
Vulnerable Migrant Groups : a housing perspective

An assessment of
the housing needs, wants and experiences
of Christchurch's Somali community

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Executive Summary

This report draws on the accounts of the Christchurch Somali population to examine the housing needs, wants and experiences of vulnerable migrant groups. This research is undertaken at a time when international literature concludes that migrant groups are one of the most vulnerable in society and emphasises the vital role that housing has in successful their successful settlement. The degree of vulnerability and subsequent experiences of migrant groups are determined by the conditions of an individual's arrival, the resources they have access to in the host country and how that society responds to them. The housing experiences of migrant groups are unique as they deal with unfamiliar systems of housing provision, new standards and cultural styles. They must overcome barriers that result from access and affordability, housing providers and language. Their ability to utilise local resources and create their own networks are vital survival strategies. This research uses a qualitative method to establish that the housing experiences of vulnerable migrant groups in Christchurch are similar to those experienced overseas and that, rather than ignoring these groups, an understanding of their housing needs, wants and experiences will help guide housing providers and support agencies.

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1. Introduction

Adequate and affordable housing is one of the most important needs of members of society. This is particularly so for groups who enter a society in a state of distress or as a consequence of upheaval from their country of origin. Their circumstances immediately place them into a vulnerable state and housing becomes an essential resource in resettlement. The vulnerability of migrant groups suggests that a smooth transition to a safe housing environment is highly desirable to maximise the group's ability to settle and participate in the host society.

Housing plays a critical role in the successful resettlement or integration of vulnerable migrant groups to a new society. Finding a suitable home in a caring community with sufficient services is vital¹. The security, shelter and personal space housing provides helps to restore dignity and regain independence². It also becomes the foundation from which new lives are built. People understand housing from within distinct social, cultural, environmental and political contexts. While housing has basic components, cultural understandings may translate into very specific needs and wants when a group moves. To a new country, a group brings the understandings they have developed and take on the discourses that revolve around the new place to which they have travelled.

The global movement of vulnerable populations affects every country. People leave their country of origin for a variety of reasons. They may seek out specific places to resettle or end up in places of which they have very little knowledge. The different histories and geographies of host countries are important, but the resources hosts make available determine the distinct experiences vulnerable migrant groups have.

The settlement of vulnerable migrant groups increasingly appears on the agenda of Governments. There has also been significant research interest around the world in the resettlement of such groups. In the past five years international reports from Australia³, the United Kingdom⁴, Canada⁵ and Europe⁶ have concentrated on the experiences of

¹ Murdie, 1999

² Foley & Beer, 2003

³ Foley & Beer, 2003

⁴ Cole & Robinson, 2003

⁵ Murdie & Teixeira, 2004

⁶ Mateman, 1999

vulnerable migrant groups in the housing markets and the barriers they face to accessing housing. Research has been undertaken in New Zealand that examines the resettlement experiences of refugees with the goal to establishing policy.

This project adds to the New Zealand research on vulnerable migrant groups. With a focus on housing, this report investigates the needs, wants and experiences of a vulnerable migrant group. It draws on the experiences of vulnerable migrant groups from around the world and examines these in the Christchurch context.

This report refers to vulnerable migrant groups. The degree to which migrant groups are vulnerable in the housing market depends on their distinctive circumstances. For the individual, these relate to education, background, gender, age, class and language skills. Further, history, or the conditions under which a person comes to a host country, will impact on the speed and effectiveness of their resettlement. Collectively, the situation is complicated by how the receiving society considers and caters for the migrant group. The degree of vulnerability also changes over time as individuals integrate into the host society and the degree to which the host society enables this integration.

The experiences of Christchurch's Somali population were drawn on. This group are representative only of vulnerable migrant groups and the findings are applicable to other vulnerable migrant groups. While it is acknowledged that not all members of the Christchurch Somali community are vulnerable in the housing market, they do display characteristics that fit this study. Further, various international research has examined the experiences of this population. Subsequently, use of the Somali group in this study adds continuity to the international research findings.

This research takes a qualitative approach. This report gives an introduction to the movement of vulnerable populations on a global scale, and places this in the context of New Zealand. It then gives a brief overview of why Somali are a vulnerable group on the move and the circumstances of their arrival in Christchurch. The methodology used in this report is outlined and followed by a review of the relevant international and New Zealand literature. From this literature review, key themes are drawn for discussion as to responsibility for housing vulnerable migrant groups, the housing choices these groups are able to make, and the quality and suitability of the housing these groups invariably occupy. The concept of housing careers is used to understand how groups improve in housing

conditions. Barriers to advancing housing careers are identified and examined in the context of this research.

2. Vulnerable Migrant Groups

Refugees, Migrants & Asylum Seekers

People leave their country of origin for a variety of reasons. Many exercise choice in a desire to seek out new or better opportunities. However, for millions their movement is highly undesirable, being forced to flee and seek refuge due to circumstances beyond their control.

The global movement of vulnerable populations affects every country. At the start of the 21st Century, one in every 35 people was an international migrant⁷. At the end of 2002, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees recorded 10.4 million people around the world had refugee status, with a further one million asylum seekers waiting for their applications to be finalised⁸. In 2003, a total population described as 'of concern' to the international community was 17.1 million⁹. More than 140 nation states are party to international agreements under which they are responsible for protecting those recognised as refugees¹⁰.

People are classified by the circumstances that determine their movement. A migrant moves from one region or country to another, often with some regularity and typically for work. An immigrant is a person who comes to a country, where they were not born, to settle. People classified by these categories have exercised some degree of choice.

People are also classified on the basis of their vulnerability. An asylum seeker is someone who leaves their own country for their safety, often for political reasons or because of war, and who travels to another country hoping that the government will protect them and allow them to live there. They remain an asylum seeker while they wait for their application for refugee status to be considered by the receiving Government. International law defines a refugee as someone who has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country they belong to or normally reside in, and is unable or unwilling to

⁷ BBC, 2004, available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/world/04/migration/html/migration_boom.stm

⁸ These figures do not include the 4.1 million Palestinian refugees assisted by the UN Relief and Works Agency

⁹ UNHCR, 2004 ; the UNHCR defines people 'of concern' as asylum-seekers, refugees returning home, and people uprooted within their own countries

¹⁰ BBC, 2004, available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/world/04/migration/html/migration_boom.stm

return home for fear of persecution, as well as those at risk of torture or cruelty and unusual treatment or punishment¹¹.

International Resettlement

The different histories and geographies of the receiving countries create very distinct experiences for vulnerable migrant groups. Australia has historically been a migrant country and has become one of the most culturally and ethnically diverse populations in the world. Today, twenty three per cent of the Australian population was born overseas and more than 200 languages are spoken¹². Australia is a major recipient of refugees and, in per capita terms, is one of the major refugee resettlement countries in the world (Foley & Beer, 2003). In the past 50 years, more than 620,000 refugees and displaced people have been resettled in Australia¹³. Canada also has a long history of accepting vulnerable, migrant populations. In the past 50 years, Canada has accepted approximately 400,000 people for resettlement.

Vulnerable populations may seek out specific places to resettle. Where choice could be exercised, many have sought refugee status in the United Kingdom. This is principally due to the draw of family and community ties¹⁴. Familiarity with the country, often through the process of colonisation, may also be a factor, as is the desire to be in an English speaking country. There was also the desire to be in a place perceived to be safe, tolerant and democratic. Proximity to the land of origin may also be a determining factor. Europe is highly accessible to many troubled or 'hot' spots. Over the last decade, there has been a considerable increase in the number of people applying for asylum in Europe, with this number reaching 381,623 in 2002¹⁵.

New Zealand has been accepting refugees since post World War II. Over 20,000 refugees and displaced peoples have been accepted for settlement by New Zealand¹⁶. Since the 1990's the number of source countries has diversified and, in 2000, the needs of eighteen different refugee groups were being administered by New Zealand agencies. The top source countries for refugees coming to New Zealand in recent years have been Iraq,

¹¹ UNHCR, 2004

¹² The Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, 2004, available at www.immi.gov.au

¹³ The Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, 2004, available at www.immi.gov.au

¹⁴ The United Kingdom Home Office, 2004, available at <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/>

¹⁵ Indymedia UK, 2004, available at <http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2004/03/288233.html>

¹⁶ Madjar & Humpage, 2000

Somalia, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Burma/Myanmar, Iran and Sri Lanka¹⁷. Of the 900 of these who were Somali, approximately 500 have settled in Christchurch¹⁸.

Somali in Christchurch

The Somali Democratic Republic occupies the land mass that forms the horn of Africa. It is a Muslim culture and the predominately pastoral society enjoys a low population density around small, widely scattered settlements. Somalis belong to clans, from which they get solidarity, and the family is a definitive source of identity. The country has a history colonisation, drought, food shortages and aid. Civil war has been a major issue and in early 1993, three-quarters of the population was internally displaced. At the end of 2001, there were an estimated 300,000 refugees outside Somalia.

Somali have been coming to Christchurch to settle since 1993. Those who arrived initially were women under a 'Woman at Risk' programme¹⁹. In recent years the number of Somalis in, and coming to Christchurch, has been notably lower and it is estimated that approximately 500 currently live in the city. The Refugee and Migrant Service believe this is because many have headed to Australia. The majority of those coming to Christchurch today are part of family reunion programmes²⁰.

The Somali that took part in this research visibly maintained a strong cultural identity. This was expressed in their dress, language and their behaviour. Bonds to family were clear from their dialogue. It was also clear that they retained links with their homeland but indicated they were happy to be in New Zealand and Christchurch.

¹⁷ Refugee Voices, 2004

¹⁸ Madjar & Humpage, 2000; citing Bell, 1998

¹⁹ Hopkinson, 1996

²⁰ *pers comm.* Refugee & Migrant Service, 24 May 2004

3. Methodology

To understand the issue of housing vulnerable migrant groups on a macro scale, the worldwide web was utilised. This provided access to extensive reporting undertaken in Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada and Europe. Literature was sought that related to the housing needs and provision for refugees, housing careers of migrants or minority ethnic groups, and the specific experiences of Somali migrants.

A qualitative approach was adopted to gather information in support of the data sourced from reports and academic findings. To locate research participants, initial enquires were made of the Christchurch branch of the Refugee and Migrant Services (RMS). This is New Zealand's refugee resettlement agency, which operates as a non-profit, non-government, incorporated society²¹. It was considered that this Service would be well placed to provide research information. Details of one potential contact were provided. This person was approached by telephone but, unfortunately, no subsequent contact could be made and attempts were dropped. An Internet search revealed a South Island Somali Association. The chairperson of this organisation proved very helpful and arranged interview opportunities with members of a development project.

Interviews were conducted in an informal setting where the research participants met regularly and were comfortable. Interviews were semi-structured. Prior to the meetings a series of questions were put together to act as cues to aid certain topics being introduced to the discussion. Questions related to:

- expectations of Christchurch housing prior to arrival
- housing needs
- information to establish housing careers
- the state of housing being accessed
- neighbourhood impressions
- accessibility of housing and providers
- housing goals

²¹ Refugee and Migrant Service, 2004, available at www.rms.org.nz.

Contact was also made with housing providers and agents. These included the initial discussions with RMS. Housing New Zealand Corporation was approached in person, as the Corporation is the major housing provider in Christchurch. E-mail communication was held with Christchurch City Council, which is also a significant housing provider in the city.

4. Literature Review

Housing plays a critical role in the successful settlement and integration of vulnerable groups into a new society. The settlement of vulnerable migrants has increasingly appeared on the agenda of Governments, with extensive reporting being undertaken on their housing experiences.

New Zealand

There has been in-depth research recently undertaken by the New Zealand Government. Most significantly is the New Zealand Immigration Service and Department of Labour report “Refugee Voices: A Journey Towards Resettlement”. This 400 page publication provides an in-depth look at the resettlement experiences of refugees in their first five years in New Zealand in relation to housing, family reunification, learning English, finding work, the experiences of children and teenagers, social networks, discrimination, and settling in New Zealand. The report found the main issues were acknowledging and responding to refugee diversity, refugees’ lack of understanding of available services and entitlements, and the need for more help with accessing English language training.

In addition, a Longitudinal Immigration Survey has been put together by the New Zealand Department of Labour and Statistics New Zealand. This survey will investigate and record migrants’ experiences of New Zealand over the period from between 2003 and 2008, and accounts used to help service providers identify how to make settling in New Zealand more successful for future migrants.

Over the past few years there has been a significant academic interest in the experiences of New Zealand’s Somali population. Many studies identified the difficulties vulnerable migrant groups have in resettlement. Humpage (1998) found that cultural barriers, religion and behavioural expectations created barriers for Somali adolescents amongst their peers in Christchurch schools. This was contributed to by teachers and people in authority who displayed a lack of cultural knowledge, lack of understanding of refugee experiences and of the special learning needs of refugee students. Jenkinson (2000) explored the challenges that arose for Somali women when they came to New Zealand, finding a number of initiatives in the Somali community that demonstrate the way Somali women actively

reconstruct, modify, and regenerate their culture in New Zealand. In a study of the ability of children to adjust to new ways of life in New Zealand, Guerin et al (2003) showed that conditions experienced prior to entering the processes of resettlement do nothing to prepare them for the new social conditions they become immersed in. This study stressed that the rupture from familiarity makes it vital for aspects of a resettlement process to assist groups, as much as possible, in the reconstruction of their social networks and community.

Housing is recognised as an important means of expressing cultural identity. Ozaki (2002) suggests housing layout reflects cultural values and norms. The layout and structure of a house can facilitate ideals of family solidarity and collectivism or enable the practice of individualism or seclusion. Cole and Robinson (2003) found there were social and cultural requirements of housing design for Somali. Principally these related to the number of bedrooms, living space arrangements and the possibility for a home to be divided into two living rooms, kitchen design large enough to accommodate the traditional social function of the kitchen as the household hub, and washing facilities with respondents reporting a cultural preference for shower facilities, rather than a bath.

Vulnerable migrant groups must deal with cultural difference in their new setting. Abdullahi (2001) identifies adjustment from living in freestanding houses with significant outdoor living to apartment block styles can be a major challenge. Further, the physical structure may allow for less privacy than is traditionally enjoyed. The type of tenure may also necessitate adjustment when home ownership rather than renting is normally predominant.

The forming of cultural networks is vital. Bihi (1999) found cultural identity to be an important asset that enables refugees to cope with many adversities. This flowed into a strong attachment to friends and family, which was significant in reducing anxiety. Brightwell (1996) evaluated the sponsorship process of refugee resettlement, finding that sponsors provide a valuable and effective service to newly arrived refugees and are an important source of assistance in meeting their initial needs.

The need for assistance with resettlement is clear. Hopkinson (1996) examined assimilation problems of Christchurch's Somali. Looking at accommodation, traditional culture, education, employment and language skills, Hopkinson conclude that more was needed to be done in New Zealand to aid the assimilation of the Somali population.

Madjar and Humpage (2000) found the challenges and barriers prevent a promise of refuge in a tranquil and prosperous place being matched in reality.

International Research

There has also been significant interest around the world in the resettlement of migrant populations. Reports from Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada and Europe concentrated on the access vulnerable migrant groups have to housing markets, location of resettlement, barriers they face and housing providers.

In 2003, Beer and Foley used a social exclusion framework to identify barriers that refugee groups face in finding appropriate housing in Australia. The report documents how refugees gain access to housing and from whom, and explores the problems encountered by refugees and how these problems are effectively resolved. This report also provided a useful discussion on private sector supply of housing.

Cole and Robinson (2003) reported on Somali housing experiences in England. They found that Somali populations had become clustered in certain inner-city neighbourhoods characterised by deprivation. Housing was limited by knowledge or awareness of social structures and experiences were compounded by the ignorance and misunderstanding of housing providers.

Canadian research undertaken by Murdie and Teixeira (2004) discussed explanations for the residential location of vulnerable migrant groups. These included cultural explanation, survival strategies to counter discrimination, and economic factors.

Mateman (2004) prepared a comparative study of vulnerable migrant housing experiences in the countries of Europe that had distinctly different housing markets in terms of social rental, private rental or owner-occupier sectors. The study found the key obstacles that vulnerable migrant groups had to overcome were access to housing, affordability and quality. Previous research undertaken by Mateman (1999) discussed feelings of safety as a key issue for refugees. This affected where they settled and impacted on their access to employment, public services, educational opportunities, leisure, friends and relatives.

Discussion

This research review shows that while there has been a significant amount of research conducted overseas, there is a clear research gap in New Zealand relating to the housing experiences of vulnerable migrant groups. It is important to improve understanding of experiences and the potential barriers so these can be addressed through appropriate responses²².

Key themes reoccur through the literature. This suggests that the housing circumstances which vulnerable migrants groups must address are similar irrespective of the geographical location in which they attempt to resettle. The housing circumstances of migrant groups' settlement do not differ greatly from major, global cities to relatively small cities in New Zealand.

A key theme that comes out of the literature is one of responsibility. The vulnerability of migrant groups should not be compounded by the experience they face in a new country. There is debate as to who has responsibility for housing vulnerable migrant groups. Closely related to the theme of responsibility is the issue of housing choice, quality and the suitability of housing these groups invariably occupy.

Many international reports discuss the concept of housing careers. Housing careers and how groups improve their housing conditions are used as a way of accessing resettlement progress. The literature identifies a number of barriers which prevent housing careers advancing. These include access, affordability, the private sector and institutional providers, language barriers, neighbourhood utility, networks and overcrowding. The extent to which these or other barriers effect the resettlement of the Christchurch Somali population is examined in this research.

The themes that come from this literature review are applied to the data collected in Christchurch and used to determine if vulnerable migrant groups in Christchurch have similar housing experiences to groups in similar circumstances overseas.

²² Foley and Beer, 2003

5. Housing Vulnerable Migrant Groups

The international requirements to accept refugees, the desire of the New Zealand government to attract immigrant populations to New Zealand and the global trend in migration, have major implications for New Zealand society.

New migrants, and particularly vulnerable groups, require specific facilities to aid their settlement. National and local services associated with accommodation, employment, health and welfare must be extended to meet new needs.

The issue of responsibility for housing vulnerable migrant groups is complicated in countries where reformed welfare ideologies have seen the retraction of Government assistance and increasing reliance on market forces to meet demand. The requirement for providing housing falls, often with some urgency, to the social support service providers in local areas. However, in light of national policies to accept refugees and migrants, central government must take some responsibility for ensuring that suitable housing be made available to accommodate them²³.

Housing Provision

The New Zealand rental market is split between the private and public sectors. There is significant pressure on both these sectors to provide good quality, affordable housing.

As a consequence of neoliberal reform, New Zealand's state housing sector was restructured resulting in a decrease in public housing stock and increased reliance on private sector supply. What State assisted housing is available is targeted on the basis of need, with eligibility criteria and means testing.

The purchase of rental properties by private investors has been well utilised in New Zealand as a form of capital gain. The private sector is primarily interested in securing a financial return. It is relatively uninterested in the supply of low cost housing as there is significantly more financial reward in supplying housing to middle or high income earners.

²³ Tuohey, 2001

Competition for quality stock also drives up rents. A recent housing boom in Christchurch caused rental prices to rise up to 20 percent²⁴

Public Sector Supply

Housing New Zealand Corporation

State housing has been part of New Zealand's history since 1905. Housing New Zealand Corporation was established to take on the role of delivering housing assistance in July 2001. The Corporation's Mission Statement is to provide access to decent homes, helping New Zealanders manage their own circumstances and contribute to community life. Housing is provided through direct rental homes to people with a housing need, links with other housing providers and working with community groups and local government to address housing needs.

The Corporation owns and manages in excess of 5,600 homes in the Christchurch area. Of these, less than 1% are leased off the private sector through the leasing programme through which privately owned properties are added to boost the pool of housing stock. Equally, less than 1% is added to the housing stock through construction of new stock.

When determining an applicant's eligibility, the Corporation considers residency status, income, assets, and the household's level of need. An allocation system is used to distribute housing stock to those in greatest need. Needs are assessed by household composition, housing history, current housing circumstances, income, assets and expenses. The ability of applicants to functioning in the private housing market is also considered.

Priority on the waiting list reflects need on a spectrum from 'severe and persistent' needs that must be addressed immediately, 'significant and persistent', 'moderate', whereby disadvantage is likely to compound over time and 'low'. For those with a 'severe and persistent' need that cannot be provided with a permanent suitable housing, a temporary solution may be offered to reduce the level of risk.

Waiting lists are managed by area. The total number of managed properties in Linwood²⁵ is 2048, in Papanui²⁶ 1611 and in the Riccarton²⁷ area there are 1769 properties. As at June 2004 there were approximately 250 people on the waiting list for each area. The significant majority of these applicants have a 'significant and persistent' housing need.

Christchurch City Council

City Housing is the division of the Christchurch City Council responsible for providing housing to Christchurch residents with a housing need. The City has in excess of 2600 rental units. The majority of these make up the 113 attached, semi-attached or close proximity housing complexes located around the city. Stocks range in age with the oldest being built in 1938 and the newest completed in 2001. Stocks are added to with the newest purchases being in 2002.

The units range in size and style from one person bed-sits to four bedroom apartment style units for families or groups. There are over 2200 one or two person units, while only approximately 14 three bedroom and 31 four bedroom rentals available. These figures clearly indicate that City Housing is catering for people living on their own.

The eligibility for a City Housing unit is based on income, asset holdings and need. There is a waiting list and the length of time spent on this is dependent on the need of the applicant and availability of units. The City Council comments that it reviews the type of housing available to its tenants to ensure that, as far as realistically possible, the most appropriate type of housing is available. However this has to be balanced with the aspect of affordability for tenants

Details sourced from

²⁴ Canterbury Property Investors' Association

²⁵ includes Christchurch City, Huntsbury, Avondale and Banks Peninsula District

²⁶ includes Shirley, Burwood, Bryndwr, Burnside, Papanui and the Hurunui District

²⁷ includes Addington, Middleton, Avonhead, Leeston and the Selwyn District

Choice

International studies show that vulnerable migrant groups have very little choice in where they live. This is often due to accommodation allocation schemes, which place them in often hard to let, socially deprived areas that nationals steer away from²⁸. Groups were found to cluster in certain inner-city neighbourhoods characterised by deprivation, high levels of unemployment, crime, poor quality services and local amenities, such as recreational and leisure facilities²⁹.

This is also the case in Christchurch. The majority of research participants accessed housing from Housing New Zealand Corporation located in areas with a New Zealand deprivation decile rating of between six and ten. As Housing New Zealand Corporation housing becomes available it is matched to applicants' requirements and rejection of offers may result in waiting list positions being reassessed. Further, research participant's frustration at the length of time they had spent on waiting lists suggests they would accept any property they were able to get.

Quality

International research shows that vulnerable migrant groups invariably end up living in low decile areas in houses that suffer poor physical conditions. These include damp and condensation, ineffective heating systems, and poor quality repairs and maintenance³⁰. Inadequate housing provision and maintenance can have serious health implications³¹.

The account of one research participant supports this. From the description, the house was clearly inadequate, described as "cold" with bare wooden floors. Water reportedly ran down the walls leaving a black silt residue. The section reportedly had extremely poor drainage and water pooled down the driveway between the front door and the street.

These conditions caused significant stress and anxiety. Of significant frustration was the perceived lack of attention given to the issues by HNZN, as owner, and the respondent's

²⁸ Cole & Robinson, 2003; Refugee Council, 2004

²⁹ Mateman, 1999; Cole & Robinson, 2003

³⁰ Cole & Robinson, 2003

³¹ Foley & Beer, 2003

knowledge of other properties that the same owner had undertaken maintenance on. Of additional concern was the belief that the poor quality of the housing was impacting on the health of young family members.

To improve the quality of its housing, Housing New Zealand Corporation has commenced schemes aimed at the modernisation and energy efficiency of homes. The modernisation scheme commenced in the period 2001/02. It is a long term programme aimed to improve HNZC houses built prior to 1980. The programme has addressed issues of living flow, upgrading of kitchens and bathrooms, parking and garaging, fencing and heating requirements. Of the 442 homes modernised nationwide during the 2002/03 period, only seven were made larger by having rooms added. It is a slow process. As at 30 June 2003, 40% of the 64,400 properties nationwide fell into the age criteria for modernisation. Less than 500 were modernised in the first year. In Christchurch, numbers have been somewhat erratic, but an average of 115 houses have been modernised each year.

The Energy Efficiency scheme also aims to improve housing quality. Commencing in the 2001/02 period, this 10-12 year project aims at improving the living environment of all HNZC homes built before 1977. This programme involves the improvement or installation of ceiling insulation, hot water cylinder and pipe wraps, under floor insulation. Maintenance will also be undertaken to address draughty windows, condensation and dampness under houses, however it remains the policy of HNZC not to provide curtains. A further issue to address in respect of the Christchurch housing stock is that of the regional council's air plan which will prohibit the use of open fires from. In some circumstances heat pumps have been added to HNZC homes.

Details sourced from
Housing New Zealand Corporation, 2004

Suitability

Quality of housing extends to it meeting the cultural needs of people. However, the increasingly multicultural nature of society poses new difficulties for housing providers. Housing recipient can less easily be predicted. A 'host' housing provider may not take the cultural requirements of a migrant community into account, assuming immersion into the local culture make any 'special' housing will become less relevant³². Christchurch's Somali population is small and it is unlikely their needs will be specifically taken into consideration in any housing design.

Research participants expressed the desire for more rooms. Two adults in one dwelling felt cramped in a one bedroom apartment and one toilet was not enough. It is unclear if these requirements were culturally specific or an outcome of crowding. Previous research found Somali had a problem with only one toilet, particularly when this came off the

³² Churchman & Herbert, 2000

kitchen³³. The kitchen is traditionally a female domain and it was difficult when men necessarily had to pass through that space. Also, Somali do not traditionally mix the sexes after the age of seven and, consequently, separate living spaces are desired.

Discussion

Between its central and local government systems, Christchurch is considered one of the better cities in New Zealand for agencies and services that provide housing and housing assistance. There are significant properties provided by the State and local public sector but numbers fall well short of the demand.

There was an acute awareness amongst the research participants of the service that Housing New Zealand Corporation provide. While circumstances may have necessitated support, the provision of assistance seemed to be assumed or taken-for-granted. This highlights the issues of whom the state service is there for.

The state system of allocation, and historical patterns of housing development, result in vulnerable migrant groups being channelled into particular parts of the city. Very little choice can be exercised by the recipients of state housing.

Attempts by the public sector to improve house stock have not been realised for some renters. Housing that is provided does not meet requirements of the research group. It is unclear whether the desire for more space was specifically cultural. Generally it appeared that cultural suitability was secondary to the desire for better quality accommodation.

³³ Hopkinson, 1996; citing Walker, 1996

6. Barriers to Resettlement

A 'housing career' is a path that a household takes through the housing system. This path is determined by the means of the individuals who make up the household. The means of a household are constrained by the opportunities, real or perceived, within the housing market³⁴. As a household moves through its 'life cycle' it takes distinctive steps to improve housing circumstances³⁵

The ability of households to move positively in a housing career is determined by the resources available to them. A primary resource is material wealth. Resources also relate to the ability to successfully process information, and political and social resources that come as a consequence of contacts and networks households have access to, and the benefits and assistance these provide. Households use resources to overcome constraints that arise due to affordability, access and structures.

The Christchurch research participants had short housing careers. Even those who had been in the city for many years had only resided in one or two houses. Further, their housing careers were not in an obviously positive direction, with shifts to lower quality properties. This suggests that even though research participants had a variety of resources available to them, the constraints they had to deal with were difficult to overcome.

Access

The difficulty vulnerable migrant groups face in accessing housing should not be taken for granted. They do not come from the same position as national citizens and face genuine problems in securing a position, even at the bottom end of the housing market³⁶

Issues relating to accessibility are a consequence of shortage of supply, discrimination and allocation schemes³⁷. The participants who took part in this research did not feel they had had to deal with discrimination. Housing had been accessed from both the private and public sectors without any prejudice being felt. However, overcoming supply shortages and processes relating to allocation schemes was a notable barrier. All research

³⁴ van Kempen & Ozuekren, 2002

³⁵ Murdie, 1999

³⁶ Murdie & Teixeira, 2004

participants who currently occupied HNZC housing were on a waiting list for different accommodation. Irrespective of whether the request was due to house size or condition, no household had advanced their housing career by securing alternative housing through the waiting list scheme.

Affordability

The income levels of vulnerable migrant groups are invariably low due to a lack of employment skills, lack of job opportunities or the discrimination of employers. This will result in a lack of financial resources and affect their ability to afford accommodation. Affordability issues are a general poverty problem, and not specific to vulnerable migrant groups. However, the potentially traumatic pre-arrival experiences might intensify the situation³⁸.

Participants in this research described housing in Christchurch as ‘expensive’. Yet most participants were receiving some sort of assistance and benefiting from income adjusted rents. However, the cost of housing is relative and was a significant issue. They also cited expensive housing related costs, such as those associated with moving.

One participant who had spent four years in a private sector rental property commented that the rent for the, then, new two bedroom townhouse in Addington had increased over that period from \$190 to \$205 per week. This may not be an exorbitant increase but, with a beneficiary income and dependents, it deems the property inaccessible.

The Private Sector

International research shows that the private sector is likely to show levels of discrimination in housing supply. The focus of such discrimination may be on such basis as age, gender, ethnicity, sources of income such as social assistance, large family size and family type, such as single parents³⁹.

³⁷ Mateman, 2004

³⁸ Murdie & Teixeira, 2004

³⁹ Murdie & Teixeira, 2004

In situations where the land value greatly exceeds that of the land, private owners may let dwellings fall into a state of disrepair. Houses begin to suffer from deficiencies that higher income renters will not tolerate. These houses may become primarily available for those with a lower income. Vulnerable migrant groups become easy tenants for these properties, as they may be less aware than local renters of the conditions that houses should be in.

One research participant considered houses accessed through the private sector were of a better quality. Further, they were able to exercise greater choice when renting properties. Another research participant suggested that landlords in the private sector were put off by large family groups, considering five or more too many.

Institutional Providers

Housing institutions and agencies exist to help people overcome their accommodation problems. However, it is the experience of vulnerable migrant groups in many countries that these organisations create a significant barrier in their housing experiences. This is particularly so due to the perceived ignorance and misunderstanding of housing providers who fail to recognise and respond to specific household needs. Alternatively, providers made the assumption that minority ethnic communities shared common experiences, aspirations and needs and are therefore equally well served by blanket policies and generic provision⁴⁰.

In actual dealings with institutional providers, those who took part in this research commented that the housing providers were “good”, however all participants expressed frustration at the delay they faced in accessing alternative housing as a consequence of allocation schemes.

Language

Language is crucial to all aspects of resettlement. The ability to think, understand and, ultimately, communicate in the predominant language of a society is essential for successful integration into any society. Vulnerable migrant groups with poor language skills do have difficulty accessing information and support from agencies. One participant

⁴⁰ Foley & Beer, 2003; Cole & Robinson, 2003; Mateman, 2004

described her situation as “hopeless” when she originally arrived in Christchurch without English skills. Another whose language skills were high stated she took an interpreter with her to agencies.

The requirement for assistance often falls to local providers. The New Zealand Government’s National Immigration Settlement Strategy released in May 2004 lists one of its goals is to help immigrants gain access to appropriate information and services that are available to the wider community. One such initiative is "Language Line", a pilot scheme of the New Zealand Office of Ethnic Affairs. The scheme provides interpreters for over 30 different languages to assist non-English speakers access selected government departments. These departments include Housing Corporation New Zealand, Work and Income and the Immigration Service. The scheme has been funded to the level of \$1.266 million for the 2004/05 period⁴¹.

Since it commenced in April 2003, approximately 4% of the interpreting calls have been for Somali speakers. Only three instances have been recorded where a Somali interpreter has been used via one a HNZA Christchurch Neighbourhood Units. This represents about 9% of the total use of Language Line in Christchurch⁴².

Neighbourhood Utility

Mateman (2004) believes housing goes beyond the physical dwelling to the neighbourhood environment, and the availability of social facilities such as education, employment, health care (Mateman, 2004). Further, when groups congregate in one area, the outcomes can be positive in terms of the development of facilities specifically for that group (Mateman, 1999).

The neighbourhoods that the research participants resided in were predominantly primary centres for shopping, social services and entertainment. The availability of public services was a significant issue for research participants as few of the participants drove a car. Good access to transport, particularly bus services, was evident in these suburbs. The Somali population is relatively small and there are limited services specifically for them. There is only one mosque in Christchurch.

⁴¹ Refugee Voices, 2004

⁴² pers comm.; Housing New Zealand Corporation, 2004

Networks

Establishing networks requires spatial accessibility and vulnerable migrant groups invariably seek close geographical association with other members of their community, family and community based services. The concentration can be a survival strategy, overcoming discrimination, safety and security concerns, or to establish a community, but the degree to which this is possible is affected by the size of the immigrant community already living here⁴³. The survival strategies of Somali women in Canadian cities include networks that function as surrogate extended family through which information could be exchanged and needs met⁴⁴. Further, many households rely on the assistance of family or friends to deal with housing matters, such as reporting the need for repairs and maintenance, or to challenge the actions of their landlord⁴⁵.

The existence of networks were evident in Christchurch. The Somali community is close, perhaps as a consequence of there only being one mosque in the city. Working groups have been organised by senior members of the community to bring people together. Through these groups people have utilized contacts to act as interpreters at housing providers and to help them negotiate much needed housing maintenance. They utilise family and friends who have been resident longer to find out information about services.

Social networks can also act as a bind, as people are less inclined to move away from the support mechanisms they develop and physical settings with which they are familiar⁴⁶. This may have the negative outcome of limiting housing choice⁴⁷. This point was reinforced by one participant who, in her request for a HNZN house, specifically requested a Linwood property. Her only experience of Christchurch was one year of residing in Linwood however she particularly wished to continue living in that same area.

Overcrowding

Overcrowding was repeatedly a factor in the international research. Overcrowded conditions have a dramatic impact on people's physical, mental and emotional well-

⁴³ Murdie & Teixeira, 2004; Mateman, 1999

⁴⁴ Mohamed, 1999

⁴⁵ Cole & Robinson, 2003

⁴⁶ van Kempen & Ozuekren, 2002

⁴⁷ Cole & Robinson, 2003

being⁴⁸. It can be particularly problematic for young people competing for space for homework and studying. The family is the ultimate source of personal security and identity. Somalis typically live in nuclear families, although older parents may move in with one of their children.

One research participant was living in a two bedroom flat with her husband, three children and her husband's mother. This arrangement was considered acceptable, although the household was on a HNZN waiting list for a four bedroom house.

Another research participant was renting a two bedroom dwelling for one adult and three children. She considered this dwelling density was acceptable to the parent while the children were young⁴⁹.

Discussion

The vulnerability of migrant groups in Christchurch is similar to that experienced around the world. The ability of these groups to advance their housing careers is limited by the resources they have access to and the constraints or barriers they must overcome.

Their starting position in the housing market is primarily determined by their financial circumstances, the information they can source and how the market perceives them. That the research participants did not feel they had suffered from discrimination may be a positive consequence of New Zealand's bicultural, and increasingly multicultural, society.

The ability to create networks are vital in the resettlement process as the experiences of others who have been exposed to the housing market for longer periods can greatly assist with knowledge of local systems and procedures.

While sentiments relating to the expense of housing must be placed in context, housing prices are a consequence of the lack of supply in the marketplace. While available stock is low, competition will continue to force the price up and the quality of housing down.

⁴⁸ Cole & Robinson, 2003

⁴⁹ 'young' being described as prior to high school age.

7. Meeting Needs

There has been significant call for development of policy that addresses resettlement of vulnerable migrant groups. These have related to the restoration of livelihoods, family, maintenance of cultural identity, improving quality and assistance with adjusting to new conditions⁵⁰. In 2001, New Zealand was identified as needing an overarching policy relating to the resettlement of refugees⁵¹. This call has recently been met by the New Zealand Government which has developed a national Immigration Settlement Strategy with goals relating to employment, language, information and services, social networks, ethnic identity and civic participation⁵².

Other studies have recommended that central and local Government show greater commitment to refugee resettlement. Suggestions for achieving this goal were through additional funding to Refugee and Migrant Service, the establishment of free services⁵³, and information campaigns targeted at the public and providers to help reduce prejudices⁵⁴. Again, these have been realised with the 2004 Budget providing for a further \$62 million for the Refugee and Migrant Service, to be applied over the next three years, for the assistance of refugees in their resettlement. Housing New Zealand Corporation tenant newsletters include a “getting to know your neighbour” segment. In a Summer 2002 issue, Somalia was the main feature. Further, initiatives such as “Language Line” are a positive addition.

These national strategies suggest that central Government is aware of the vulnerability of migrant groups and is prepared to take some responsibility for their resettlement. However, housing is a key aspect of that process that requires significant attention. There is a lack of policy relating to rental regulation in the private rental market which forces renters to compete for housing resources. If market forces create vulnerable populations, Government has little choice but to address this or deal with the social consequences through some other sector of society.

⁵⁰ Bihi, 1999

⁵¹ Department of Labour, 2001

⁵² New Zealand Immigration Service and Department of Labour, 2004

⁵³ Brightwell, 1996

⁵⁴ Mateman, 1999

The Christchurch public housing market is incapable of meeting any specific housing needs of vulnerable migrant groups. Public sector housing is inadequate in terms of quantity and condition. Providers struggle to maintain the existing stock and are insufficiently resourced to increase property numbers. It is considered that this situation will not change in the foreseeable future, particularly as other centres in New Zealand continue to grow at a greater rate than Christchurch drawing scarce resources away. Further, decisions relating to housing supply are complicated by predictions that the New Zealand population is getting older and New Zealanders are having fewer children. Consequently, it may be determined that the greatest need will be for smaller, rather than significantly larger, dwellings.

It is questionable whether the private sector has any desire to meet the needs of vulnerable migrant groups. Housing development for high income groups dominates the Christchurch landscape. Subdivision and infill trends result in low quality dwellings being demolished and sections redeveloped. Alternatively, private owners 'sit' on properties, undertaking minimal repairs, awaiting property value increases. Providing housing at low rentals goes against private goals of capital gain.

8. Limitations

The research participants offered a good spectrum of age and family circumstances. They also resided in different parts of the city and had been in Christchurch for various lengths of time. It would have been useful to have collected accounts from a greater number of participants. Unfortunately, Somali groups proved difficult to access.

There was enthusiasm towards the research in terms of a perceived need for the study. Unfortunately, this did not translate into a high level of responses. A comment made by the Refugee and Migrant Service that the Somali population was ‘exhausted’ as a research group should, perhaps, have been heeded.

The findings in research are applicable to other vulnerable groups. A comment to this extent did not prove timely to enable interviews with other groups to be undertaken. In light of the low responses from the Somali community, extending the research focus to include other perceived vulnerable migrant groups would have proved beneficial.

Language and cultural barriers provide a new challenge in qualitative research methods. Inexperience in interviewing people for whom English was a second language is something that can only be overcome by practise. However, direction should be sought from support networks familiar with the culture of the research participants to ensure an interviewer is well prepared.

Interview participants were aware that the interviews were to take place and the subject of the research. It was felt that some were prepared, with specific ideas they wanted to get across. At times it proved difficult to move the discussion away from certain issues and participants continued to circle back to the key point they wished to make.

9. Conclusion

This research has examined the housing needs, wants and experiences of vulnerable migrant populations. It used a qualitative research method to establish that the housing experiences of vulnerable migrant groups in Christchurch are similar to those experienced overseas. It draws on the accounts of Christchurch's Somali population, as representative of a vulnerable migrant group.

Recent international studies of the housing experiences of migrants recognise that, in accessing this resource, migrants are one of the most vulnerable groups in society. Similar to overseas experiences, the research participants in this study occupied properties at the bottom end of the housing market. This resulted in them renting the worst quality houses in the most deprived areas. Other circumstances, such as employment opportunities and capital accumulation, affected their ability to improve their housing circumstances and advance their housing career. Barriers had principally been overcome by maintaining strong cultural identity, and networking through social and neighbourhood groups. These are very important survival strategies which any housing provision strategy should attempt to facilitate.

Housing providers are assisting vulnerable migrant groups but not taking specific responsibility for their housing welfare. The private sector does not exhibit discrimination, but takes no part in providing of low cost housing. Vulnerable migrant groups must compete for housing against locals who are, perhaps, better equipped to participate in the New Zealand system. Consequently, vulnerable migrant groups have limited access to and low utility of private sector housing stock. The participants in this research relied heavily on public sector housing providers and agencies. The services of these providers and agencies were clearly understood and utilised. Vulnerable migrant groups were also specifically catered for by the public sector through language initiatives and resettlement services. However, in the acquisition of housing, they were treated without exception, necessarily participating in the state allocation schemes.

People make decisions about housing with the help of local resources and through their own understandings. In an unfamiliar context, the degree of vulnerability and subsequent experiences of migrant groups are determined by the conditions of an individual's arrival,

the resources they have access to in the host country and how that society responds to them. The housing needs of vulnerable migrant groups are often overlooked. However, paying attention to these groups, and gaining an understanding of their housing needs, wants and experiences will help prepare a host society receive these groups, facilitate their ability to help themselves, and direct the provision of housing and support.

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