseminate the report to key stakeholders** including other Metro Vancouver Mayors, Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, BC Housing and the Ministers of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development and Housing and Social Development.

Long-term

- (6) Create and distribute a **Newcomers Guide to Surrey** brochure based on existing guides (e.g. City of Vancouver, Richmond). Again, this would benefit foreign- and Canadian-born alike, and allow newcomers to familiarize themselves with the City. Possible information to be provided may include the availability of Leisure Passes for Low-income households.
- (7) Create a **multilingual “Welcome to Surrey” rotating sign** on the City’s website as an important symbol of outreaching to newcomers who do not speak English while building the foundation for a more welcoming and inclusive city.
- (8) Encourage Surrey’s Mayor and Council to **lobby the UBCM / FCM to join the campaign to eliminate Government Transportation Loans** for refugees to Canada.

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Appendix A: Review of Existing Literature

Recent research undertaken in Metro Vancouver converges on the difficulties faced by refugee newcomers in obtaining adequate and affordable housing (Francis forthcoming; Sherrell 2007; McLean et al. 2006; Cubie 2006). For many, the difficulties imposed by low workforce participation, insufficient social assistance rates and a tight rental market frequently intersect with other barriers to make it more difficult to obtain housing. The combination of these factors has been found to necessitate reliance on various informal strategies, such as doubling up or in some cases entire families renting a single bedroom in a house for a family of 4. In their study of Acehnese GARs arriving in 2006, for example, McLean et al. (2006) found over 80% of respondents report living in overcrowded housing conditions; one in five were living in households of 3 or more people per room.

Settling In: Newcomers in the Canadian Housing Market 2001-2005

In this study, Hiebert and Mendez (2008) extend their previous analyses of the experiences of newcomers in Canada's housing market (cf., Mendez, Hiebert and Wyly 2006) through analysis of Wave 3 of the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada (LSIC). Results from wave 3 of LSIC show the proclivity of refugee households to live in crowded conditions is three-times that of economic class immigrants (Hiebert and Mendez 2008). Although the housing affordability challenges faced by refugees have been shown to improve over time – from 14.8% spending less than 30% of household income on housing in Wave 1 to 48.4% in Wave 3 – it is important to note that one in five refugees in Vancouver continues to spend over half of monthly household income on housing four years after arrival. Further, while government-assisted refugees receive financial support upon arrival through the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) the rate is still too low to obtain housing in the context of Metro Vancouver's high rental prices.

Although homeownership rates for refugees in Vancouver have increased in the first four years since arrival, results from wave 3 show that refugees continue to experience the worst degree of crowding, and serious affordability problems. Four years after arrival, one in five refugees in Vancouver continues to spend upwards of 50% of monthly household income on housing. While refugees have been shown to have a progressive housing career over the first four years, they continue to experience many challenges that require further attention.

New Beginnings: Insights of Government-Assisted Refugees in BC into their Settlement Outcomes

This report presents the findings of a study conducted by Dug Cubie and the Immigrant Services Society of British Columbia (ISS_{of}BC, 2006) on government-assisted refugees who arrived in Vancouver, BC during 2003 and 2005. The report interviewed 152 GARs, or approximately 10% of GARs arriving during those two calendar years. Twenty-two percent (22%) of respondents

lived in Surrey at the time of the interview. Results from the study reveal low labour force participation and continued reliance on government-assistance as the main source of income. While high unemployment and reliance on government transfers is not unexpected among those arriving in 2005, as many were still receiving RAP funding at the time of the interview, over half of respondents who arrived in 2003 continue to report being unemployed.

All respondents continued to live in rental housing, marked by crowding and affordability challenges. Almost 40% of respondents reported their accommodations were not comfortable and/or appropriate for their family, citing overcrowding and problems in reconciling low incomes and high rents as the most significant issues. Although the majority of respondents live in households with 6 or more people, for example, over 90% live in housing with 3 bedrooms or less. Affordability challenges are widespread, with over half of all respondents spending upwards of 50% of household income on housing. Almost one-third report spending upwards of 60% of monthly household income on housing, leaving them precariously housed and at-risk of absolute homelessness. Further, insufficient RAP assistance rates meant that one-quarter of all respondents had to rely on food banks during their first year after arrival.

In spite of having encountered difficulties with housing (e.g. problems with landlords, leases, etc), many had not sought assistance from anyone. Those seeking assistance had done so from a variety of sources, including ISS of BC staff, building managers, landlords, religious organizations, and social workers.

A comparative analysis of housing trajectories of government-assisted refugees and refugee claimants in two Canadian CMAs

Drawing on 80 interviews with refugees (40 in each city) and 21 key informant interviews in Vancouver, BC and Winnipeg, MB (40 in each city), Sherrell (2008) examines the intersections of legal status, policy environment and local context. In so doing, the research considers the extent to which the housing trajectories of government-assisted refugees (GARs) and refugee claimants (RCs) are influenced by their local environments. Results indicate that GARs and RCs are experiencing housing affordability problems in Winnipeg and Vancouver owing to low employment participation, high housing prices and insufficient social assistance rates. While housing affordability is an issue for respondents in both cities, the affordability problems are most severe in Vancouver. Approximately three-quarters of respondents, for example, do not meet national affordability standards (defined as spending $\leq 30\%$ of monthly household income on housing), a problem that is most severe for refugee claimants.

Consideration of the experiences of Sudanese and Afghan GARs in Vancouver suggests that while place plays a key role in housing outcomes, certain groups face barriers beyond legal status and place, owing to characteristics of the group itself. Those with low educational levels, large household sizes, and/or chronic medical problems face barriers that may be difficult, if not

impossible, to overcome. In Vancouver, group characteristics intersect with local context (e.g., low vacancy rates, rising rents, small stock of 4 and 5 bedroom units) to create additional problems for these groups.

Discriminatory behaviour by landlords and building managers in the private market makes obtaining housing even more difficult. While the type of discrimination varied people spoke of problems relating to size of family, presence of children, source of income and legal status. As vacancies have fallen in both cities it appears that landlords have more freedom to select tenants, exacerbating an already difficult situation for large families with low incomes to find housing.

“You can not settle like this”: The housing situation of African refugees in Metro Vancouver

Francis (forthcoming) undertook a study of the housing outcomes of African newcomers in M Vancouver. In total, 65 newcomers of African Origin who had arrived in Greater Vancouver within the previous five years were interviewed. Almost 90% were refugees (either GARs, PSRs or RCs). Approximately one-quarter of her respondents lived in Surrey at the time of the interview. While not specific to Surrey, Francis’ findings are significant because 40% of refugees settling in Surrey between 2004 and 2008 were of African origin. Respondents experienced difficulties in obtaining employment, with over half of all GARs reporting they had not worked since their arrival in Vancouver. The outcome for the majority of respondents interviewed by Francis (forthcoming) is of overcrowded, insecure and poorly maintained housing. Over 90% of respondents reported renting their housing; GARs most likely of all groups to report experiencing high to extreme housing stress (76% for GARs/PSRs compared to 46% for refugee claimants).

The First 365 Days: Acehnese Refugees in Vancouver, BC

Drawing upon 70 individual survey responses and five focus groups (made up of 47 participants) with Acehnese refugees in Vancouver, McLean et al. (2006) examines the outcomes of a unique policy decision to settle an entire group of refugees in the same urban area. In so doing, it assesses the challenges and successes of this particular refugee settlement process and provides an overview of the first year of settlement.

Although there continues to be a programmatic separation between English and employment, respondents view them as related, and expressed their desire for integrated employment and language training. Respondents expressed difficulties in obtaining stable self-sufficient employment in the absence of English language proficiency and difficulties in accessing English and employment-related programs (e.g. owing to waitlists, lack of eligibility, etc). All Acehnese refugees surveyed reported difficulties in obtaining employment; none were successful in obtaining full-time employment within the first year.

High rents and low incomes have resulted in widespread housing affordability challenges among Acehnese refugees. The need to double – and in some cases triple – up to obtain more affordable housing has meant that over 80% of respondents report living in overcrowded housing conditions. More than one in five Acehnese report living with three or more people per room. Further, although assistance is provided by ISS of BC Welcome House facility in obtaining the first permanent accommodations, pressure to move quickly means the housing obtained is not always suitable. Consequently some spoke of having engaged in secondary migration to obtain housing that better met their expectations and needs elsewhere in Metro Vancouver. Provision of housing information is central to resettlement, yet funding remains limited to provide this service. Respondents identified the need for access to detailed and up-to-date information on housing (e.g. where to get help, how much to expect to pay). While affordability remains the key criteria for decisions relating to housing, proximity to transit and schools were also significant.

On the Outside Looking In: The Precarious Housing Situations of Successful Refugee Claimants in the GVRD

In this article, Sherrell et al. (2007) examine the results of a 2005 study on the extent and profile of absolute and relative homelessness among immigrants and refugees in the GVRD (Hiebert, D'Addario and Sherrell 2005). Although findings from the larger study (Hiebert et al. 2005) reveal that immigrants and refugees are under-represented in the shelter population, closer examination of the numbers reveals that while immigrants as a whole are underrepresented among the absolute homelessness, refugees may be over-represented.

In the housing survey, both immigrants and refugees alike identified *language* and *size of family* as the greatest obstacles in finding housing. Refugees were twice as likely as the total respondent group to cite language as a barrier in accessing housing (76 and 36 percent respectively). Lack of proficiency in English can increase barriers owing to the potential inability to read classifieds or negotiate rental contracts with landlords, a barrier that is not necessarily experienced by others in Vancouver's aggressive housing market. Thirty-four percent of refugees in the housing study cited size of family as a barrier, while a number of claimants raised this issue spontaneously in the individual interviews. Difficulties in obtaining adequately sized housing owing to a lack of affordable units of sufficient size, as well as the unwillingness of landlords to ignore occupancy standards may be compounded by policies prohibiting children, owing to concerns about increased wear and tear on the units. The affordability challenges experienced by immigrants and refugees in the study are staggering: at the time of the study less than one-quarter of respondents report meeting national affordability standards (defined as spending $\leq 30\%$ of monthly household income on housing).

Research conclusions:

Research on the housing outcomes of immigrants and refugees in Metro Vancouver has increased dramatically over the last five years. Both large scale analyses, such as the LSIC analyzed by Mendez and Hiebert (2008), and smaller scale, qualitative analyses, such as those by Sherrell (2008), Cubie (2006), McLean et al. (2006) and Francis (forthcoming) identify significant challenges among refugees in Metro Vancouver. Findings converge on three main themes:

- Refugees primarily continue to live in rental housing within the private market and display the lowest homeownership rates of all newcomers;
- Refugees are experiencing considerable affordability challenges owing to low employment participation, continued reliance on government transfers (e.g. RAP, MHSD), and/or employment in minimum wage, part-time jobs; and
- Low incomes, high rents and, for some, large household sizes have contributed to significant overcrowding problems among refugee households.

Appendix B: Summary Data of 2004-2008 GARs by Source Country

	Country of Origin				
	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Afghanistan	20	11	20	31	8
Burundi				20	
Colombia	15	12	35	<10	<10
Congo		11			<10
DRC					24
Eritrea					<10
Ethiopia	<10		<10	<10	28
Indonesia	21	<10			
Iran	<10	<10	<10	<10	<10
Iraq	17	<10		<10	50
Liberia	11	28	14		<10
Morocco	<10				
Myanmar	<10		110	106	55
Nigeria				<10	
Pakistan		<10			<10
Rwanda				<10	<10
Sierra Leone	<10		<10	<10	
Somalia	17	34	<10	29	29
Sri Lanka	<10	<10	<10		
Sudan	10	51	13		17
Togo					18
Uganda					16
Zimbabwe				<10	
Total	145	162	223	216	269

Values <10 have been suppressed to ensure confidentiality

Appendix C: Financial Assistance – RAP and MHSD

Monthly Shelter, Food and Basic Needs Assistance for RAP (ISSBC 2009)²⁵			
	Shelter Maximum	Food	Total
Individual	\$375	\$235	\$610.00
Family of 2	\$570	\$307	\$877.00
Family of 3	\$660	\$508	\$1168.00
Family of 4	\$700	\$615	\$1315.00
Family of 5	\$750	\$722	\$1472.00
Family of 6	\$785	\$829	\$1614.00
Family of 7	\$820	\$936	\$1756.00

MHSD Basic and Shelter Support Rates (MHSD, 2007)			
	Shelter Maximum	Food	Total
Individual	\$375	\$235	\$610.00
Family of 2	\$570	\$307	\$877.00
Family of 3	\$660	\$401	\$1061.00
Family of 4	\$700	\$401	\$1101.00
Family of 5	\$750	\$401	\$1151.00
Family of 6	\$785	\$401	\$1186.00
Family of 7	\$820	\$401	\$1221.00

²⁵ Single parents receive slightly more funding. For example, a single parent household with 7 people would receive \$1834, compared to \$1756 for a 7 person household.