

Planning for Newcomers in Winnipeg's Inner City

For many decades Winnipeg's inner city has been the destination of successive waves of new arrivals. Immigrants, first from European countries, have been followed more recently by immigrants and refugees from South East Asia, Latin America, and Africa. In addition to international migrants, in the last three to four decades, many Aboriginal people have moved from Reserves and smaller rural and northern communities to the area. Today the inner city is home to people who have come from more than fifty countries.

One of the attractions of the inner city is the more affordable, although not necessarily good quality, housing. Many of the services new arrivals need are also located in the inner city. Over the years the area has become a transition zone for many groups. It has been a place where they get established and start organizing a new life, then as soon as they can afford to, they move on to better accommodation, and what many perceive as better neighbourhoods.

This paper highlights the diversity that exists in Winnipeg's inner city, then examines some of the difficult challenges newcomers face, and ends with a discussion of some of the policy and planning initiatives that would help new arrivals adjust to a new country, a new home, and often a new urban lifestyle.

Winnipeg's inner city contains approximately 120,000 people, nineteen percent of the City's population (Statistics Canada 2001). This population contains 26,500 immigrants, 4,500 recent immigrants and 24,000 people characterized as visible minorities; these groups represent 22, four, and twenty percent of the inner city population respectively. As Table 1 illustrates, these groups represent much lower proportions of the non-inner city population. Aboriginals are also more

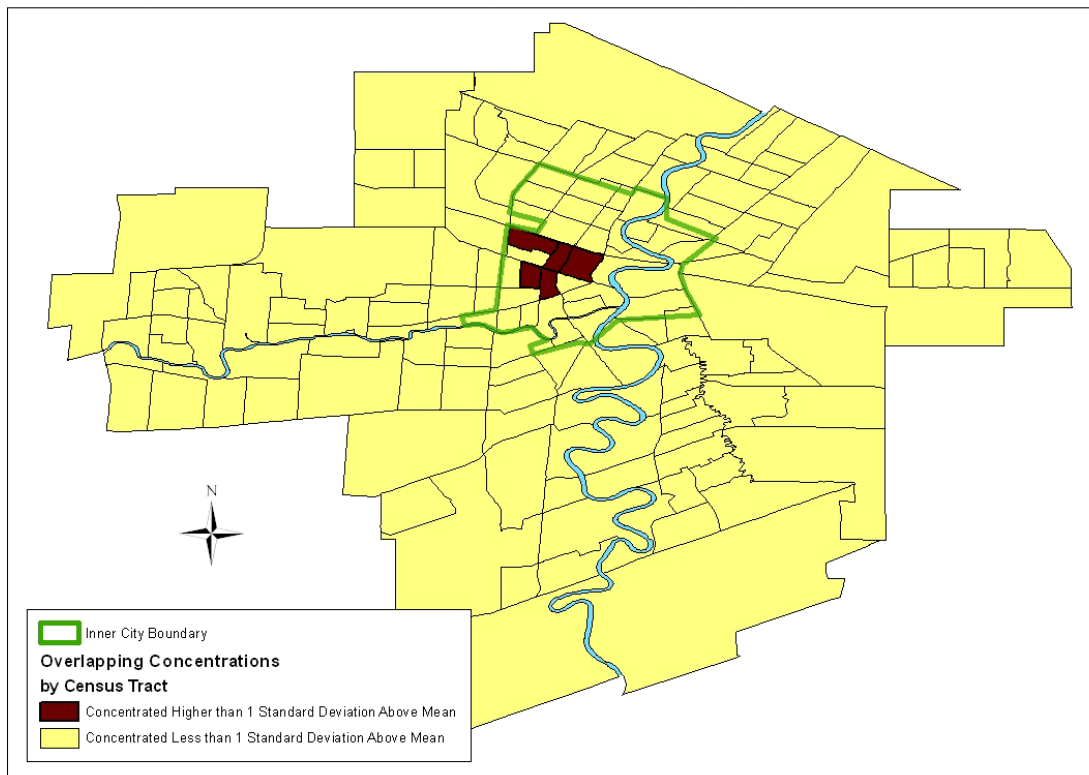
	Inner City		Non-Inner City		Total City	
	#	% of Total	#	% of Total	#	% of Total
Total Population	119,670	100	490,125	100	609,795	100
Immigrants	26,515	22	79,210	16	105,725	17
Recent Immigrants ¹	4,540	4	8,725	2	13,265	2
Visible Minorities	23,940	20	58,017	12	81,957	13
Aboriginal ²	22,995	20	29,415	6	52,410	9

¹ arrived in the previous five years
² based on self-identification
Source: Statistics Canada 2001

concentrated in the inner city. Of the 52,410 Aboriginal people in Winnipeg, 23,000 or 44 percent, live in the inner city. They constitute twenty percent of the inner city population compared to only six percent in the non-inner city. In some neighbourhoods more than fifty percent of the population are Aboriginals (Carter and Polevychok 2003). Map 1 illustrates there are six neighbourhoods in the

inner city where the residential location of Aboriginals, visible minorities, and recent immigrants overlap significantly.

Overlapping Concentrations of Aboriginal, Recent Immigrants and Visible Minorities in Winnipeg



Many inner city neighbourhoods are characterized by varying degrees of urban decline and are home to a large number of marginalized people. Poverty is very pronounced in the area. Thirty-two percent of all households, 33 percent of families, and 56 percent of unattached individuals fall below the poverty line. By way of comparison, figures for the non-inner city are much lower at twelve, nineteen, and 38 percent respectively (Statistics Canada 2001). Eighty-three percent of renters in the inner city are also below the poverty line.

Affordable, good quality rental housing is scarce in the inner city. The vacancy rate currently stands at 1.6 percent. Although there are very few three and four bedroom units that many larger immigrant, refugee, and Aboriginal families need, vacancy rates for these units are near zero. Rental rates for private market units in the inner city range from about \$400 for a bachelor to over \$700 for three and four bedroom units (CMHC 2007). Access to subsidized housing for low-income households can be a long wait – up to two years for larger units. The rental rates, plus the low vacancy rates, create considerable competition for the few units available and, with the marginalized characteristics of the groups in question, housing affordability is a problem. Approximately 42 percent of all renter households and fifteen percent of all owner households in the inner city pay thirty percent or more of gross incomeⁱ for shelter (Statistics Canada 2001).

The plight of new arrivals to the inner city is clearly illustrated by a two year study of recently arrived refugeesⁱⁱ conducted by Carter, Polevychok, Friesen, and Osborne (2008) with funding from Metropolis and Human Resources and Social Development Canadaⁱⁱⁱ. In the first year of the study (2006), 75 households were interviewed. The following year, 55 of these same households were re-interviewed. The focus of the study was on the housing characteristics and neighbourhood experiences of the group, the barriers they faced when trying to access other services, the strength of their support network, their relationships with landlords, and their general resettlement experiences.

This study provides good information for planners and policy makers as they plan more welcoming and inclusive neighbourhoods, and the services that facilitate resettlement. Although the focus of the study is refugees, other new arrivals face many of the same difficulties and could benefit from similar policy and planning initiatives.

Specific findings from the study indicate that seventy percent of the households interviewed were from Africa and the Middle East. Another sixteen percent were from South and Central America. The vast majority fall into the visible minority category, perhaps making their adjustment more difficult than that of many new arrivals. The households faced high levels of poverty. In the first year, their average annual household income of \$22,374 was one-third of the \$63,025 average household income for the City. Ninety-two percent of the households fell below the poverty line.

	Year One (%)	Year Two (%)
Living in the Inner City	78	64
Feel Unsafe in Their Neighbourhood	26	17
Prefer to Move to Non-Inner City	85	85
Below Poverty Level	92	73
Paying 30% or more for housing	51	22
Living in Crowded Housing	51	36
Living in Public Housing	32	46
Employed	42	66
Source: Carter, et al 2008		

Over ninety percent of the households were renters. With an average rent of \$566 a month, 51 percent of households spent thirty percent or more of their income on housing, twelve percent spent more than fifty percent. A year later their housing affordability circumstances had improved considerably. Average household income increased by 31 percent to \$29,357. The proportion in poverty declined to 73 percent. Improved employment circumstances contributed to this change as 66 percent of those interviewed were employed in the second year compared to 42 percent a year earlier. Higher incomes led to

improved housing affordability in the second year when only 22 percent were paying thirty percent or more and two percent more than fifty percent.

The larger size of refugee households (3.6 compared to 2.4 persons for Winnipeg households), is, in many ways, at odds with housing designed to accommodate Canadian-born households. Many refugee households require three and four bedroom rental units to reduce crowding. With few such units available, 51 percent of the households lived in accommodation that was crowded. This fell to 36 percent in the second year although there was no appreciable decline in household size.

In the first year one-quarter of the households felt their housing contributed to health problems. The same percentage felt their housing was unsafe for them and their children. Forty-five percent had no idea of their landlords' rights and responsibilities and twenty percent did not know their own rights and responsibilities as tenants. Many also felt they faced discrimination in the housing market. In the second year there was growing satisfaction with building and unit safety, greater satisfaction with landlords and caretakers and an improved knowledge of both tenant and landlord responsibilities. There was also less concern regarding discrimination and a growing number of households felt they were better equipped to deal with the discrimination they faced. A noticeable change that was contrary to these positive trends was a growing dissatisfaction with the condition of their home and with repairs not being made in a timely fashion. In the first year 25 percent felt their home was in poor condition but by the second year this ratio had increased to 42 percent. Concern about the timeliness of repairs increased from 26 percent of households to 42 percent in the second year. This may reflect an improved understanding of the standard they can expect and less reluctance to express their concerns.

Refugees also reported considerable difficulty in finding housing. In the first year sponsors and immigrant agencies were noted as providing considerable assistance but by the second year information sources included real estate and property management agencies, and more of their own efforts through websites, newspapers and street searches by walking and driving around. Respondents in the second year had also developed better social support networks with an increased number of friends, neighbours and co-workers to help in solving their problems with housing. Their expanding network in the second year led to growing knowledge of the city and the housing market, but many still struggled with lack of knowledge of the market, and neighbourhood characteristics, and tenant rights and responsibilities. Many noted the absence of a place to go to get the reliable, comprehensive information they need.

Those who are able to access social housing had some distinct housing advantages. In the first year two-thirds of the refugee households lived in private rental accommodation, one-third in social housing. By the second year, the proportion in social housing had increased to 46 percent. Overall social housing

residents felt more positive about their housing circumstances than private renters: fewer households were crowded and more were satisfied with management, the safety, and the condition of their home. They were less positive about their neighbourhoods and more were concerned about safety and security; perhaps because most social housing is located in the inner city. The biggest advantage for social housing residents was affordability. With rents set at 27 percent of gross income^{iv}, even with responsibility for some utilities, few paid more than thirty percent of income and on average \$150 less per month than private renters. Social housing offers advantages in the resettlement process but the development of new social housing for low-income households has been very limited for several years and waiting times for the existing inventory are long.

The majority of the refugees in this study lived in Winnipeg's inner city: 78 percent in the first year and 64 percent in year two. Safety and security were issues of concern for many households. One-quarter did not feel safe in their neighbourhood the first year, although this number fell to seventeen percent in the second year. Although most households liked the convenience to services, public transportation, friends and family, sixty to seventy percent in both years said they would like to live in a different neighbourhood and 85 percent in both years preferred to move to non-inner city areas. Many households are looking for safer neighbourhoods with less crime.

The perceptions of neighbourhood and their difficult housing circumstances did not always contribute to stability and positive resettlement circumstances. Their life was also characterized by high mobility, 93 percent had lived in more than one place during the first year, 25 percent in more than three. Most of the moves were prompted by efforts to find more affordable and suitable housing or better neighbourhood characteristics.

The findings indicate that housing trajectories for refugees are positive and with time refugees begin to feel more optimistic about their neighbourhood circumstances. A number of initiatives that have facilitated resettlement contribute to this positive trend. One of the changes in recent years, that has facilitated better local planning for integration, is the agreement between the Province and Federal Government that gave the Province responsibility for delivery of settlement services. Under this agreement over \$17 million in '07/08 was channelled into settlement services (Department of Labour and Immigration 2008). The Province uses some of this money to strengthen community involvement in helping new immigrants and refugees settle and succeed. In the inner city, money goes to community based organizations such as the Manitoba Interfaith Immigration Council (MIIC), the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba (IRCOM) and Hospitality House, amongst others, to deliver a range of services to the recently arrived. IRCOM and Hospitality House, for example, operate transitional and second stage housing where refugees can stay for periods of six months to three years. Other services offered by community based organizations range from assistance in finding

housing in the private market to interpretation, language training, how to use public transportation, and the banking system, life skills training and helping access health services. The Province also delivers a very successful Entry Program that provides orientation on working in Canada, doing daily tasks, using immigrant services, and understanding Canadian Laws. Inner City education institutions, the Winnipeg School Division, the University of Winnipeg, and Red River College, for example, also offer education, recreation, life skills and community awareness programs.

The activity of these many organizations certainly facilitates improved integration and inclusion of new arrivals but the study illustrates many challenges remain.

Community based organizations need more resources, including staff with different skill sets to adequately serve the demand. Many interviewees indicated that their counsellors did not have the time to help them. There are too few counsellors and they have too large a case load and often lack the resources to provide the service and follow-up needed. As the number of new arrivals increase each year more resources for community based organizations will be required.

There is a need for an organization with a mandate to provide comprehensive housing and neighbourhood information for new arrivals. Refugees face difficulties finding affordable housing and this problem is compounded by their lack of understanding of how to find housing. They lack information on the housing market and the characteristics of the neighbourhoods where housing is available. This lack of knowledge leads to mistakes in their housing choice and residential location decisions. The problem is compounded by the fact that there is no one agency that provides this necessary information. Lack of knowledge of their rights and responsibilities also leaves them vulnerable to exploitation or to making mistakes due to misinterpretation of information, or an inability to understand rental agreements.

The supply of three and four bedroom units should be increased. Refugee households tend to be larger and there are few units in the affordable housing stock large enough to accommodate them. This leads to overcrowding. Extended families or families with adult children are often forced to split, but would prefer to live together for support, for interpretation/translation purposes, to share costs and incomes, or to enable the older generation to provide childcare.

The most important priority is to increase the supply of affordable housing. The study findings illustrated the benefits of access to subsidized housing. Adequate, affordable housing with security of tenure cannot address all the challenges refugees face, but it can provide the stable basis from which they can deal more easily with other challenges including those presented by living in Winnipeg's inner city.

Although the focus of this study has been recently arrived refugees, many other new arrivals, including Aboriginal households, face the same challenges and can benefit from similar planning initiatives.

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Endnotes

ⁱ In Canada low income households paying thirty percent or more of their gross income before taxes are considered to have an affordability problem.

ⁱⁱ Refugees who had been in the City for a period of one year or less were the target in the first round of interviews.

ⁱⁱⁱ A complete copy of this report can be found at http://ius.uwinnipeg.ca/CRC/crc_publications_journals.htm

^{iv} The Manitoba Department of Family Services and Housing currently charges low income tenants in subsidized housing 27 percent of gross income.