

# Restricted Access: The Role of Social Capital in Mitigating Absolute Homelessness among Immigrants and Refugees in the GVRD

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## **Abstract**

*The housing patterns of newcomers mark a primary indicator for their successful integration. However, different groups of people have varied access to the stock of housing in Canada. The purpose of this paper is to examine the role that social capital plays in housing trajectories of immigrants with particular attention to the experiences of refugee claimants. In this paper we draw upon the results of a 2004–2005 study on the profile of absolute and relative homelessness among immigrants, refugees, and refugee claimants in the Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD). We highlight the importance of social networks in the housing careers of newcomers, and argue that access to social networks varies according to the mode of entry for immigrants (e.g., skilled immigrants vs. refugees). We find that refugee claimants are particularly vulnerable, given their combination of uncertain legal status, lack of official language ability, and unfamiliarity with Canadian society. They are the most likely of all newcomers to “fall between the cracks” of the housing system. We discuss the benefits of social capital for immigrants and refugees, especially the key role that social capital plays in the integration process.*

## **Résumé**

*Les préférences des nouveaux arrivants en matière de logement constituent un indicateur primaire pour la réussite de leur intégration. Cependant, l'accès au parc de logements au Canada varie selon les groupes. Le but de cet article est d'examiner le rôle que le capital social joue dans les trajectoires des immigrants en matière de logement, avec une attention particulière pour l'expérience de demandeurs du statut de réfugié. Dans cet article nous puisons à partir des résultats d'une étude entreprise en 2004-2005 sur le profil du sans abris absolu et relatif parmi les immigrants, les réfugiés et les demandeurs de statut de réfugié dans le District Régional du Grand Vancouver (DRGV). Nous soulignons l'importance des réseaux sociaux dans le parcours de nouveaux arrivants en matière de logement et soutenons que l'accès aux réseaux sociaux varie selon le mode d'entrée des immigrants (par ex., les immigrants qualifiés à l'opposé des réfugiés). Nous constatons que les demandeurs de statut de réfugié sont particulièrement vulnérables, étant donné qu'ils combinent en eux-mêmes l'incertitude du statut juridique, des faiblesses par rapport aux langues officielles, et le manque de familiarité avec la société canadienne. De tous les nouveaux arrivants, ils sont les plus susceptibles de passer entre les mailles du filet du système de logement. Nous traitons des avantages du capital social pour les immigrants et les réfugiés, surtout le rôle clé que joue le capital social dans le processus d'intégration.*

### Introduction

“Vancouver Housing Least Affordable” pronounces a recent headline.<sup>1</sup> According to a Royal Bank of Canada report, housing costs for the average detached bungalow now account for 57.5 per cent of average pre-tax household income in Vancouver.<sup>2</sup> Rapidly rising prices in the housing market are having a predictable impact, placing a higher proportion of the population at risk of homelessness.<sup>3</sup> The severe challenges faced by the Canadian-born population in gaining access to affordable housing are compounded for newcomers. This paper will draw from a 2004–2005 study on the profile of absolute and relative homelessness among immigrants, refugees, and refugee claimants in the Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD).<sup>4</sup> We examine the connections between (relative and absolute) homelessness and immigrant settlement. We concentrate on the important issue of social capital, and how it can be used to help newcomers settle into Canada. However, we also argue that newcomers have variable access to social networks (and therefore social capital). Given the combination of uncertain legal status, lack of official language ability, and unfamiliarity with Canadian society, refugee claimants are the most likely of all newcomers to “fall between the cracks” in terms of access to relevant social networks, and have limited means to offset barriers to finding housing. This latter point is often overlooked in the literature on social capital and immigrant settlement. We aim here to understand the dynamics of in-group systems of support, and highlight both the positive features of social capital and also the limitations faced by those lacking it. In the process, we reveal an important weakness in theories of social capital.

### GVRD Study on Homelessness

This research is based on a study that incorporated qualitative and quantitative methods to explore three key issues (see Appendix A for a brief explanation of the methodology). We investigated the degree of absolute homelessness of newcomers through a survey of homeless shelters; we investigated relative homelessness through an analysis of the housing trajectories (retrospective) of successful refugee claimants (SRCs); and we investigated both relative and absolute homelessness using a survey of immigrants that asked them to itemize the level of in-group support that they were either providing or receiving (we refer to this part of our study as the Immigrant and Refugee Housing Survey, or IRHS).

Our principal objective is to consider the ways in which social capital mitigates against the most serious forms of homelessness. We employ a broad definition of homelessness that includes a range of circumstances from being without permanent shelter (*i.e.*, “rooflessness”), through

various forms of relative homelessness, such as “sofa surfing” and crowding. The former definition refers to those people who live without shelter and therefore reside on the streets or rely on public facilities such as emergency shelters (often defined as *absolute homelessness*); while the latter refers to those people who possess shelter, but are subject to substandard, unsafe, and/or temporary conditions.<sup>5</sup>

### The Economic Position of Newcomers

Authors point to the increasing evidence that immigrants do not fare as well economically as their Canadian-born counterparts.<sup>6</sup> The *economic assimilation model* has dominated the general understanding of immigrant integration, and asserts that although immigrants earn less than the average Canadian-born person, this gap narrows over time. This long-standing theory of economic incorporation has recently been challenged. Garnett Picot reports that immigrants entering Canada during the 1970s have nearly reached economic parity with the average Canadian-born citizen.<sup>7</sup> After spending more than twenty years in Canada, the 1970s male cohort earned 97 per cent of the earnings of the “like” Canadian (adjusting for age, education, etc.). Immigrants arriving during the 1980s earned approximately 85 per cent of incomes earned by their Canadian-born counterparts after sixteen to twenty years in Canada. Finally, the 1990s cohort earned 70 per cent of the average Canadian-born income, after six to ten years in Canada. These findings are roughly consistent for both men and women immigrants entering during the same time period. Therefore, more recent cohorts have experienced both a lower relative income upon entering Canada (compared with earlier cohorts), and a delayed catch-up period. Further, the same research shows that even well-educated immigrants share this economic disadvantage. Picot explains that educated immigrant males arriving during the 1970s entered the Canadian labour market earning 82 per cent of the earnings of the average male Canadian. By the 1990s, new immigrant males earned only 50 per cent of their like counterparts.<sup>8</sup> The trend for educated women is similar. These financial setbacks translate into difficulty accessing affordable and adequate housing.

Picot also shows that between 1980 and 2000, the proportion of immigrant family incomes that fell below the low-income cut-off (LICO) has risen considerably.<sup>9</sup> In 1980, 24.6 per cent of immigrant families were classified in the low-income category, but this was the case for 31.3 per cent in 1990, and by 2000 the proportion had risen to 35.8 per cent. In contrast, corresponding figures for the Canadian-born declined from 17.2 per cent in 1980 to 14.3 per cent in 2000. Reil and Harvey concentrate on the Toronto case, showing that visible minority immigrants have expe-

rienced the greatest increase in poverty levels there, from 20.9 per cent below LICO in 1991 to 32.5 per cent in 1996.<sup>10</sup> Recent economic changes have therefore had uneven social consequences, and have been especially hard on immigrants.

Pendakur and Pendakur extend the general story of income dynamics into the labour market, and show that recent immigrants earn wages well below the Canadian average.<sup>11</sup> In Vancouver, the average Canadian-born earned \$26,213 in 1991, compared with \$18,208 for immigrants who had been in Canada less than ten years. In addition, 42 per cent of this group of immigrants in Vancouver lived below the LICO, almost triple the poverty rate for the Canadian-born. As a result of below-average earnings, housing and rent affordability is a critical issue for new Canadians. In 1996, 21 per cent of immigrant households suffered from “core housing need,” which refers to a combination of poor housing quality and problems with affordability. Ley further reports that poverty tends to be highest for immigrants who have less than high school education, are females, do not speak English at home, or are of non-European ethnicity.<sup>12</sup>

On this latter point, Hiebert and Ley show that European groups earned average incomes 34 per cent higher than non-European groups.<sup>13</sup> They interpret this financial gap as the result of a combination of factors including human capital discrepancies, ethnocultural clustering, and labour market discrimination. According to David Ley, poverty underscores the visibility of immigrant groups and may lead to both alienation among newcomers and antipathy among the Canadian-born.<sup>14</sup> In light of these trends, immigrants and refugees can be expected to fare poorly in accessing affordable and adequate housing. At the extremes this may involve a total inability to access housing.

### **Introducing the Problem: The Shelter Dilemma**

Despite high levels of economic disadvantage revealed in the literature on the economic incorporation of immigrants, we found that immigrants and refugees are disproportionately under-represented in the GVRDs emergency shelter system. While 38 per cent of the population in the GVRD in 2001 was foreign-born, immigrants and refugees accounted for less than 18 per cent of the clients who were registered in our shelter survey. When the results from a refugee-specific shelter are removed, this number drops to 13 per cent or, effectively, one-third the level that would be expected if immigrants had the same economic characteristics as the general population. The question then arises: How are immigrants able to avoid the use of shelters, in general? More particularly, what alternate forms of help are they receiving?

### **Social Capital**

Our study shows that the answer to this question, at least in part, is related to social capital. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu was one of the first to produce a theoretical analysis of social capital, and defines the term as:

The aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in various senses of the word.<sup>15</sup>

Since then, many scholars have added to the debate on social capital including Loury, Coleman, Putnam, and Portes.<sup>16</sup> More recently, a definition was put forward by the Policy Research Initiative, a special research initiative of the Canadian government.<sup>17</sup> They recognize social capital as: the networks of social relations that can provide people and groups with (the access to) resources and support. According to Granovetter, these social relations can be understood as strong ties made up of family and close friends, and weak ties that are comprised of networks of acquaintances (or, using another terminology, *bonding* and *bridging* resources).<sup>18</sup> Most people find themselves part of a dense social group, made up of family and close friends, as well as part of a circle of acquaintances. Each acquaintance will have his or her own unique circle of close family and friends. Granovetter argues that the existence of one’s circle of acquaintances (weak ties) is crucial in bridging two or more densely knit groups of close friends and family.<sup>19</sup>

The idea of social capital has appeared in the literature on housing and immigrants. Family members and friends are seen to be instrumental in housing searches for newcomers. Drawing on the work of Granovetter, Brian Ray discusses the importance of social networks in the housing choices of immigrants in Toronto and Montreal.<sup>20</sup> The strength of bonding resources is usually related to the time people spend together, and the level of trust and reciprocity that has been generated between them. Strong ties are characterized by intense relationships, namely those between relatives and friends. Weak ties are less intense and are limited to acquaintances, and are believed to link various social networks together. The scale of one’s social network is directly related to one’s length of time in Canada. Both strong and weak networks have been shown to be influential in providing newcomers with practical assistance and knowledge surrounding the housing market. However, Ray reports that recent immigrants to Toronto and Montreal have an inadequate support base, especially

of weak ties.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, he suggests that newcomers, particularly those who have been in Canada for five year or less, are required to make decisions based on limited knowledge.

### ***“Taking Care of Their Own”—Findings from the Shelter Study***

As we have already noted, immigrants and refugees are under-represented in the shelter system.<sup>22</sup> Anecdotal evidence from the other sub-studies and discussions with key informants suggests that our finding is valid; that is, immigrants and refugees do not use shelters to the same extent as the Canadian-born population. One key informant on the Advisory Committee of this study, who is an immigrant him/herself, went so far as to say “it is not in our culture.” Instead, it appears that immigrants and refugees are helping one another in their various ethnocultural and religious communities. When facing a lack of secure housing, it was suggested that members of established ethnocultural and/or religious groups stay with family or other acquaintances, instead of relying on mainstream emergency shelters.

In addition to the member of the Advisory Committee just mentioned, several of the key informants consulted in this study offered explanations that help explain why newcomers, especially refugees, are not using shelters as much as the Canadian-born population. Undocumented immigrants and refugee claimants, for example, may believe there is a risk of being detected by authorities and subsequently deported if they access shelters. Newcomers may react differently to circumstances that might lead individuals who were born in Canada, or who have lived in Canada long enough to know their legal rights, to seek shelters—the issue of spousal violence comes to mind. Others credited the low level of shelter use to a combination of two factors: a general lack of trust of formal institutions and the state, on the one hand, and the widespread ideology of “taking care of their own” within newcomer communities. On the latter point, both strong (*i.e.*, family) and weak (*i.e.*, acquaintances) networks have been shown to provide newcomers with practical assistance and knowledge about housing markets.<sup>23</sup> It is also worth noting that settlement service organizations are well aware of this propensity for mutual aid within communities and frequently attempt to link isolated individuals with pre-existing community networks, which can then be tapped to provide temporary accommodations.

### ***Living on the Edge—Findings from the Housing Survey***

Results from our Immigrant and Refugee Housing Survey highlight the existence of these networks. While most of the

individuals surveyed were taking care of themselves (*i.e.*, neither extending nor receiving help), 28 per cent of all respondents reported receiving help; and 15 per cent of those respondents not receiving help reported providing help.<sup>24</sup> In the analysis phase of this project, we realized that we committed a methodological error in the IRHS that likely leads us to underestimate the degree of mutual aid in housing. When an individual respondent answered that they were extending help to another person, we skipped over the question that asked if they were also receiving help. Anecdotal evidence that we heard after collecting the data in the survey suggests that many people extend and receive help at the same time. Given the methodological choice we made at the outset of the project, we were unable to capture this dynamic. In any case, almost one-quarter of those receiving help were staying with friends and family.

Significantly, those providing assistance often do so despite living in precarious situations themselves. Over 61 per cent of those providing help in our survey, for example, are “in core housing need” (defined as spending 31 to 50 per cent of monthly household income on rent); while over one-quarter are in critical housing need (spending 51 per cent or more of monthly household income on rent). The findings of the IRHS underscore the importance of in-group networks that bring about mutual aid, such that coping mechanisms are found and homelessness among immigrants and refugees remains largely hidden. Interestingly, the number of people who have provided assistance decreases as the percentage of income spent on housing increases.

### ***The Assumptions of Social Capital***

The literature on social capital differentiates between *bonding*, *bridging*, and *linking*.<sup>25</sup> In this respect, people will generally begin building social capital with the *bonds* that they have with close friends and family. Social networks will begin to disperse throughout larger society as people move to *bridging* with others of different ethnicity and/or class, for example. This leads to *linking* with public services and supportive institutions. Although our two studies have so far illustrated that social capital, in the form of in-group systems of support, has worked to mitigate absolute homelessness for newcomers, we have also found a slippage between theories of social capital and the ability for some to utilize these resources. To date, however, much of the literature that surrounds social capital underestimates the range of access to social capital. While social capital literatures acknowledge that not all individuals have the same ability to attain and/or access social capital, our findings suggest that access to social capital may be differentiated according to a person’s category of entry (*e.g.*, skilled worker *vs.* refugee).

In particular, we argue that refugee claimants are a group who frequently lack access to social capital. In fact, while many new immigrants rely on social networks in order to access both information and resources to find adequate housing, refugee claimants are subject to initial bouts of (hidden) homelessness owing to circumstances that are directly related to their status as refugee claimants.<sup>26</sup> Research undertaken by Robert Murdie on the pathways to housing of refugees and refugee claimants in Toronto, Brian Ray on the housing experiences of refugees in Toronto and Montreal, and Damaris Rose and Brian Ray in Montreal has forwarded similar arguments about the differential ability of some groups to access social capital.<sup>27</sup> Our research contributes to the overall literature by adding another piece of the puzzle, namely the housing experiences of immigrants, refugees, and refugee claimants in Vancouver. The following section will focus on the findings of claimant study in order to open up discussions surrounding access to social capital.

### ***Falling through the Cracks—Findings from the Refugee Claimant Study***

In this paper we argue that, although social networks (made up of both strong and weak ties) have worked to help newcomers settle and integrate into Canadian society, the availability of networks are not equal across populations. Given the combination of uncertain legal status, lack of official language ability, and unfamiliarity with Canadian society, refugee claimants are the most likely of all newcomers to “fall between the cracks” of both ethnocultural communities and the welfare and housing provisions of the state. All but one of the thirty-six successful refugee claimants who were interviewed arrived in Canada without any pre-existing social networks (*i.e.*, family and friends). Although the claimants did not have anyone to assist them in the first few days after arrival, some did manage to tap into broader ethnic networks. One settlement councillor noted that

[Claimants] will turn to people that seem familiar to them. Familiarity. If they speak their language then they will approach them ... people who look like their group ... they are looking for a face or words that will lead them to a place.

For many newcomers, economic integration is a constant battle, a finding that is particularly salient for SRCs. Thirty-two of the thirty-six SRCs interviewed in this study relied upon government aid for at least the initial stages of settlement, which for a single employable person consisted of \$510 per month.<sup>28</sup> Note, however, that according to the National Council of Welfare, the poverty line (measured by LICO) is \$19,795 for a single employable person living in British Columbia. Therefore, we could say that there is a

poverty gap of \$13,351 per year for single recipients.<sup>29</sup> As well, the average bachelor apartment in the Vancouver Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) was \$654 in 2003.<sup>30</sup> For SRCs in particular, low incomes and high housing costs are exacerbated by their relative social isolation. In the absence of social networks, SRCs are often unaware of the location of less expensive housing in the GVRD. Adding to the story, discrimination based on their level and source of income (*e.g.*, welfare), and their legal status (especially while their case is pending), means that SRCs often found themselves settling for whatever housing was made available to them.

With such limited circles of family and friends, many claimants in this study found themselves relying on the advice of strangers when they first arrived. A thirty-two-year-old man from Cameroon was able to find housing by networking with other refugees and African migrants. He said,

I met this friend from Liberia. Then I spoke to him that I was looking for accommodations. In fact I was with one African guy that just came at the same time. So we were both looking for accommodation, so we happen to meet this guy who is from Liberia, then that's when he invited me to meet [a settlement worker] at church with the possibility of how I can get accommodation.

A twenty-nine-year-old female from Sri Lanka recounted that she felt most comfortable approaching someone from her own ethnic group.

On bus I met some Sri Lankan Singhalese lady, my language. She said do you know about Inland Refugee Society, they help refugees. Go and talk to them...then I go and I try to find them but it was difficult. We don't know any information, especially BC housing, we don't know anything.

In both these cases as with all of the others in this study, SRCs were only able to access information on housing after their arrival in Canada. In some cases these weak ties took some time to establish. As a result some found themselves without a place to reside and without even basic information on shelters. One respondent from Nigeria arrived in Vancouver in 2003. She was eight months pregnant and was accompanied by two children, aged one and four. She recalled her experience with the immigration officer:

...they said that I had to go...I said where do you want me to go? [The officer] said anywhere...[I said] I don't know anywhere...you have to tell me. I [asked], if I can sleep on the floor. She said yes. So I slept on the floor ... I am pregnant.

Another women from Congo had a similar experience. On her first night in Vancouver, at eight months pregnant, she said, "I had to sleep on the chair because I don't know where I am." A thirty-five-year-old single mother from Mexico succinctly stated,

No one explained any services...no information what you can get as an immigrant, where to get money, how to get a home; I didn't know about community centres. I feel totally isolated, no language, no family, no hope to go back, no money, no house.

These three women speak of the additional plight that claimant women have faced upon arrival. As single expectant mothers there was no information provided to them about even basic services. The bridging process had occurred only after these women had spent several days or weeks in Canada.

The successful refugee claimants who have come from China tell an important and unique story regarding the lack of access to social networks upon arrival. Six of the seven claimants from China found their first accommodations in Chinatown, and all six still reside in this area of the Downtown Eastside. As newcomers to the country, they arrived alone, without any financial resources or English language skills. Without any knowledge of the housing market, all six found themselves wandering the streets. When asked about how they came to know about Vancouver's Chinatown, several Chinese claimants stated that they relied on the advice of strangers, which led them to seek housing there. Lacking pre-established networks of family and friends, these refugees were funnelled into a precarious housing situation based on their perceived racial/ethnic affiliation. Five Chinese refugee claimants found themselves in similar rundown accommodations that are geared towards newcomers from China. The interpreter/settlement worker acknowledged one specific hotel as a place that nearly all of her refugee clients from China find themselves. According to these six participants, the conditions were nothing short of horrendous. A male claimant aged forty-nine from China gave these details:

Things there are in a mess...there were cockroaches everywhere. But the rent was cheap. There were a lot of seniors living there; they are dirty and have a lot of personal belongings, so things are in a mess. A lot of cockroaches. Dirty, stinky.

The detailed description of crowding varied slightly between respondents, but the basic image remained the same. Four of the claimants noted how this site for Chinese refugees allots one washroom and a small kitchen area for twenty to thirty people. Electricity and heating work sporadically at

best. Each participant provided a similar list of unhealthy and unsanitary conditions, which include dirty, smelly, and infested rooms. For these refugee claimants the inability to access information about housing in Vancouver played a key role in where they settled. Given their lack of knowledge of housing prices in the GVRD, the refugee claimants from China were all charged \$325 per month and all were restricted to the same welfare allowance of \$510 per month.

In the Downtown Eastside location, safety is also a major factor. A female claimant from China, age sixty-five, became very emotional during the interview as she discussed her first reaction to living in Chinatown.

First it's very noisy, second there is drug trading inside the hotel and some people using drugs and there is different mixture of people living there like refugee claimants, those very low-income people, or long term residents and there is a gambling room for people to go gambling....

Although this woman stated how unsafe she felt in an environment where there was rampant drug use and dealing as well as illegal gambling, she still resides in Chinatown five years after her arrival.

In the case of Chinatown we can see that weak ties, based loosely on ethnic affiliation, do not always provide opportunities that help newcomers establish a trajectory of upward mobility. On the contrary, these claimants, who generally lacked initial social networks, all found themselves in a state of relative homelessness where they lived in precarious situations and spent a high proportion of their income on rent.

The lack of initial social capital that is prevalent amongst refugee claimants places this group at a tremendous disadvantage and is associated with extreme vulnerability to homelessness. The situation is quite different for those immigrants and refugees who have access to social networks and support systems

### ***Implications of Research for Our Understanding of Social Capital, the Role of Government, and Policy***

Certainly, critics could argue that highlighting the importance of social capital will only prompt the government to divert its resources away from the need for public support and social housing, claiming that these services are no longer needed since (social) resources within the community are substantial in assisting the integration of newcomers. After all, why provide something at a cost which is already being provided for free? On the contrary, the findings of the Policy and Research Initiative study acknowledge the key role that social capital plays in assisting community development but

at the same time this research notes that government is needed in order to facilitate social capital.<sup>31</sup> The research found that the government of Canada already facilitates the growth of social capital through direct and indirect forms of support. Policies with indirect effects include providing access to public transport, housing, daycare, and recreation. All three levels of government have mounted programs to promote the development of social capital, which is done through efforts to build individual or community capacity. This is enhanced through efforts aimed at mobilizing networks of social support, intra-/inter-community bonds, and linkages to institutions. Researchers report that there are at least two key ways that policy can assist in facilitating social capital within the wider community.<sup>32</sup> First, policies and programs that build social capital should be designed in order to have the goal of community building at the fore. In the case of immigrant newcomers, we suggest that this includes focusing on bringing newcomers together while they are accessing information from service agencies. At the same time the role of government entails ensuring that settlement agencies are continually linked to each other's services. Second, the report suggests that government should support in the investment of its individuals and communities in their development of social capital. This idea originates from Anthony Giddens's social investment state, which views social expenditures as an investment in the human capital of citizens.<sup>33</sup> Although this seems to be a proper step in community building we emphasize the stipulation of being a *citizen* in being able to access services that are designed to assist in social network building. Many refugee claimants are left to settle without access to social resources and without permanent citizen status.

### **Conclusions and Future Challenges**

Housing affordability continues to be a pressing concern in Canada, and particularly in British Columbia.<sup>34</sup> Yet, the high levels of economic disadvantage revealed in the literature on the economic incorporation of immigrants are not reflected in the GVRDs emergency shelter usage. Rather, we found that immigrants and refugees are disproportionately under-represented in the GVRDs shelter population. We argue that the social capital of particular ethnocultural groups is a key factor in the relative absence of immigrants and refugees in the shelter population.<sup>35</sup> That is, individuals belonging to a group share resources, whether these are access to employment, knowledge about host society norms and expectations, or the tangible benefits of housing provision. Social capital, then, may mitigate against the worst forms of absolute homelessness.

These systems of reciprocity, however, do not include everyone. Refugee claimants, given the combination of

their uncertain legal status, lack of language facility, and lack of familiarity with Canadian society, are the most likely of all newcomers to "fall between the cracks" of both ethnocultural communities and the welfare and housing provisions of the state. We have found that refugee claimants tend to be socially isolated and generally lack established social networks prior to arrival. The individuals in our sample group, for example, do not typically have elaborate social linkages to draw upon (despite the fact that these participants were recruited from settlement service and advocacy organizations). Only one of the SRCs interviewed was able to rely on the assistance of family members or friends (*i.e.*, strong ties) upon arrival in Canada. In contrast, a number of respondents did discuss the importance of acquaintances and friendships (*i.e.*, weak ties) that were formed after arrival. This is most prevalent in the case study that discussed the experiences of SRCs from China. In the absence of strong ties (family and close friends), some of the Chinese respondents, as well as other respondents, said that they had no other option upon arrival but to roam around the streets and look for a familiar face, someone who shared their cultural background.

This significance of social capital in integration, as well as the unequal access of groups and/or individuals, has previously been examined in the context of both Toronto and Montreal.<sup>36</sup> Our research contributes to the existing literature by looking at the housing experiences of immigrants and refugees in the Vancouver context.

Current literature and policy research both stipulate that there exists a need for all scales of government to facilitate in the development of social capital among newcomers. The finding that not all groups have equal access to social resources (*i.e.*, social capital) upon arrival has implications for future policy development. For newcomers, access to social capital does not always commence with networks of family and friends. In the case of refugee claimants we see that bridging with members of society occurs after arrival and precedes the bonding that occurs with close family and friends. Those without access to social capital (*e.g.*, refugee claimants) are most likely to end up in precarious housing situations.

### **Appendix A: Methodology**

In approaching this research, and in light of the complexities in defining and enumerating homelessness, we adopted an evidence-based, multiple points of contact study combining qualitative and quantitative approaches. The project was composed of three sub-studies, each of which focuses on a particular aspect of homelessness.

1. Sought to examine those experiencing absolute homelessness by developing a portrait of the immigrant and refugee populations using emergency shelters and transition houses. This sub-study involved twelve semi-structured interviews with key informants from emergency shelters and second stage transition houses in the GVRD, and the compilation and analysis of data collected by shelter personnel over seven 24-hour periods between October and December, 2004. In total, we received 261 completed shelter data collection forms.
  2. Sought to explore the housing situation of refugee claimants who have recently received a positive decision enabling them to stay in Canada. Thirty-six individual interviews were conducted with SRCs in the GVRD. The interviews were semi-structured and explored the housing situation of claimants both before learning of the positive decision, and in the first six months since receiving it. In addition, four interviews were conducted with settlement workers.
  3. Sought to examine the profile and extent of relative homelessness among immigrants, refugees, and refugee claimants. In so doing, we hoped to generate a basic estimate of the "sofa surfing" or "camping out" population among recent immigrants, as well as to identify in-group systems of support through questions about the provision or receipt of housing assistance. This sub-study is mainly focused on the Immigrant and Refugee Housing Survey (IRHS), which was conducted on October 4–8, 2004. In total, we received 554 completed surveys.
- Notes**
1. "Vancouver Housing Least Affordable," *CBC News Online*, March 29, 2006, <<http://www.cbc.ca>> (accessed 29 March 2006).
  2. This compares to 42.7 per cent in Toronto, 35.6 per cent in Calgary, 34.1 per cent in Montreal, and 33.1 per cent in Ottawa.
  3. See J. Woodward & Associates Inc., Eberle Planning and Research, Deborah Kraus Consulting, J. Graves, and May Communications, *Research Project on Homelessness in Greater Vancouver* (Prepared for the Greater Vancouver Regional District, 2002), <<http://www.hvl.ihpr.ubc.ca/pdf/WoodwardGVRD2002.pdf>> (accessed May 2004).
  4. See D. Hiebert, S. D'Addario, and K. Sherrell, *The Profile of Absolute and Relative Homelessness among Immigrants, Refugees, and Refugee Claimants in the GVRD* (Vancouver: Multilingual Orientation Service Association for Immigrant Communities, 2005), <[http://www.mosaicbc.com/The\\_Profile\\_of\\_Absolute\\_and\\_Relative\\_Homelessness.pdf](http://www.mosaicbc.com/The_Profile_of_Absolute_and_Relative_Homelessness.pdf)> (accessed May 2005).
  5. T. Peressini, L. McDonald, and D. Hulchanski, *Estimating Homelessness: Towards a Methodology for Counting the Homeless in Canada* (Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 1991), <[http://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/imquaf/ho/ho\\_005.cfm](http://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/imquaf/ho/ho_005.cfm)> (accessed March 2005). Defining homelessness has always proved to be contentious, and the particular definition adopted in a study will influence results, especially in terms of the number of people included in the category of homeless. Further, the definition chosen will affect policy, since the scope of provisions and assistance is directly linked to the scale of homelessness that is identified. See also: G. Valentine, *Social Geographies: Space and Society* (Harlow, England: Prentice Hall, 2001); and A. Veness, "Neither Homed nor Homeless: Contested Definitions and the Personal Words of the Poor," *Political Geography* 12, no. 4 (1993): 319–40.
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  22. In some cases, respondents provided anecdotal evidence of shelters sending immigrants and refugees to other (*i.e.*, more appropriate) shelters, while one particular shelter frequently refers immigrants and refugees to another facility within their organization that does not require Ministry of Human Resources (MHR) vouchers. Both refugee claimants and those lacking proper documentation are populations that may be particularly affected by these requirements. The inability of some newcomers to qualify under the MHR mandate was seen to prevent some immigrants and refugees from accessing the system.
  23. Ray.
  24. For our purposes, “help” was defined as being informal (*i.e.* not government or NGO), temporally variable (*e.g.*, for some this help could last a few hours or days, for others a few months), and could involve a range of activities including helping scan the newspaper, accompanying people when they view potential places to live, or in some cases providing subsidized—or free—accommodations.
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  35. The term “social capital” is invoked to provide an understanding of the advantages that derive from membership in an ethnocultural group, but with a greater emphasis on the presence of reciprocity and trust. This is particularly the case for large, well-organized ethnocultural communities that have developed a degree of institutional completeness that includes help for those in need, such as the Chinese-Canadian population in Greater Vancouver.
  36. Murdie; Rose and Ray; and Ray.

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