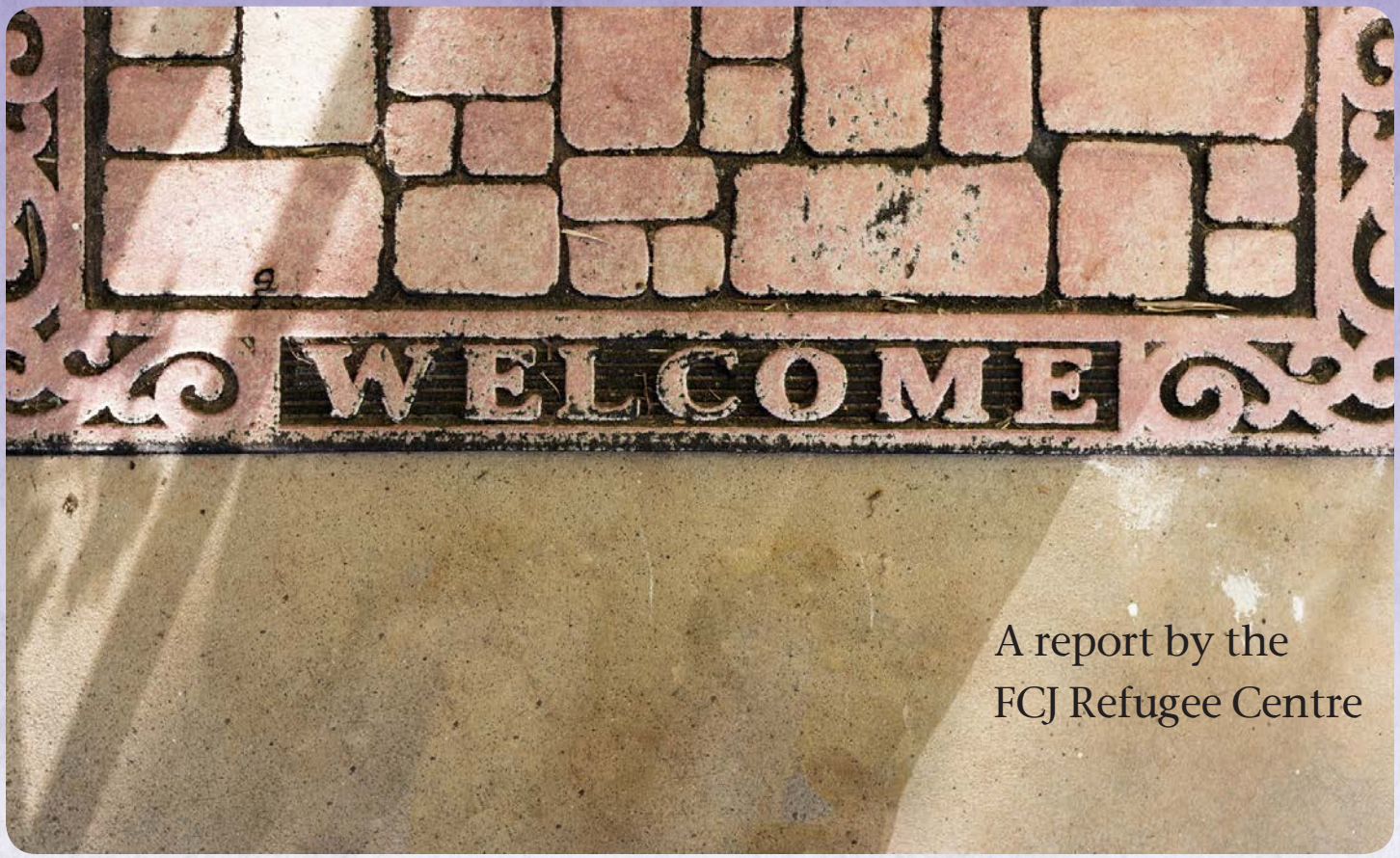
Welcome Home

“Which home? Just a place to sleep?“

Welcoming refugee claimants and precarious migrants to the City of Toronto



A report by the
FCJ Refugee Centre

FCJ Refugee Centre

Walking With Uprooted People

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Introduction

This report shares our findings on the challenges that refugee claimants and precarious migrants face in finding a place to stay in the city, whether that is a temporary shelter or more permanent housing through the rental market.

Refugee claimants refers to those who have submitted an asylum application either upon arrival at the border (port of entry claim) or afterwards when they are already in Canada (inland claim). Immediately after applying, they need to follow a procedure with a number of urgent deadlines and after they submit their forms they are in a position of waiting for a hearing from the Immigration and Refugee Board to assess their claim. This period of waiting for a hearing can last between 1 to 2 years. In the meantime they have to find a place to stay, go to school and/or apply for a work permit without much support, except from small organizations such as the FCJ Refugee Centre.

Precarious migrants refers to those who hold some form of uncertain migration status. The City refers to them as "undocumented Torontonians."

They include:

- Refused refugee claimants who have filed an appeal or are considering filing an appeal;
- Temporary foreign workers (who may fall out of status when they leave an abusive employer and are left without a valid work permit);
- Students whose temporary student visa has expired;
- Visitors whose temporary visitor visa has expired;
- Victims and survivors of human trafficking; and
- Individuals without status due to a sponsorship breakdown.

In our view, housing is a human right, a hugely important factor in the settlement process and a key prerequisite for the enjoyment of health, employment, and a life of quality. But both refugee claimants and precarious migrants, including rejected asylum seekers, are particularly vulnerable to violations of their right to adequate housing.

Precarious migrants are often in an insecure housing situation, as an inability to pay rent usually results in immediate eviction. Their lack of legal status, and the

criminalization of precarious migration in many countries, means that most will be unable or unwilling to challenge discriminatory or otherwise abusive rental practices and seek legal remedies.

Displaced persons and precarious migrants are particularly vulnerable to a range of other human rights violations that can then impact their right to housing. They are particularly vulnerable to discrimination, racism and xenophobia, which can further interfere with their ability to secure sustainable and adequate living conditions. People who have been forcibly displaced will often have suffered trauma during their journey, and will have lost familiar coping strategies and support mechanisms. Often unable in practice or because of their legal status to rent adequate accommodation, many are forced to live in overcrowded and insecure conditions.

These challenges are compounded by Toronto's ongoing housing crisis, which is a long-standing problem. The shortage in shelter places and affordable rental units is not a new phenomenon but a long-standing issue resulting from a number of trends, including years of underinvestment in social housing. Rising inequality in the city also affects access to housing for refugee claimants and precarious migrants. A recent study by University of Toronto Professor David Hulchanski [1] attests that Toronto is a highly segregated city, with visible minorities (among them new and long established immigrants) concentrated in low-income neighbourhoods in numbers far higher than their share of the population. Among other factors, this raises the question of discrimination and what role it plays.

Despite knowledge of these problems, the vulnerabilities of refugee claimants and precarious migrants are not given the due attention they deserve. As we found while we were collecting the information for this report, they are almost entirely absent from most government plans impacting poverty and access to housing, and from most proposals put forward by housing advocates to address the issue. At times, the studies and plans refer to the concerns of "immigrants" and "newcomers." However, the needs of these populations are quite distinct as people are eligible for different services depending on their immigration status.

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1 Contenta, S. (2018, September 30). Toronto is segregated by race and income. And the numbers are ugly. *Toronto Star*. Retrieved from https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2018/09/30/toronto-is-segregated-by-race-and-income-and-the-numbers-are-ugly.html

There is also a lack of intersectional analysis when it comes to addressing these challenges. An initiative that truly addresses people's needs must take into consideration how people's intersecting identities have an impact on their rights and search for housing. Intersectionality considers that various forms of social stratification, such as class, race, sexual orientation, age, religion, creed, disability, gender, and in this particular case, immigration status or the lack thereof, do not exist separately from each other but are interwoven together.

To exacerbate these problems, the influx of refugee claimants in Toronto has been blamed for the crisis in Toronto by politicians who wish to deflect attention away from their responsibility and point fingers at other levels of government. Refugee claimants are not the cause of the shortage, but only its latest victims.

To find appropriate solutions, it is crucially important that governments act with the interests of precarious or undocumented migrants in mind, as they are not in a position to fight for their rights due to their vulnerabilities. As a document on "The Right to Adequate Housing" by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights specifies: "Adequate housing is "the right of every woman, man, youth and child to gain and sustain a safe and secure home and community in which to live in peace and dignity."[2]

This right is so much more than simply four walls and a roof over your head. It is recognized in international human rights law as part of the right to an adequate standard of living. It considers a number of elements, such as security of tenure, equal and non-discriminatory access to adequate housing, affordability and location.

Human rights are interdependent, indivisible and interrelated. Access to adequate housing can be a precondition for the enjoyment of several human rights, including the rights to work, health, social security, voting, privacy or education. In housing, discrimination can take the form of discriminatory laws, policies or measures; zoning regulations; exclusionary policy development; exclusion from housing benefits; denial of security of tenure; lack of access to credit; limited participation in decision-making; or lack of protection against discriminatory practices carried out by private actors.

2 Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (n.d.) Right to Adequate Housing Toolkit. Retrieved from https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Housing/toolkit/Pages/RighttoAdequateHousingToolkit.aspx

Refugees and precarious migrants face many of these forms of discrimination, but housing strategies rarely include migrants, and often do not include precarious migrants. If our governments approached housing using a rights-based approach, they would place the needs of the most vulnerable at the centre or each discussion and decision. And there would be a concerted effort to address core issues such as discrimination, classism, racialized poverty and segregation in the city. Moreover, the people most impacted by the process tend to be the furthest away from the decision making process — and their occasional participation in City consultation processes does not always translate into influence.

This is not to say that positive initiatives have not come out of government decisions at the municipal, provincial and national level. However it is fair to say that the push from civil society is what has led to these developments — often at great expense of energy by the advocates who work with refugee claimants and precarious migrants. Advocates in these areas tend to be underfunded and working under extreme pressures.

Governments need to take a more invested, proactive approach to addressing the issue. Using a rights-based approach, all levels of government can implement measures that are needed to prevent homelessness, prohibit forced evictions, address discrimination, focus on the most vulnerable and marginalized groups, ensure security of tenure to all and guarantee that everyone's housing is adequate. While the right to adequate housing does not require governments to guarantee housing for everyone, it does require that they play an active role in facilitating and enabling the actions of all participants in the creation and improvement of adequate housing. This could include the provision of direct assistance, including focused housing allowances, in addition to adopting legislation that legislates housing providers to comply with standards of adequate housing.

For the purposes of this report, we will focus primarily on solutions that the City of Toronto can implement to ensure that refugee claimants and precarious migrants have access to adequate housing, while also acknowledging the role of other levels of government. The report is intended to be a tool for housing advocates and public servants to support system change within the City of Toronto.

Methodology

To inquire about people's challenges in accessing housing in Toronto, FCJ Refugee Centre put together a multiple choice questionnaire. This touched on the barriers faced upon arrival, in navigating the shelter system and in trying to find a unit through the rental market. (Please refer to Appendix B of the report for the questionnaire).

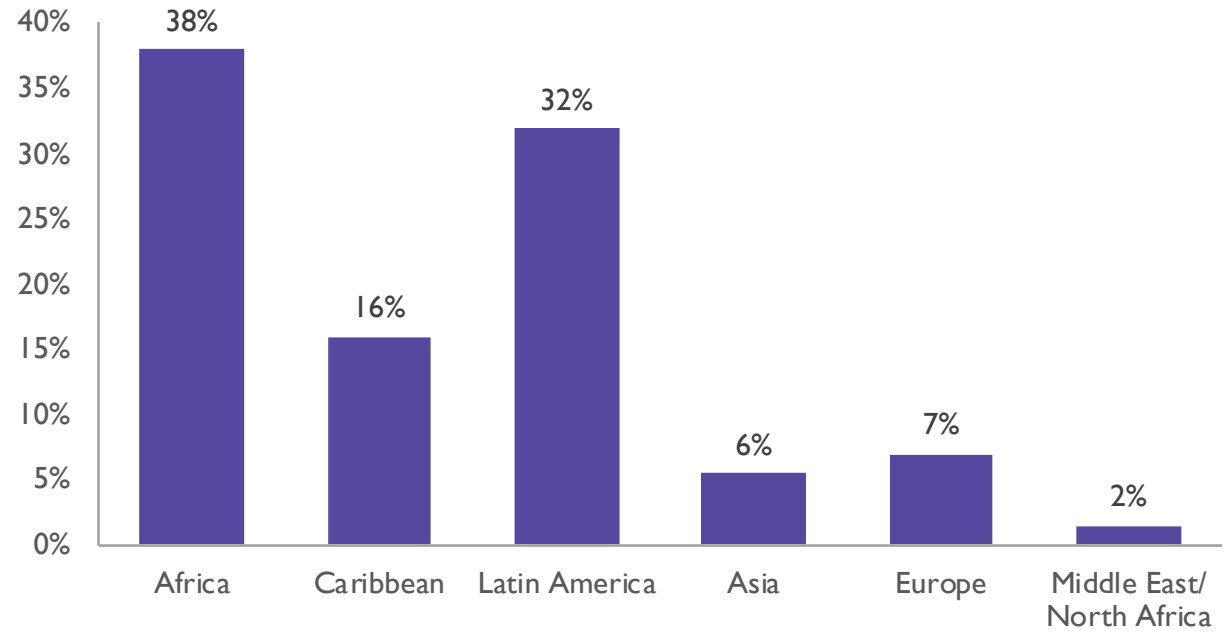
This questionnaire was shared with the refugee claimants and precarious migrants who came to our office over a period of several months in 2018. It was also shared with our partner organizations, members of the Coalition of Service Providers for Refugee Claimants in Ontario, so that their clients could also fill them out.

All in all we collected about 150 questionnaires in which people referred to a number of challenges such as discrimination, racism, the cost of housing in the city, and the lack of shelter space. In addition, 10 housing workers and youth workers responded to questions about challenges their clients face in accessing housing in the city.

We also contacted a number of focus groups with the youth who take part in the weekly FCJ Youth Network and with some of the women who live in our transitional houses. There were also more in depth one-on-one interviews with other clients — single men and women, couples (some with children), families, and migrant workers — allowing us to collect a wide range of experiences.

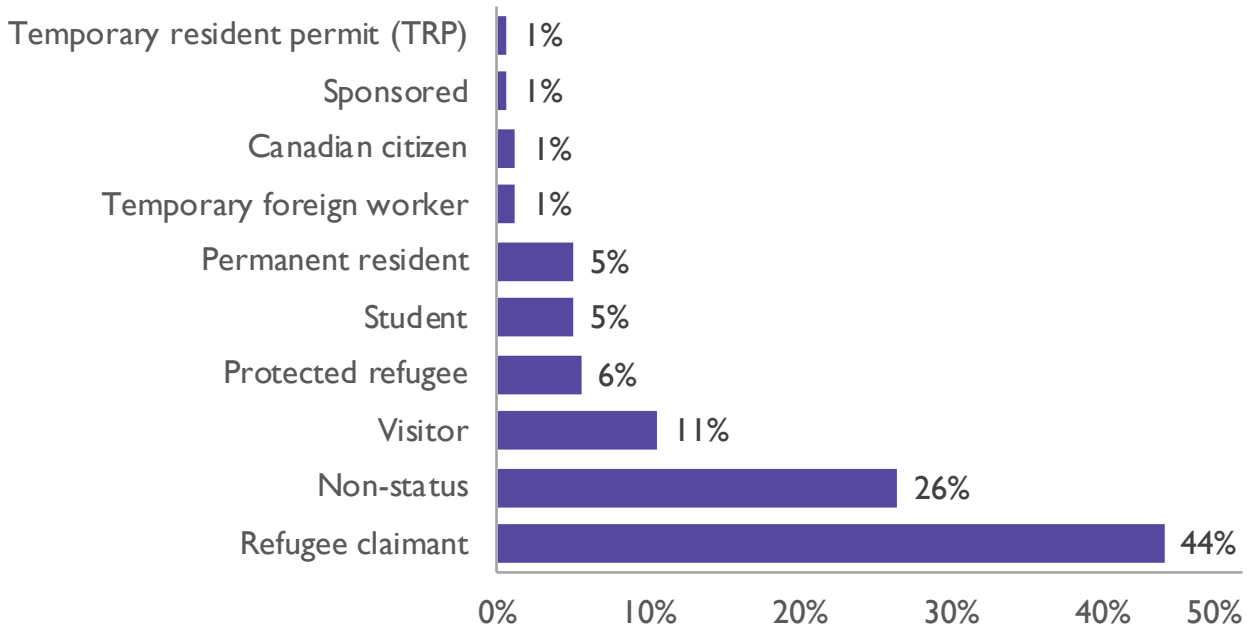
At the FCJ Refugee Centre we serve people who come from all over the world. Nevertheless the bulk of those who responded to the questionnaire originated in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean.

Region of origin



We also asked people about their current status. Roughly one quarter or 26.4% stated they had no status in Canada, which placed them in a very precarious situation. Another 44% were refugee claimants, facing insecurity till their status was "regularized "due to the long waiting times for a refugee hearing.

Current status



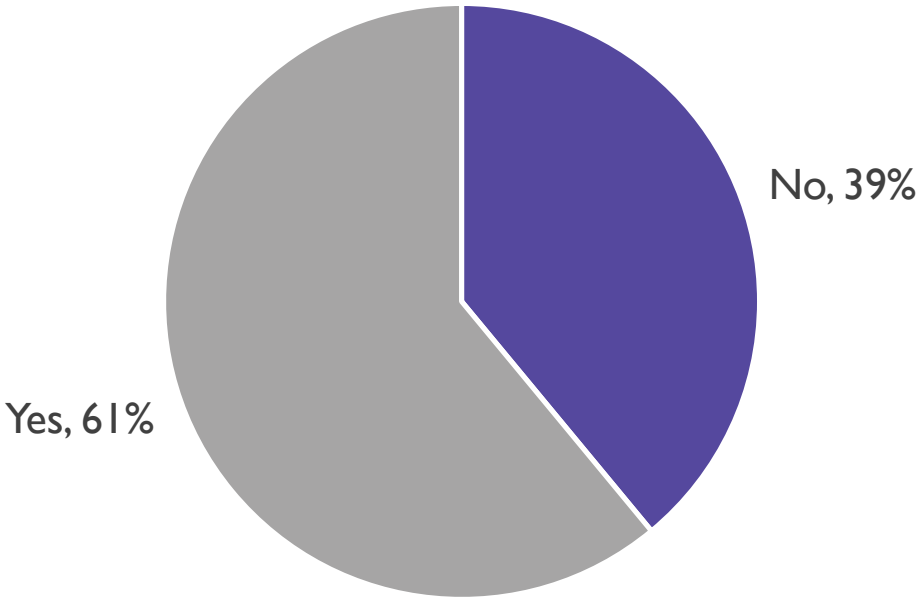
People spoke to us of a) their experiences and concerns immediately upon arrival to Canada, b) the challenge of being placed in one of the City of Toronto shelters and c) the difficulty of finding a place to rent and securing more stable housing. In the following sections, we will present their experiences in each of these three phases as the challenges and vulnerabilities at each of these moments is quite distinct. For each phase, we will also offer recommendations for solutions that can be implemented by the City. We also include recommendations for the community sector and other levels of government where appropriate.

Phase I: The first 24-48 hours after arrival

One of our first findings in talking to people about their experience was how vulnerable many people are when they first arrive in the country. Those first 24 or 48 hours in particular can be extremely stressful, especially when people arrive without any information or contacts.

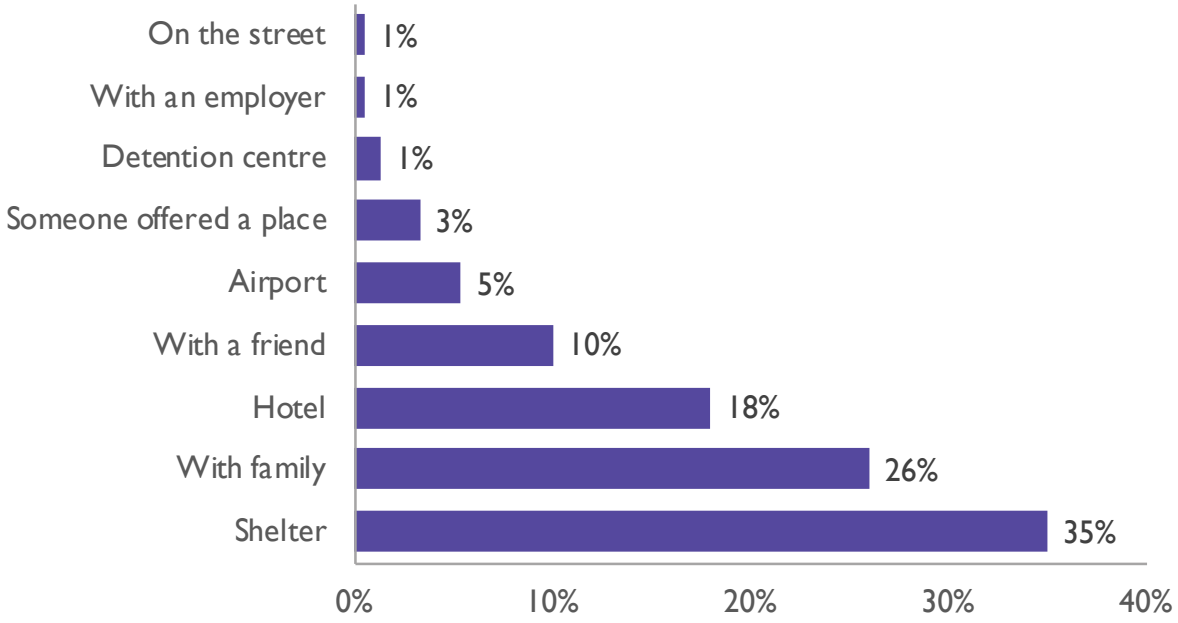
When we asked people if they had arranged for a place to stay before arriving in Canada we found that 39%, or more than a third, had not. This suggests a real vulnerability and precariousness as the individual is then in a position of having to urgently find shelter upon arriving.

Did you have a place to stay upon arrival?



In response to the question "Where did you stay in the first few days upon arrival," people responded as follows:

Where did you stay upon arrival?



We note that 35% ended up in a shelter (with all the accompanying challenges), while 18% stayed in a hotel. Very few of the respondents were able to stay in the hotel for more than a few days or a week at the most, and a number of them commented that a big chunk of their savings had been eaten up by this cost.

Approximately one quarter of respondents or 26% stayed with family while 10% stayed with a friend, so it is encouraging to note that one third of the respondents would have received some type of welcome and support. However, even when the newcomers come here with certain supports already set up (for example, family links, a sponsorship, etc.), they can still easily fall into a precarious situation when circumstances change. We have had cases of people arriving at FCJ after the family members who received them in Canada were no longer able to support them or after they had changed the conditions of the support being offered. Others commented on falling prey to situations of domestic violence or other types of abuse involving the family member.

For the great majority of the people staying with family, the arrangement was a temporary one due to the lack of space and they eventually needed to find more permanent housing through the Toronto rental market.

Testimonies

Falling prey to scams

Family X. arrived in Canada after having paid an agent for "settlement services" that they believed would include a permit that would allow them to work legally in Canada, and accommodation upon arrival. When they arrived in Toronto there was no one waiting for them at the airport as had been agreed. When they went to the hotel that had been reserved for them they found out that the room had not been paid for and they needed to cover the cost themselves. The agent never appeared and they were stranded with no contacts in Toronto and no employment leads. Through a Facebook page for Mexicans in Toronto they connected with a woman who offered them work and accommodation in Barrie — however, it soon became apparent that she was also cheating them and taking advantage of them as they ended up in a home shared with 28 other people, with no privacy, in a dirty environment and paying exorbitant prices for the rent. They eventually were able to find some help by searching online for assistance through a working women's organization and after a circuitous route were eventually referred to FCJ.

Lack of information and fear of deportation

C. and her daughter ended up at the FCJ Refugee Centre very soon after they arrived in the country. They landed at Toronto's Pearson airport with a tourist visa on a short stay. Having spent all her savings to get here, C. had little more than $30 on her. (Luckily she was not asked about this at immigration.) Nor did she have any contacts in the city... just an idea that hopefully arriving in Canada would provide an opportunity for a safer life.

After arriving at the airport in the nighttime, she and her daughter decided to wait till the morning, sitting on a bench till about 5 am. A man who was an immigrant himself eventually began speaking to them, as he was also a person of colour. He ended up helping them, taking them to someone who could assist. Soon afterwards they were referred to FCJ.

While C. intended to file a refugee claim, she did not opt to do so upon arrival at the airport, thinking that there was a possibility she could be refused and she and her daughter sent back on the next plane. She also knew she was very nervous and very conscious of saying "the wrong thing."

Difficulty accessing shelter space

F. and her baby entered Canada overland, after crossing into Quebec from the United States. She filed a port of entry claim at the border. Soon afterwards she was connected to a shelter in Montreal set up for newcomers. Her first few days in Canada were fine — the shelter was "okay," with some large rooms shared by various people on bunk beds, and separate rooms for families.

F. and a number of other families decided to come to Toronto as they were aware that more services were offered here and they did not speak French. The Montreal shelter provided them with a number of telephone numbers of services in Toronto, such as the Red Cross.

Three families paid a man who drove them to Toronto. The driver dropped them off at one of the family residences (F. doesn't remember which one) that they thought would receive them and left. However the place had no space, refused to accept them and told them to call Central Intake to be referred to a shelter.

F. had no more money, no Canadian SIM card and no way to connect to the shelter system (which as settlement organizations are aware is hard to connect with at the best of times). She was scared, out on the street with her baby, with no place to go. Luckily a woman found them on the street and took them to her house for one night. In the morning, she gave them some money, took them to the subway and gave them instructions about how to get to Red Cross. From there, F. was referred to FCJ and was settled in one of the FCJ transitional houses with her child.

Sudden loss of support

Responder A. came to Canada with her two young kids to flee an abusive situation. She had her own money to support herself and initially stayed at a hotel, taking some time to think about next steps. Then all of a sudden her credit card was declined, most likely stopped by her ex who would have had that kind of power and connections in her home country.

Suddenly left with no money the family was out on the street, without knowing anything about the city or anyone who lives here. They were lost on the street, not knowing where to go but then A. had an idea to go to the Red Cross as she remembered this organization from her home country. The family asked a woman on the street for help, who helped them get to the Red Cross, as they had no money for a taxi or even a token for the TTC. From there they were referred to the FCJ Refugee Centre, and they stayed in the office the first night before being moved

to a more permanent situation. “We were suddenly safe,” says A. “Before that we really felt like we could die. We were wet and cold, it was raining, and we didn’t have the proper clothes.”

In the best-case scenarios, individuals who submit a port of entry claim at the airport or at the border, are referred to the Canadian Red Cross First Contact Centre in Etobicoke, which serves as a referral and receiving centre. They in turn will refer people to FCJ Refugee Centre, other refugee houses or shelters. In some situations, people can stay with their relatives or friends.

However, the refugee houses are only open during the day. If the individual arrives at the airport after hours, the border official may provide information about various shelters, including FCJ Refugee Centre, which is a positive development that came up as a result of lobbying the Canadian Border Services Agency (CBSA). However, the official tends to not give any information about who might be open at that moment and able to receive people. Nor do they inform the centres in question that they have referred someone to them.

Another situation emerges when individuals or families submit an inland refugee claim after having been in Toronto for a while (this could be days or months, even years). They then find their way to the FCJ Refugee Centre and other refugee houses through peers, community centres, other non-governmental organizations or community agencies, relatives or friends.

The best-case scenario is when the individuals ask for an orientation from FCJ Refugee Centre or another institution working with refugee claimants before they submit their refugee claim. In these situations, we always try to secure emergency shelter for them before they make their claim. In some cases, individuals have slept in the FCJ board room due to the shortage of emergency beds managed by Central Intake.

Solutions for change

While in each of the cases presented in the testimonies section the individuals involved found a way to navigate those first hours, they all lived through scary, lonely moments and at times even unsafe moments. Some of the following measures could help assist refugee claimants and precarious migrants in their first 24 or 48 hours in the city when they are at their most vulnerable.

City of Toronto

The City of Toronto has approved resources for the Canadian Red Cross so that they can keep running First Contact Centre and extend their hours from 8 to 12 hours daily. However, we would like to see a further expansion of the hours so that the centre is open 24/7. And we would like to see it transformed from what we have now to a "Reception and Respite Centre" for refugees so that if people arrive after hours they could at least be accommodated for one night. At all times of the day there should be a staff person, something to eat, and a welcome smile.

We would also like to note that the Centre is in Etobicoke. We would continue advocating for a location that is somewhere in the downtown core and easily accessible by transit.

Other levels of government

- A 24-hour orientation station for newly arrived individuals and refugee claimants should be set up at both terminals of the Toronto Pearson Airport. It should serve as a place that can provide the necessary information but also refer people in need to the Reception and Respite Centre. Until this centre is created, the referral would be to the Red Cross First Contact Centre. The border official should refer arrivals to the station but there should also be enough signage around so that people could identify the station without a referral.
- We would also like to see an information booth, by the international arrivals area, with an introductory information kit in a number of different languages and a referral service to organizations that can assist. There should be clear signs that say something to the effect of: "If you are just arriving and don't have a place to stay, please contact us." If there is no staff person, there should at least be a phone that people can use for assistance.

- Similar information booths should also be set up at terminal bus stations, train stations and border crossings, providing referrals to organizations that can provide assistance. One clear example is the Peace Bridge Newcomer Centre at the Fort Erie border where there is a staff person from a settlement organization who can help find space for the person.
- The introductory information kit we refer to would contain information about what people need to know upon arrival. This kit, as we said before, should be translated into a number of different languages (at least the 12 most commonly used languages). The kits should be available at the 24-hour Reception and Respite Centre, as well as at the information booths already mentioned. All government immigration and Canadian Border Services Agency (CBSA) offices should have them as well, and they should be circulated to other organizations as well.
- These kits should include information on frontline organizations, places who can receive people when they first arrive, and so on. The most important thing is to connect people with a legal orientation and urgent information on the refugee claim process as there is very little time to adjust upon arrival and people have to submit a number of documents to the authorities within the first two weeks.
- The resources for these kits could come from private donors or the government but the refugee houses or settlement organizations should compile the information and create the content. There is already a precedent for such a model with the preparation guides created for the Ready Tours preparing people for their refugee hearing, created by civil society organizations including FCJ with funding from the federal government.
- This information could also be made available to Canadian offices overseas as there are a lot of misconceptions overseas that people have about what might happen at the airport upon arrival. (For example, there is the fear of immediate deportation which prevents them from asking for any assistance). There could at least be a link on the websites of Canadian embassies or consulates, referring people to this type of information and assistance.

- There is a lot of false information online about how one may come to settle in Canada, information that is attractive to people who are in a desperate situation. As noted, one family we spoke to arrived in Toronto after having paid a lot of money to an agent who had promised them accommodation in the city under false pretences. It would be a big task but an important one to have a team dedicated to monitoring Facebook pages and social media accounts that are trying to scam people and post false information and find a way to counter this by providing correct information.
- Migrant workers are also very vulnerable to fake online job sites that should be monitored. These tend to promise certain labour conditions and accommodation that end up being untrue, leaving people in a very vulnerable position.

Phase II: Navigating the shelter system

The current system in the city is no more than a bandage solution, a reaction to the crisis that has been in place for decades. It is not a proper way of receiving people who are arriving in the city in need of immediate accommodation.

Nevertheless, for the moment, this is the path the great majority of refugee claimants and precarious migrants in the city will have to navigate unless they are lucky enough to have family or friends who can accommodate them.

There are two main concerns for refugees and precarious migrants navigating the shelter system in Toronto — accessing the system and the quality of shelter. In addition, the City's use of hotels as an emergency measure has certain consequences for the safety of refugee claimants.

Accessing the shelter system

The general process for accessing shelter space is by calling the Central Intake Line of the City of Toronto Shelter, Support and Housing Administration. All shelters and organizations that have a space available have to inform Central Intake by a certain time as a way of centralizing the information.

Through this process, people may find themselves in a number of different situations including:

a) An emergency respite centre (generally open between the late fall and early spring to accommodate people during the coldest winter months). These are the most "basic" — people sleep in large, shared rooms, in bunk beds. They are typically asked to leave the sleeping area quite early in the morning (6 am), though they can stay in the common areas throughout the day. Meals are provided. Generally there is no privacy, or any lockers for one's belongings.

b) A shelter housing homeless individuals alongside refugee claimants. People may sleep in large, shared rooms though some shelters have private rooms for families. Sometimes there are lockers for one's belongings. Meals are provided. Some shelters have settlement services, such as a housing worker. Often no interpretation is provided.

c) In one of the only two City shelters specifically catering to refugee claimants (Christie Refugee Welcome Centre and Sojourn House) which are funded by the City and part of the City's emergency response program. These refugee houses have more services geared to assisting refugee claimants with the refugee claim and settlement processes. These shelters have been functioning for more than 30 years.

d) In addition to the above, due to the increase in refugee claimants arriving in Toronto during the last 2 years, there is a City emergency fund to use four hotels to shelter refugee claimant families, as an emergency measure. One hotel is administered by City staff, two by COSTI Immigrant Services and one by Sojourn House. In addition, some motels are used by family shelters when they face a situation of overload. This use of motels has been in practice for decades.

We should note that, separately from the City of Toronto funded shelters, there are the refugee houses that are members of the Coalition of Service Providers for Refugee Claimants in Ontario. In the City of Toronto, these include FCJ Refugee Centre, which runs transitional houses for women and their children, and Romero House, Matthew House, Adam House, and Silas Hill House which host people on-site. COSTI, Christie Refugee Centre, and Sojourn House are also members of the Coalition. Canadian Red Cross First Contact Centre tries to link people directly to the refugee houses instead of the City's shelter system, as they know they provide wrap around support and settlement services.

While these houses exist to support refugees and precarious migrants, most people will go through the City of Toronto funded shelter system.

If a person goes to a shelter in person, generally they will be refused and asked to call the Central Intake Line. An individual can call Central Intake to find space directly or a housing/settlement worker can call on their behalf. This second option tends to be more successful as the person calling will be less intimidated, have previous experience with the Central Intake system and be able to "push" a bit for their client.

Immigration status is not relevant for accessing shelter space in the City of Toronto, so both refugee claimants and precarious migrants can be accepted. An exception to this rule is that Central Intake only refers refugee claimants to the

hotels funded by the City emergency fund. No homeless person or non-status person is referred to these hotels. This is creating tensions between the homeless people of the City of Toronto and the newly arrived refugee claimants.

This is the reason why, as our housing worker notes below, a Central Intake worker may inquire about the immigration status of the person looking for space. They can refer them to the specific shelters for refugee claimants, shelters that have the necessary expertise to guide them through the refugee claim process. For precarious migrants, the question about status can be problematic and contravenes the "sanctuary policy" of The City of Toronto.

On a positive note, when we have taken people to the emergency respite centres, our experience is that no questions about an individual's immigration status were asked, just the person's name.

One important factor to keep in mind is that immigration status is relevant in other metropolitan areas outside of the City of Toronto so those people need to come to Toronto — we know of cases where the precarious migrants in question were referred by shelters in other municipalities.

Testimonies

Reflections from a housing worker

> The wait time involved in calling the Central Intake Line and getting through to a worker is about 50 minutes. About the same, no matter what time of the day you call. The best time to call to get space is around 11 am. The client must be there with you, to answer questions over the phone. It is not easy to get shelter space for the clients. Quite often there is a shortage of shelter spaces and there is nowhere to house the individual or family we are helping. Generally they ask you to call back, and I will try around 2 pm again. Some of the shelters open at 6 pm in the evening. When a space opens up at a shelter the person has to get there very quickly, usually within the hour, or they will miss out!
>
> Another concern is that with Central Intake, you are not able to register ahead of time. It doesn't matter if you only have a week left at your place of residence, and you are worried about where you will end up next. You have to call the same day you need the bed or one day before at the most. You almost have to be homeless to

be able to be considered by Central Intake! This is very stressful for the client and the housing worker.

The staff answering the phones can be quite abrupt. They ask a lot of questions about the individual's status, their situation, where they slept the previous night, have they applied for the Ontario Works emergency fund, etc. These are detailed questions, more like something Legal Aid would ask, they seem inappropriate for just finding a shelter space. I am not sure what they are allowed to ask and what they are not. Even I feel vulnerable answering some of their questions, they are invasive. I will sometimes rephrase the question to soften it for the client. Most questions seem to stem from the staff's lack of awareness about the situation of refugee claimants and their reality. Instead of trying to help the person find housing, it feels like they are using their authority to make a judgement call about allocating shelter space.

The other day the Central Intake staff person told me, if [the client] is a refugee claimant and they don't have children, they cannot go to the refugee shelters. Is this something new, a new policy? Or something that this woman made up? I am concerned that single people or couples without children will have to end up at the shelters housing homeless people which are more challenging. And about same sex couples who may not be received as a "family."

At the homeless shelter, our clients are sometimes harassed by the other people staying at the shelter, and as a result experience more trauma. You have to take care of your belongings at all times and you can't stay there. You have to leave that shelter during the day.

Central Intake does have a separate phone line for individuals experiencing domestic violence. This is a little better than the general line, usually you wait for less time on the phone.

Solutions for change

The following are some ideas for the City as well as the community sector to address problems around accessing shelter space for refugee claimants and precarious migrants.

City of Toronto

- There is a concern that single people and/or couples without children are not being given priority by Central Intake with regard to being transferred to the refugee shelters. Is this a policy response or a response from an individual worker? Further clarification is needed so that we can respond appropriately. Generally, each refugee claimant or precarious migrant who needs a space should be placed in a City shelter catering to refugee claimants, if a space is available, or in a hotel supported by City funds. However as noted, of late, we have had a few cases of refugee claimants, a young man, an elderly couple etc., who were directed to one of the shelters housing homeless individuals. They did not find the environment safe and would return to FCJ again and again, hoping we could help them move to an alternate location.
- A related concern is that shelters tend to be divided by gender and are not set up for couples. Members of a couple will be treated as a single person and separated. Women separated from their partners have expressed concerns about safety and about not being able to be supported by the partner in terms of child care.
- This also brings up the question of how same gender couples should be treated. There is currently no accommodation for this in the shelters. More attention should be paid to safety issues as they can be in a more vulnerable position due to discrimination and homophobia. We would ideally like to see some private space dedicated to same gender couples, or individuals who self-identify as trans, LGBTQIA etc.
- We see the need for additional training for Central Intake staff in a systematic way on: the refugee experience and process; sensitivity training and how to work with a trauma-informed approach with refugee claimants and people with a precarious migration status.

    - First, staff should have more sensitivity in the way they ask people questions so as not to harass and re-traumatize them. We understand they are under a lot of pressure but we would like to see a culture shift and more support for the staff internally so that they are less abrupt and more patient on the phone.
    - Second, the staff should be trained in assessing the need of the refugee claimant in person or over the phone.
    - Third, the staff should have access to a mapping of services for refugee claimants in the community and their eligibility criteria, so that they can make referrals when appropriate.

- For the purposes of City planning, there should be a system to capture the data on immigration status through Central Intake without the client's identification. This data should only be collected with the intent to have proper statistics on precarious migrants in order for the City to be able to properly plan services. Central Intake staff should explain this to the client.
- We would like to see a change of policy at Central Intake, regarding the fact that one can only call them on the day that the person is homeless, or just before when the situation is almost critical. As the housing worker explained, this places stress on the client and the person assisting them. Central Intake could create a special category of people who are at imminent risk of becoming homeless and their needs should be accommodated in the system.
- Central Intake staff could also be more sensitive and try to understand why the person might be leaving their place of residence and are seeking space in a shelter. It may be that there is a bad relationship with the landlord, or their economic situation may be forcing them out. There should be even more sensitivity for the situation of precarious migrants who may be facing additional challenges and needing to move.
- Shelters should also shift away from refusing people who arrive at their door. If a client shows up at the shelter, they should facilitate the call to Central Intake.
- A number of the stresses we have referred to really stem from the ongoing shortage of shelter space in the City.

- The City has to implement a rights-based approach and make a plan together with the community to address the situation of refugee claimants and precarious migrants. And it must really work in collaboration with experts in the community. There should be ongoing communication, versus just meeting with the invested when there is an emergency.
- This also calls for a broader change in the funding policy at the City level. There should be a flexible approach to having funding agreements with any organization that houses refugee claimants or people with precarious migration status, such as the refugee houses forming part of the Coalition of Service Providers for Refugee Claimants in Ontario.

Community sector

- In practice, access to space in a shelter bed is facilitated if a community worker makes the phone call to Central Intake, because the worker understands the reality of the client and can be a good advocate for them. It would therefore be beneficial to expand that type of intermediary service via community centres, so that frontline workers at the centres are trained to receive people in need of emergency housing so they can make that call to Central Intake.
- The Coalition of Service Providers for Refugee Claimants in Ontario has a proposal addressing this wider issue. In summary, the proposal for a Refugee Capacity Plan suggests that the easiest way to respond to the influx of people is with the refugee houses model, as they can expand or reduce the spaces they manage depending on the need of the people arriving. With assistance from Ontario Works, refugee claimants could be housed in the houses run by the refugee houses — this is the model currently used at FCJ's transitional houses where the OW income helps cover the rental costs.
- An added benefit would be that people would be less vulnerable as the refugee houses have housing workers or can hire staff dedicated to the housing search, and also provide interpretation and other settlement services as needed. Such services are not available in some of the shelters or hotels currently used to house newcomers and refugee claimants. This model is more economical than spending millions of dollars on hotels. As well, it is an investment in the community.

Quality of the shelter system

The attitude of the staff can change from one shelter to another. Particularly in the homeless shelters the approach tends to be quite different. The staff is busy dealing with the very demanding social issues affecting the local homeless population. There is no time to focus on a particular process for a small number of refugee claimants or precarious migrants. Additional barriers could be due to language or cultural misunderstandings. Shelters have a case management approach but they tend to not respond to refugee claimants with a holistic approach as they do not receive mandatory training in order to understand the refugee process, for example all the urgent deadlines that are involved.

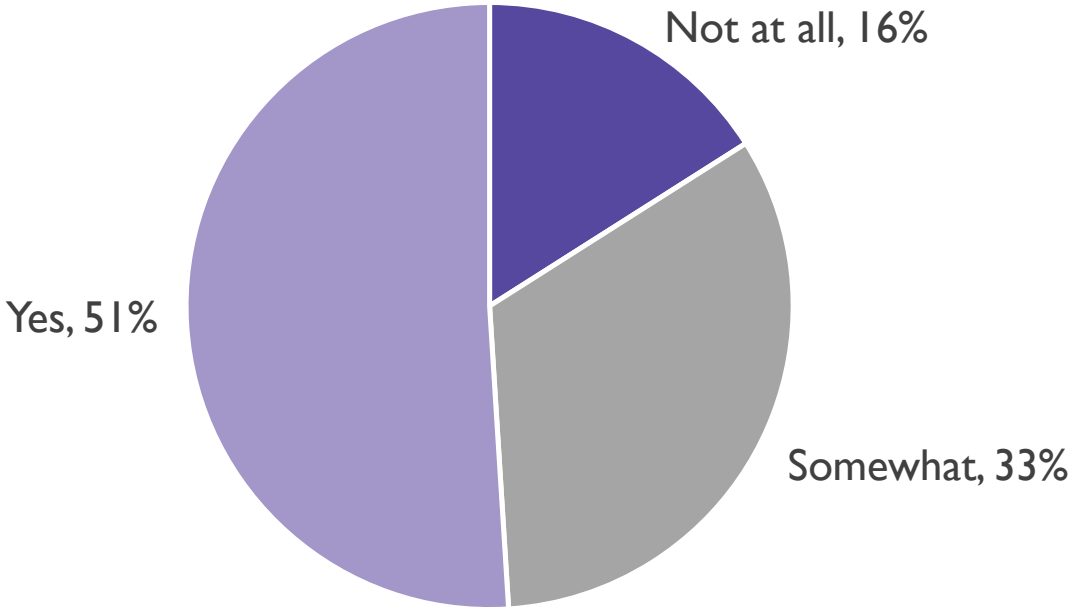
Moreover, they usually have little knowledge about the different immigration processes. For example some workers start pushing people without status to submit a refugee claim. This may be because for the worker it is "logical" — they can then help the client apply for Ontario Works assistance and look for housing. However, it may not be the best option for the client.

Precarious migrants face discrimination from some of the workers, especially if the worker does not understand how they came to be in the situation they are in and instead of trying to help them starts judging them. At times shelter staff send the clients to organizations like FCJ Refugee Centre for assistance, instead of trying to find ways to support them.

The following responses shed a bit more light on people's experiences in the City of Toronto shelter system.

It is noteworthy that when our respondents were asked "Did you have a good experience at the shelter?" only 51% said "Yes," 33% said "Somewhat," and 16% said "Not at all."

Did you have a good experience at the shelter?



In response to the question, "Every time you had a problem, did you receive support?" 58% said "Yes," 23% said "Somewhat," and 19% said "Not at all."

The question "Were you referred to other organizations for additional support?" resulted in 63.5% of the respondents saying "Yes," 12% saying "Somewhat," and 24.5% saying "Not at all."

So while over half of the respondents responded positively it is of concern that a good one quarter or one fifth are finding that the shelter staff did not at all respond to their needs.

The responses to the final question on shelters were only slightly more encouraging. In response to "Did the information received strengthen your capacity to have access to services in the city?" 69% said "Yes," 19% said "Somewhat," and only 12% said "Not at all."

Testimonies

Concerns about safety

> As soon as **B.** arrived in Canada she bought a local SIM card at the airport. A newcomer's phone can become a lifeline and access to the Internet over a phone is key for navigation around the city, researching services, etc.

B. was supposed to stay with an uncle whom she had contacted before arriving in Canada. However, after she arrived he quickly changed his mind and asked her to go, even though he really hadn't supported her very much.

She ended up at a shelter, albeit not one geared to receiving refugees and newcomers. The environment was shared with people who are homeless. Sometimes there was a lot of tension in the shelter. B. found it very hard to sleep there at night. "There is a whole street culture you don't understand," she says. "You are leaving a difficult situation and you are retraumatized." Moreover she adds, you feel very vulnerable in the beginning and you don't know your rights!

FI. had a similar experience in a shelter not geared to receiving refugees and

> newcomers. He said he found the exposure to violence at the shelter retraumatizing. Moreover, he added he had concerns for his safety. It was not easy for him to charge his phone at the shelter, a device key for accessing services, using GPS to navigate the city, etc. Fearing that the phone might disappear at the shelter, he would often come to FCJ and sit in our kitchen simply to charge his phone there.

He also enjoyed having a warm place to stay during the day when he was asked to vacate the shelter. As winter was approaching and he did not have a lot of warm clothes, he was concerned about where he would go during the days. We gave him information about spaces such as malls, libraries and community centres that were closer to the shelter so he did not have to spend money on the TTC to come to FCJ.

Lack of accessibility due to language barrier

> **Q.** did not speak English, only Spanish. No one at the shelter spoke Spanish and the only information they were given was in English. Q. tried to use their phone and a translation program to communicate. Also they would observe what other residents were doing. At a certain time they would see them all heading to the dining area for example and they inferred that it was time for a meal.

The experiences at the shelters geared to receiving refugee claimants and precarious migrants tend to be quite different. Lack of privacy and safety may still be an issue. However these shelters tend to have a lot more resources for people, as well as staff to assist with the settlement and integration process — from libraries to laundry rooms, to housing workers and other settlement services. The following testimonies are about experiences at shelters specifically geared to receiving refugee claimants and precarious migrants.

Experiences at refugee shelters

> I have been in the same refugee shelter since 2017. It's not a bad experience. I haven't changed as it is more important for me to have stability so that I can focus on my studies.
>
> A young man, FCJ Youth Network

> One thing that I would like to see changed [at the refugee shelter] is the food situation. The shelters provide food, you are not allowed to buy or cook our own food. I understand that they need to make rules to organize the space and our lives but what if the rules end up hurting people? It can be difficult for people to maintain their health through the food they eat — or their customs and traditions. These things mean a lot — especially when you first arrive, you miss [your home country] and everything is unfamiliar. You have a craving for the food from your home.

> I had a problem with my digestion and faced a lot of restrictions in what I could eat. The shelter was not able to make any allowances for this. Other residents could only eat halal food. You might say we could eat outside the shelter but we didn't have the funds for this. Also when you are fasting there were no special accommodations.

> In some family shelters, there is a money allowance for food and a kitchenette people can use. Single people might eat what they cook.

Solutions for change

The following measures being requested from the City and the community sector would help address some of the pressing problems with the quality of conditions, such as lack of safety, lack of training for staff and lack of coordination between the community sector and the City.

City of Toronto

- We would like to see more attention paid to addressing safety concerns at the shelters, through increased staff trained in conflict resolution and secure spaces such as lockers for people's belongings at all shelters and respite centres.
    - Safety is one of the major concerns at the shelters housing homeless people. There has been aggression from people with mental health challenges and some refugee claimants have been subjected to violence or have witnessed violence which has given them flashbacks and re-traumatized them. Having a place to stay is important but it must be welcoming and not frightening.
- Even if shelters/respite centres etc. do not have bilingual staff, the City must ensure that all the spaces have printed information about their rules and practices translated into a number of different languages. This should be provided to the client at the time of the intake interview and/or posted around the shelter.
- The policy of the shelters is such that the people have to leave every day and come back around 5 pm. For refugee claimants this is a challenge as they may not be familiar with the city and don't know where to go for the day. This policy must stop immediately.
- Not all the shelters have enough housing workers to help residents look for housing — it depends on their capacity and who is providing funding to the shelter. We recommend that all shelters have housing workers to facilitate access to permanent housing and to support the person in their interactions with landlords.
- In the shelter system, people have access to a weekly allowance. Around three years ago there was a change in the policy from the Province. However, precarious migrants and those who are at the beginning of the refugee claim process are not eligible. In order to be eligible one must have

access to Ontario Works. This decision should be questioned as it has had a big negative impact, especially for precarious migrants and for women with children who would greatly benefit from such an allowance — for example, to pay for transportation and be able to go to their appointments.

- Shelter workers do undergo training but the training on the Immigration Refugee process is not compulsory. In addition, there is a lot of turnover in the staff and the trainings are not held frequently. (There is a training that is provided by FCJ Refugee Centre through the Hostel Training Centre for shelter workers but it is not compulsory and only takes place once a year. The turnover in staff taking part means that any knowledge gained through the training is lost.)
- Conflict resolution and a trauma-informed approach should be part of the training for shelter staff.
- We would like to see more training aimed at increasing sensitivity in the staff vis-à-vis members of the LGBTQIA population who stay at the shelters.
- The refugee houses would like to see more spaces for meetings and interaction with shelter staff and representatives from the City to discuss the provision of services and access to shelters.
    - We would like to see regular meetings every two months. Having more opportunities for interaction would lead to more transparency and coordination among all those in involved in the welcome and settlement of refugees. It is important that this meeting be with decision-makers from the City. The idea is not to have meetings in order for the refugee houses to receive information only or to learn about the City's decisions.
    - Currently only Christie Refugee Centre and Sojourn House meet regularly with Central Intake, and the City of Toronto, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration. These two shelters are part of the City's emergency response system as well as members of the Coalition of Service Providers for Refugee Claimants.
    - The City of Toronto Immigrant and Refugee Housing Committee does bring everyone who works with refugees together every two months. But this space is mostly for networking, though there is an opportunity to meet staff from shelters there.

The City's use of hotels

As mentioned above, the City uses 4 hotels to shelter refugee claimant families, as an emergency measure.

But accommodating refugee claimants in high-visibility hotels is not an ideal choice. Besides the high costs involved, the set up does not make it easy to create a connection between the hotel residents and the community — who might be able to protect them from hateful actions. Relationship-building is much harder to do when the refugee claimants are being housed in a more impersonal hotel.

We have also seen that hotels housing refugees in large numbers make for an appealing news story for the media that wishes to exaggerate a crisis or focus on a negative aspect of the issue. This is yet another argument against housing the city's newcomers in these spaces, in addition to the cost.

These problems were highlighted in October 2018, when the Radisson Hotel — a temporary home to 570 or so refugee claimants — was the target of an arson attempt. The attack came in the wake of comments and videos circulating online that expressed anti-refugee sentiments. The racism that became apparent through this incident further indicated that the City's short-term approach to solving the influx of refugee claimants through this set up is wrong.

Solutions for change

The following recommendations offer suggestions for the City in working with the community sector to create safer conditions for refugee claimants and to foster better relationships between the hotels and the surrounding community.

City of Toronto

Ultimately, we would like to see a shift away from the City's emphasis on housing refugee claimants in hotels as an emergency measure towards more cost effective, longer-term alternatives. In the meantime, we would like to see more training for staff being hired to address the needs at these hotels — though we understand the limitations of the use of hotels as an ongoing reactive measure, constantly responding to an emergency situation when there is never enough time or enough training on complex issues.

We would like to see a more holistic and long-term approach to safety for refugee claimants and precarious migrants at the hotels. The safety measures implemented to respond to the security concerns at the Radisson Hotel following the October 2018 incident were not inappropriate. But our concern is that they only addressed the problem in the short-term. And there was no public awareness campaign to respond to and counter the issue of racism. Moreover, focusing only on enhanced security measures may increase safety but it also creates an unpleasant environment for the residents, and could result in a re-traumatizing scenario for the refugee claimants.

We recommend a different approach that would instead focus on prevention:

- Countering the negative publicity and false claims being made about refugee claimants by promoting more nuanced and humane portraits of the individuals involved (for example, FCJ's attempt to create goodwill and raise awareness through an arts exhibition and education project);
- Focusing on stories of communities welcoming newcomers, refugee claimants and precarious migrants that have had positive experiences and not experienced any negative consequences as this is the majority of experiences that do not make the front page of the news. This will ultimately be a collaborative effort since the media, government officials and other spokespeople all have an important role to play in portraying a different image;
- Encouraging politicians not to stay silent when this type of trolling and negative publicity is uttered about refugee claimants and to have all the facts in hand to avoid misinformation — community organizations could inform politicians, putting them in touch with the communities of refugee claimants and precarious migrants who can share their perspective;
- Questioning politicians when they use refugee claimants as "scapegoats" for the city's housing crisis and other problems;
- Urging the media to be extremely careful with the reporting on these sensitive issues given the current political climate and to take into account negative consequences and (unintended incitement) to violence;

- Welcoming actions such as the National News Media Council criticisms of the *Toronto Sun* for their inaccurate reporting;[3]
- Stressing the importance of the media calling out their own colleagues when they fail to meet journalistic standards; and
- Building relationships with the community surrounding the shelter or home housing the refugee claimants, so that the neighbours come to support the initiative, speaking out in its support and even assisting with fundraising. FCJ Refugee Centre, Romero House and other groups have been able to do this very successfully with their neighbours, through community outreach, their annual street parties;

While refugee claimants continue being housed in the hotels, more responsible journalism could help by stressing the positive outcomes of interactions between the refugee claimants and the host community. And the hotels could reach out to the local community, inviting them to volunteer.

3 See Audette-Longo, T. (2018, December 13). Press Council comes down on Toronto Sun after 'serious breach' after false report about goats. *Canada's National Observer*. Retrieved from https://www.nationalobserver.com/2018/12/13/news/press-council-comes-down-toronto-sun-serious-breach-after-false-report-about-goats

Phase III: Transitioning to the private rental market

We share below some of the experiences shared with us by refugee claimants and individuals with precarious status, who participated in a number of one-on-one interviews or focus group discussions, or who filled out a questionnaire about the experiences connected to the housing search.

People talked about:

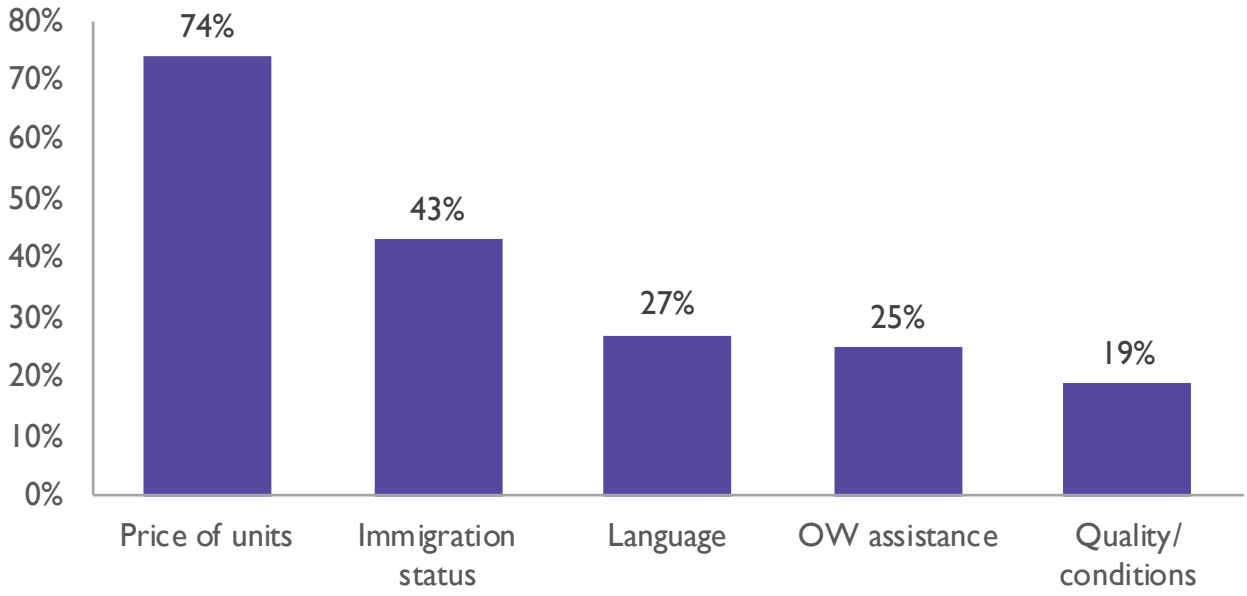
- The great difficulty in finding an affordable home;
- The great difficulty in providing the necessary documents and proof landlords ask for (credit history, bank statements, employment history or a guarantor);
- Landlords who refuse to rent to refugee claimants or people on social assistance;
- Discrimination and prejudices connected to race, but more often related to their background or culture, or just strange ideas about newcomers;
- Landlords who take advantage of newcomers by overcharging;
- Individuals who try to scam people (all renters may fall prey to this but newcomers who are not familiar with the system or the city's neighbourhoods are more vulnerable to such practices, with people sometimes trying to rent apartments even before arriving in the country);
- Landlords who discriminate against families, especially large families, and/or single mothers with children (some young women reported a change in treatment after they became pregnant);
- Landlords who discriminate against someone because of their age (for example a young person) or gender (assuming young men like to party); and
- Landlords who sometimes ask for their social insurance number (SIN), which can reveal someone's status because the SIN starts with a different number for refugee claimants.

Respondents were asked if they experienced any challenges while looking for housing, and were asked to indicate what types of challenges they faced. These were the challenges and barriers identified by those who responded to the questionnaires, by percentages:

- 74% found that the price of units was a barrier;
- 43% identified immigration status as a barrier;
- 27% identified language (their lack of understanding of English);
- 25% pointed to receiving assistance from OW; and
- 19% pointed to problems with the quality/condition of the units for rent.

A couple of people mentioned particularly bad conditions in the units they rented such as the presence of bed bugs, while 3 others stated that they had health or mobility challenges which made it more difficult for them to find an appropriate unit. One person mentioned "not being aware of my rights as a tenant" as an additional barrier or challenge.

Challenges in accessing housing



We compared these responses with the responses we received from housing workers and youth workers who help people find housing in the city. In response to the challenges they saw that their clients faced, out of 10 housing workers:

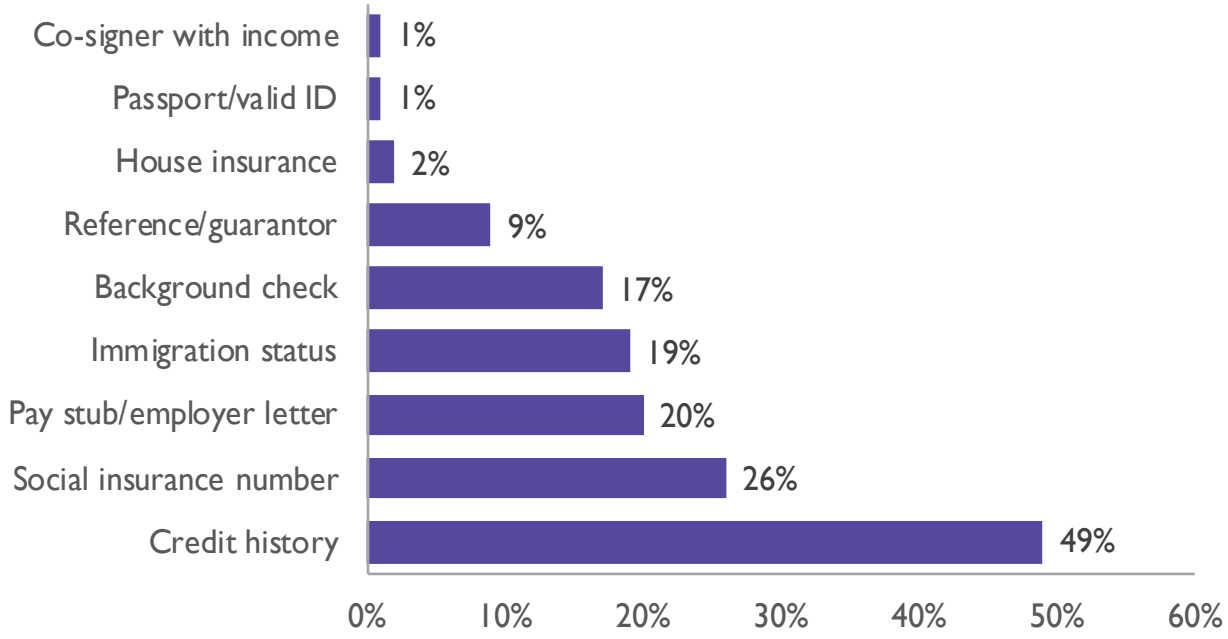
- All 10 said that the price of units was an issue;
- All 10 said receiving OW assistance was an issue;
- 8 identified language as a barrier;
- 7 identified immigration status;
- 7 identified the family size/having small kids;
- 5 identified the quality/condition of the unit; and
- 4 identified age.

Those who filled out the questionnaire also responded to the question "Were you asked for some requirements (i.e. documentation from the landlord)?" and "Were you able to provide these requirements"?

Respondents stated that the following documents were difficult or impossible to obtain (*with many respondents being asked for more than one document*):

- 49% were asked for and could not provide their credit history;
- 26% were asked for and could not provide a social insurance number;
- 20% were asked for and could not provide a letter from their employer or a pay stub;
- 19% were asked for and could not provide documents showing their immigration status;
- 17% were asked for and could not provide a background check;
- 9% were asked for and could not provide a reference letter or a guarantor's note;
- 2% mentioned the need for housing insurance;
- 1% mentioned that a passport or valid non-expired ID was needed; and
- 1% mentioned the need for a guarantor to co-sign, with proof of savings over $75,000.

Were you asked for any documentation by the landlord?

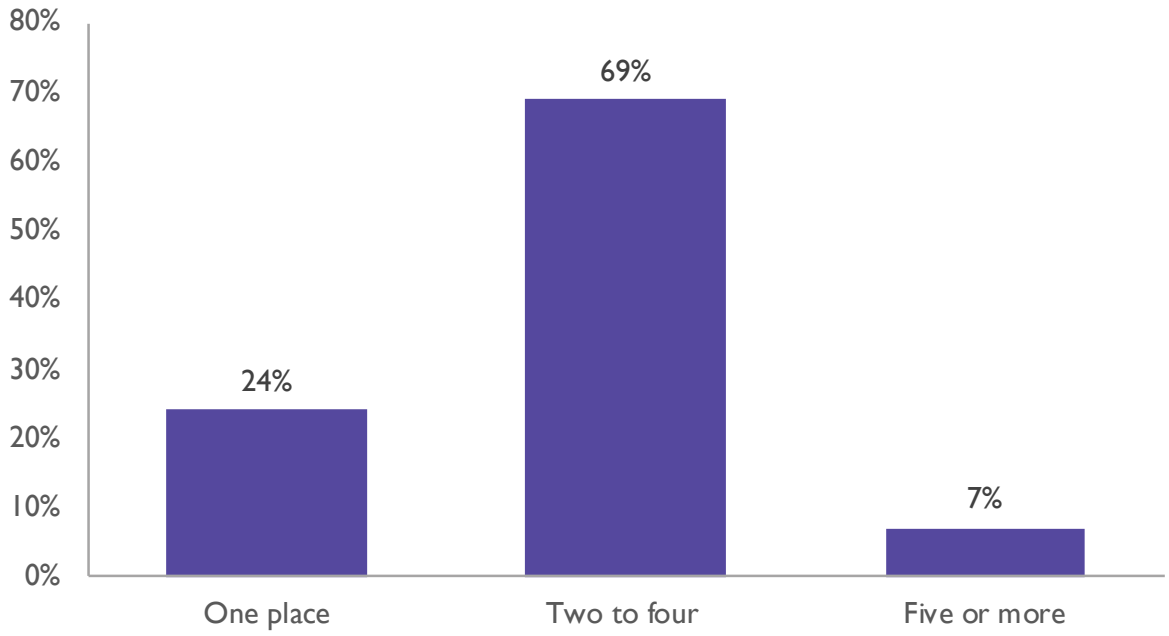


When we asked the 10 housing workers about documents that their clients had been asked for and had difficulty providing,

- All 10 said credit history was a challenge;
- 5 said providing background history was a challenge;
- 4 said clients needed a letter from an employer / reference letter / guarantor;
- 4 said clients needed a social insurance number; and
- 3 said clients had to show proof of immigration status.

What the responses also pointed to was the need to change residences on a regular basis, either due to the ending of a temporary arrangement, the worsening of conditions at the person's place of residence, exposure to domestic violence or fear of deportation. Almost 70% of people responded that they had stayed in 2-4 places since arriving although most had been in the country for less than 2 years. Only 24% or one quarter stated that they had only stayed in one place since arriving in Canada — the great majority of those were either still staying with family (whether the situation was a positive one or not) or were still stuck in a shelter many months after arriving because they could not transition to a rental place.

How many places have you stayed since you first arrived in Canada?



Those who were able to find a place to rent found that it took upwards of 2 to 4 months to achieve this, and sometimes over a year or more.

When we asked housing workers and youth workers how long it took for their clients to find a place to rent this is what each one of them said: 2-3 months, 2-4 months, 3 months, 45-90 days, 4 months, 4-7 months, more than 6 months.

Many people were forced to take spaces that were far from their school or place of employment, which of course implies additional transportation costs.

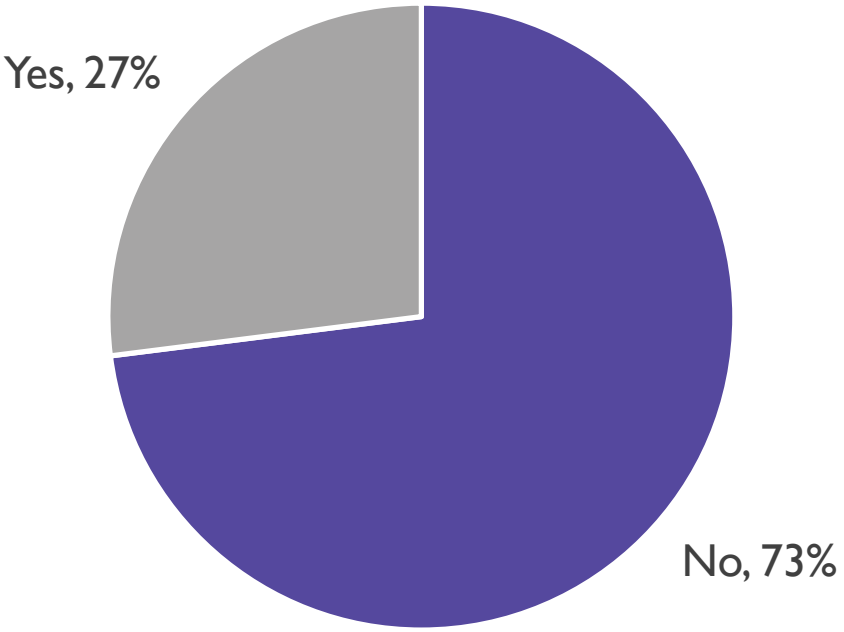
Not surprisingly, most people are placed in a position where they are devoting the main bulk of their monthly income to rent, often up to 70%. The basic allowance received from Ontario Works for food, transportation or other basic needs is also often needed to pay the rent, forcing people to rely on social services such as food banks for their monthly needs.

Another concern for undocumented Torontonians is that fearing deportation they may keep changing addresses in order not to be found. This leads to additional vulnerabilities and being more subject to the precarity and the abuse of the market system (i.e. can't even benefit from rent control by staying in a unit for a long time).

Those who were able to stay with family members or other connections were the "lucky" ones, who were spared most of this. However, those who do not have to contribute in some way tend to be a very small group. In most cases, the family members may not have extra disposable income so after an initial welcome period, the refugee claimant or precarious migrant will have to start paying rent or at least partly covering their costs. This can place a lot of stress on that family relationship and the concern is of course what happens if their situation changes or a sponsorship breaks down and the person is left in a vulnerable state.

Respondents who filled out the questionnaires were asked if they felt that landlords hesitated to rent to them due to their race/ethnic background. While some responded that it was "difficult to know with certainty," 27% or over a quarter felt that this was a factor while 73% did not.

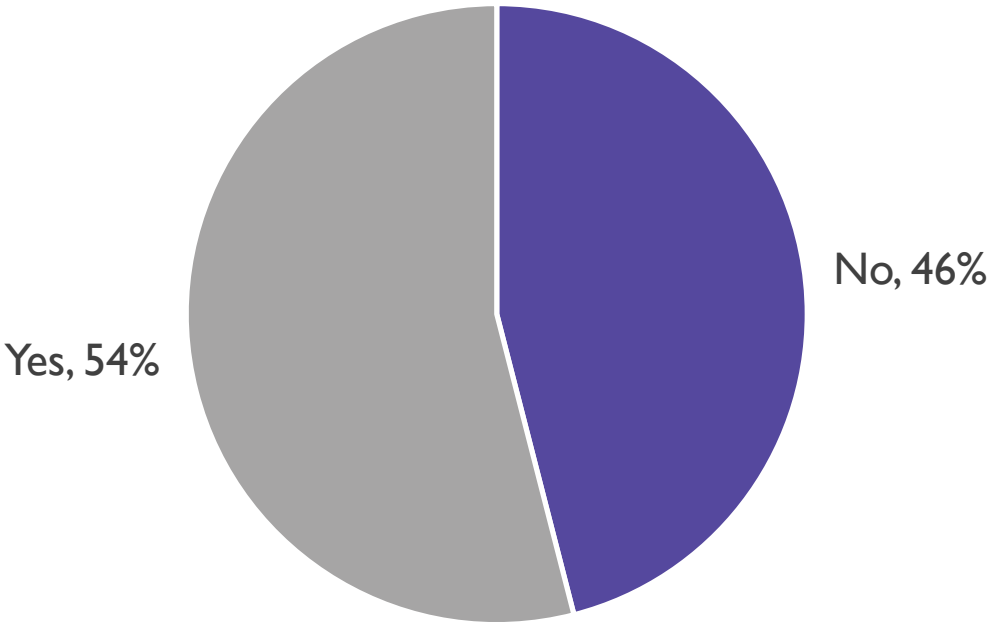
Did you feel that landlords hesitated to rent to you due to your race/ethnic background?



Housing workers were asked the same question. Interestingly enough their impression was slightly different. Seven responded that landlords hesitated to rent due to the person's race or ethnic background. Not a single housing worker responded that it was not a factor.

The responses were even more discouraging when people were asked "Did you feel that landlords hesitated to rent to you when you told them about your immigration status"? More than half or 54% felt that this was a barrier.

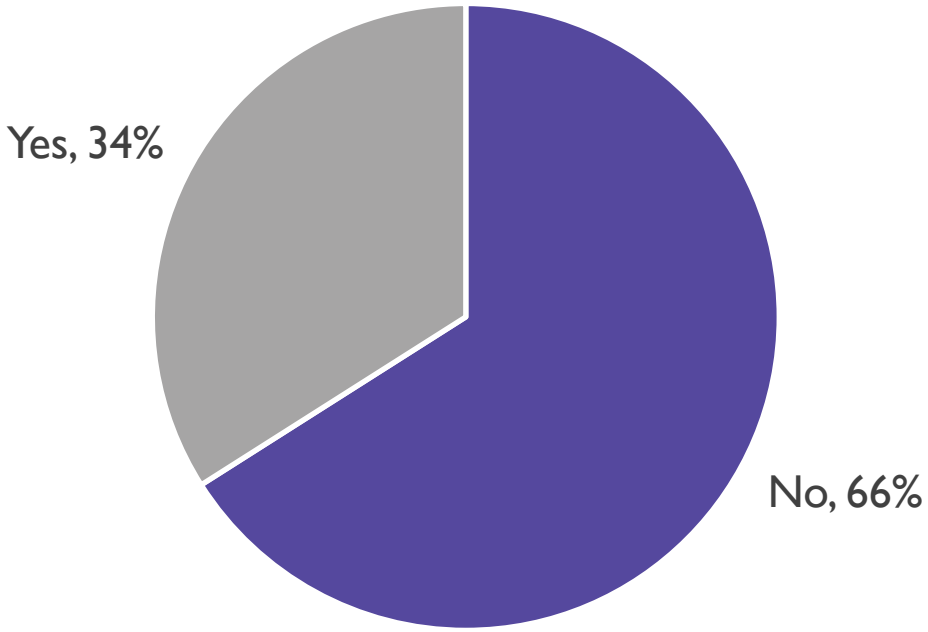
Did you feel that landlords hesitated to rent to you due to your immigration status?



When the housing workers were asked for their impressions, 7 felt that immigration status was a defining factor that discouraged landlords while only 2 did not.

Finally people were asked, "If you were asked for your SIN and you have a number beginning with #9, did you receive a negative reaction"? Not everyone was asked about this but of those who did, one third or 34% thought that it resulted in a negative reaction, while 66% did not.

Did a social insurance number beginning with #9 result in a negative reaction?



When the housing workers were asked the same question, 2 felt that clients with a social insurance number beginning with a #9 received a negative reaction while 6 did not.

Testimonies

"Finding a place to live is more difficult than finding a job!"

Lack of affordability, many requirements

E. was referred to FCJ and she is staying at one of our transitional houses. Since then, she has been trying to find a place for rent so she can move out. She has joined forces with a friend who also has a child, so together they can pay about $1,200 in rent.

"There is a lot of resistance from landlords when you say you are a refugee," she explains. "You go to the appointment to see the apartment, they ask for your bank statement, the previous landlord's recommendation, your pay slips proving you had paid rent before, your credit score. It's too much stuff."

"'Can I bring my guarantor who can vouch for me," I will ask. "No, you must show proof of income, and employment." Even though I have the money to pay the

rent they ask for and Loly [FCJ co-director] can write a letter in my support proving I have been paying rent here, that's not good enough. I would argue with landlords that OW [Ontario Works social assistance] is steady income. You try to reason with them with no luck."

"You get the feeling you should be able to show you have a lot of money in savings. I would ask this question to landlords then, 'So do you mean people who are new to Canada don't have the right to rent a place?' 'It's not my fault, that's how the system works' — this was their response. If I wasn't a refugee, and I came to Canada, would I not be able to stay? It doesn't seem right."
Landlords ask for so many things, your history, where are your parents, why are they not helping you. Some of the questions are not legal, that's what I feel!

> I was finally able to find a place, but my workplace is very far from there — a lot of money and time spent in commuting.

Discrimination

> Even though the place may be available they give you the impression the apartment has been rented. Or they might say the rent is higher than was stated previously. We went to see one place that was renting to folks who seemed to be refugees (because we recognize each other, we can tell who is a newcomer), we were told the rent was $1,900. Of course this amount is not affordable, but I suspect the amount was inflated because they didn't want us. That may have been a race [discrimination] issue, as the rest of the folks were white [the interviewee is a woman of colour from Africa].

> I have faced discrimination for being a newcomer, on OW [Ontario Works social assistance], or a refugee claimant. Also for having 2 kids, they are 5 months and 2 years old. Race or racism has not been an issue so much."

> Some landlords have a lot of assumptions about people from African countries, especially if they haven't travelled. They think we are loud or go

out a lot to party, or invite a lot of friends over. We are not that kind of people, we are pretty quiet.

I really found these types of assumptions being made about me, as I am a young black man. My mom faced less of this type of thing.
The housing search is really challenging. I have been looking for more than 3 months, and must have looked at more than 20 places. As my name is a commonly used one, landlords don't realize until they meet me that I am from Africa, Muslim or that I wear the hijab. Many also react to the fact that I am a refugee claimant and on Ontario Works.

When I tried to rent a room in a house, I had to share my whole personal history. They asked me so many questions, to prove that I was trustworthy. You don't have a choice...
Sometimes I don't feel welcome. A letter circulated in our apartment building commented on the odour from people's cooking. I felt like that was directed at people from other cultures, with different traditions.

Being overcharged / scams

> I know one case, they are overcharging for a basement apartment that is not so nice.

Another woman asked if I cook a lot, would I be using the kitchen. In my room, I only had access to a microwave and a small fridge, and was not allowed to use the common area or the kitchen. For that I would have to pay extra. They try to take advantage when they see that you are a newcomer.

> I was staying with my sister and parents. After my dad left, it was just my mom, my sister and myself. The landlord realised we were women alone and raised the price by a lot. I know that's not right and I am trying to find a lawyer to help me fight it. We had some maintenance issues in the house too, like a broken ceiling and problems with the water. The landlord complains we are not paying enough, and we are breaking things. His own secretary told us that what he is doing is not legal. But I also knew, I had looked it up online.

> The woman [who had a unit for rent] gave us the application, asked us to sign, and asked for a copy of a cheque. Is this the proper first step or was she trying to trick us?
>
> Another one asked for us to sign a contract and send it by email. When should we be signing things in person? We do not know.

> One guy made up a fancy story about being a doctor, being away from the city because of his family, etc., and asked for a deposit. Luckily we didn't give the money to him, instead we wanted to go see the supposed apartment for rent. When we got to the address he had given, we realized that it was a commercial space, not residential. So he was trying to trick us. I felt really silly at that moment, and even wondered if this fake landlord was hiding around the corner looking at me.

Solutions for change

The following section offers some recommendations for the City of Toronto to improve conditions for refugee claimants trying to find housing, including measures to combat discrimination and improve accessibility of information.

City of Toronto

- Currently there is no good mechanism in place from the City of Toronto whereby one can easily find information on the available pool of affordable housing (this is partly due to the recent reduction in the size of Toronto City Council plus internal changes and website restructuring). This is an access

issue as newcomers unfamiliar with the City system would face additional challenges. The information needs to be made much more accessible and transparent.

- In October 2018, there was a "random draw" by the City in order to allocate 75 units — 2,773 applicants took part, which is an incredible indication of the great demand. It also raises the question of how people were informed of the draw and how this process could have been more fair. If the process was more transparent and clear, newcomers would still be at a disadvantage due to their unfamiliarity with the system. Still, we would hope the transparency could translate to a more equal opportunity of access.
- In FCJ's view, affordable housing units should not be allocated on a "first come, first served basis" but instead, on a needs assessment. This would ensure that the specific vulnerabilities and challenges faced by refugee claimants or precarious migrants who are new to the city and have very few supports are taken into account.
- We also feel that there should be an ongoing needs assessment mechanism. This will ensure that the persons currently living in the units are in need of supportive housing and their circumstances have not changed. Otherwise, those units should be liberated and allocated to others who are in need.
- Individuals do approach FCJ Refugee Centre and other organizations with the misconception that they can help them get priority on the waiting list for affordable housing and speed up the process (which can take years and, as mentioned above, is based on a "first come, first served" system). Sometimes the intervention of an advocate can help an individual in a specific situation advance on the waiting list (due to priorities set by the City). What's important is to make sure that the process is consistent, fair and not reliant on the "connections" a settlement organization may have.
- We also note that access to most types of affordable housing is dependent on immigration status — for example, permanent residency is often a requirement. While this is a not a stipulation set in place by the City but rather by the Province, it is an important barrier to access that must be addressed.
- The City should run a hotline which can receive complaints from refugee claimants and precarious migrants about discrimination and abuses by landlords. It should be accessible in different languages.

    - Refugee claimants and precarious migrants who have been mistreated do have the option of approaching the Federation of Metro Tenants' Associations (FMTA) for assistance. They run a tenant hotline — funded by the City of Toronto — providing free information on tenants' rights and options for addressing a violation. Interpretation is provided in some languages. The City should resource the hotline to be available in more languages so that refugee claimants and precarious migrants can fully access the service. The City should also play more of a role in advertising and promoting the hotline.

- Shelters and community services should collect data about discrimination and centralize it in a way that can be presented to the Ontario Human Rights Commission and the City to take steps forward. Parallel to this, we would like to see a standard procedure whereby if a person is rejected by a landlord due to discrimination or faces some other type of violation, they should have a way to report back to the institution that is assisting them.
- Even if the worker is not able to advocate on their behalf, they could at least document the incident. It is important to record as many details as possible at that moment as usually there are no witnesses to the incident and memories can fade.
- The information from the various organizations should be collected in a centralized place and compiled in an annual report. It can be used to:
    - Identify "bad landlords" and penalize them;
    - Share with the Ontario Human Rights Commission which does play a role in bringing landlords to the Human Rights Tribunal (the data could perhaps serve as evidence in some cases); and
    - Leverage discussions with governments, who will not be able to deny the extent of the issue when presented with the data.
- The City should penalize landlords for abusive behaviours and crack down on scams. For example, the City could penalize landlords who practice "upfront discrimination" by advertising for example that they will not rent to anyone of a certain race, "from a terrorist country" etc., or who pose unreasonable requirements of very high deposits from tenants.

- The City is also encouraged to adopt the Refugee Capacity Plan proposal, developed by the Coalition of Service Providers for Refugee Claimants in Ontario. These recommendations include:
    - Immediate establishment and operation of a 24/7 Refugee Reception Centre;
    - Expansion of permanent emergency shelter system via refugee-specific programs through either existing refugee shelters or with new partner organizations;
    - Expansion and operational funding for additional refugee houses, including both short-term/emergency and transitional housing models;
    - City of Toronto funding for housing workers at current refugee houses in Toronto;
    - Restructuring of Toronto's Transitional Housing Allowance Program (THAP) to allow for increased access for homeless Torontonians;
    - Timely and effective access to the Housing Stabilization Fund (HSF) benefit for all eligible recipients of Ontario Works social assistance;
    - Advocacy with the Province of Ontario to restructure Ontario Works client agreements in order to provide monthly transportation allowance to shelter users for housing searches;
    - Enhanced partnerships between refugee houses and settlement organizations funded to provide services for convention refugees and permanent residents;
    - Development of an emergency/contingency plan to respond to large numbers of unexpected arrivals to Toronto;
    - Establishment of an ongoing Refugee Affairs Committee to be run through the Toronto Newcomer Office, which will meet regularly and aim to address the following:
        - Issues impacting refugee claimants and precarious migrants in Toronto;
        - Initiatives directly related to Toronto's Refugee Capacity Plan;
        - Current immigration policy and strategic advocacy for the City to engage with other levels of government;

- Specific initiatives addressing particularly vulnerable groups of refugee claimants, including unaccompanied minors, LGBTQIA refugee claimants, and detained refugees and migrants.

Other levels of government

We would like to see additional training for OW workers regarding the vulnerabilities of refugee claimants and precarious migrants. The training should take a trauma-informed approach, focusing on anti-racism and anti-discrimination. The idea is to shift the approach to one of "enabling access" for people — versus the OW worker being put in the position of having to act as a "doorkeeper."

The housing worker may be able to advocate for the client with the Ontario Works worker to ensure that they can receive social assistance. Certainly they can act as a "buffer" between the client who is in a vulnerable situation and the OW worker who is sometimes lacking in sensitivity about the client's situation — or does not fully understand the vulnerabilities of a refugee claimant or precarious migrant (as they are not the majority of their caseload). This may change if the volume of refugee claimants increases. The shifting reality is forcing OW workers to become more familiar with these populations' vulnerabilities.

Community sector

- It is important for settlement organizations and the refugee houses to build a relationship with landlords to facilitate the accessibility of precarious migrants to permanent housing. This could be done via the Housing Help Centres, which are located in different catchment areas. Their role is to help people find housing and they advocate with landlords.
- The current challenge is that they don't provide proper services for refugee claimants and precarious migrants. We recommend the provision of training for these centres on the refugee claim process, as well as sensitivity in dealing with precarious migrants. Not all the centres are aware of the complexities resulting from having different immigration status. Nor are the centres well promoted as a place where one can get help with accessing permanent housing.
- An "open homes" model could also be used to improve access to housing for vulnerable newcomers. This approach would involve City of Toronto

residents who are owners of homes. They would be invited to rent the space on a temporary basis at an OW rate to a refugee family with the purpose of providing temporary relief to the client and to relieve their stress, while they are searching for a permanent house. The refugee houses could play a key role in contacting the community and coordinating this program.

- Naturally people are in a vulnerable position, and even if they are aware of their rights they most likely will not be in a position to advocate for themselves, at least not alone. But together with allied organizations and settlement or housing workers it may be possible to leverage this information and "put some pressure" on landlords.
- Organizations that advocate on housing and tenant rights should provide information sessions and have services in different languages.
- Precarious migrants may be too fearful to call the hotline or seek other types of assistance if their rights are violated, most likely stemming from the fear of being deported and the police becoming involved. Migrant workers who flee abusive situations may be in an equally tenuous state. Settlement organizations could perhaps work in conjunction with the FMTA to find a way to assist clients in such vulnerable situations.
- Generally there is a lack of concrete information on the number of precarious migrants in the City and the abuse they face. The FCJ Refugee Centre would like to step forward to create an online system and mechanism that can be used to collect the information from settlement organizations. One possibility may be to work in conjunction with the FMTA as they do collect information on their hotline. They do not collect statistics on immigration status for privacy concerns but perhaps there is a way to develop or expand the mechanism of reporting, for research purposes, while still safeguarding the person's privacy.
- It's important for refugee houses and settlement organizations to have a housing worker. It is important that the housing worker explains the challenges to the families so that they can manage their expectations. They also need to know early on in the process that it will require persistence and it can take a long time to find a place to live.

- The system would benefit by learning from the way housing workers provide services at the Christie Refugee Centre.[4] Their housing worker job description includes the following areas of responsibility:
    - Provides information about the rental process (e.g. leases, first and last month's rent, utility costs);
    - Provides information about social assistance benefits (transportation, special diet, transitional child benefit);
    - May help the client develop a budget so that they can make informed decisions;
    - Continues to check in with people during the housing search, to make sure they stay motivated and don't get discouraged;
    - Continues to check in after the client has rented a place to ensure the moving process is smooth;
    - Tries to connect people with new schools, community centres, doctors, affordable grocery stores, etc. in their new neighbourhood (this is particularly necessary as people are often moving outside of the GTA to Hamilton, Kitchener, Brampton, Oshawa);
    - Provides a housing letter or income letter than can be presented to a landlord, as a reference attesting to the client's assets and ability to pay their rent; and
    - Provides a blank rental information form that can be filled out when the client goes to see an apartment so they can return to the Christie Refugee Centre with their questions — (for example, what kind of deposit is required, does the rent cover cable, Hydro, and so on).
- Resources permitting, the housing worker should be tasked with outreaching to and advocating with landlords, to ensure that any concerns they may have are addressed.
- Since it is not possible for housing workers to accompany clients to an appointment to view an apartment for rent, due to the reality of the lack of

4 For more details on Christie Refugee Centre's Approach, please refer to Steve Meagher's presentation "Housing for Vulnerable Newcomers" from the Local Immigration Partnership forum held on December 12, 2018. Available here: https://torontolips.wixsite.com/capacitybuilding/housing

resources and funds for most refugee houses, we would like to see a system whereby a volunteer could carry out this task. During the visit they could advocate on behalf of the client with the landlord, clarify anything that is unclear and provide interpretation. This could perhaps be implemented via community centres or volunteer organizations, with the guidance and training from the refugee houses.

Conclusion

This report has examined the challenges faced by refugee claimants and precarious migrants as they try to find a place to stay in Toronto, and offered several recommendations on how the City can move forward to address these challenges, often in conjunction with the community sector and other levels of government.

The FCJ Refugee Centre is grateful to the individuals and families who spoke to us about their experiences with finding a place to stay in the City. Their honesty and trust has given us an even deeper sense of the barriers they face and the challenges they must overcome at each step of the process. These include challenges that all individuals face in a city with a stretched shelter system, a shortage in affordable housing, and a rental market that is increasingly inaccessible to a large swath of the population. And at the same time these challenges are accentuated by the barriers specific to refugee claimants and precarious migrants, stemming from discrimination due to race and/or immigration status and the difficulty in settling in a new land and securing a decent job, resulting in poverty.

We cannot rely on the rental market to provide access for people in a vulnerable situation.

The City of Toronto must simply step in to address the challenges, if housing as a human right is to be enjoyed by all. For example, the shelter system is at capacity and the number of affordable housing units available in the city is simply not able to meet the demand. And this has been true for many years.

The City also has an important role to play in terms of perceptions and misconceptions about the most vulnerable who are not in a position to advocate for themselves. While it is easy to blame the influx of newcomers and refugee claimants, they have not caused the crisis.

As we begin to work on these solutions, it's important to note that the City does not have the necessary data on the need in the city in order to plan properly for programs. In terms of the numbers of refugee claimants and precarious migrants that are here, we are certainly aware that there are estimates, but there is no real certainty.

In an earlier section we spoke of the importance of improved data collection, particularly on precarious migrants as they are the hidden issue in the housing

crisis. One suggestion we made was for a centralized information system that settlement organizations and refugee houses could use to share information about cases. And we consider the possibility of the FCJ Refugee Centre working with an organization such as the Federation of Metro Tenants' Associations that already collects some data through their tenant hotline — though currently not on immigration status due to privacy concerns.

Having the necessary data would help bring the City closer to being able to plan for the numbers of undocumented Torontonians in the city. Even without this information however, organizations such as FCJ Refugee Centre can attest to the vulnerabilities of precarious migrants, as they regularly cross the threshold of our office.

Where refugee claimants and precarious migrants integrate is at the local level — in the city where they live, work and study. That said, to leave the city alone to profile the international commitments ratified by the Canadian state in regards to refugee claimants and precarious migrants, is completely unfair and unmanageable in the long term. Refugees have always been a shared responsibility between the three levels of government.

The way forward is to create more spaces of connection between the City and other levels of government as well as the community of housing advocates as we can draw on their decades-long experience working on this issue. At the same time, we need to bring to each forum, discussion, and civil society submission the perspective of these vulnerable, invisible populations.

All three levels of government shoulder some of the responsibility, and each government has a role to play. We need all levels of government at the table to address housing as a human right, in a way that:

- Involves those who are most affected;
- Addresses core issues such as poverty, inequality in access and discrimination; and
- Considers the need of the most vulnerable, those who are not always in a position to advocate for their rights.

Appendices

Appendix A

Useful resources and reports

Housing for Vulnerable Newcomers. (2018). [PowerPoint presentation from a December 2018 Local Immigration Partnership (LIP) Forum]. Available here: https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/daa9aa_c0e2af91fb584d9eaacb1f3dfc64342a.pdf

Barata, P., & Richter, T. (2017, March 20). A portable housing benefit could ease our homeless crisis. *The Globe and Mail*. Available here: https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/a-portable-housing-benefit-could-ease-our-homeless-crisis/article34341148/

Toronto

Atak, I., Hannan, C., Hudson, G., & Manocchi, M. (2017). *(No) Access T.O.: A Pilot Study on Sanctuary City Policy in Toronto, Canada*. [RCIS Working Paper No. 2017/1]. Available here: https://www.ryerson.ca/criminology/about-us/faculty-staff/for-faculty/faculty-news-and-events/current-news/no-access-to/
{FCJ Refugee Centre provided input for this study and the research process}

Mendonca-Vieira, P. (2018). *Actually, Rent Control is Great: Revisiting Ontario's Experience, the Supply of Housing, and Security of Tenure*. [Report prepared for the Federation of Metro Tenants' Associations]. Available here: https://torontotenants.org/sites/torontotenants.org/files/actually-rentcontrol-great-phillmv_0.pdf

Freeman, L. (2018). *Toronto's Suburban Rooming Houses: Just a Spin on a Downtown "Problem"?* [Report prepared for the Wellesley Institute]. Available here: http://www.wellesleyinstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Suburban-Rooming-Houses-FINAL-Sept-24.pdf

Park, N. (2016, January 25). Torontoist Explains: The Social Housing Waitlist. *Torontoist*. Available here: https://torontoist.com/2016/01/torontoist-explains-the-social-housing-waitlist/

Ontario

Centre for Equality Rights in Accommodation. (n.d.). Housing and the Human Rights Code. Available here: http://www.equalityrights.org/cera/your-housing-rights/housing-and-the-human-rights-code/

Tenant Duty Counsel Program, Advocacy Centre for Tenants Ontario. (2017). *Where Will We Live? Ontario's Affordable Rental Housing Crisis.* Available here: https://www.acto.ca/production/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/WhereWillWeLive_May2018_ACTO_Report.pdf

Federal

Advocates Urge Independent Oversight and Human Rights Hearings in Forthcoming Legislation. (2018, November 26). Available here: https://nhs.socialrights.ca/nov-press-release/

Canada Without Poverty & Citizens for Public Justice. (n.d.). *Dignity for All, a National Anti-Poverty Plan for Canada.* Available here: http://www.cwp-csp.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/DignityForAll_Report-English-FINAL.compressed.pdf

General studies

Keenan, Louanne. (2017). *Low Income Immigrant and Refugee Seniors: Housing and Health Needs Assessment.* [Report prepared for the Homeward Trust Edmonton]. Available here: http://homewardtrust.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Keenan-2017.pdf

Halliday, B., & Teixeira, C. (Eds.) (2010). Newcomers' Experiences of Housing and Homelessness in Canada. [Special Issue]. *Canadian Issues.* Available here: http://canada.metropolis.net/publications/aec_citc_fall2010_e.pdf

Toolkits

Resources Exist for Networking and Training (RENT). (n.d.). Housing Help Resource Toolkit. Available here: http://www.housingworkers.ca/rent/toolkit/

Federation of Metro Tenants' Associations. (n.d.). *Tenant Survival Manual.* [Available in English, French, Arabic, Chinese, Farsi, Hindi, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Tamil, and Vietnamese]. Available here: https://torontotenants.org/resources/tenant-survival-manual

Getting to Know the Housing Worker. (n.d.). [Infographic]. Available here: https://infograph.venngage.com/p/402489/housing-worker

Appendix B

Housing questionnaire

General information

When did you arrive in Canada?

- ☐ 1 year ago or less
- ☐ Between 2 and 3 years
- ☐ 4 or more years

In which city did you **arrive**? _____

Port of entry: _____

Your age:

- ☐ 18 or less
- ☐ 19 to 35
- ☐ 36 to 50
- ☐ 51 to 65
- ☐ 66 or more

Number of family members coming with you:

- ☐ None
- ☐ 1 or 2 relatives
- ☐ 3 or more relatives

Number of children coming with you (below 18):

- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4 or more

First language:

- ☐ English
- ☐ French
- ☐ Spanish
- ☐ Arabic
- ☐ Tigrinya
- ☐ Hungarian
- ☐ Other: _____

Status when you **arrived** in Canada:

- ☐ Visitor
- ☐ Temporary worker
- ☐ Student
- ☐ Refugee claimant

Please check the box that best describes your **current** status (it can be more than 1):

- ☐ Refugee claimant
- ☐ No status
- ☐ Temporary worker
- ☐ Rejected refugee
- ☐ Sponsored
- ☐ Other (please specify):
- ☐ Visitor
- ☐ Student
- _____

Your ethnic background

These questions are being included here as we are trying to understand if your country of origin or ethnic background has impacted on your housing search and resulted in discrimination.

Your country of birth: _____

Race/Racial identity - Do you consider yourself to be (pick all that apply):

- ☐ Black/African
- ☐ Southern European/ Mediterranean
- ☐ East Asian
- ☐ Black/Latin American
- ☐ Eastern European
- ☐ Western European
- ☐ Latin American/ Indigenous
- ☐ Afro-Caribbean
- ☐ Arab/ Middle Eastern
- ☐ Asian
- ☐ Latin American/ Hispanic
- ☐ Prefer not to answer
- ☐ South Asian
- ☐ Southeast Asian
- ☐ Other (please specify):
- _____

First night in Toronto

How long have you been living in Toronto?

- ☐ 1 year or less
- ☐ From 2-5 years
- ☐ More than 5 years

At the time you came to Toronto, did you have any place to stay?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

If you answered yes, where did you stay?

- ☐ Family
- ☐ Friend
- ☐ Shelter
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____

a. How long did you stay there?

- ☐ Less than 1 month
- ☐ 1-3 years
- ☐ 2-6 months
- ☐ More than 3 years

b. Reasons for moving out?

- ☐ It was temporary
- ☐ Endured domestic violence
- ☐ Found a new place
- ☐ Evicted
- ☐ Faced discrimination
- ☐ Received subsidized housing
- ☐ Space was too small
- ☐ Threats
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____

If you did not have a place to stay when you came to Toronto, where did you sleep the first night?

- ☐ Hotel
- ☐ On the street
- ☐ Referred to a shelter
- ☐ At the airport
- ☐ Someone offered space on the first night
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____

How many more days did you stay in the same place? # ☐

How much money did you have when you arrived in Toronto? $ _____

Who helped you find a place after the first night? (choose all that apply):

- ☐ Community centre
- ☐ Central Intake
- ☐ Other (please specify):
- ☐ A random person

How many places have you stayed after you came to Toronto, or since you first arrived in Canada?

- ☐ 1 place
- ☐ Between 2-4
- ☐ More than 5

Reasons for moving?

Types of challenges/obstacles faced

Did you experience any challenges while looking for housing?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

If yes, please indicate what types of challenges you faced (check all that apply):

- ☐ Language
- ☐ # of family members
- ☐ Immigration status
- ☐ Price
- ☐ Space/ Physical condition
- ☐ Other

If "other," please specify:

What are the main situations that make it difficult to rent a house/ apartment?

- ☐ Receive OW
- ☐ Language barriers
- ☐ Other (please specify):
- ☐ Financial

Were you asked for some requirements (i.e. documentation) from the landlord?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Were you able to provide these requirements?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

If you answered NO to the last question, please tell us which documents were difficult for you to obtain? (Please check more than one if applicable):

- ☐ Credit history
- ☐ Background check
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____
- ☐ Immigration status
- ☐ Social insurance number

If you were asked for your social insurance number, and you have a number beginning with #9, did you receive a negative reaction?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Did you feel that landlords hesitated to rent to you when you told them about your immigration status?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Were you asked to pay more, due to your status?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Did you feel that landlords hesitated to rent to you due to your race/ethnic background?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If you have been staying in a shelter, please fill out the following section:

	Yes	Somewhat	Not at all
Did you have a good experience at the shelter?	☐	☐	☐
Every time you had a problem, did you receive support?	☐	☐	☐
Were you referred to other organizations for additional support?	☐	☐	☐
Did the information received strengthen your capacity to have access to services in the city?	☐	☐	☐

Please indicate the information/ service you have received in the past from the FCJ Refugee Centre (please choose all that apply to you):

- ☐ Immigration and legal assistance
- ☐ Education and language programs
- ☐ Children programs
- ☐ Refugee process orientation
- ☐ Employment and job search
- ☐ Recreation programs
- ☐ Referral to support groups
- ☐ Youth support
- ☐ Transportation
- ☐ Temporary housing (i.e. shelters)
- ☐ Permanent housing
- ☐ Other (please specify):
- ☐ Application to social assistance
- ☐ Health and counselling

Did you receive support on the above listed services:

- ☐ While living in a shelter
- ☐ While living with a friend
- ☐ While renting

If your answer is **yes**, can you please provide more details (was it useful, how did you learn about it)?

Please provide any additional information on the challenges that you have faced in accessing housing/shelter:

Thank you for your time, we really appreciate your participation in this questionnaire.

FCJ Refugee Centre

Walking With Uprooted People

www.fcjrefugeecentre.org