

Housing need and provision for recently arrived refugees in Australia

REFUGEES (PERMANENT PROTECTION VISA AND TEMPORARY PROTECTION VISA HOLDERS) ESTABLISH THEMSELVES IN THE HOUSING MARKET FOLLOWING A NUMBER OF MOVES IN THE FIRST YEAR OF SETTLEMENT. SUPPORT PROVIDED BY FRIENDS, FAMILY AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS, AS WELL AS BY GOVERNMENT, IS IMPORTANT IN THE SETTLEMENT PROCESS.

KEY POINTS

- While respondents experienced problems early in their Australian housing careers, the housing circumstances of most tend to improve with subsequent moves.
- There are different housing pathways for Permanent Protection Visa (PPV) and Temporary Protection Visa (TPV) holders. PPV holders are typically sponsored into and remain in the private rental market, typically moving three times within the first year. TPV holders are slightly more mobile, moving four times within 12 months of release from detention. They typically spend their first night post detention in a hotel, motel or backpacker hostel, with subsequent moves into the private rental sector, and stay with friends, relatives or community members.
- Based on the conventional definitions applied in Australia, at least one-third of respondents have been homeless at some stage since their arrival in Australia – primarily due to the temporary and transitory nature of their accommodation. But this differs from the perception of respondents, with few believing that they had experienced homelessness, most probably due to the fact that they had not been without shelter of some form.
- Support provided by friends, family and community members is important in the settlement process, particularly for those refugees sponsored by family members (such as special humanitarian program entrants). Government assistance will be most effective when targeted to locations and communities where PPV and TPV holders are settling with their friends, family and community supports. This would complement the role of government agencies, such as the Department of Immigration and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA), Centrelink and State Housing Authorities (SHAs), in finding initial accommodation.

This research, by Professor Andrew Beer and Paul Foley of the AHURI Southern Research Centre, interviewed 434 refugees (Permanent Protection Visa and Temporary Protection Visa holders) about how they navigated the housing market and the impediments they encountered; the use of government and non-government services, such as the Department of Immigration and Multi-cultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA), Centrelink and State Housing Authorities (SHAs); and the risk and experience of homelessness.



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BACKGROUND

Housing is an important part of the settlement process for refugees who are one of the most vulnerable groups in Australian society. Housing is especially important during the early stages of their resettlement experience. The issue is pertinent for policy-makers, as almost 10,000 asylum seekers have arrived in Australia since 1999, with many spending a period of time in a detention centre before entering the community.

The Australian government's permanent immigration program has two distinct categories: the Migration (non-humanitarian) stream for skilled and family migrants wishing to immigrate, and the Humanitarian stream for refugees and other persons of humanitarian concern. The Humanitarian Program itself comprises two programs: offshore resettlement and onshore protection.

People admitted entry to Australia through the offshore resettlement program (that is, they applied for entry from outside of Australia), which consists of the Refugee and the Special Humanitarian Programs, are granted a Permanent Protection Visa (PPV) upon arrival.

The onshore protection program is for those people who arrive in Australia on a temporary visa or in an unauthorised manner, and request Australia's protection. Persons who arrive in Australia lawfully, and are subsequently found to require protection, are granted a PPV that enables them to live permanently in Australia. Since 20 October 2000, unauthorised arrivals who apply for protection and are subsequently determined to be refugees according to international criteria are issued a temporary protection visa (TPV).

Different refugee categories are eligible for different levels of settlement services, especially on arrival accommodation and housing assistance. The range of settlement services available for PPV holders differs when compared to TPV holders. Settlement services for PPV holders entails four weeks of on arrival accommodation for Refugee Program entrants, while Special Humanitarian Program entrants are provided accommodation by their sponsors.

METHODOLOGY

There were 434 face-to-face interviews (266 PPV holders, 153 TPV holders and 15 not stated). These were undertaken in Adelaide (152), Perth (150) and Brisbane (132) during 2002–2003. A snowball sampling methodology was used meaning that this is an indicative, rather than a representative sample of refugees. A representative sample cannot be constructed because the refugee population in each city is not known and there are difficulties in applying a standard random selection process. Adelaide, Perth and Brisbane were selected because they were the place of first arrival for immigrants from Afghanistan, Iraq, Sudan

and Croatia – major countries of birth for Refugee and Humanitarian Program settlers during the study period. The interviews were conducted in the first language of the refugees and asylum seekers.

FINDINGS

HOUSING PATHWAY FOR REFUGEES IN AUSTRALIA

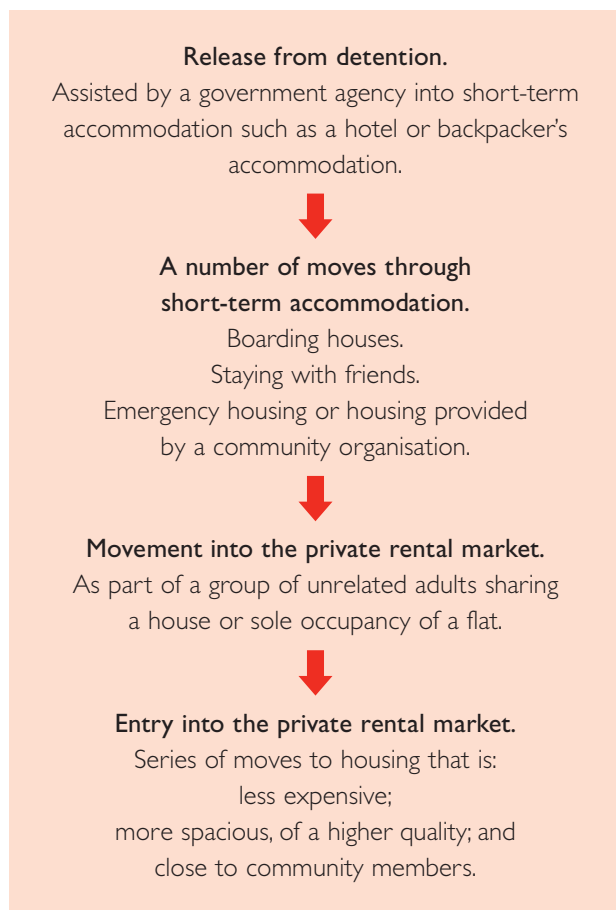
The housing experiences of respondents reflect a period of transition as they settle and acquire familiarity with the Australian housing system. Three-quarters of TPV and two-thirds of PPV holders, are likely to be renting privately or living in community housing when entering the Australian community. Both groups are highly mobile in the housing market. The timing of moves varies for individual households, but typically PPV holder households move three times within the first year, while TPV holders move four times within 12 months of release from detention. Further housing moves were likely with 76% of respondents wanting to move from their current housing if they had the opportunity because they wanted better housing (50%), cheaper housing (40%) or a greater degree of independence in their housing (30%).

There is no one housing pathway for PPV and TPV holders. For PPV holders, such as special humanitarian program entrants, their initial housing experience is typically defined by support from a sponsor (Figure 1). 'On arrival' accommodation and housing assistance is available for newly arrived PPV holders to facilitate their settlement. Their housing pathway is characterised by private renting upon arrival with subsequent moves in the private rental market.

FIGURE 1. HOUSING PATHWAY FOR A HUMANITARIAN (OFFSHORE PROGRAM REFUGEE) – PPV HOLDER



FIGURE 2. HOUSING PATHWAY OF A TEMPORARY PROTECTION VISA (TPV) HOLDER



TPV holders (Figure 2) have a different housing pathway. They typically spend their first night post detention in a hotel, motel or backpacker hostel. Only 8.4% of respondents have a friend or relative who provides accommodation for them and community groups, refugee groups and church groups play a very small role in their initial housing.

The transitory nature of initial housing for TPV holders is emphasised by short stays with 40% spending only one night in their initial accommodation, 50% less than a week and 80% three weeks or less. For subsequent moves, TPV holders rely on the private rental sector, and stay with friends, relatives or community members. Their first experience of the private rental market is sharing with other adults from their community. This experience is especially common for single men.

HOUSING DIFFICULTIES EXPERIENCED BY PPV AND TPV HOLDERS

The housing difficulties experienced by PPV and TPV holders are varied. Fully 10% of respondents had been unable to pay their rent/and or bond and 20% have experienced some difficulties in paying rent. Low incomes and limited resources, through lack of employment, result in some households struggling to find affordable and appropriate private rental housing. This problem is particularly acute for TPV holders with large families.

Dealing with real estate agents, neighbours or landlords is problematic with 22% of respondents reporting harassment. For some, there is confusion about Australian tenancy arrangements and in understanding lease conditions and terms. This is compounded by language difficulties, as identified by 27% of respondents.

Some respondents are dissatisfied with the location of their housing, as they considered it being too distant from shopping opportunities (18%), social services (20%) and schools (20%), as well as concerns about overcrowding (17%).

The study estimates that at least one-third of respondents have been homeless, based on conventional definitions applied in Australia, which includes having no choice but to live with friends and relatives and those who had made use of temporary accommodation. This estimate differs with the perception of respondents, with 6% believing that they have been homeless since their arrival.

The lack of paid employment is an important contributing factor to the housing difficulties experienced, with the strength of local labour markets having an impact on the ability of PPV and TPV holders to find accommodation. Fully 42% of respondents to the survey are not part of the paid labour force; typically students, permanently sick or disabled, pensioners or otherwise outside the world of paid work. 64 per cent of PPV holders in the paid labour force are unemployed. The unemployment rate is higher amongst TPV holders at 71%.

HOUSING OUTCOMES

While respondents experienced some problems early in their Australian housing careers, the housing circumstances of most tend to improve with subsequent moves. PPV and TPV holders typically move to housing that was of higher quality, more spacious and less expensive. Often the movement through the private rental stock is accompanied by a move to another area where other members of their community are settled.

The end points of the housing pathways for PPV and TPV holders are unclear. It is anticipated in the study that many TPV holders are likely to stay in Australia after their three-year visas have expired. Some will move city or region during that period of transition, while others will settle relatively quickly. For PPV holders, few have achieved their desired housing outcomes, such as home purchase, entering public rental housing or living in private rental accommodation that is satisfactory and considered to be their long-term home.

ROLE OF COMMUNITY AND GOVERNMENT SUPPORTS

Support provided by friends, family, and community members and by government is important for the settlement process. Fully 60% of respondents received assistance in securing their current accommodation. Friends and relatives are the major source of assistance (40%) followed

by community groups (35%), government officers (20%), refugee support groups (8%) and ethnic organisations (12%). In most instances, assistance came from within the respondent's community – either friends or relatives or the broader birthplace group.

Government agencies, through the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, Centrelink and State Housing Authorities, are an important source of help in finding initial accommodation. Other types of assistance provided, by community and government agencies, includes health services (57%), torture/trauma counselling (34%), clothing (25%), furniture and household goods (39%) and food (30%).

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

As a general point, strategies to foster the supports provided by friends, family and community members, as part of the settlement process, would appear to be an effective way of assisting the housing career pathways of PPV and TPV holders.

Government assistance will be most effective when targeted to locations and communities where PPV and TPV holders are settling with their friends, family and community supports. In this way housing assistance and support can build on links with local communities and labour markets, and strengthen and utilise the networks of support. One practical example is government support for community-based organisations to provide emergency relief, such as food and clothing.

The extension of on arrival accommodation and housing assistance for a wider range of arrivals, including TPV holders released from detention, would reduce the risk of homelessness and provide greater housing stability.

Also, as the private rental market will continue to be where a large proportion of immigrants are housed the targeted provision of information, bond assistance and bond guarantees, could be considered. This could

be complemented by steps to reduce discrimination in the housing market and to enforce existing regulations, as well as encouraging self-regulation by the real estate industry and the provision of appropriate education for real estate staff about discrimination.

FURTHER INFORMATION

This bulletin is based on AHURI project 40048 entitled '*Housing Need and Provision for Recently Arrived Refugees in Australia?*' Reports from this project can be found on the AHURI website (www.ahuri.edu.au) by typing the project number into the search function. The following documents are available:

- Final Report
- Positioning Paper

Or contact the AHURI National Office on +61 3 9660 2300.



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