

COVID-19 compounds housing instability for Canada's Syrian refugees

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Apartment buildings in London, Ont. Credit: Scott Webb for Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

New research from Western University shows the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the struggles Syrian refugees in Canada face in finding

adequate housing, and highlights the need for policies to keep up with reality

Nursing Ph.D. student Fawziah Rabiah-Mohammed led the study, alongside Western graduate, Leah Hamilton, Ph.D. '11, asking government-assisted Syrian refugees how the pandemic has affected their efforts to find housing and settle in Canada.

Their findings come from a [subgroup analysis](#) as part of a five-year [longitudinal study](#) (2018–2023), led by Rabiah-Mohammed's supervisor, nursing professor Abe Oudshoorn. The study, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, is investigating the barriers and facilitators influencing Syrian government-assisted refugees' ability to achieve housing stability.

"When the pandemic hit in 2020, we were already collecting data," Rabiah-Mohammed said. "We were interested in seeing how the pandemic affected the process."

The analysis involved in-depth interviews with 38 government-assisted refugee families living in Calgary, Fredericton, and London, Ontario. The interviews were conducted in Arabic by telephone or by Zoom during the first summer of the pandemic by team members across the three sites.

'Back to zero'

"Overall, the pandemic revealed and exacerbated the existing structural inequalities the refugees face," Hamilton said, with interviewees also reporting increased isolation, further economic loss and a new set of anxieties brought on by COVID-19.

"Any progress they were making in language and housing acquisition,

employment, and in forming social connections halted," Hamilton said.

Government-assisted refugees were already financially vulnerable before the pandemic. Most arrive in Canada with lower education (or with unrecognized credentials), and lacking language skills in English and French. These barriers limit their employment options to low-paying jobs.

"Those same low-paying jobs were most adversely affected by the pandemic," Rabiah-Mohammed said. "Most of the people we spoke with were laid off. They had been employed with some income, although it wasn't enough, or they were on [social assistance](#), or emergency benefits. (Losing their jobs) took them back to where they started from when they arrived in Canada five years ago. They felt like they were going backwards to point zero and it disturbed them psychologically."

Those who kept their jobs were often employed in unsafe, overcrowded workplaces, such as meat processing plants or warehouses, where they were unable to social distance and at an increased risk of contracting the virus.

Unlike many Canadians who adjusted to the "new normal" by working from home, "these are essential workers facing both health and financial challenges who weren't doing work that brought the privilege of being protected from COVID," Rabiah-Mohammed said.

Keeping up with reality

Syrians within the government-assisted [refugee](#) program are supported by the Canadian government for one year through the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP), which provides income support and immediate essential services.

"The idea is that after 12 months they will have found employment or will transfer to provincial assistance," Hamilton said. "However, we know that COVID-19 really impacted or delayed people's ability to learn the language and led to job losses. Yet, the assumptions around the length of time it takes to acquire skills and find a job have not changed. The policies really haven't kept up with the realities and challenges this cohort of refugees has had to face."

While social and emergency assistance, and the child benefit program allowed families to keep paying their rent during the pandemic, Rabiah-Mohammed noted, "it doesn't aim to improve their housing situation."

Finding suitable, affordable housing remains one of the main challenges refugees face upon arriving in Canada. Rabiah-Mohammed hopes findings from the study will underscore the need for increased housing and financial assistance programs beyond the pandemic, so refugees can acquire more suitable homes, and integrate into communities where they can access businesses, schools, parks and community centers. Currently, most of them live in spaces too small for their families, with limited or no access to green space.

Before the pandemic, many families went to neighboring parks for what one mother described as "the luxury of fresh air," but that was no longer an option when lockdown restrictions were required.

"A lot of these families live in apartments without balconies," Hamilton said. "Initially, when parks and playgrounds closed, it affected everyone. If you have a house and backyard, your kids can still go outside and play. But if you live in an apartment building, and don't even have a balcony, you have no access to fresh air or green space at all."

Most government-assisted Syrian refugees come as nuclear families, leaving extended [family](#) behind. The pandemic meant any social

connections forged with friends or neighbors who could help with childcare were put on hold. And without extended family support, it was impossible for parents to look for work, improve their language skills and mind children who were learning remotely.

"Allowing extended family members to migrate to Canada would not only improve (the refugees') mental health but would add more income to the family budget and provide help with childcare," Rabiah-Mohammed said.

Enduring gratitude, hope

Despite the challenges exacerbated by COVID-19, the Syrian refugees shared a sense of gratitude to be living in Canada, viewing it as a sanctuary both before and during the pandemic.

"People still felt determined to pursue their dreams of home ownership and suitable employment. Those dreams didn't go away," Hamilton said.

Rabiah-Mohammed found those sentiments to be a source of empowerment and hope.

"They would talk about how ambitious they are and how lucky they felt to be living in Canada," she said. "An important part of their experience is their connection to their families back home. It's not only that they are reading the news about what is going on there, but they feel and live it every day being in contact with their family and friends.

"They compare these two lives and where they are at now. Although the [pandemic](#) has brought them back to zero after five years, the one thing they haven't lost is Canada."

Provided by University of Western Ontario

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