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In search of a "home": Comparing the housing challenges experienced by recently arrived Yazidi and Syrian refugees in Canada

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Abstract

Housing that is affordable and appropriate is a necessity for successful integration for all newcomers. It is not uncommon for newcomers to Canada to report difficulties finding suitable, safe, and affordable housing for their families. For refugees, however, the challenges are sometimes greater. Settlement organizations and refugee sponsors experience various challenges in accommodating families with large numbers of children, but as our research shows, refugee groups have differing needs based on their culture, family composition, and experience of trauma. Using data collected from two recent studies, we identify and compare the housing needs of two newly arrived groups of refugees to Canada: Syrians and Yazidis from northern Iraq. All participants in our study have lived in Canada for 2 years or less and currently live in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, or Ontario. Data was collected either by face-to-face surveys (with Syrian participants) or unstructured interviews (with Yazidi women) conducted in Arabic, Kurmanji, or English. We discuss their experiences of living in resettlement centers and their transition to independent housing. In addition, we discuss how family composition and previous trauma influence their housing experiences with special attention to how increasing agency increases satisfaction with housing.

Keywords: Canada; resettlement; Syrian refugee; temporary and permanent housing needs; Yazidi Refugees

For refugees, housing is an essential first step toward successful settlement and integration. It is the first place where they may begin to feel safe and protected after fleeing their home country. Not only is it important to find suitable permanent housing for refugees, but integration begins from where they spend their very first night in Canada. Before discussing the housing strategies used to resettle refugees, it is necessary to define the two predominant categories of refugees in Canada as these categories reflect different housing experiences.

Refugees are resettled in Canada through several programs, the two largest are the Government Assisted Refugee (GAR) and the Privately Sponsored Refugee

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(PSR) Programs.[1] Each group receives varied levels of support and assistance in various aspects of integrating into society. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) refers GARs for resettlement in Canada and this group is provided with financial assistance from the federal government for 1 year and settlement assistance through the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP; Government of Canada, 2018a; UNHCR 2018). After their arrival, GARs are provided with temporary accommodation in reception centers during the first few weeks in Canada. These accommodations are arranged by the settlement organizations until permanent housing is secured (UNHCR, 2016). Almost all of the GARs arriving in the country had their first "experience" of Canada in a reception house (Wilkinson et al., 2017). The RAP providers help this group locate suitable permanent housing within the first 2 months of arrival. PSRs, conversely, usually enter permanent housing upon their arrival to Canada because their sponsors have already arranged for accommodation as part of the arrival procedures.

Despite the housing differences dictated by the arrival category, GARs and PSRs have some similarities. Having experienced varying degrees of trauma, torture, and loss of property, RAP and private sponsors try to ensure that first housing is located nearby important amenities such clinics, settlement support centers, schools, and transport systems. In some cases, refugees may prefer having other refugee families living close by (Carter & Osborne, 2009) but in other cases prefer to live further apart (Wilkinson, Bhattacharyya, Riziki, & Karim, 2019). Affordability is a greater concern for refugees than for other types of newcomers (Francis, 2010; Wayland, 2007) due to their larger family size and weaker financial conditions. Factors such as social status, ethnicity, gender, economic resources, cultural norms about homeownership, household size, the presence of social networks, family composition such as presence and absence of children, and male- or female-headed families, are additional considerations which we discuss below (Carter, Polevychok, Friesen, & Osborne, 2008; Murdie et al., 2006; Wilkinson, Bhattacharyya, et al., 2017).

This paper examines the temporary and permanent housing experiences of two recently arrived refugee groups to Canada. We used both quantitative and qualitative methods to identify and examine the challenges faced by the Syrian and Yazidi refugees in locating affordable permanent housing in Canada. In our paper, we learn about the transition from federal government financial assistance to provincial assistance and how this influences housing among refugees. We also examine the shelter-to-housing ratio in order to establish the extent to which these refugee families are able to avoid housing crises as they resettle in Canada.

The two studies are complimentary using qualitative and quantitative means to identify issues related to housing inadequacy and affordability. Factors such as levels of prearrival trauma, female- versus male-headed families, and number of children have an impact on housing and the information gathered from surveys provide different but supporting information to the data collected from unstructured interviews. The studies focus on Syrians and Yazidis—two different ethnic groups who arrived in Canada within 2 years of one another. This comparison is important for policy recommendations signifying "one model of resettlement" do not fit the varied needs of different groups of refugees.

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Demographic characteristics of Syrians and Yazidis in Canada

In late 2015 and throughout 2016, over 46,000 refugees entered the country, the majority being Syrian who resettled by the end of February 2016 (IRCC, 2020). About one-third were privately sponsored (PSR) while the other two-thirds were assisted by the government (GAR). The war in Syria has been well-documented and is currently ongoing, displacing over half of the country's population. One year later, the Canadian government resettled approximately 1,300 Yazidis (IRCC, 2020), mainly female-headed households and their children. This group is largely composed of GARs but there are a small number of PSRs. The Yazidis are a long-persecuted minority group located mainly in northeastern Iraq.[2] In August 2014, thousands died in a Daesh attack in the Sinjar Mountains in Iraq. Men and teenage boys were separated from their families and killed. The surviving women and children were captured and many were kept as sex slaves for several months and some for much longer. Today, the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHCHR, n.d.) estimates that over 3,000 women and children remain missing or in captivity.

Although there are a number of similarities between the Syrians and Yazidis who resettled in Canada, there are some differences. As with other refugees, resettlement for the Syrians focused on those considered to be the most vulnerable and at most risk: children, single female-headed families, and larger family units who could not be successfully resettled in other countries (Houle, 2019). Most of the resettled Syrians were couples with children under the age of 15 years (85%), although there were more men than women during that period which is slightly unusual (Houle, 2019). The level of education at arrival of the Syrians was lower than refugees who had arrived in Canada previously. Of the Syrian GARs, 3% had a university degree, while 25% of the PSRs had a university degree. Few Syrians had knowledge of French or English prior to their arrival to Canada. According to Houle (2019), 55% of the Syrian refugees were not fluent in either official language. Syrian PSRs, however, were more likely than GARs to have some knowledge of English or French prior to their arrival.

The Yazidis who were resettled in Canada during 2017–2018 have some similar demographic characteristics to the Syrians. They are a youthful population, with 70% under the age of 30 (Wilkinson et al., 2019). In regard to the family structure, the demographics are different with the Yazidis more likely to have fractured families but with larger numbers of children than the Syrians. Unlike the Syrians where there are more males, the Yazidis settling in Canada have larger numbers of females, largely due to the genocide that focused on killing male Yazidis (Harris, 2017; IRCC 2018, personal communication; Cairo Review, 2016).

Previous studies have shown that the Yazidis, especially females, were less likely to have formal education (Akin, 2011; Wilkinson et al., 2019) than other refugees, mainly because of the intergenerational persecutions they faced in their home countries and also the fact that formal education in Kurmanji is difficult to acquire (Wilkinson et al., 2019). Low levels of prearrival education also mean low levels of prearrival knowledge of English or French. Further complicating matters, the Yazidis were relocated to Canada very quickly compared to other groups of refugees, some as fast as 2 weeks after their release from captivity. This is highly unusual as most refugees must wait years for resettlement.

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Common housing challenges faced by refugees in Canada

Newcomers, especially refugees, face a range of barriers to finding permanent housing. Refugees with large families tend to face more housing challenges (Francis & Hiebert, 2014; Wilkinson, et al., 2019). Most Canadian dwellings are not designed for large families, which may cause illegal living and overcrowding while accommodating refugees. Other challenges include finding housing in good condition, suitable for large families, and located in a safe central neighborhood (Carter, Polevychok, & Osborne, 2009; Francis & Hiebert, 2014; Sherrell, 2009). Often, refugees have fewer choices in the housing they can select because of size and affordability issues (Francis, 2009; Netto, 2011).

Unfortunately, some of these barriers involve race, ethnicity, gender, age, and disability. Researchers have identified several instances where landlords' prejudices have denied refugees housing opportunities (Mensah & William, 2013; Murdie, Preston, & Ghosh, 2006; Netto, 2011; Teixeira, 2014; Wayland, 2007). Studies in Canada and elsewhere have detailed the difficulties African immigrants and refugees experience when trying to rent an apartment (Preston, Murdies, & Murnaghan, 2006; Xie & Zhou, 2012). In a study of Somali and Ghanaian immigrants in Toronto, Mensah and Williams (2013) found that just over one-quarter of Somalis and 15% of Ghanaians had someone without an accent make arrangements to view apartments to avoid being told "the apartment is already rented." Another 15% altered their accent at the time of the viewing. Thirty percent of Somali and 7% of Ghanaians left some or all of their children at home when they viewed apartments. Stunningly, two-thirds of Mensah and Williams's study participants felt discriminated against when they searched for housing.

Women tend to face more challenges in locating housing in Canada (National Housing Strategy, 2018). Vertovec and his colleagues (2019) noted women from West Asian countries experience barriers in acquiring rental housing in Vancouver. Their results show that almost no West Asian refugee women owned a home and less than 5% had affordable housing, although the outlook for West Asian refugee men was not much better with less than 10% having access to affordable housing (Vertovec, Hiebert, Gamlen, & Spoonley, 2019). Ghosh's (2015) study found that Sri Lankan Tamil refugees and immigrants experienced affordability concerns, with more than half paying 30% or more of their monthly income toward rent and another one-fifth paying more than 50% of their incomes toward rent. When a family spends more than 50% of their income on rent, they are in significant danger of losing their accommodation due to affordability (Murdie, 2008). The federal government acknowledges that the funding provided to newly arrived refugees is often inadequate (IRCC, 2015). In their review of the Refugee Assistance Program (IRCC, 2015), 46% of GARs reported that the financial assistance provided by the Refugee Assistance Program (RAP) did not meet their basic needs and they mostly had to depend on food banks for compensating other basic necessities. The situation is a bit different for PSRs, only 13% felt that their sponsors' income support was not enough to cover their daily expenses (IRCC, 2015).

Affordability usually plays a major role in newcomer's satisfaction with housing, and the trade-off for acquiring affordable housing usually means settling further away from much needed settlement services (Carter et al., 2009). Affordable housing

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is not usually conveniently located near schools, grocery stores, settlement services, and jobs. Instead, these units tend to be segregated in particular geographic locations, creating ghettos and even greater marginalization into areas with insecurity and limited resources (Carter et al., 2009). In addition, some neighborhoods are located in what geographers call "food deserts" whereby little variety in healthy, nutritious food choices is offered. These food deserts do not have grocery stores. Instead, the neighborhood is full of convenience stores that sell junk food at low prices and nutritious food at high prices. Acquiring healthier food involves traveling long distances that incur added costs of living (Larsen & Gilliland, 2008).

There are, however, other challenges unique to refugees in their quest to locate suitable housing. Canada accepted larger refugee families when settling the Syrians and Yazidis, but locating housing for larger-than-average families posed critical challenges for the settlement providers (Rose, 2019). For example, there are national occupancy rules that must be followed when renting apartments or houses. Conditions include no more than two persons per bedroom, parents do not share a bedroom with children, and dependents of the opposite sex do not share a bedroom (BC Housing, 2015). Arnault and Merali (2019) found that some families tried to circumvent these rules by reducing the number of children they reported on rental agreements. This tactic often ends poorly when landlords eventually discover that their tenants are breaking national occupancy rules and evict them. This puts the family in jeopardy of homelessness as they must find larger and suitable accommodation on very short notice.

There is also a high demand among refugees to live closer to one another. The Canadian approach to housing refugees closely together is given priority unlike Denmark, Germany, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, and Finland, which have resettlement policies that prioritize dispersing refugees throughout the region (Larsen, 2011). Their rationale is that the refugees would learn the language, customs, and way of life faster when they rely on the host society for assistance rather than on their coethnic families. This system might be better in the long run, but in the short term, for families who do not speak the local language, living in close proximity might help mitigate some of the immediate and short-term challenges they face in resettling (Wilkinson, Bhattacharyya, et al., 2017; Wilkinson et al., 2019).

An additional housing difficulty involves basement suite apartments. In some instances, refugees are housed in basement suites in an effort to create space for large families. Although more affordable, evidence suggests that some refugees find the conditions traumatizing (Rose & Charette, 2014; Teixeira, 2014; Wilkinson, Garcea, et al., 2017). Basement suites are particularly troublesome as they are located fully or partially below ground, which mimics the detention conditions many former refugees have experienced. Despite the fact that this environment might retraumatize former refugees, many are forced to live in basement suites as they are the only affordable housing alternatives available (Wilkinson, Garcea, et al., 2017).

Language is also a barrier in communicating to landlords regarding problems with the unit, understanding national occupancy standards, or accessing vital information for resettlement (Francis, 2010; Francis & Hiebert, 2014; Ghosh, 2015). GARs mainly depend on service providers for assistance in selecting their permanent housing and most communications are done through them. When a problem

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arises with the rental unit, many refugees count on their settlement service providers to assist but sometimes they are not available. This causes difficulties in negotiating the rental price and communicating problems to the landlord. There is evidence that some landlords do not rent to persons with accents and this increases the challenges in locating affordable housing (Ghosh, 2015).

Methodology

In this paper, we used data from two studies: a study on Syrian refugees (Bhattacharyya, Riziki, Songose, Ogoe, & Wilkinson, 2020; Wilkinson, Garcea, et al., 2017) conducted in March 2017 and a study on Yazidi refugees (Bhattacharyya, Ogoe, Riziki, Songose, & Wilkinson, 2020; Wilkinson et al., 2019) conducted in March 2018. Both studies were funded entirely by Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada—Integration Branch (Prairies Region) and concerned resettlement conditions such as experience in the reception centers, current housing conditions, language class attendance, prearrival knowledge of English, prearrival employment history and accessibility of employment services, prearrival orientation, postarrival settlement service use, general health-related service accessibility, and various demographic questions.

The Syrian study was a short survey conducted in English or Arabic in March 2017 with 624 participants living in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. This number represents 18% of all Syrians who arrived in Canada during the previous 16 months. Participants were invited to participate in the study by their local RAP service providers. The RAP providers identified and approached potential participants for the survey team. Study participants were all aged 18 and above, and one participant per household was interviewed in person either at the RAP agency or in their home. The Syrian survey was conducted in Arabic for almost all participants with few respondents who preferred English over Arabic. Content for the survey was prepared with consultation of an advisory committee and an independent Arabic-speaking translator translated it, along with the consent form and recruitment script.

The characteristics of the people who participated in the Syrian survey were mainly GARs (90%), but about 10% of participants were PSRs. In addition, the participants had mixed demographic characteristics with 82% dual-parent (presence of both the parents in the household) families with five or more children. Those who were single or never married were 11%, and participants who were living in common law were 4%. The remaining 4% indicated widowed, divorced, or separated as their current marital status.

The Yazidi study used unstructured interviews conducted in Kurmanji with 35 participants living in Ontario, Alberta, or Manitoba. All the participants came from northern Iraq. As with the Syrian study, the Yazidi participants were identified by the four RAP agencies. Settlement workers explained the study to the participants and arranged appointments for our Yazidi interviewer. Interviews were conducted in four different cities: 6 interviews in Calgary, 10 interviews in London, 9 interviews in Toronto, and 10 interviews in Winnipeg. An advisory committee assisted the team in developing the interview guide while an independent Kurmanji-speaking translator was hired to translate it, the consent form, and the recruitment script.

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Table 1. Demographic characteristics of Yazidi and Syrian research participants

	YAZIDIS	SYRIANS
Sex	66% female	42% female
Age	45% age 20–29 years	57% below 25 years
No formal schooling	50%	23%
GARs	100%	88%
Average no of family size	5.5	5.5
Average no of children in the families	3	4
Knowledge of English	0%	11%
Months in Canada	0–14 months	57% in Canada for 12 months; 21% are "new" (0–5 months)

To increase reliability, a different Kurmanji-speaking interpreter was appointed for cross-checking the translated transcripts with the voice recordings. The Yazidi participants who took part in the study had arrived to Canada within the last 14 months. All the Yazidi participants were GARs. In addition, the participants were mainly single-headed female households with three children on average, and had immediate family still in captivity or presumed deceased.

Nationally, GARs make up 67% of new arrivals (Wrzesnewskyj, 2016). The participants in our two studies reflect that national distribution especially since we used RAP providers to help identify potential participants. Table 1 shows the demographic differences and similarities between the Yazidi and Syrian study participants. Two-thirds of our Yazidi participants were females between the ages of 20 and 29 years compared to 42% females in our Syrian study who were below 25 years. Syrian families had, on average, 4 children in the household, compared with Yazidi families having 3 children on average. Average household size was similar at 5.5 persons per unit. For the Yazidis, household units comprised multiple families. For example, two sisters and their children living together would comprise an "average" household unit among the Yazidis. This is due to the large number of separated families and the genocide of male family members. In comparison, the "average" Syrian household consisted of what Westerners consider a "nuclear" family unit.

Findings

Temporary housing

Most GARs, upon their initial arrival to Canada, stay in temporary housing. Their stays are short, usually 2 months or less until more suitable permanent housing can be located. Most of the time, temporary housing is provided by RAP agencies, and housing is usually communal where families stay in a small apartment-like or bedroom-style unit in a commonly shared building with shared laundry. PSRs normally have their rental accommodations identified prior to their arrival to Canada.

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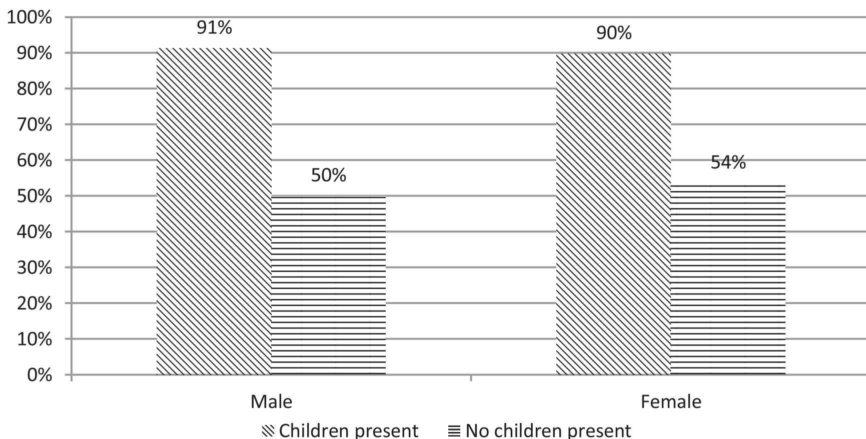

Figure 1. Syrian refugees placed in temporary accommodation upon arrival by sex and presence of children, 2017. χ^2 male = 39.33, $p < .01$. χ^2 female = 26.75 $p < .01$.

As most of the Yazidis who arrived in Canada were GARs, most of them spent some time in temporary accommodation.[3] The arrival of 25,000 Syrians in a short period of time meant that many of them spent time in temporary accommodation as well (Houle, 2019; Wrzesnewskyj, 2016).

Our study on Syrians in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta reveals that the vast majority (87.5%) spent time in temporary accommodation upon arrival. Because of the large numbers of people who arrived within a 6-week period, existing temporary housing units large enough to accommodate refugees were oversubscribed so hotels were commonly used to manage the new arrivals. We found the average number of days spent in temporary accommodation to be 16.5 days with a maximum stay of 3 months. As we did not have comparable data for the Yazidis, we relied on reports from the RAP service providers. They indicated that the goal was to have the Yazidis stay in temporary accommodation for a month or less, though sometimes it was difficult to locate suitable accommodation, particularly for large families, so some of our study participants stayed in temporary accommodation for about 2 months (Wilkinson et al., 2019).

Having children in the household makes a difference in whether or not a refugee stayed in temporary accommodation, at least for the Syrians. Figure 1 shows that while over 90% of those Syrians with children stayed in temporary accommodation, only 50% of those without children stayed there. Among those who stayed in temporary accommodation, those without children stayed, on average, only 9 days compared to those with children having an average stay of 17 days. There is a statistically significant difference between Syrian male (χ^2 male = 39.33, $p < .01$) and female (χ^2 female = 26.75, $p < .01$) refugees and that there exists a relationship between sex and presence of children in the family.

We asked the Syrians to rate their satisfaction on a scale of five with 5 being “very satisfied” and 1 being “very dissatisfied” with their stay in the hotel or temporary accommodation. Two-thirds were extremely satisfied with their stay. Of those

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reporting dissatisfaction, overwhelmingly it was due to concerns about the food served (Wilkinson, Garcea, et al., 2017). For most of the Syrians, staying in a hotel meant that they could not cook their own food. As a result, they were served food that they were not familiar with and suspected it was not Halal. Concerns about the strangeness of the food outnumbered all other concerns such as difficulty communicating with hotel staff and settlement service providers due to language barriers, having a small room to share with the entire family, and that the heaters in the hotel rooms could not keep them warm enough. As such, lack of culturally appropriate food was the root of much of the unhappiness the Syrians expressed when they reflected upon their time in temporary accommodation.

Unlike the Syrians, most of the Yazidis in our study who spent time in temporary accommodation were housed in refugee reception centers run by RAP agencies. These are specially designed complexes with staff having training and experience working with newly arrived refugees. Interviews among the Yazidis informed us on what might make stays in temporary accommodation better for future refugees arriving in Canada. Like the Syrians, there was great dissatisfaction among the Yazidis who had to eat the food cooked for them in a reception center. The participants in Toronto were the most likely to complain that they could not "tolerate" the food. Gesa (female, Toronto) said "the only problem with the reception house was their food. Sometimes we could have Kurdish food then other times it was African food. We weren't used to it, that's all." According to another participant in Toronto, "if I mentioned to the staff about disliking the food they would get mad. My children would go hungry at times. The only thing the agency did was to give us $50 each" (Wejdan; female, Toronto). This funding was used by the mother to purchase food her children would eat. A third participant from Toronto mentioned that she too was unfamiliar with the food and that her children would not eat Chinese food, so they ate elsewhere (Saadia; female, Toronto). Much like the Syrians, the main problem some Yazidi refugees experienced with the food at the reception centers was not due to its quality but due to its cultural "strangeness." Accommodation in temporary RAP-run housing must accommodate all cultures, which means cooking culturally palatable foods can be a great challenge, particularly as most of these institutions are on very tight budgets.

Our Yazidi study revealed that those who could cook for themselves during their temporary shelter stay were much happier with this experience, as identified by the Yazidis living in Winnipeg. However, providing facilities for refugees to cook their own food brought challenges for both the RAP agencies and the refugees themselves. The primary concern cited by the refugees in our study was the size of the kitchen. Almost all of the refugees we interviewed complained that the kitchen facilities were too small, an observation shared by the RAP providers. When we investigated further, the biggest problem was that the facilities did not have enough ovens and stoves. RAP staff members working in reception centers pointed out that the reason for the shortage of stoves was due to the additional electricity required for setting additional cooking units while modifications to the existing structure would be cost prohibitive. To make matters worse, the cooking practices of some Yazidi families are resource intensive. One Yazidi woman told us that "one kitchen for so many people can be a problem. Making food and baking bread is hard to do in one kitchen with so many people" (Manal; female, Winnipeg). Upon further inquiry, we identified the problem; everyone wanted to bake bread at the same time, and

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counter and oven space are limited. There is much "competition" between families at meal time given that everyone wanted to bake their own bread. On the whole, however, the families were more satisfied when they were living in temporary shelters with their own cooking facilities.

Several other problems with temporary housing were identified through our interviews with the Yazidis. Due to the large numbers of incoming refugees in need of temporary housing, stays at reception centers cannot be very long. There was a perception among the Yazidi participants that they were being forced to leave the reception housing and accept more permanent housing before they were ready. One married Yazidi couple in London told us about their time in reception housing, "the only thing that was bad and stressful for us was that we were told 'you have 15 days to find a place or choose a place we provide you, whether you like it or not. If you haven't found a place by then, you'll still have to move out" (Khalaf; male, London). According to information we received from the RAP providers, there are large numbers of refugees and the need for temporary housing outstrips the availability of temporary spaces. RAP staff members in all the cities told us that there was not enough temporary housing to shelter refugees for more than 15 to 30 days.

Another reason settlement service providers are reluctant to provide refugees with accommodation for longer periods of time is the belief that staying in temporary housing for too long delays the integration process. Longer stays in reception centers delayed entrance to English language classes (as they are usually arranged to take place in a location near their permanent residence), delayed the enrollment of their children in school (again for geographic reasons), and increased the uncertainty of actually beginning their new lives in Canada.

Studies show that people experiencing mental distress experience poor health, social and economic outcomes (Brunner, 2017), and settlement policies based on principles that tend to establish "one model" for all, do not take into account the special resettlement needs of refugees, such as women who are single parents facing high levels of trauma. One participant in London, Khalaf, who was single, suggested that the pressure to leave the reception center could be particularly difficult for women. He said,

> It's very hard for the women with children who fled captivity. They came here and they were told if they didn't find a place by the 15th day they must move out whether they've found a place or not. It's easier for me, a man. I am able to do anything and live in any conditions. But these women need extra help. If they take time to find a place it's because they want to be close to their relatives or friends that they have known because they have depression. Some of these women are barely able to care for themselves, let alone their children. They then become rushed to take any place, regardless of how clean or dirty it is. (male, London)

The findings from the Syrian and Yazidi studies indicate that the pressure to locate permanent accommodation can cause some families distress. Larger families tend to stay in reception housing longer than smaller families. Given that the average family size for Syrian and Yazidi families is higher than for Canadian families, it is no surprise that the pressure to locate suitable housing can be daunting.

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Permanent housing

Most refugees must rent their accommodations after they arrived in Canada. Almost all of the participants in the Yazidi and Syrian studies indicated they lived in their own unit, though about 5% of the Syrians indicated that they lived with their sponsors. The average number of people per household in the Syrian study was 5.5, higher than the Canadian average of 2.47[4] (Statistics Canada, 2017a). Only 12% of the participants in the Syrian study were living in households without children or were living alone. The Yazidis tend to have big families as well, but we do not have comparable data for this group.

Among those who indicated their accommodation was not suitable, the two most popular responses were that the size of the accommodation was too small (43%) or that the rent was too expensive (29%). Perhaps a bit surprising, Syrians without children (47%) were more likely to indicate their current house was too small compared to 42% of Syrians with children in the household. This could be due to the fact that sharing space with non-family members is more difficult. Syrians without children (41%) were also more likely than those with children (29%) to indicate their house was too expensive. We later discovered that the child tax benefits given to all Canadian families helped offset the cost of rent for families with children. Families without this benefit often found themselves short of funds or living in overcrowded conditions in order to be able to afford shelter.

Finding affordable housing is extremely difficult for Canadians, so it is not surprising that many refugees have the same problem (Bunting, Walks, & Filion, 2004; Ling, Almeida, & Wei, 2017). All of the participants in the Yazidi study mentioned the high cost of housing and were worried about their economic future. In 2017, the average cost of a one-bedroom apartment in Calgary was $1,247, in Winnipeg it was $1,107, in London it was $1,041 and in Toronto it was $1,404 (CMHC, 2017). The Advocacy Centre for Tenants Ontario (ACTO; 2018) warns, however, that these averages reflect the costs for all renters, including those in long-term rent controlled units. The reality is that the average costs of available rent units are actually about $200 per month higher as few people move out of the cheaper rental units (Wilkinson et al., 2019). According to the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC, 2017), affordable housing is defined as the condition where renters pay less than 30% of their before-tax household income, called the shelter-to-income ratio. This ratio helps determine the “affordability” of accommodation (Statistics Canada, 2016). A person is said to be in extreme financial danger if the shelter-to-income ratio exceeds that number. In Toronto, 46.7% of the population spend more than 30% of their income on rent, in London, that figure is 45%, while in Winnipeg it is 38% and Calgary it is 34% (ACTO, 2018). Nearly 90% of Canadians living below the poverty line are paying rent that exceeds 30% of their income (ACTO, 2018). We do not have comparable information for the Syrians or the Yazidis in our study, but given that rental cost was a major concern, we believe many were experiencing similar shelter-to-income ratios.

Vacancy rates in the rental market are also extremely low in Canada, a problem that is particularly prominent in the large cities. The vacancy rate for apartments in Toronto is less than 1% (Mathieu, 2018). The vacancy rates in London are not much

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better at 1.7% (ACTO, 2018). In Winnipeg, the vacancy rate is 2.8%, while in Calgary it is 6.3% (McNeil, 2017). With vacancy rates this low, finding suitable units that can accommodate large families at a good price is extremely difficult.

Federal and private sponsor funding for newly arrived GARs and PSRs usually ends after 1 year (Report of the Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights, 2016). Our studies show there is much anxiety among some refugees as their federal funding ends after 1 year. In the settlement sector, these worries are articulated in brief by using the term "month 13." They worry that the provincial government funding they will receive at "month 13" will not be adequate to meet their family's monthly expenditures. It is a concern that is tied to the cost of housing, which is perhaps not surprising, because many of the families are already spending more than 30% of their monthly income on rent. "Month 13" is a concern we heard frequently from the Syrian refugees we interviewed. Fear of "month 13" and the financial changes that may occur was also mentioned by some Yazidis but at a lower rate. We suspect that because the interviews with Yazidis took place much earlier in the settlement process compared to when we interviewed the Syrians, the concern over the change over from federal to provincial support had not been realized. Elias, one of the Yazidi participants living in London and just entering "month 13" at the time of the interview, felt he was receiving significantly less funding from the province telling us, "when I was on the federal program I received a little over $1000. Now I receive $700 and something. I'm not sure the exact amount right now" (male, London).

Condition of rental housing was also a concern. Rental units that are less expensive tend to be smaller and in greater need of repairs. Refugees enter this market as other Canadians and find similar problems (Wilkinson et al., 2019). Bed bugs and insects were mentioned by the participants in both studies. When they were asked to specify what was wrong with their current housing, Syrian participants indicated the presence of bed bugs, rats, mice, and insects in their living space. The Yazidis had similar experiences.

> "There are a lot of rats in the house."
>
> Interviewer: "Have you talked to anyone about the rat problems in your home?"
>
> "Yes, I have. They've come and set traps and sprayed it with some sort of chemical but [it is] still there. When I open my kitchen pantry they jump out at me."
>
> Interviewer: "Have you spoken to your worker about your concerns?"
>
> "Yes, I have but it's just being delayed." (Wejdan; female, Toronto).

Others reported the units were in poor shape with broken appliances and fixtures. A Yazidi participant in Toronto told us, "The house is cold, the stove isn't working. The burner exploded on my wife.[5] She's okay though, and the fridge is leaking [but] we are moving soon" (Tujan; male, Toronto). These complaints are similar to those expressed by other Canadians in low-income and precarious housing. Improvements in refugee housing are likely to be beneficial to all Canadians who rely on low-income housing. A few Syrians also indicated that the housing was old and in need of repair. Conversely, the Yazidis lived in overcrowded conditions. A widowed

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mother of six children lived in a two-bedroom apartment in Calgary (Dalal). Another woman in Calgary shared a three-bedroom apartment with seven people (Khawala). A male in Calgary reported: "We are living in a house with me, my mother, two brothers, a sister-in-law and my sister. There are in total 7 people, but one is not a relative. They just put them with us" (Bassil).

Basement suites are often seen as a cost-friendly type of housing for low-income earners (Rose & Charette, 2017; IRCC, 2016a; Ontario Human Rights Commission, n.d.; Wilkinson et al., 2019). Several of the Syrian and Yazidi participants reported that they were currently living in basement suites, and none of the refugees were happy about that. We noticed in our research that a few well-meaning agencies were making appeals to Canadians to offer their basements for rent particularly during the large-scale arrivals of the Syrian refugees. They are among some of the cheapest accommodation options in all four cities, but it is not appropriate to house refugees in basement units because for some, basement suites are linked to memories of torture and captivity (Wilkinson, Garcea, et al., 2017; Wilkinson et al., 2019). Our Yazidi participant, Behi, who was married with six children in Winnipeg and was living in a basement suite, indicated: "My children, my family, were locked away underground for over a year and a half. This is not where I want to live. It is not safe here." Khalida, concurred, telling us: "I cannot be in the basement apartments at all. I was in captivity, held underground for two and a half years. I wasn't allowed to see the light nor the sun." Some of the families complained about living in the basement and worried about break-ins and home invasions. It is understandable that refugees would bring this fear with them to Canada.

Some, but not all refugees, would prefer to live in close proximity to one another. Many recently arrived refugees from Syria and Iraq come from small villages and communities where they are used to living close together (Asher-Schapiro, 2014). In a new country, it is not surprising to want the comfort of living close to people who understand your situation and can speak your language. Zeri, a widow with five children told us: "I like living here a lot. We are surrounded by Yazidis. It's like living in Shengal[6] again. So it's good, we call it Shengal" (female, Winnipeg). In Winnipeg, not unlike the other three cities, Yazidis were settled in two clusters: one in downtown and the other in a complex of apartments in the south end of the city. From our study we found that those living in downtown Winnipeg were less happy with the location of their housing. It was a complaint made by other newcomers as well. When asked about how they felt about downtown, one participant in Winnipeg said: "It's full of problems you know. Why we left Iraq was to get away from the problems" (Amira; female, Winnipeg). The Syrians felt the neighborhood was unsafe due to drunken behavior by their neighbors at night.

Complicating factors include the fact that most of the refugees in our study could not speak English or French prior to their arrival, which is typical of other refugees (Statistics Canada, 2017b). This means that wayfinding, particularly in the early phases of settlement, is difficult. Learning a new language, especially when it involves an entirely new alphabet, can be challenging. Besides the differences in orthography, languages can differ in other components such as sounds of letters and rules by which sentences are constructed (Farran, Bingham, & Mathews, 2012). For instance, an individual who speaks Arabic as their first language may refer to it while learning a second language like English. Because these two languages are unrelated, a learner may

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encounter difficulties acquiring a second language (Sabbah, 2016). This could be due to the typology of English that is classified under the Indo-European family tree whereas Arabic falls within the Afro-Asiatic. This was also evident from our study. Khalida in Winnipeg told us that due to her inability to read and comprehend the Latin alphabet, she had trouble taking the bus or picking up her children from school. She relied heavily on her brother-in-law, whose English was not much better, to help her. Similarly, Dyla told us: "I am done. I am unable to do anything. I don't understand the language and others don't understand my language. Shopping, going to the doctor, locating important places, I am unable to find (them) on my own" (female, Winnipeg).

Some of the Yazidis we interviewed had never attended school. Those who have no or little formal schooling in their mother tongue will have difficulty learning a new language because their foundations in their mother tongue are not fully developed and this presents a challenge with wayfinding in a longer term (Cummins, 2001; Merisuo-Storm, 2007). Not knowing the language presents other difficulties when navigating the new environment. Proximity to grocery stores, schools, health specialists, language classes, and other services is also important to both the Yazidi and Syrian refugees and can be more challenging for those with low levels of language learning (Wilkinson, Garcea, et al., 2017; Wilkinson et al., 2019). Those who are most satisfied with their accommodation tend to live close to these services. A Yazidi respondent from Calgary told us that "we want to continue living here as neighbours are good, buses are close, market is close and banks are close. Thank God we have no difficulties with neighbours and Yazidi members in this community are good" (Khawala; female, Calgary). For those not so lucky to be living close to amenities, their dissatisfaction was apparent: "I am not happy there. The schools, markets ... everything is far for me. I have to use the bus and train to go everywhere and if I could move, I would" (Dalal; female, Calgary).

Discussion

From an integration perspective, it is stressful for refugees to stay in temporary and communal housing for long periods of time because it lengthens the resettlement process. Families cannot start to rebuild their lives and adjust to their new society when they are in a situation they know is temporary. The wait to gain entry into Canada is often years long and at the reception center, their lives are on hold once more, which can add additional stress because it impedes their ability to start integrating in other ways. In our study, parents could not start language training as the location of their classes was tied to the neighborhoods where they would settle permanently. Children could not start school as their school districts were also tied to neighborhoods for the same reasons. For those who stayed in hotels rather than reception centers, the lack of suitable playground space for young children meant long days in small hotel rooms with nowhere to play. Settlement cannot begin when the family is in limbo. Research suggests that the faster a normal routine can be established, the less stressed the family is in the long run (Doyle, Dotsch, Savazzi, & Awamleh, 2015).

Frustration with the length of time living in transitional housing can carry forward into the initial phases of resettlement. Communal living conditions in

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the transition houses were stressful on families who already struggled to adapt to their new lives in Canada. Unfamiliarity with their environment and the cultural foods that were served at reception centers increase uncertainty about their future resettlement added to the problems. A study of refugees in reception centers in Norway is consistent with some of our observations. Terragni et al. (2018) found that there was wastage of food when refugees refused to eat the food that was unfamiliar to them and the children sometimes went hungry. Some parents resorted to purchasing their own food just to establish a normal routine.

The refugee families who stayed in temporary accommodation that allowed them to prepare their own food were more satisfied with their experience. We believe there are two reasons for this. First, the families indicated they felt a stronger sense of agency and independence when they were able to cook for themselves and their families. It gave them a sense of "normalcy" in their first weeks here in Canada. This finding supports the notion that small acts of agency help normalize the transition to Canada (Kyriakides, Bajjali, Mcluhan, & Anderson 2018). Second, they were far less likely to complain about the quality and type of food because they had more "control" over the preparation and ingredients. The importance of agency and returning to "normal" are important aspects to both short- and long-term integration. The small act of cooking for one's family is an activity that many have not participated in for months or years. Living conditions in refugee camps often mean that there are few opportunities to have a normal family life. While providing kitchen facilities can cause a different set of challenges for the settlement organizations, we believe the challenges are worthwhile as refugees tend to be happier when they can work for themselves.

Our results for the Syrian part of the study show that families with children tend to spend longer in temporary housing. This is likely due to the difficulties of locating affordable housing that can accommodate large families. The average number of family size per unit for the Syrians in our study was 5.5, comparable to the national average of 4.8 members per unit among Syrians already living in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2017b). Syrians on average have the highest number of children per household unit among refugees in Canada and their children are typically under the age of 14 years (Statistics Canada, 2017b). Just over half (54%) of GARs were children under the age of 14 years, while only 33% of PSRs were of similar age.

Accessing affordable and or subsidized housing is a major concern for many newcomers and much has been written about this topic (Carter et al., 2009; Rose & Charette, 2017; Francis & Hiebert, 2014; IRCC, 2016b; Murdie, 2008; Sherrell, 2009; Yu, Ouellet, & Warmington, 2007). GARs are particularly vulnerable because they have more children and have spent time in temporary housing whereas PSRs usually move directly into permanent housing when they arrive to Canada. The wait for subsidized housing is long. In Ontario, the wait in some cities is over 10 years (Settlement.org, 2018). Our findings reveal that the refugees in both groups had difficulty accessing accommodations that were both affordable and large enough to legally house their families. Our evidence also reveals that the families depended very heavily on the child tax benefit checks to pay for their rent. Most refugees received assistance in completing the paperwork from their local settlement organization. There is, however, a minimum wait of 3 months before they receive their first check. For many families, the wait was longer, putting them in danger of not

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having enough money for rent or for food, utilities, and other necessities. This caused the families great stress. Until refugees can access subsidized housing, locating and maintaining affordable housing is a problem.

"Month 13" is also a concern for most refugee families. At "month 13" most families switch from federal or private sponsor funding to provincial social assistance funding. Like federal funding, provincial social assistance funding is based on the number of adults and children in the household and is nearly equivalent in dollars per month for each family (Wilkinson, Garcea, et al., 2017). Despite reassurances, many families in our study worried they would receive less money from the province than they did in their first year of settlement. They worried about being able to pay for their rent when it was already difficult making ends meet. The Syrian study included dozens of families who had already passed "month 13." Most of these families felt that the funding they received from the province was equivalent to what they had received in the first year. Only two families indicated they had less money in Year 2. We know from speaking with the various settlement service organizations that they tried hard to reassure the refugees that their funding would be stable, and that "month 13" was not something to be feared. It is not surprising, however, that people in new environments have questions and concerns about the future and the refugees in our study were no different. Perhaps providing some Arabic and Kurmanji language brochures and or online videos about the transition from federal to provincial assistance would help reassure some families.

Many, but not all, of the Syrian and Yazidi families preferred to live close to one another. Our results reveal that the refugees who lived in close proximity to one another had higher satisfaction with their resettlement and integration experiences. This is understandable because it is easier to feel secure in a new country if families from the same country are located closely to one another. The Yazidis in particular felt strongly that they should live closely together. Several settlement service providers told the research team that the Yazidis wanted to live closely to one another given their shared trauma experiences and their willingness to work as a community to integrate into their new lives in Canada.

Knowledge of the host society language has an influence on housing and integration outcomes. Almost all Syrian and Yazidi refugees participating in our studies had no knowledge of English or French prior to their arrival to Canada. In addition, the Syrian and Yazidi refugees had lower levels of education compared to other previous refugee groups, as the government selection criteria in recent years give more preference to families with higher needs and limited language skills and lower levels of education (Houle, 2019), which was not the case prior to 2015. This change happened recently when Canada stepped up to take in Iraqi refugees who had significantly higher needs than the refugees who were resettled in the past. This means that learning a new language would be difficult for many of them. It also means they would likely spend more time in language classes before they were ready to enter the labor market or receive employment training. As a result, many of these families were likely to live in low rental accommodation for longer periods of time. In the immediate resettlement period, having a low level of education and low language fluency makes wayfinding very difficult. Some of our participants, particularly single and single-female headed householders were afraid to leave their apartments and to take public transportation. Settlement service providers are aware of these issues and

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have made efforts in some cities to help bus drivers to understand the situation. In some places, the refugees can hand the bus driver a note with the location of their appointment and the driver will indicate to them their stop (Wilkinson et al., 2019). Sometimes, even this is not enough.

Coupled with trauma experiences, many of the Yazidi women we spoke with were afraid to leave their houses. A recent study in Germany by Abbott (2016) indicates that over 90% of all refugees have witnessed or personally experienced physical violence, rape, attempted murder, witnessed murder, or witnessed assault or rape. Recent and widely shared media reports (Buck, 2017; Porter, 2018) about the Yazidi refugee survivors of Daesh and psychologists working with Yazidis across Canada have all observed that the level of trauma they have experienced is significant (Health Reference Centre, 2018; Hoffman et al., 2018; Multicultural Health Brokers Cooperative, 2017). Yazidis have experienced genocide at least 74 times, the most recent being the attacks in Sinjar in August 2014 (Marczak, 2018; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2016). As a result, their trauma is intergenerational. A sizable number of Yazidi families are fractured, having members missing or killed. All of the Yazidi participants were either captured by Daesh or had direct family members killed or kidnapped by them. Kidnapping often meant that the Yazidis were held in underground, windowless units for months or even years at a time. When presented with a basement suite as a rental unit, it is understandable that many of the families refused this accommodation despite its affordability. Those who accepted the basement suite apartments were miserable, experiencing nightmares and memories of their captivities. We urge housing authorities to avoid placing refugees in basement rental suites, particularly those who have experienced captivity.

Conclusion

Resettlement is always challenging, and no two refugees have the same needs or experiences. Resettlement policies tend to establish "one model" for all. With Canada's growing commitment toward increasing refugee resettlement (IRCC, 2019), there is a more urgent need to more deeply examine the housing needs of newcomers and understand that a "one size fits all" approach may not be adequate. Until recently, refugees have mostly been considered as passive agents and individuals with poor mental health conditions, and nothing more than victims of war. As a result, they often have little say in their initial housing selection upon their arrival to Canada. Investigating the existing provisions of extending better choices in housing among refugees for better integration should be prioritized in the Canadian context.

Shelter-to-income costs for the Syrian and Yazidi refugees are higher than acceptable. Like other studies (Ghosh, 2015; Rose & Charette, 2017; Silvius, 2016), the refugees in our study had higher rates of housing crisis, a shelter-to-income ratio that exceeded 50%. IRCC (2016b) has acknowledged that they need to revisit the funding they provide refugee families in their first year. Often the families struggle to feed, clothe, and cover the other necessities. Our evidence supports their conclusions. While the federal government and provincial governments may have to reassess their social assistance support, the funding required to become a private sponsor must also be reviewed. Both the demand to sponsor refugees and the number of refugees needing

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resettlement remain high. Increasing the amount of funds required to resettle refugees and their families will facilitate the resettlement process but may "price out" potential sponsors who cannot raise more money. This is an important consideration because the Canadian government is increasing the number of privately sponsored refugees relative to other refugee classes for the next 3 years (Government of Canada, 2018b).

Recognizing "agency" is highly empowering and can facilitate successful short-term integration for refugees. Our research reveals that refugees who were given the facilities to cook for themselves in temporary accommodation were much more satisfied with the experience and with their initial integration in Canada. This is likely because this gives refugees some agency, at least in determining what and when their family will eat. Our results are supportive of Kyriakides et al.'s (2018) recent study of how giving refugees agency, even on the most mundane of matters such as the choice of color for the apartment walls or the type of bedsheets provided, gives refugees a sense that they are full actors in their resettlement and integration. Agency provides a sense of normalcy and routine to a group that has largely been denied this ability, sometimes for years. As Clayton (2016) rightly suggests, refugees have rights and the freedom to choose and these rights should be exercised whenever it is possible. This is one of the problems with the existing system. Refugees, even when they arrive in Canada, rarely have a chance to choose anything. Giving them the chance to choose is a powerful and important aspect of successful resettlement and integration.

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Notes

1. There are other refugee resettlement streams including Blended Visa Office Referral, which was introduced in 2017, An In-Canada Asylum claim also known as a refugee claimant, Protected persons in Canada and humanitarian classes. These groups are small in number and the number of Syrian and Yazidi refugees arriving in these programs is small so they were excluded from our sample selection.

2. The Yazidis have also sizable settlements in Georgia, Turkey, Armenia, and Iran. The largest diaspora community of Yazidi numbers approximately 100,000 and is located in Germany.

3. Operation Ezra in Winnipeg and Project Abraham in Toronto are the two groups sponsoring Yazidi refugees arriving in the PSR program. Syrians arriving in the PSR program are sponsored by a number of different groups. In both cases, GARs outnumber PSRs by roughly 3 to 1.

4. The large difference in family unit size between Syrians and Canadians is partly due to the number of children. Among Syrian families, the average number of children is 3.4 per family. Among Canadians, it is 1.56 per female (Statistics Canada, 2017b).

5. The explosion can occur on stoves using the old coil elements. The explosion happens as a result of a fuse breaking in the element.

6. Shengal is the Kurmanji name for Sinjar.

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