

# Finding housing for the Syrian refugee newcomers in Canadian cities: challenges, initiatives and (preliminary) lessons learned

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Université INRS

[Webinar](#) at the Centre interuniversitaire québécois de statistiques sociales ([CIQSS](#))

17 May 2017, 1-3 PM EDT

Webinar recording available at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XdljsPO4fkU>

# Plan

## **Presentation (45 min.)**

- Research context
- Questions and methods
- Main findings
- Take-aways

**Questions and comments: Webinar chat-log**

**In-person discussion: Montréal attendees**

# Research context

# A research project funded under a “rapid response” proposal call



Social Sciences and Humanities  
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en  
sciences humaines du Canada

Canada

- **Targeted Research: Syrian Refugee Arrival, Resettlement and Integration** (grant no. 890-2016-4027)

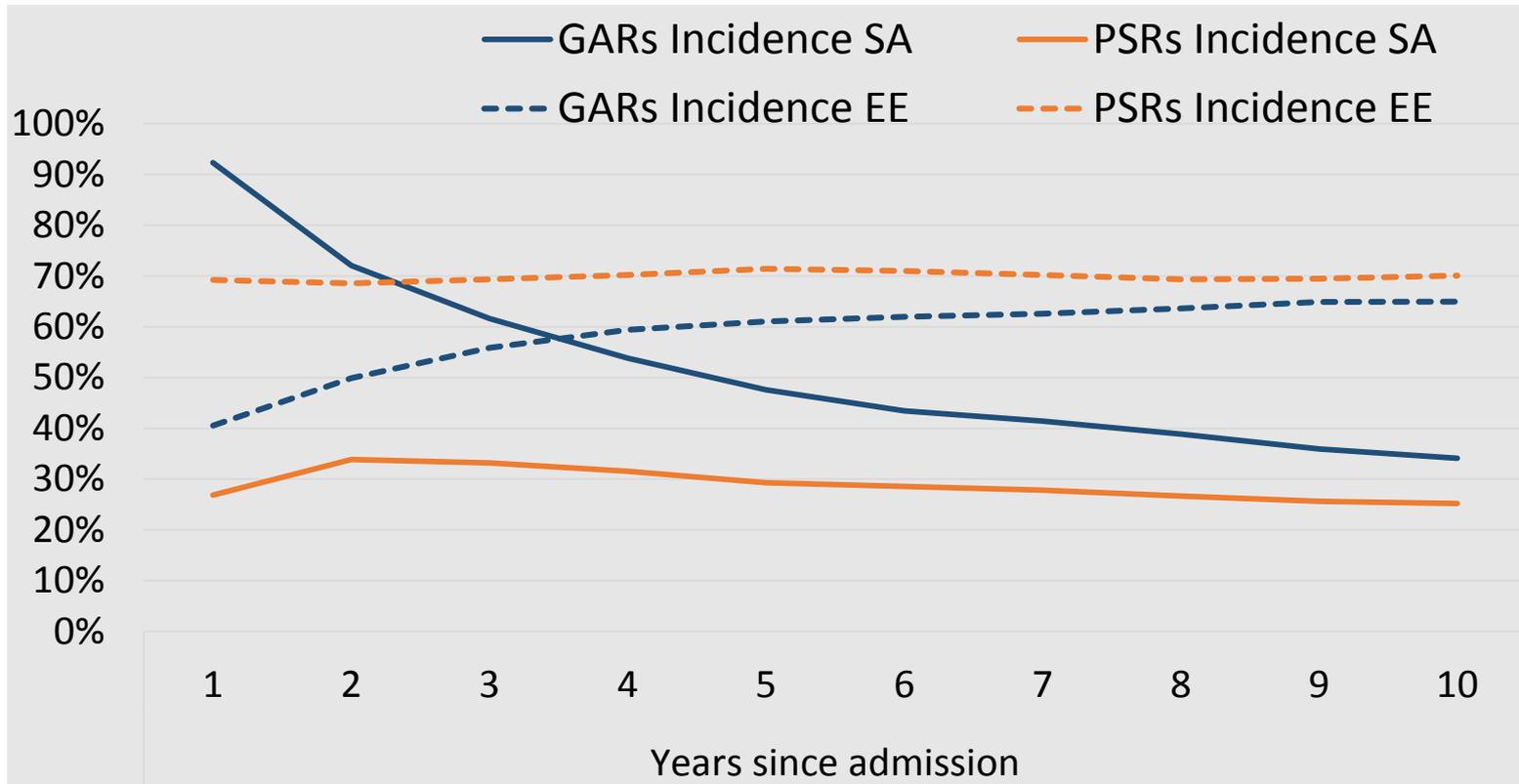
*“The arrival of Syrian refugees in Canada is a rare event, full of challenges (...). Governments and communities will need access to the latest knowledge to develop best practices in supporting and resettling refugees. (...) [T]his special call seeks to support research and mobilize knowledge in a timely way on **key issues and events** (...) in the **early days of the migration and resettlement process.***

*In partnership with IRCC (...), [t]his joint initiative aims to support **targeted, practical and actionable research projects** capable of delivering initial findings **within six months to one year**” (SSHRC proposal call, April 2016)*

# Why did we undertake this study? (1)

- *“Once people are in permanent accommodation they begin to rebuild their lives”*  
*“That first apartment is that first place that they are safe”*  
(SPO interviews 2017)
  - Practicalities of daily life
  - Making connections, sense of inclusion
- Previous research on newcomer housing experiences
  - Refugees face greater barriers than other entry categories but catch up after a few years
  - Refugee claimants compared to government assisted (GAR) and privately sponsored refugees (PSR)
- However, since 2002 Immigration and Refugee Protection Act → admit higher share of GARs with “high-needs”  
⇒ housing implications?

# IRCC's analysis of incidence of Social Assistance (SA) and Employment Earnings (EE) for 2003-2013 cohorts of GARs and PSRs



Source: Edlund , Dawn (2017), Settlement of Syrian refugees – one year later. Metropolis conference presentation (chart reformatted by us).

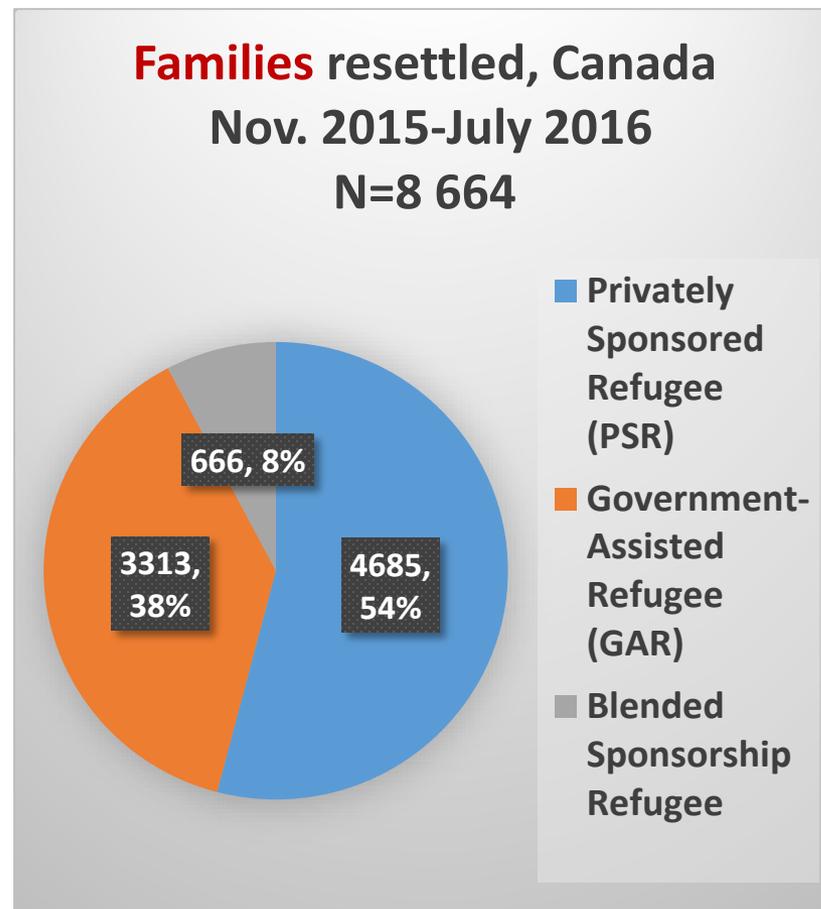
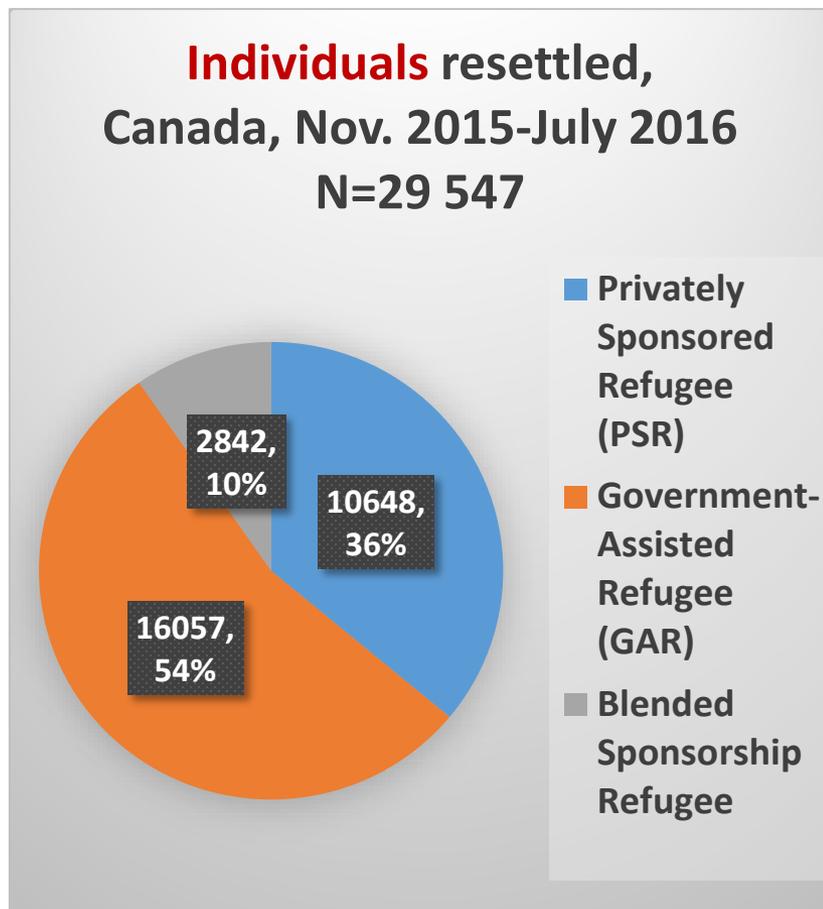
# Why did we undertake this study? (2)

- Housing markets have changed since last large-scale refugee arrivals (1999)
  - Spiralling rents in high-growth urban regions
  - Lack of new investment in affordable housing
- Widening affordability gap in general for those on social assistance or earning minimum wage
- Inadequacy of Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) income assistance for GARs = longstanding problem
  - especially for large families and single people

# What aspects of the Syrian refugee operation were unusual?

- No pre-arrival orientation (time constraints)
- Very uneven pace of arrivals
  - Very high volumes of GARs to some destination cities over a very short time frame (Dec. 2015-Feb. 2016)
  - High PSR component, unpredictable arrival dates
- GAR profile: even more high needs than expected
  - High number of very large families with young children
  - Some very major health issues
  - Significant literacy limitations

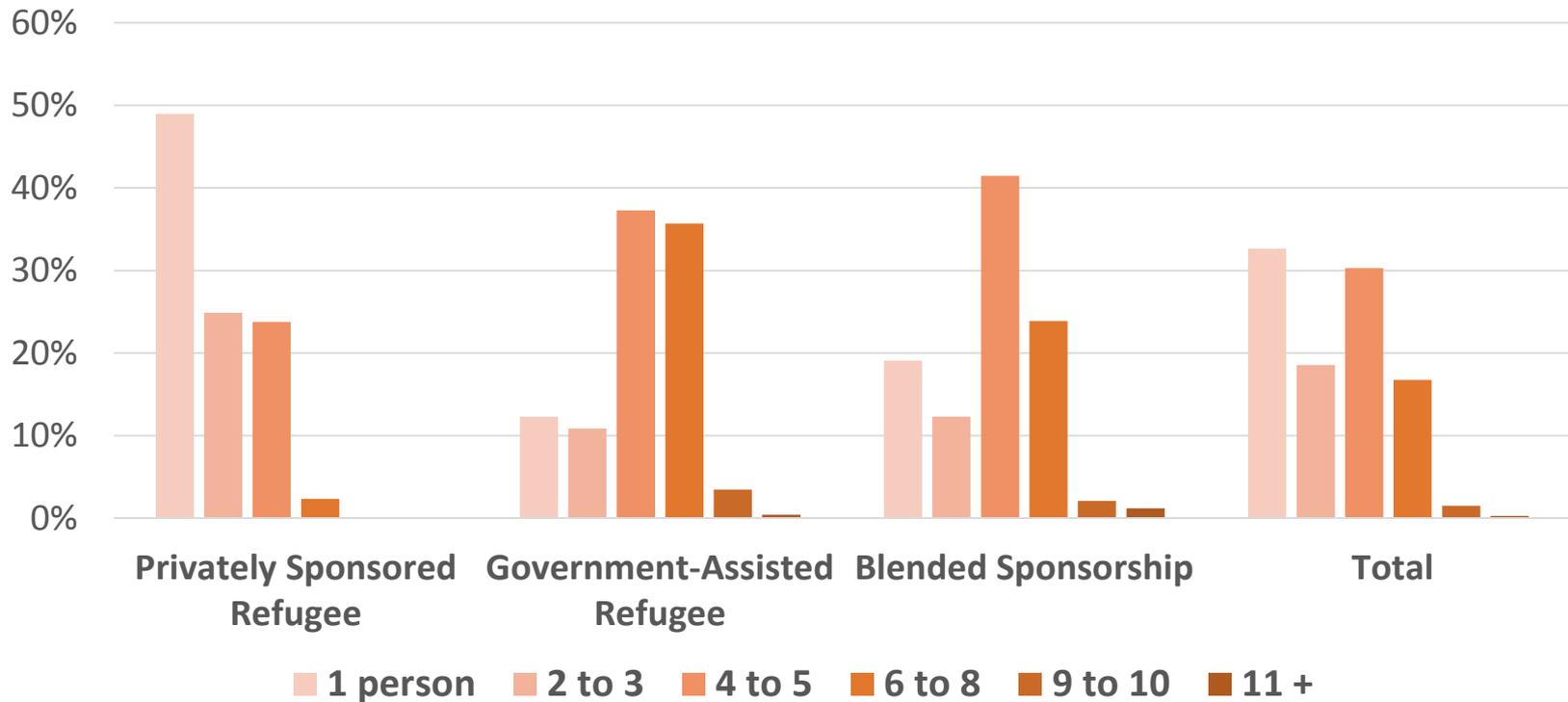
# Syrian refugee newcomers by entry category – individuals and families



Source: IRCC, August 2016 Data, [http://www.cic.gc.ca/opendata-donneesouvertes/data/IRCC\\_SyriaFC\\_0013\\_E.xls](http://www.cic.gc.ca/opendata-donneesouvertes/data/IRCC_SyriaFC_0013_E.xls), consulted 2017/03/02

# Family size distributions vary greatly by entry category

Syrian refugee newcomer families, by family size for each entry category, Canada (Nov. 2015-July 2016 arrivals)



Source: IRCC, August 2016 Data, [http://www.cic.gc.ca/opendata-donneesouvertes/data/IRCC\\_SyriaFC\\_0013\\_E.xls](http://www.cic.gc.ca/opendata-donneesouvertes/data/IRCC_SyriaFC_0013_E.xls), consulted 2017/03/02

# Research questions, data, methods

# Research questions

- Main focus: Syrian GARs
  - Secondary goal: identify issues for research re housing of PSRs
- How did the “local social infrastructure” cope with housing-related aspects of Syrian refugee arrivals in **different cities** across Canada (*impacts of size, state of local housing market...?*)
- How did the **process of finding the first permanent housing** for the Syrian refugees unfold in these places?
- Challenges, strategies, resources, successful practices for **suitable, affordable** and **sustainable** housing outcomes
- Issues for policy consideration

# Data sources and analysis themes

## QUESTIONS:

How did the local "social infrastructure" in Canadian cities cope with the challenges of finding housing for the Syrian refugee newcomers?  
Common experiences and significant differences between places?  
Lessons learned?

## MAIN THEMES --> DESCRIPTIVE CODING

RAP providers in 12 cities  
3 PSR key informants (Mtl)

**DATA:**  
Interviews (SPO)  
Press files (by city)  
Parliamentary hearings  
Secondary sources

Advance preparedness,  
information re arrivals

Temporary living arrangements -  
challenges, resources

Finding permanent housing -  
challenges, strategies, help

Refugees' housing experiences,  
stability/mobility, month 13

Topics specific to private  
sponsorship

Informants' views as to key  
issues & recommendations

City

RAP-SPO interviews

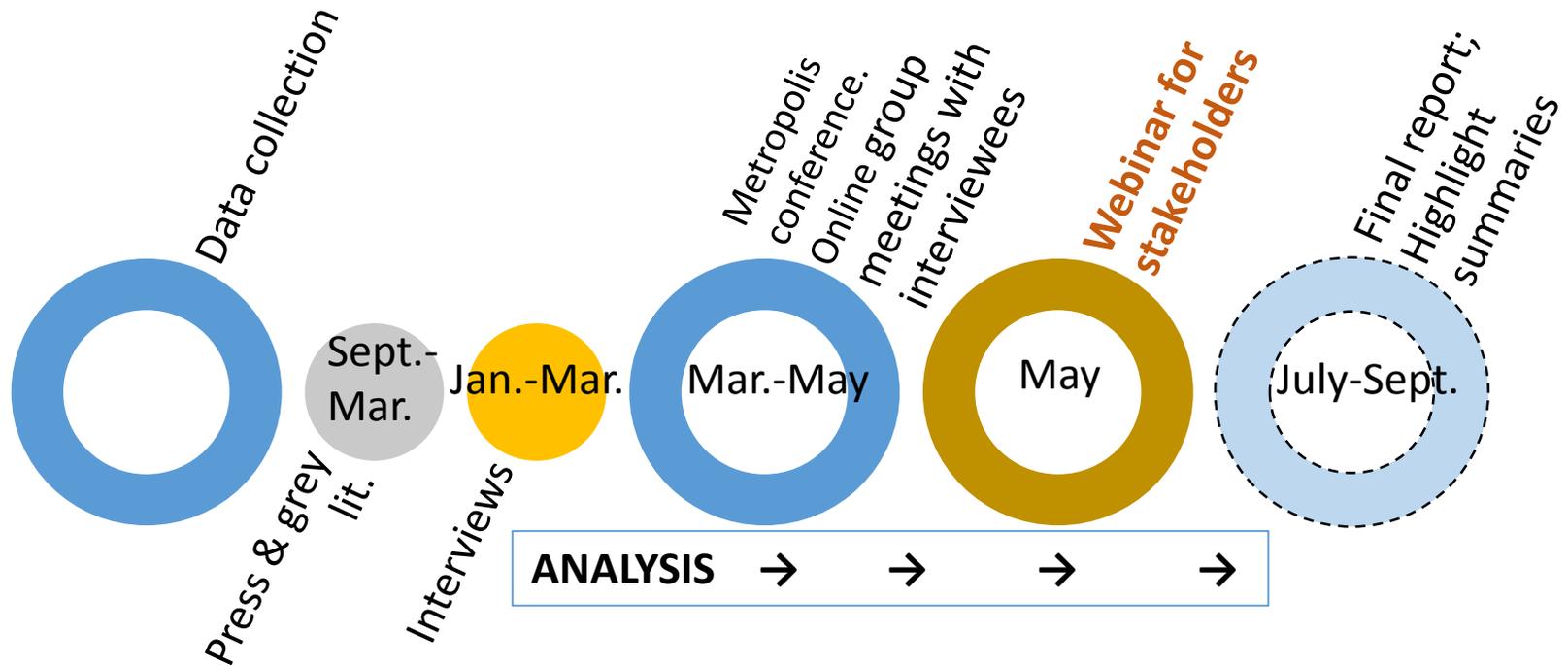
Others 100+ Syrians

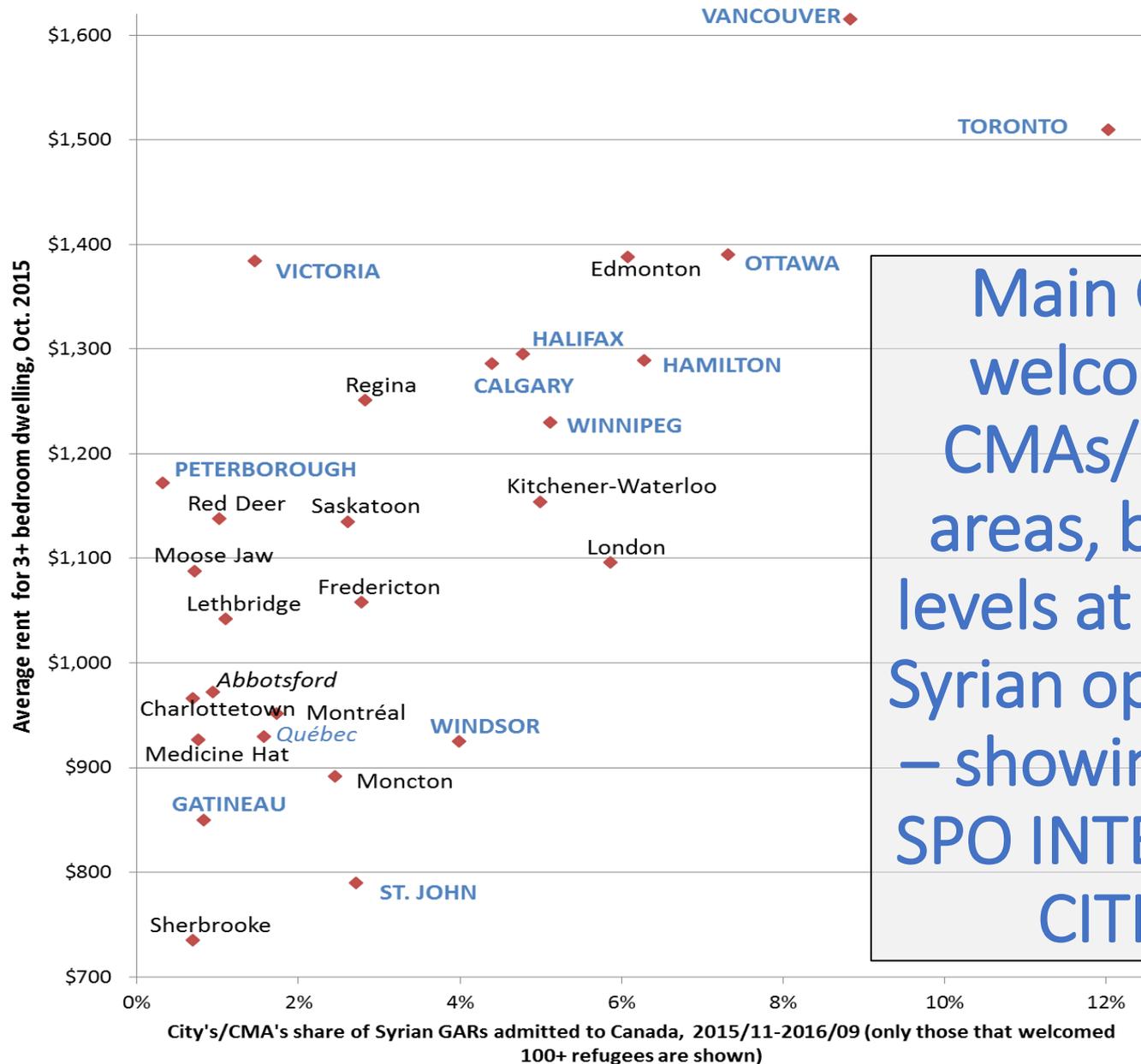
Local housing market context

Info refers to GAR/PSR/both?

Role of informant/organization in  
Syrian resettlement

# Project timeline, 2016-2017





Main GAR-welcoming CMAs/urban areas, by rent levels at start of Syrian operation – showing RAP-SPO INTERVIEW CITIES

# Main findings

# Aiming for “*Advanced preparedness for just-in-time planning*”

- Most cities: multi-stakeholder, multi-sector tables - help plan (inter alia) for temporary accommodation, permanent housing
  - Consolidating , increasing effectiveness of existing capacity
  - Avoid overlaps : new municipal, provincial interventions vs. existing services
  - Need to plan integration of volunteer and community initiatives
  - Emergency planning model vs scaling-up normal resettlement work?
- ✓ **Early buy-in by landlord associations and other housing providers had major positive impacts later on**
  - Those already working with RAP-SPOs , + building new relationships
- ✓ **Lasting impacts for future occasions – networks, information sharing**
- **Limits to “housing readiness”: insufficient advance notice about GAR family profiles and arrival timetable**

# Unpacking the (headline-grabbing) long hotel stays

## Causes

- Pace & volume of arrivals in tight housing markets
- Unanticipated family configurations, special needs
- Delays in administrative ramp-up
  - \$ for training housing search workers
  - timing of first cheque
  - furniture
- Managing expectations

## Mitigating measures

- ✓ Programs to connect with schools, local services
- Missed opportunities to initiate language training while waiting?



[CBC Radio, June 18, 2016](#)



[Vancouver Courier, February 24, 2016](#)

# Finding housing: affordability

- Syrian resettlement operation spotlighted inadequacy of RAP rates vis-à-vis market rents
- Child Benefit (CB) changes 2016 → narrowed affordability gap, more so for larger families
  - But often a 3 month wait for newcomers to access CB
- Shelter-cost-to-income ratios for GAR families paying average market rents (excl. utilities), 2016:
  - 2-parent family, 3 children (4, 10, 14) in 3-bedroom apt, getting RAP + CB: Toronto CMA: 47%; Windsor CMA 32%
  - Couple, no children, in 1-bedroom apt, Calgary: 74%
  - Single adult, Calgary CMA, in bachelor apt: 95%

# Finding housing: affordability (2)

## Strategies deployed and resources available to make housing affordable for Syrian GARs

- RAP-SPOs negotiating rent reductions with private landlords
  - Only possible in balanced or softer housing markets
- Ad hoc rent supplementation using Welcome Fund targeted donations
  - allowed local flexibility to determine most needy cases
- Municipal and provincial rent supplement programs
  - certain cities/provinces only
- Rent-gearred-to-income social housing
  - Accessed by some Syrian GARs in a few cities – depends on local supply context, priority needs criteria, residency rules...

# Finding housing: quality

## Refugee newcomers' reliance on aging private rental stock ⇒ *potential* adequacy issues

- Less desirable buildings ⇒ more negotiable rents
- ✓ Yet RAP-SPOs' **long-standing** relationships with landlords ⇒ positive impact on quality of GARs' first housing
  - Risks of infestations (etc.) greater with “unknown” buildings
- Using contingency fund for “houses” for large families (rather than apartments)
- Housing search workers: importance of training and experience
  - Shortages of time and resources for training during peak resettlement period

# Finding housing: suitability

- *"When you have low vacancy rates (...) one of the challenges we faced (...) was convincing landlords to rent units to people with 4 or 5 children under 5" (RAP-SPO interview)*
- Persuading landlords to connect 2 smaller housing units
  - More feasible in weaker housing markets
- Renovation loans to increase supply, e.g. basement suites
  - But **basements can evoke trauma**...
- Outreach to/from grassroots to expand housing supply – importance of communicating suitability needs
  - **short-term housing offers not appropriate** for refugee resettlement
  - Over time, community/city collaborations for better tools: housing portals

# Finding housing in a suitable location and place

*“If you put them out in an isolated area, they are isolated (...) And the tendencies towards depression, or towards other mental health challenges are exacerbated because of their isolation. So, it's quite simple that the more effort we put in up front towards their housing needs, (...) the more positive long term effects come through for the families.” (RAP-SPO, small city)*

- Social networks and neighbourhood
  - Keeping friends together
  - Spatial concentrations (same housing complex): pros and cons
- Proximity to specialized health services
- Access to settlement programs
- Making public transit affordable: municipal contributions important, but not always tailored to needs



# Housing stability



[CTV News Atlantic, May 13, 2017](#)

## Accompaniment for “living well” in rental housing

- “Neighbouring” issues stemming from pre-migration housing and living arrangements , especially child supervision in semi-public space
- Understanding landlord-tenant framework: respecting leases
- ✓ **Wrap-around accompaniment throughout year 1 on these aspects (Ready-to-rent” programs, Volunteer support groups...)**  
**But not available everywhere**
- ✓ **Programs fostering newcomer involvement in neighbourhood improvement**

## Use of contingency funds (Welcome Fund) for emergencies

- Helping people stay put in case of arrears
- Helping people move in case of inadequate housing (rent deposit)

# Housing stability—“Month 13” shift from RAP to provincial social assistance

## The issue: drop in income support in some provinces

- loss of monthly allowances for housing ( $\leq \$100$ ) & transportation
- Loss of separate allocation for young “adult” children ( $\geq 18$ )
- ✓ **In practice... Adjustment problems largely pre-empted**
  - Month 13 planned for when negotiating rents of 1<sup>st</sup> housing
  - Coaching GARs, liaising with provinces
  - Welcome Fund to assist transition in high-rent markets
  - Just-in-case planning (option to switch to monthly lease)
- ✓ **No “month 13” issue for those already in rent-gear-to-income housing**

# *“Channelling (unformed) volunteer energies”*

- **Volunteer contributions to housing aspects of resettlement were major**
  - Facilitating daily life in temporary accommodation
  - Housing search – types of assistance to RAP teams
  - Logistics for donated household items
  - Welcome/support groups in collaboration with RAP-SPOs
- **Challenges arising from surge of volunteering**
  - **Extra work and costs for SPOs** at busiest time: training, coordination, managing donations...
  - Need to improve Information flow to orient volunteers: how they can help with housing
  - **Need for protocols to clarify avoid “boundary crossing”**
- ✓ **Learning experience - evolving models for collaboration between RAP-SPOs and grassroots community initiative**

# Housing issues relating to private sponsorship

- Differences in welcoming context
  - Cities with/without established Syrian communities
- Syrian operation → many **new** sponsor groups ⇒ inexperienced with rental housing systems
- Sponsors facing unanticipated financial challenges
- Are GAR and PSR housing searches competing for same limited housing??
- Are resources sufficient for SPOs to assist sponsors (orientation, emergency aid, family reunification)?
  - Some SAHs needed ad hoc donations to add to RSTP resources
  - ***No RSTP equivalent in Québec***  
***⇒ Effectiveness of outreach to sponsors?***

# In conclusion...

# Study strengths and limitations

- ✓ Large representative, Canada-wide RAP-SPO sample
- ✓ Variety of city types, housing market conditions  
= different urban contexts of refugee reception
- ✓ Integration of different data sources
- X No interviews with non-RAP settlement organizations  
that GARs may have used for housing services post-RAP
- X PSRs: this study can do no more than raise issues for  
future research

# Take-aways (1)

## Local level advance planning

- needs good information re arrival timing and refugee profiles
- Need to work out all stakeholders' roles including volunteers

## Managing refugees' housing expectations

- Needs to begin with pre-arrival training, then ongoing reinforcement to assist housing choices

Accompaniment for housing stability – need for wrap-around supports through year 1

# Take-aways (2)

Housing affordability for GARs - a structural problem

- Should RAP allowance still be based on “last resort” principle?
- In many cities, ad hoc solutions (Welcome Fund and in-kind contributions by housing providers) and/or the Child Benefit SPOs were essential for adequate affordable year 1 housing outcomes...
  - Ethics (equity) of targeted contributions?
  - Sustainability of donation model?
  - Should CB be used for rent?
- Access to RGI housing a sustainable solution for refugees needing medium-term income support

# Thank you for attending!

Thank you to CIQSS staff for Webinar hosting

We gratefully acknowledge the contributions to this research of ...

- 16 interviewees in 14 newcomer serving organizations
- Sara Lyons, Community Foundations of Canada
- Project team collaborators: Valerie Preston (York U.) & Kathy Sherrell (ISS of BC)
- Student transcribers: Robert Jennings: Christine Préfontaine-Meunier

*The usual disclaimers apply*

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