

The role of housing and other services in successful settlement of new arrivals to Australia

*Many immigrants to Australia aspire to home ownership, and access to decent, affordable housing has been seen as one of the benefits of settlement here. This report set out to answer a question about settlement: do new arrivals who receive housing assistance settle more successfully than those who do not receive such assistance? In the research reported here, successful settlement in Australia is assumed to result in a lesser use of government and other services. The study, by **Andrew Beer** and **Sarah Morphett** of the **AHURI Southern Research Centre**, is the first to explore interactions between the housing of immigrants and their use of other services.*

KEY POINTS

- Housing tenure is an important indicator of an immigrant's labour market circumstances and their degree of integration into Australian society, and thus their need for support services.
- Although housing is important in the integration of new arrivals to Australia, it is not the driver of this integration (factors such as visa category, level of skills, education, wealth and English language ability are more important to successful settlement).
- Receiving early help, including housing assistance, is particularly important to help immigrants arriving under the Humanitarian program to settle more successfully.
- Humanitarian program settlers made up 36% of all users of housing services, despite being just 14% of the total pool of immigrants.
- Informal support from relatives, friends and community networks is very important in the successful settlement of many new arrivals. Given this, housing services could be provided in a way that makes the most of this support.

CONTEXT

The housing of immigrants is a significant issue. Since 1945 Australia has accepted large numbers of immigrants, and the continued growth or maintenance of its population depends upon immigration. Governments have tried to help recent arrivals in their adjustment to life in Australia by providing them with a range of housing supports. These have included rent assistance, advice in finding a suitable home, counseling and access to public housing.

This study investigates the relationship between housing and the use of other services by recently arrived immigrants. Important questions include whether housing assistance results in a better settlement experience for immigrants and who uses housing services. People who use fewer services are assumed to be better integrated into Australian society. However, several factors that may impact on service use were not able to be considered in the study: firstly, the accessibility of housing and other support services; and also the degree to which using certain services indicates successful settlement (children attending school as opposed to adults accessing unemployment benefits, for example).

This research made use of the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Australia (LSIA). The LSIA is a survey of people who arrived in Australia from September 1993, to August 1995. They were first interviewed six months after they came to Australia. They were interviewed again approximately 18 months after arrival, and again roughly three and a half years into their settlement in this country. The LSIA included questions on their satisfaction with life in Australia, their housing circumstances, their household characteristics, employment status, and government and non-government supports used. The LSIA was conducted in the capital cities and major urban centres such as Newcastle, Wollongong and Townsville, and just over 50,000 responses were reported.

Throughout this study, a 'service' refers to the receipt of assistance or support that contributes to the well-being or development of the immigrant or their family. From this perspective, things like income support, children attending school, a visit to a doctor or hospital, attending English language classes or help in finding a place to live are all considered a service. The term 'service use' refers to an immigrant reporting to the interviewer that they used one or more services for a defined period. In most cases this covered the time since the previous interview, but for medical services it refers to the four weeks prior to the interview only. Finally, 'housing services' are those services used by the recent immigrants to enter and stay in a place of residence.

It is worth noting that some types of government help were overlooked in the survey responses, with some respondents reporting that they had not made use of housing assistance despite living in public housing at

the time. The use of Medicare services could also have been under-reported, given the episodic nature of some illnesses, and the four-week reporting period.

FINDINGS

A. RELATIVE USE RATES OF HOUSING SERVICES COMPARED TO OTHER SERVICES

'Housing services' means receiving Commonwealth Rent Assistance or State Government housing assistance; being helped to find accommodation or being directly provided with it; or having a bond paid by a State Housing Authority or service agency.

- Looking first at the total service use, the research found that recent immigrants used government and other services a lot. More than 250,000 uses of services – an average of just over five uses per immigrant – were reported over the three interview waves.
- Housing assistance was a relatively minor part of all services used by recent immigrants, comprising less than 5% of the total. However, the possibility of some undercounting on this measure has already been noted.
- For those who did use housing services, this form of assistance was far more important than for the total pool of LSIA respondents. It amounted to 13% of the total assistance received by this group, and was almost as important – in terms of the number of services used – as support aimed at finding work.
- 'Other government agencies' were the single most important source of help in finding a home (24.3%), followed by friends in Australia (13.9%) and relatives in Australia (11.8%).

B. WHO USES HOUSING SERVICES?

- Service use varied significantly between categories of immigrant. While educational qualifications, country of birth and age were important, the most basic determinant of service use, including housing services, was visa category.
- Immigrants who arrived under the Humanitarian program made up 36% of the users of housing services, despite being just 14% of the total pool of immigrants. They also comprised 95% of the high users – services used on four or more different occasions – of housing services.
- Preferential family immigrants (those sponsored by an Australian resident) were the other substantial group of housing service users.
- Tenure type was also an indicator of a person's need for housing and other support services. For example, compared to the other groups of immigrants, high users of services were under-represented in home purchase, home ownership and living rent free, and over-represented in private rental and public rental throughout the period of the survey.

USERS OF HOUSING SERVICES BY VISA CATEGORY AND PERIOD OF HOUSING SERVICE USE

	High Users		Early Users		All Users	
	Number	Per Cent	Number	Per Cent	Number	Per Cent
Preferential Family			335	15.0	2,283	34.1
Concessional Family			200	9.0	530	7.9
Business Skills & Employer Nomination			391	17.5	421	6.3
Independent	2	5.2	429	19.2	1,019	15.2
Humanitarian	45	94.8	878	39.3	2,450	36.6
TOTAL	48	100.0	2,233	100.0	6,702	100.0

*Data do not add to totals due to entry error.

- Immigrants from other visa categories were not significant users of housing services, as shown in the table above, although those entering under the Business Skills and Employer Nomination and Independent streams used housing assistance on first arrival.
- Those using housing services typically had higher levels of difficulty with English, higher rates of unemployment and lower household incomes throughout the survey period.

C. WHAT ROLE DO HOUSING SERVICES PLAY IN SUCCESSFUL SETTLEMENT?

The analysis clearly showed that for disadvantaged immigrants – particularly those arriving under the Humanitarian program – providing early help, including housing assistance, will result in more successful settlement.

However, although housing is important in achieving successful settlement, other factors, particularly visa category and the skills, education, wealth and English language ability play a more fundamental role in determining this outcome. In particular, these factors largely determine the immigrant's capacity to find employment, and their subsequent position within the labour market.

Housing is the centre of family or household life and the focus for receiving community support. The data showed how important community, friendship and kinship networks are in the successful settlement of many new arrivals. Housing therefore becomes a way of gaining access to these supports.

Rent assistance and access to public rental housing were the two most significant types of government-provided housing assistance evident within the LSIA.

D. WHAT ARE THE OTHER MAIN SERVICES IMPORTANT TO SETTLEMENT?

- Education and language assistance was the largest single category of government service used by recent immigrants, followed by social services (including income support), employment assistance and health and aged care services.
- However many other bodies – government and non-government – helped new arrivals. These included the churches, the Vietnamese Welfare Association, Migrant Resource Centres, Centrelink, and the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs. This emphasises the many and varied routes immigrants take in settling in Australia.
- The data also highlighted the importance of community and kinship linkages in settlement. Family, friends, ethnic clubs and churches all constitute the community a migrant arrives into, and such communities provide important help. For example, 46.6% of respondents who reported they received help in finding a house got that assistance from their community.

E. WHO USES THESE OTHER SERVICES?

- Variation in service use was linked to the visa category of immigrants, as shown in the table below.
- More than 17,000 immigrants made use of support services on four or more occasions. Fully one quarter

VISA CATEGORY BY PATTERN OF SERVICE USE

	Non-Users	Early Users	Late Users	High Users	All Immigrants
Preferential Family	73.5	56.8	77.0	49.1	57.3
Concessional Family	5.8	9.8	4.9	9.4	8.6
Business Skills & Employer Nomination	3.9	5	3.2	2.5	3.4
Independent	16.1	23.2	13.3	13.8	16.5
Humanitarian	0.5	5.2	1.7	25.2	14.3
TOTAL (per cent)	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
TOTAL (number)	3,774	7,754	7,734	17,638	51,934

of the immigrants in this 'high users' group came to Australia under the Humanitarian program – the same visa category for whom housing services were most important. People in this group reported high levels of use of education and language training, social security and childcare support, and employment assistance.

- Those immigrants who did not use government services – the 'non-users' in the table – mainly came to Australia under the Preferential Family program. By Wave Three, most of them were home owners or home purchasers, and none were looking for work.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The research showed that kinship and community networks are very important for many immigrants. Support from community members such as friends, relatives, other people born in the same country or people of the same faith was significant for successful settlement in Australia. Those unable to make use of these networks because of geographic or social isolation substitute government-provided services for supports otherwise gained from their community. This suggests that housing services could be provided in a way that makes the most of these informal supports. One housing policy option worth exploring is to group new arrivals who speak the same language closer to each other, so that they can more easily access support from these networks.

Closer collaboration between housing service providers, other service providers, Departments of Multicultural or Ethnic Affairs and communities of the overseas born would also help immigrants to make best use of kinship and community support mechanisms.

In the same vein, developing alternative, community-based solutions to the housing needs of recent arrivals warrants further investigation. There are already some housing co-operatives and housing associations based around

immigrant communities. Further extension of their activities would offer new arrivals both secure accommodation and community support.

The study found that immigrants in the Humanitarian stream will generally require either public housing or some other type of housing assistance, as well as other services. This is because they may have limited life and employment skills within Australia. It therefore makes sense to integrate housing assistance with other forms of support that help settle new arrivals into mainstream social and economic life. These would include employment training, English language training, financial counseling and the like. Such an integrated approach would mean building linkages between housing providers and organisations such as industry departments, local government and Centrelink. As part of this approach, the tenant support staff within Housing Authorities could deliver an integrated information package on the range of assistance available to new arrivals.

Limitations in the LSIA data point to areas where further research may be useful. For example, there is no breakdown of housing services into 'crisis', transitional or long term. Analysis of housing support service use by these categories could yield useful data for State Housing Authorities and other housing providers. Another limitation of the data is that, since the survey was compiled, a new visa category has been introduced – Temporary Protection Visas. Another AHURI study is examining the housing requirements and experiences of this category of visa holder.

FURTHER INFORMATION

For more information about this research project, the following papers are available:

- Positioning Paper
- Final Report

See www.ahuri.edu.au/research/summary/project06.html
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